

Chapter 1 Grief Defined

Loss is hard. Grief is painful. It feels terrible to experience the many losses that occur in a lifetime. You just want to get out of the painful spin and to feel better. You're weary from the constant barrage of grief. Like the waves of the ocean, the emotional waves of grief just keep crashing on you and taking you down again and again.

Each time a grief wave crashes on you, you start to question whether you will ever feel whole again. You wonder if you could thrive again or if feeling continuous grief is your lot in life. The more you question your own ability to handle your grief the more you spiral down. You start to heap more pain on top of the pain of grief with your judgment of yourself and your inability to manage your thoughts and emotions.

The purpose of this workbook is to increase your understanding of grief and to walk you through the five Foundations of Growth – coping, understanding, discovering, resolving, and rebuilding. These foundations are not bound by time but by lessons learned, applied and integrated, which can set your heart and mind up for emotional healing.

Grief, Mourning and Bereavement Defined

While extremely painful, grief is normal. It is the reaction that we have to loss. People who have a healthy mind experience grief. Loss can be defined as a change in circumstances. The old adage says the only constant in life is change. Some changes just feel like inconsequential bumps in the road while others create feelings of grief. These changes *require* grief and mourning which can lead to resolution.

Grief is the signal that attention is necessary. We often associate grief with death but there are dozens of life changes that create feelings of grief. Grief is the deep sorrow that we feel when we experience loss of any kind, such as death, divorce, illness, moving, pet loss, a breakup, crime, a house fire, financial loss, career loss, etc. Grief also encompasses the many varied and conflicting emotions associated with loss, which includes guilt, shame, fear, confusion, loneliness, etc.

In our society which is overly focused on positivity, grieving can feel like it's not normal. You may feel like you need to get over it as soon as possible. This feeling that you must get over it quickly can lead to additional pain as your efforts to force yourself to move on are unsuccessful. On the other hand, you may feel tremendous resistant to societal expectations and become more attached to your pain as a way of proving you have a right to grieve. This leads to victimhood. In some cases, such as losing a child, your friends and family may reinforce the idea that you will never get over your loss. While you will never get over your child or anyone else you've lost, you can get over the unrelenting pain of loss. No matter how you have responded to your grief in the past, there are answers for you to help you move through your pain with more acceptance and less resistance. By accepting your grief, you will start to feel better and will be able to use your grief to assist you in healing.

Many people will suggest that you must carry your grief with you forever and build around it. While it's true that your losses will always be a part of your story, the deep sorrow associated with grief does not have to continue for the rest of your days. In this workbook, we'll be looking at grief as a season and exploring the difference between the deep, aching sorrow of grief and the sadness you may experience occasionally after you have done the work of healing.

Draw a very distinct line between grief and occasional sadness. Experiencing sporadic, short-lived bouts of melancholy is not the same as daily carrying around the burden of deep sorrow which is grief. Often people will say, "of course, you will always grieve." But it's not true. The occasional sadness that you may continue to feel a few times a year, specifically on anniversaries of tragedy and loss, is not grief and mourning. Through grief healing, grief no longer needs to be your daily, weekly, or even monthly companion. You can release the grief so that you can make space for the good that is all around you. Carrying around heavy grief for years, blocks you from the joy in life, it stops you from pursuing passions and it keeps you from genuinely enjoying happy memories.

Alan Wolfelt wrote in *The Journey Through Grief* referring specifically to the grief following death, “grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in our grief journeys. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.”

Sometimes the words mourning, and grief are used interchangeably but mourning is the expression of your grief. Examples of mourning may include crying or wearing black. These are outward expressions of the inward deep sorrow.

Bereavement is the state of grief or the period of grief. No one can say how long this period of grief will last. You may have heard to give it a year and things will get better. Or you may have heard the second year is worse or that the pain will continue for years. It’s not valid to give your grief or bereavement a time boundary. Each person’s experience is different as is their relationship to the loss. It’s important to respect your own process and the process of others.

Lessons from Physical Pain

One day while in college, I bounded up a flight of concrete stairs barefoot. Just before I reached the top, my right foot collided painfully into the concrete. The pain stopped me immediately. My roommates helped me to a car and drove me to the walk-in clinic on campus. My foot was examined and x-rayed and not surprisingly I learned that I had fractured the bone just below my small toe. They casted my foot and ankle to limit mobility, gave me a protocol for healing and sent me home.

When we experience physical pain, we understand the need to slow down, seek answers and get support from those who can help us. Unfortunately, when we’re in emotional pain, we believe that we need to keep busy and that time will heal our wounds. Imagine applying that to a physical injury.

In the experience of breaking my foot, to keep busy I would have ignored the pain and ran up two more flights of stairs to prove that I could. It’s ridiculous to consider.

If I was to just wait for time to heal, I would have just sat down and waited. Now the pain may have eventually gone away but without the care and protocol to encourage healing I probably wouldn’t have healed well or completely. Again, it’s a ridiculous way to approach a physical injury, especially a severe one.

Physical pain is there as a warning. Imagine if you didn't experience pain when you broke your ankle or had an appendicitis or any number of injuries or disease. Without the warning of pain, you wouldn't know that something is wrong and that it needed to be addressed.

This program is like casting a broken ankle and following a protocol for healing. The setting of the bone, the casting of the ankle and the protocol don't heal the ankle. Your body holds the miracle of healing. The cast and the healing protocol work with your body to promote healing. Likewise, this program offers education and tools to help you work with the healing properties that already reside in your body, mind and spirit.

Just as physical pain is a warning, emotional pain is a warning that your emotional health needs attention. Let's look at the 3 S's that we naturally apply to caring for physical pain and how that relates to emotional pain.

1. **Stop and slow down.** In a world that asks, "what have you done for me lately?" it feels hard to stop and slow down and give your emotional wound the time and attention it needs. However, if you don't, it will fester and become infected. Your grief requires space to express your grief and to work through the many emotions and conflicts that your loss experience has triggered.
2. **Seek answers.** Grief is not a topic taught in school. It's also not a topic of conversation or exploration in general. Therefore, when you find yourself in the pain of grief, you don't know what to do or what's normal. Grief is a topic of great importance to understand but you don't know you need that understanding until you find yourself in the middle of it. One important component of this program is to offer more knowledge about grief. As scientists better understood gravitational laws, they were able to work with the laws of gravity to fly a plane and launch a rocket. As you better understand your grief, you will be better equipped to travel through it and eventually thrive, not merely survive.
3. **Get Support.** Think of all the areas of your life in which you have sought support. If you wanted to learn a new skill, you found a teacher who could teach it to you. If you wanted to learn to lift weights, you hired a personal trainer. If you wanted to develop greater spirituality, you found a church or a preacher or spiritual guru. If you hurt yourself, you saw a doctor or a specialist. Why is it we're hesitant to find support for our emotional pain?

You cannot face your new challenges with the same level of support you had before your loss. Your support needs to be greater than your challenge. I'm confident that because you are here, you understand the need to seek support in your grief and healing journey. Trust the process and lean into this experience of growth and healing.

Questions to Consider

1. What ways have I slowed down and given my grief space? _____

2. How do I feel about slowing down and paying attention to my grief? _____

3. In what ways have I sought for answers? _____

4. How do I feel about asking for help? _____

5. Where have I received support? Are there other ways I would like to seek support? _____

Responsibility and Choice

In Viktor Frankl's book *Man Search for Meaning*, he writes about the suffering in his years in Nazi concentration camps that he and his fellow captors endured. He said,

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

In this oft-quoted, powerful statement, Frankl emphasizes the power of responsibility and choice. You are not in a concentration camp. Your circumstances are different than Frankl's, but you have found yourself in a position of pain that is calling for you to choose to learn and grow.

The program before you is both educational and a plan for you to learn and explore your own experience with loss and grief. You are taking responsibility for your own experience. You are choosing to face your pain rather than ignore it.

You have felt powerless in your grief but now is the time to choose to take back your power by facing your pain and addressing it with patience and self-compassion.

Viktor Frankl also said, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Losses and the resultant grief are the stimulus, now you get to choose your response, and choose to take responsibility for your response.

You take responsibility as you open your heart and mind to the possibility of healing. I have experienced this healing through learning and exploring and being willing to look at things differently.

Your Soul Expanded

Bad things happen. They happen all the time. As listed before there are many loss events that you may experience. People we love get hurt or ill, or die, boyfriends or girlfriends leave, marriages end, people are sometimes mean and cruel, we lose a job, we lose a home, we move. There are dozens of events in life that cause feelings of grief. As human beings on the planet we are built for this. How do we know this? Because bad things have been happening since the world began. What this tells us is that even though loss and grief are painful you can learn to cope and then move through the pain of grief.

When you experience grief, it takes you to a new level of pain that you haven’t experienced before. It stretches you and expands your soul. The expansion of your soul is painful, but it can lead to greater joys and meaning in the future.

We tend to think that when bad things happen that we need things to go back to our old normal so that we can start living again. Then one day we wake up to the idea that living through grief, and learning to cope, understand, discover, resolve, and rebuild *is* living. Without exception these are the times when we have lived the most, when we have had to dig deep, find our resolve, pick up our courage and travel forward.

Life never goes back to your previous normal after a painful loss. But life can be different *and* good. You can work through your grief and rebuild your life. On the other side of the pain, like emerging from a dark room, the sun is brighter, the joy is deeper, and the triumphs are greater. No matter where you find yourself on life’s timeline of loss and gain, know that you are living life right now.

Questions to Consider

1. How do I feel about taking responsibility for my response to my grief?

2. How do I feel about being open to learning and growing in my grief and through my healing journey? _____

3. Am I committed to my healing? In what ways am I willing to take responsibility for my learning and growth?

Suggested Build a Life After Loss Podcast Episodes

Ep 33 Avoiding Victim Mentality

Ep 50 Take 1% Responsibility

Ep 64 The Power of Choice

Ep 77 Moving Through Grief