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Premium

‘In a short space of time my whole family was gone – my fiancé, my dad and then my mum’

Niamh Ennis from Dublin helps women make life-enhancing changes and says a series of tragic events in her own life sparked a career reinvention



Niamh Ennis says her experiences of grief changed her profoundly

As told to Katie Byrne

December 28 2021 02:30 AM



“When I was in my thirties, I felt like my life was mapped out in front of me. I was flying along in my career, I was engaged to be married and there was so much promise and so many plans for the future.

It really felt like I had found my groove but then things changed quite dramatically. A few months before our wedding, my fiancé was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. We found out on a Wednesday and he died on the Friday week. My dad died very unexpectedly four months later and then my mum died a few years after that.

In the space of a fairly short time my small family unit was completely gone and nothing in my life was the same.

The experience changed me profoundly and it got to the stage where I felt like I wasn’t able to move beyond it. I knew I needed time to grieve so I took a year’s sabbatical and moved to Spain. There, I gave myself the space to think about what I wanted to do next and how I was going to make sense of all this. Then, as the years went on, I began to gain some clarity.

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communications and fundraising. That’s where the idea of transformation and change coaching was born.

If I could share the experiences I had through grief, loss and, ultimately, through my own transformation with other people, maybe it would make them feel less alone.

The idea began to take shape but it took time to bring it to fruition. It didn’t happen in the space of six to 12 months. It happened in a four- to five-year period. When I look back now, I can see how I was following the breadcrumbs. One step led me to the next step and to where I believe I was always supposed to be.

Today, I work with women who feel stuck and unable to move forward. They might be dealing with redundancy, loss and grief or a breakdown in a relationship.

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There is no typical client profile but in the last 18 months I’ve noticed a marked increase in people in their forties and fifties who are, probably for the first time in their lives, re-evaluating where they are.

Lockdown gave people so much time to question their purpose and reassess their careers and their lifestyles. A lot of people started to think, ‘Before I feel like time has run out, I want to do something different’.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic is that it has made change less dramatic.

People have found their voice and they are less afraid to use it. They can now ask for things they never asked for before, even if it’s just different working arrangements.

I suppose that’s one of the benefits of re-evaluation. And that’s what time, space, silence – and removing yourself from the busyness of life – can do.



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themselves out of the dreaded comfort zone can fill them with so much resistance.

That resistance can stop people from doing anything different. And then there's the fear that they might not be able to do it.

Some people aren't sure what it is they want to change. A lot of people come to me thinking one area in their life is causing all the problems but, actually, when we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, it's rarely that one thing.

Others encounter resistance from their loved ones. When we start making changes, what we're actually doing is declaring, 'I am not happy with who I am or how I'm living my life' and, unfortunately, the people who are closest to us can sometimes feel like we're holding a mirror up to them.

It can show them what they're not doing and they can start to feel a little unsettled or insecure. They might think, 'If she's not happy, how do I know she's happy with me?'

So you have to be mindful of others but you also have to be careful not to be influenced by their reaction to you wanting to change.

They might do it with a full heart or with the best of intentions but they're holding you back to make themselves feel more comfortable, rather than them wanting what is right for you.

A lot of people start thinking about the changes they want to make in their lives around this time of year. But I have a big problem with the concept of New Year's resolutions. I used to spend the first week of every year writing a very long list, and it only made me feel worse.

Nowadays, I prefer to think of it as the setting of intentions for the year ahead. When I'm working with clients, I advise them to pick one or two goals they would like to start working on – less is more – and I tell them that their goals should be realistic and achievable.

I also advise them to think of their goals in terms of the feeling they want to achieve. It's not necessarily what you want to get but why you want to get it and how you want to feel when you get there.

You have a much stronger likelihood of achieving something if you're in pursuit of a feeling as opposed to a thing.

If you were to say to me, 'In 2022 I want to be really rich or make loads of money', I would ask why that matters to you. What is the feeling? Is it because you want to feel more safe, more secure, less worried about paying the bills? Likewise, if your goal is weight loss, the feeling might be one of being stronger and healthier. That's more likely to result in you getting out for exercise or maybe making better food choices.

It is never too late to change. There are so many ways we can change who we are and how we show up in the world that can make such a difference. And so much of the work I do, and the message I'm trying to get across, is that change is not just possible but that it's entirely possible.

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The alternative is finding yourself this time next year saying, 'Damn, I wish I had done this last year.' And we all know that feeling..."

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