

## **Stories from a pandemic: A Podcast by It's OK To Talk**

### **Episode 2: Coping with loss—feat. Eleanor Hodgson**

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**Episode Contributors:** Dr Eleanor Hodgson, Divya Hariharan, Mona Talwar, and Vinay Bhaat

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#### **Contributors**

- **Dr Eleanor Hodgson** is a clinical psychologist from the UK. She has ten years experience working in mental health services in the UK and India, with a particular interest in trauma and severe and enduring mental health difficulties. She is passionate about the need for mental health understanding to be available to everyone and to integrate support into communities at multiple levels.
- **Divya Hariharan** is an experienced social impact and development sector professional. Passionate about social inclusion issues, she has contributed towards several research, consulting, and implementation projects. She has worked in challenging low-income, low-literate settings across India with marginalized communities. Her focus and priority are to build consciousness on and understanding of the importance of mainstreaming gender within large scale policy making and program design.  
She received her education at the London School of Economics and Political Science with a Master's in Gender Studies. She also holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Hindu College, Delhi University. She is an avid reader and a fitness enthusiast. She currently works as a Senior Research Manager with BBC Media Action, India.
- **Mona Talwar** is a working professional, student and destiny believer living in Delhi. She's passionate about travelling and exploring new places, culture and different kinds of food. Travelling gives her peace of mind and real life education.
- **Vinay Bhaat** is founder of Puppet Kala, a platform to protect and promote the art of puppetry as well as to give a platform to the talented artists of the Kathputli Colony. Vinay Bhaat has trained under eminent national and international artists. He is associated with major puppet theatres in the country and performs modern and traditional effigy plays.

#### **Host**

**Pattie Gonsalves** works in the areas of public engagement and digital interventions to improve adolescent and youth mental health. She is currently a Project Director at Sangath (India) with the PRIDE research programme where she leads the design and evaluation of a digital intervention for school-going adolescents in low resource settings. Pattie also leads It's Ok To Talk ([www.itsoktotalk.in](http://www.itsoktotalk.in)), a national anti-stigma campaign for young people's mental health. As part of this initiative, Pattie currently leads a new Wellcome Trust funded project, "Mann Mela", that is setting up awareness-building immersive media museums for youth mental health in five cities across India. Pattie holds an MSc in Global Health from the University of Oxford and is completing her PhD from the University of Sussex.

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## Transcript

Welcome to Stories from a pandemic, a podcast by Sangath It's Ok to Talk project. Sangath is a mental health research organization in India and I'm your host Pattie Gonsalves. I am a mental health researcher and campaigner.

Through the pandemic, and in this second wave, we have seen or experienced grief everywhere, but most people have had few places to mourn, and the traditions of mourning that help bring comfort have been interrupted.

*"Everything was in complete chaos and a wreck and I was in no state to even prioritize my mental health until now because I think my parents were a priority, following which there was a lot of bureaucracy associated with following my father's death. I had to also take care of my mum..." - Divya Hariharan*

*"My mother, uncle and I were calling everyone we knew to help us... My father was just lying there outside the hospital, and we were desperately asking the hospital to admit him...We experienced a terrible ordeal trying to hospitalize him, and were rejected in many places on account of hospitals being for Covid patients only." - Vinay Bhaat*

*"Two important days that stand out for me in the pandemic months-The first was the day when I lost my job, and the second was the day when I cleared my MBA exam. It took me a while to accept that I have lost my job overnight, as I didn't expect that I would lose it because I was working for this organization for a long time." - Mona Tiwari*

"Loss" during the pandemic has come in many other forms, such as the loss of connection with friends and family, the loss of touch, and the losses of safety, jobs and economic stability, and importantly the loss of a known future. Each of these is significant in itself; most people are processing a combination of many losses all at once.

Those combined losses can put us at risk, and they require some managing.

When mourning and grieving are derailed, it becomes difficult to move forward.

In this episode, I'm very glad to be in conversation with Dr Eleanor Hodgson. Eleanor is a clinical psychologist from the UK with 10 years of experience working in mental health services in India and the UK with a particular interest in trauma and severe and enduring mental health difficulties. We have the pleasure of Eleanor working with us at Sangath for 2.5 years on our young people's mental health projects in schools. Welcome Eleanor, we're so glad to have you on today's show. Could you begin by telling our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

**Eleanor-** Hi, Pattie! Thank you very much for inviting me on the podcast. It's very exciting to be on a podcast after so many months and years of listening to podcasts. Umm, what would people like to know about me apart from what you've already said? So I'm back in London, back in the UK after a few years of

being in Delhi and Goa. Umm, it's been a year of transitions for me as far as moving back from India to London and having a baby. Big things have happened to me over this pandemic and that's been an interesting experience for me to learn how to cope with the transitions in a lockdown and it's been lots of challenges involved in that but also kind of really good learning and wonderful experiences of being a mother for the first time as well as some very trying experiences in being a mother for the first time. Umm, so yeah. I don't know what else to say. (Laughs)

**Pattie-** That's amazing! Congratulations on becoming a mum and do you mind me asking, what was it like being pregnant in lockdown?

**Eleanor-** It was I mean in some ways actually I think the pregnancy bit, thankfully for me was quite easy, I had a good pregnancy and in some ways actually, it was a real crutch during the first lockdown because I had something very concrete that I knew was gonna happen and I could look forward to so even when everything else was in a lot of uncertainty I knew in October I was gonna have a baby so that was really actually quite helpful and gave me something to really set my mind on. Umm, I guess pros and cons of having a young baby in lockdown, it's been absolutely amazing because my partner has been working from home, for us to be a family together for the first six months of his life and he's had way more attention from both of his parents than he ever would have done before so that's been really lovely. Doing endless laps of my neighbourhood as the only sort of source of outside entertainment, it didn't last much but you get that. It's been one of those really life-changing experiences in all of the ways you can imagine.

**Pattie-** Today, we're talking about how to find meaning in loss. In the research we did in preparing for producing this series, we spoke with many young people from across India about their experiences through the pandemic, especially coping with the loss of loved ones. In the last year, we have seen over two hundred thousand deaths due to COVID-19 and fifty thousand of these in the last 3 weeks alone. We'll first hear from Divya Hariharan, a developmental sector professional whom we heard from in our first episode. Divya lost her father to COVID-19 late last year.

**Divya:** My mum, dad and I, all of us contracted COVID-19 in late October last year. And as a consequence, both my mum and dad in the same week were admitted to the hospital. Unfortunately, I was the only one managing the whole situation because there was nobody at home and we couldn't have brought people in because they would have then been vulnerable to contracting the disease. As a consequence, my mum was in the hospital for a week and a half, my dad was in the hospital for nearly a month. While all of this was happening, my grandma and dad's mum passed away. All of this was two weeks before my wedding that they were admitted to the hospital and umm, when dad was in the hospital he was there for about 30 days and by the end of it, he couldn't make it back home. Everything was in complete chaos and a wreck and I was in no state to even prioritize my mental health until now because I think my parents were a priority, following which there was a lot of bureaucracy associated with following my father's death. I had to also take care of my mum so by the time it reached me and the fact that I was lucky enough to be a part of an organisation that was humane, that was kind, that provided me with the kind of institutional support and backing when I needed it. So from an employer standpoint, I feel lucky and I feel like that was something that did anchor me. That was something that helped me keep a sane head through it all in some sense. I think now after two months is when I'm at a position where I can take the time out for myself, where the dust seems to have settled a little bit and I've gotten through the administrative stuff that I needed to prioritize at home. So that's something I'm gonna be starting soon. Reading about statistics, about COVID-19 deaths in the country or COVID-19 cases. Also seeing that people have been able to recover and

the recovery rate was extraordinarily high, at some point. So the fact that it just feels like you've been dealt a bad hand and that's how the whole experience sort of unravelled in front of me and I feel as a consequence it has definitely affected the way that I'm grieving, it's definitely affected the way that I'm thinking about my father's death and it also just sort of puts me in a spin on occasions where I'm like, could we have done something better, could we have been more careful, could things have been different had the pandemic not struck. So yes, it's definitely having a stronger impact. Umm, and not just mentally, physically I feel we struggled to find a place for cremation because most places were dedicated to COVID-19 patients. My father had recovered, I mean he was COVID-19 negative. So the fact that..and it just kept continuing. I had to get the paperwork done, there was insurance, things that were happening where you would have to go in physical form and just the irony of the situation, you're going to talk about a COVID-19 death and people like surrounding you and you're not like socially distancing or you're just in an office environment which is not ideal, given the circumstances. It's just been overwhelming across the board mentally, emotionally, physically. It has for sure impacted the way I've been dealing with loss or the way I've been grieving.

**Pattie-**These losses cannot be undone but spaces for mourning these losses could be created. With large parts of our social interaction going virtual, many have lost access to extremely important and familiar grieving customs, gatherings or rituals that often comfort those experiencing loss.

How do you think we can find ways to muster presence, patience and support in order to make room for loss, especially in a time like this?

**Eleanor-** My heart really goes out to Divya and everyone who has lost someone during this pandemic, it really comes across from her story just how stressful and deeply kind of upsetting these kinds of both, illness and the loss can be having to manage both at such an unstable time is well, I think it takes huge amounts of strength and that comes across in her story. I think one of the things that sort of really struck me in the way that she speaks is how this sort of simultaneous kind of overexposure to the news in the context of the pandemic but also how that sort of places all these additional demands on her time that may interrupt her grief. So she sort of ends up with both sides of this going on at the same time which is a real challenge I think, for lots of people at the moment. You know there are so many rituals that we have around loss that are really really important. They are there for a reason. They are traditions that give us a framework to allow us to process our grief, to express our grief and to kind of commune with other people to receive comfort, to get sort of a sense of support from other people. That's really kind of fundamental to our human experiences of grief. So I think those sort of the ways those ceremonies have been interrupted is a significant loss in itself actually. But I do think, the highlight is that grief isn't something that happens at a funeral. Anyone who's lost someone will know that that grief happens in lots of moments. Some of them big like what happens at a funeral but many of them kind of much smaller happening over time, you know, a moment of remembrance as you have a cup of tea, kind of a reminder a couple of weeks or months down the line on anniversaries, all of these moments are parts of our grieving process. So although all those big events that we think about as being sort of central to our grief might have gone. That doesn't mean the opportunity to grieve has gone, actually, this would be an ongoing process for everyone who has lost someone and I think kind of one of the ways to think about this is to try to work on what one's needs are in terms of grief and you can almost use this sort of rituals or ceremonies that you might be so used to as a way to try to kind of find those. So thinking about, you know, that the customs that you would normally go through, what are the things that most sort of resonate with you where you feel might be most important, it might be kind of about sharing stories about the loved one, it might be about saying goodbye.

So thinking about those aspects that might kind of help you. And trying to, like you say, kind of make space for that make time for that creates a kind of novel way of expressing that. So, you know, calling a friend to share stories or Lighting a candle and saying a prayer. And kind of picking a day and saying Actually, this is going to be my day of remembrance, and I'm going to, you know, listen to music that we used to listen to together and look at photos or sort of say goodbye. So really trying to try to dedicate that time in a way that feels right to you that feels like it kind of honours the memory of that person and gives you space to really feel how you're feeling and, and express that to, to the degree that you can and those are the sort of practical things I suppose one can do to help with grief, which is always going to be ongoing, you know, even after those, those self ceremonies, there's still going to be more to do over the weeks and months to come.

**Pattie-** It's helpful to understand, that we, do you think COVID-19 has impacted how we grieve in the context of unprecedented news of death and disease constantly bombarding us?

**Eleanor-** Yeah, I mean, I think again, I think Divya really kind of hits upon these two aspects in which COVID-19 might really have impacted people's grief. And I mean, grief is different for everyone. So the impact of COVID-19 is not going to be the same for everyone in their grieving process, but I do think that this kind of, as you say, this kind of bombardment in the news, this sense of sort of constant reminders might be one that is particularly challenging, because although reminders again, like I mentioned that they're part of our natural grieving process, but we also have to have time for our minds to move to other parts of our lives, if we get completely stuck in, in the loss in the grief. And our mind is never allowed to kind of have respite from that grieving process that then that is, in and of itself can be quite upsetting and quite debilitating, we need to be able to gently sort of do that dance of remembrance, and kind of focusing back into the here and now starting to kind of reframe our minds towards the future. So I can well imagine that kind of in the context of all of this news and the ongoing anxiety about potential future losses, losses of different sorts of things of, as you mentioned, kind of employment or other sorts of parts of our lives, kind of our freedoms, I think that can be can be really, really difficult. And I can see how people might get really caught up in sort of quite unhelpful processes of really not being able to move past the grief really getting stuck. And that that can be really, really challenging. So I think, I guess it's kind of the flip side to what I was just talking about it, I think it's also really important to make time for the other parts of one's life, you know, it's to be able to perhaps shift that balance for yourself, which is very difficult to do, I think when your environment is really throwing this at you all the time. But trying to find ways to, to hold both to hold the grief but also to, as you said to sort of hold the hope for the future to hold a sense of being in the here and now and not kind of always getting pulled back into those thoughts of the past are those, "What if.." questions, really, really difficult process.

**Pattie-** We'll now listen to the story of 25-year-old Vinay Bhaat, a puppeteer from Delhi who lost his father and his livelihood when the country locked down last year. In Vinay's story too, we can see that loss can be experienced due to many reasons and in many different ways. And the loss of our loved ones could also be accompanied by the loss of employment or livelihood. And the sense of loss and grief can be happening inside us and outside us at the same time. What are your thoughts, Eleanor?

**Vinay:** *Right before the first lockdown last year, I was in a very disturbed state of mind because of the ongoing violence in Delhi. There were communal riots. I could not have imagined what was happening around me. I couldn't understand what terms we were defining people, by their religion.*

*I come from a family of puppeteers and have been working from a very young age. Being the oldest, I support my family as my siblings are a lot younger than me. Right before the pandemic, my father who has been ill for a long time took a turn for the worse. He recovered this time though.*

*I lost my part-time job as a puppeteer-teacher with a local organization due to the lockdown setting in. The pandemic put immense strain on us. We needed money. There were days we didn't have enough food. I then started looking for and taking up ad-hoc labour work. On two occasions I was beaten by the police for going out. I was doing work I had never done before. I had to lift a cement 'katta' and move it up flights of stairs. I was working 10 hour days on some days. It eventually made me very ill though, so much so that we suspected I had maybe contracted Covid.*

*In September, my father took another turn for the worse. We experienced a terrible ordeal trying to hospitalize him, and were rejected in many places on account of hospitals being for Covid patients only. I was so worried he would die on the way. My mother, uncle and I were calling everyone we knew to help us... my father was just lying there outside the hospital, and we were desperately asking the hospital to admit him. We had signed a waiver relieving the hospital of any liability if my father got Covid there. Once he was admitted, we were not allowed to meet him or see him, until after he died. That Friday, they informed us he was on a ventilator now. That night, I couldn't sleep and had strange and bad dreams. On Sunday, I was outside the hospital, where I had spent most of my time that week, about to have a cup of tea, when they told me. So when you ask me to describe 2020 in one word, it is "broken". I lost my work, lost my father...it was too much. I had no money even for the funeral. My friends helped me. I had to even pay off the people at the crematorium to just see my father's body.*

*Through this whole experience, I'd say it's important to have faith. There are a lot of people who feel demotivated and it's okay to be demotivated, you're human, but at the same time we should have faith in other people, not just ourselves. We should share the difficulties we're going through with others...that is always helpful. When we had no food at all, we got help with ration supplies. Where I needed money, many people helped me out through a fundraiser for my father's last rites. I even got help finding work. Later, because of the lockdown and inability to have any live puppet shows, we started making films of the puppet shows to publish online. I just worked on a film about two types of families, one who enjoyed the lockdown, and another who suffered as a consequence of it. I've also just set up my own puppet company, Puppetskala.*

**Eleanor-** So again, I mean another really, really inspiring story actually, in terms of kind of the importance of social support. It really kind of takes a lot to reach out for help when you need it. And I think, you know, a lot of people can, when they're under stress can really turn inwards and withdraw. And it's a very natural response to kind of close off from those around you. But I think what really strikes me is how Vinay was able to do the opposite. And really kind of digging really deep to work against the tide of all of these losses, to try to kind of start to rebuild life and kind of the fact that kind of, there's been this sort of creative outlet sounds like it has been really, really, really helpful in that process.

**Pattie-** And what do you feel the longer term impact of this trauma will be, especially coping with the combination of these losses together?

**Eleanor-** Yeah, I mean, it may well be I do think, as I said, kind of everybody's experience of losses is going to be different. I mean, I do think these kind of very challenging experiences, particularly having multiple

losses in different areas of one's life, kind of in quick succession, or simultaneously, can be extremely, extremely challenging, we, we really have to muster up kind of our deepest resources in the face of, particularly losses of our immediate family, these, these are hugely significant lows, in what in one's life at any time, but in the context of a pandemic, in the context of a loss of employment, or kind of other forms of kind of social instability or, or issues that are going on in terms of as, as Vinay sort of talks about the, the riots that were going on in Delhi, that sense of kind of political or kind of actual physical safety being compromised, these are real, significant, kind of concrete challenges that, that take, take resources from us physically, emotionally. And so it's, it's incredibly challenging to think that, you know, our life can just continue on as normal, when we're hit by these sorts of events. And, as I say, I mean, for some people, they may find that, you know, that they're able in, in a shorter space of time to start to kind of adjust to these things, to accept the losses to move to move on and find ways to cope, who are others, actually, this might be a really long process, and one that one that really takes some, some time and some dedication and, and that that's going to be different for everyone. But I think, as I said, what really strikes me about his story in terms of strength is really about turning towards others for help, and really seeing that as a source of strength.

**Pattie-** How do we support ourselves and our loved ones who may be grieving too?

**Eleanor-** I think the first thing is kind of not being afraid to ask the question, I think often we can kind of get in our heads a bit about, you know, not wanting to overstep a boundary or not wanting to upset someone by asking someone if you think they're having a rough time, and but actually, asking someone how they are, even just letting someone know that, that you're there for them, if they want to talk can be really, really significant for that person who might be struggling. So, you know, not listening to that kind of voice that says, you know, it's too risky, or, or kind of, they'll get upset, but just offering out, you know, offering out some help offering at hand to say that you care that you're there. And they may or may not take you up on answering that. But just knowing that someone has done that, you know, we know from lots of stories that are shared kind of on the it's okay to talk website, but also kind of from my experience clinically, knowing that someone has asked, makes a huge difference, you know, to someone who's struggling, that can really kind of shine a light of hope, and have a sense of of security that they may not have otherwise. So asking is the first thing I think, also looking for ways to invest in that relationship to nurture that relationship, that are not related to the loss or the struggle or the pandemic. kind of thinking about, you know, what, what did we used to do together that helped us kind of feel connected feel, you know, together, and really trying to make time and kind of get a bit creative about how you might be able to do that virtually or kind of via messages or letters or whatever it might have to be. But actually kind of not sort of getting too tied up in the stress. And that because that can also mean that the relationship gets lost. And actually, you're always just talking about the stressful thing or the loss or the pandemic. So, I think that, that's another really important way that people are supported is having a whole life, right, that doesn't just get swallowed up. By the stress. I think the other thing that I would kind of highlight is thinking about your, you know, the different relationships you might have different sort of hats you wear or roles you have. And this isn't just about friends and family, of course, we'll be thinking kind of most automatically about them as the people that we are supporting. But actually, we have all sorts of social relationships in our lives, right, we have neighbors, we have colleagues we have, you know, people in our communities, in our workplaces, all of these relationships, there is the potential there that I can offer some support, it can be small things--it could be getting groceries for someone, it could be, you know, just sitting with someone for five minutes, it could be you know, in a workplace, making sure that someone has the right sort of systems in place for them to be able to work at home or, you know, whatever it might be thinking about the different roles and relationships

that I have, and making sure that I just take a moment to think about if there is some support I could offer if there is a question I could ask. And again, it could be a really, really small thing and something that perhaps they don't take you up on. But asking the question, you know, in those relationships can again just really make a big, big difference.

**Pattie-** One of the young people we talked with, a 22-year-old law student, shared that the biggest sense of loss she was experiencing was something to look forward to. And while many of the young people we interviewed spoke of the loss of their loved ones or of people whom they knew, others spoke also of the loss of education, of human connection and the loss of a sense of direction for their lives too. That sudden loss of a routine has left many people in a downward spiral.

Let's now hear from Mona Talwar, who worked for almost a decade in the travel and tourism industry. In October last year, because of the impact of travel restrictions through the lockdown mode, she was laid off.

**Mona-** Two important days that stand out for me in the pandemic months-The first was the day when I lost my job, and the second was the day when I cleared my MBA exam. It took me a while to accept that I have lost my job overnight, as I didn't expect that I would lose it because I was working for this organization for a long time. There were many thoughts in my mind as I was the only person with a stable job earning in the family.

And I was thinking about how I will take care of things. There were so many responsibilities when looking after a home. At first, I was applying for new roles in any and every industry in any and every kind of job, but nothing was working out. I realized that there is no point in putting myself into a situation where I was putting such immense pressure on myself. And by doing this, I will not be able to find a solution and will not be able to take care of my family needs or essentials. So I made a decision that I will only grow from here and not let negative thoughts take over my strength. And to regain my strength I made a decision to study further and enhance my skills and knowledge so that when the right opportunity comes I shall be ready for it. I replaced negativity, negative thoughts and tough times with learning and used the time to study. I always wanted to do an MBA. However, while I was working, I only had time on the weekends or in the evenings. So now with this newfound free time, I enrolled in an MBA course. I know that by doing this, I am enhancing my skills for any future challenge or opportunity that I will get in my professional life. I even enrolled in short term courses for mental health. I started practising yoga and joined meditation sessions in the morning. These sessions actually helped me keep my calm and build motivation towards my work, my health, my professional life, my personal life. Alongside another one of the biggest things I learned was cooking, which I was never able to do because of having had to travel so much for my job.

For the last few years, I was barely at home because of my work and travel. So this pandemic has brought me much closer to my family and my loved ones together. We were happy being together during such a time, and talking to my parents and being around them was one of the things which have been very helpful to me. The day I cleared my MBA first semester wasn't special only because I achieved that goal I dreamt of for so long, but also because I had utilized my time when most people around me were struggling that too during the pandemic, which was and is a challenging time. I had worked over the months thinking about, "How will I do it?", but now with this additional education qualification, I am confident that I can find better opportunities too and will be in a better position to support my family. Through the pandemic months, I realized the importance of doing things that make me happy, and also sharing my feelings with others is important. It does not matter what others think. I used to worry if I would look like a fool or others

may make fun of me. But it's okay not to know everything... It's completely fine. The world is evolving at such a fast pace, there will be changes in everyone's life. And so we cannot think No, no, I can't do it. I learned to accept and appreciate myself. This goes a long way in coping with anxiety, which can affect our mental health. I think everybody needs to talk to somebody so that they don't put too much pressure on themselves and need to involve themselves with different kinds of activities or hobbies to stay positively engaged. For me this was rediscovering--I learned how to paint which was an old hobby, but earlier, I did not have time to do it. And I learned cooking, finally! it's important to do things that help us. we should not lose hope. Because then it can get difficult to regain confidence. I faced that myself when I was applying for so many jobs, it affected my confidence. But at least now I'm hopeful that with time I will definitely get a job. Because I'm already experienced. I have my skills and experience in hand. And I am improving day by day. It of course helps to have the support of your loved ones too. However, I am not leaving that home because that is the only thing I have.

**Pattie-**What have we learned through the pandemic about loss that can prepare us better to cope with uncertainty in the future?

**Eleanor-** I think that is a really, really important question because I think at times like this, it is really really easy to get pulled into a kind of very pessimistic frame of mind to feel completely hopeless and that nothing is going right. And I think it's really important to remember that to get to where we have gotten to now has already taken so much strength and resilience from each and every person. It doesn't. You know, it doesn't matter how you have gotten here. The fact that you are here now managing as well as you are is such an achievement and I think that's really important to recognize both individually and collectively. We have done so well, this is completely unprecedented, you know, the situation no one expected this, you know, level of loss, this level of kind of economic instability. So, really, you know, for want of a better phrase, you know, giving yourself a pat on the back for, for getting through it so far, right everyone is, is, is doing such a good job to be managing as well as you are. But, I mean, I think the other, the other thing to highlight that, that certainly I have kind of been really reflecting on through the pandemic is, is trying to recognize that, that there is no kind of "ought to" about our lives, kind of that. As humans, we build stories, right, we build stories about who we are, and what should happen, and what life should look like, we make plans, you know, these are all absolutely natural, normal human ways of living, right, we live through these stories. And, you know, equally, we are surrounded by all of our social media and all of our, you know, culture that that also says those things, my life should look like this, you know, by x age, you should be doing x things, it can get very, very prescriptive, and we can get very attached to those ideas about what life should look like. And it can make it really, really hard for us when that doesn't actually turn out to be the case when life doesn't work out like that. But if we are able to kind of reconcile ourselves with the fact is, many things in my life are going to be completely different from that story that I have in my mind, right, some of them are going to be great things that I didn't expect or plan. Others of them I'm not going to like, right, they're going to be things that I will view as negative as bad. But sort of, if I'm able to kind of understand that that's the nature of life, then that can actually really help me not to get stuck. So that's not to say you shouldn't feel sad or angry or upset when those things don't happen. Of course, you know, if I miss out on my opportunity to physically go to university because of the pandemic or I lose a loved one, or I lose my job, these are real, concrete losses, right, I'm not at all saying that, that those should be, you know, dismissed as insignificant or just sort of think positive, it's one of my least favourite phrases of all time. But I do think that if people are able to kind of hold their ideas about their futures a bit more lightly, sort of not be kind of not sort of cling on to them too tight, then we're able to kind of be a bit more flexible to kind of roll with the punches when things don't follow that script. Kind of just like Mona did so

impressively I think in in in her story, there's, there's much more of a chance that we can be resilient for future stresses, which again, are inevitable right now, no one's life is easy, we're always going to have these things that we don't expect that we have to cope with. So I think that would be kind of an important sort of mental shift. If people can kind of help themselves think you know, there, there are no 'ought-tos' or 'should-haves'. This is what's happened. What can I do now?

**Pattie-** That's a really helpful way to think about it. The theme of this podcast, in fact, emerged to be how do you hold on to hope even through the experience of difficulty and loss? And we tend to look at hope and loss as being at odds with each other. But do you think that they really are?

**Eleanor-** Well, for me, I certainly don't see them at odds at all. I mean, I think in a similar way to kind of what I just described, I think loss can actually be a really important marker of, of the things that are most important to us kind of the value and meaning in our lives. Right, if we're grieving over something, it kind of points us to, to the fact that you know, that there's something significant there, right, I mean, that that might sound really obvious, but I think if we can sort of dig into that a little bit we can we can really learn something important about how we want life to look like for ourselves in the future. Right? It might be that we learn that actually spending time with family is incredibly important to meet investing in those relationships. It could be that I learned that actually, opportunities for learning are really important to me. It could be that I just learn that exercise and taking care of myself physically is really important to me. So if we can kind of understand what sits underneath that grief, what the value is in my life for me and think about the capacity to cope with these stresses. Now, how have I gotten through this period of stress, this period of loss then actually loss serves as a way to build hope and direction for myself in the future. So I mean the specific loss that you're grieving for might not be able to be recovered or replaced and again, that's not the aim here to say that it's not important. It in fact is your (unclear) it is important and if you can really think about how to learn from the value you've placed in that thing and look for opportunities to bring those things into your life going forwards then actually you can be a really rich source of hope of the life you want to build for yourself in the future.

**Pattie-** Even if someone has not experienced a loss personally, is the fear of losing something that is making us all anxious?

**Eleanor-** Yeah, absolutely! Instinctively, if we value something we want to hold onto it. We don't like losing things, whether it be small things about our day to day lives from our ability to go and sit in a coffee shop to the kind of most important relationships and things in my life. It is absolutely natural, particularly at a time like this that the (unclear) to those things I hold dear causes me to get anxious, causes me to worry, causes me to kind of get stuck in thinking over and over about what-if scenarios. Those are really kind of natural human tendencies.

**Pattie-** And what advice would you give to someone who is fearful or worried about experiencing a future loss?

**Eleanor-** Well, firstly I would say that it's completely normal to be worried about loss. That's simply a natural human response, right. If I care about something, if it's important to me and that thing is under threat then very naturally, very automatically I will become anxious about that thing. That's just how our brains are wired. This is an evolutionary survival-focused brain that kicks into gear when I experience a threat to something that's dear to me. So I think recognising that is actually really is a step in itself. Not just saying as

a background, I think being able to kind of I guess reassure ourselves if we're getting caught up in a loop of thinking about loss or kind of really racing through what-if scenarios. Just to recognize, this is not me being broken or defective or bad, this is my brain doing what it does naturally as a human brain. This is normal, kind of survival thinking. So if I'm able to do that then I'd stop to get a little bit of kind of feeling on a bit more stable ground to then kind of go to the next step of perhaps helping my mind to let go of some of that unhelpful worry if that's what I'm experiencing, that I can't stop thinking about you know, anticipating the loss or I can't stop worrying about the loss. So, that next step is about sort of reassuring yourself that it's normal but it's not gonna be the most helpful thing for me right now to spend more time in this loop. Right, I've been through this loop before. I'm sure many times I've gone through the what-if scenarios, I know there is no solution, there is no answer to these what-if questions. I just, you know, end up going round and round and round in circles. So, kind of telling yourself it's okay, this is what my mind does but actually right now it's not gonna be helpful for me to continue on this loop. And I just generally take my mind off that and put it onto something else. So, can I redirect my attention gently, compassionately, kindly onto something that's gonna be more helpful right now? It might just be having a cup of tea, it might be doing some exercising, it might be spending time with my mum...you know, whatever it might be. It doesn't have to be something big and you know, life-changing, just anything. Anything that I can shift my attention to and inevitably because this is how human brains work that worry will come back, right. Those questions will come back. That anxiety will come back and the process is just to be that same broken record back to the anxiety. Oh, there it goes again. Back to the worry, back to that anxiety. This is a normal, natural, human survival brain, fine. I hear you. I know you're worried. It's okay. I'm just going to pick up my attention and bring it back into the here and now and just keeping going with that process, really kindly can help to sort of re-train the brain, not to get so endlessly caught up. It's, you know, I'm not saying this is easy work, it requires a lot of patience and a lot of practice, but actually, you can fight against those loops of anxiety in that way.

**Pattie-** And I have a question that even I struggle personally a lot, which is it's very difficult to ask for help and how do you ask for help?

**Eleanor-** So I think that's a really, really important question because I think, for most people asking for help is difficult, even for small things, I think our culture is one in which we are told that, you know, independence is the greatest virtue and managing things on your own is the kind of ultimate pinnacle of what we should all be aiming for. So, I think we receive these messages in, you know, in lots of ways that are quite unhelpful, and that does make it quite scary to ask other people for help. So I think it is really, really important. I think a couple of things can help. I think one is knowing that, you know, asking for help doesn't mean I have to tell every single person in my social circle that I need help, right? You don't have to broadcast it to the world, I mean you can, there's nothing wrong with that, but you don't have to right.. asking for help can be a quiet, simple, one-on-one thing. You know, they might just be one person, you know, in your life who you can turn to who, you know, that's kind of got your back. And that's, that's all that is required, right? So it doesn't need to be such a kind of big or public thing. I think that's one thing. And I think the other thing that often helps people, is just to switch it so you're not thinking about yourself asking for help, you're thinking about what is it? Like when someone asks me for help, how do I feel when that person asks me for help? What do I think about that person? Because I can almost guarantee you that you're not thinking, oh, what a useless incompetent, weak person that's coming in and asking me for help. How terrible are they? That they have to ask me for help. I would almost guarantee that your sort of natural human response is, of course, you know, I care for you. I love you. I want to support you and therefore, you please tell me what I can do, right? Because we are human social beings, we rely on each other, that is just

how we are. So really trying to kind of reassure yourself that if that is my natural instinct, I can pretty much guarantee that, you know, 99% of other people are going to have that same response. So just remind yourself that the things that you think about yourself are not automatically going to be the things that other people think about you when you ask for help, just trying to kind of switch that kind of judgment center that is often kind of really having a go at us when we're struggling. And I guess the other thing that one might sort of think back on is times in the past when you have managed to ask for help ..could be over anything doesn't have to be a big thing. What was that like? Because most of the time again, even if it felt very scary before you did it, afterwards, actually, it feels great. Oh my goodness, I'm so glad that I just said to someone that, you know, I'm having a bad day or I'm really upset about this loss or I'm really struggling with this. You know, there is a reason that, you know, a problem shared is a problem, halved is a phrase right? Because actually people almost always find it hugely helpful just even to say it before the help comes just saying it makes a big difference.

**Pattie-** Those are really helpful insights. This brings me to my last question, which is based on the lessons you've learned through this last year. If you could go back to just before the pandemic began and give yourself a message, what would it be?

**Eleanor-** Hmm. Okay well yeah, I mean I think so, so I am a planner. I am very much one of those people that likes to think about the future. And kind of really gets into the detail of what life might look like in kind of months years time. And I think actually what the pandemic has really taught me and what I think would have been helpful to be, to have been an attitude throughout it, is to actually just focus on what you can do now, right? Actually, investing lots of time in that future planning, right now is not that helpful and sort of the things that are most have been most important to me over this pandemic and you can kind of particular kind of with having a baby has been about, you know, just being present, being here now, right? I might not be able to go out, I might not be able to do all of the things that I would like to be doing, but I'm here now, right, with my son, or in the park or whatever. Um, so what can I, what can I bring my mind to? What can I focus on? You know, what can I, what kind of joy and pleasure and meaning, can I get out of today and try to, you know, acknowledge that my brain will do that? My brain will keep pulling me into the future, keep wanting to make plans, keep wanting to kind of spend time on that, but really sort of telling myself that that's not really going to help me. It means it's not an investment that will, that will pay back right now because there is so much uncertainty because there is, you know, all of this is subject to so much change that if I can just be present, I'll actually have a much nicer time of the whole pandemic than if I just kind of keep just getting pulled into future thinking.

**Pattie-** Thanks Eleanor for sharing that and for spending time with us today!

As we record this episode, we are faced with arguably the most challenging phase so far. In terms of the rising spread of COVID-19 across India with cases averaging four hundred thousand daily this past week. While it will take a combination of many people working together, including governance, healthcare systems, biomedical research and citizens, and communities, we also need faith.

In Vinay's words, whom we heard from earlier, *"It's important to have faith. There are a lot of people who feel demotivated and it's okay to be demotivated, you're human, but at the same time we should have faith in other people, not just ourselves. We are all human, and if we share our problems with others, they will definitely help us."*

Many of you may have experienced loss in these last few weeks or months and we want you to know that you are not alone. There are places and people you can reach out to. We've got resources on our website and social media. So we encourage you to visit these to learn more. Thank you to our listeners for tuning in.

You can find links to more information and helpful resources on our website - [www.mannmela.in](http://www.mannmela.in). Stories from a pandemic, lessons in hope are supported by the Wellcome Trust as a part of our Mann Mela project. And thanks to our studio engineer Ishaan Gandhi and producer Faith Gonsalves.