

Chapter 3: Three Prerequisites: Desire, Hope and Effort

Prerequisite #1: Desire

Everything starts with desire. What did you get lately that you desired? Maybe it was cookies or ice cream, so you stopped at the store to buy cookies or a pint of ice cream. Maybe it was new clothes or shoes, so you went online and ordered the clothes or shoes you wanted.

You might be thinking, *I wanted the new clothes or the new shoes, but I couldn't afford them, so I didn't get them.* And that's because you desired something else more than the shoes or the clothes. You desired to be fiscally responsible more than buying new shoes or you wanted to go out to dinner instead of buying the new clothes or you wanted to pay your mortgage instead of buying new shoes. You decided based on your desire.

Maybe you desire a clean house. Depending on how much you desire a clean house, is proportionate to how clean your house is. If you desire a clean house and you don't have a clean house, your desire isn't high enough to move you to action and that's ok.

I heard someone say once that we can educate our desires. What a great concept. If you educated your desires, what would that look like?

This idea that it all starts with desire is the beginning of choices. It's what causes us to choose what we choose. Desires are our inner, strongest motivations. Neal Maxwell, a scholarly theologian, said, "Your deepest desires will control your choices, and your choices will then control the consequences to be felt both in this life and in the life to come."

Desires infused with emotion lead to your choices or behaviors which leads to your results. Therefore, our actions are a result of our desires.

It is importance to believe that you can feel better, and that healing is available to you. If you don't believe you can feel better, you won't notice the support that can help you feel better, you won't search for answers and resources, and you won't do the work of healing.

But even before that you must have a profound desire to heal. Not in a quick fix sense. The most asked question I hear is, how can I solve my grief now? It's not often phrased quite like that, but that is the intent in the questions people ask. I wish I could answer that question of how to solve your grief now. The answer to that question doesn't exist. There is no quick fix. There are ways to help you down the path of healing, and there are things that take you off the path, but there is no one answer to fixing grief.

When you strictly desire to put away the pain, without the understanding of the effort required, that can get you into trouble fast. That can lead to excessive drinking, drugs, or participating in other numbing activities which instead of helping you, and bringing you closer to healing, these harmful activities separate you further from healing. Numbing is an artificial solution which is not a solution at all. The work of grief healing is to seek true healing, not numbing.

Let's review the simpler desires and choices which illustrate what is meant by educating your desire. Think about how your desires have changed over the years. When I was in high school, I spent a lot of money on pop music but as I got older, I wanted to spend my money somewhere else. My desires changed.

I used to drink soda regularly. My favorite was Dr. Pepper. I liked and drank Dr. Pepper, until I switched to Diet Coke because I desired a slimmer frame and I thought that would help me to stay thin. Over time, I learned about the negative impact of soda, so I drank less and less soda and more and more water, because I desired health more than soda. I started to see soda as chemicals and poison. I know that's strong but that really was the shift in my thinking.

Occasionally I still drink soda but usually less than once a month compared to several times a week. Why did I change? I educated my desires. I got clearer about my priorities. I sought resources that educated my desires and put me more in line with what I wanted.

I'm still working on educating my desires. I still over desire cookies, ice cream and anything sugary. My desire for sugar is greater than my desire to eliminate it, even though I believe reducing sugar intake will improve my health. I desire sugar, so I eat sugar, which leads to my results.

Desire



Behavior



Results

Desire leads to your behavior which leads to your results.

I have an opportunity to align my desires with the truth about good health. It's a work in progress. I buy more fruits and vegetables and I try to reach for them more often but it's a process. If I educate my desires enough, I'll be able to create the steady desire needed to get what I want in the long run and avoid what I don't want which is poor health. But if my desire for sugar is stronger than my desire for improved health then I will continue to reach for the sugar and experience the same results. As Einstein said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." In contrast, when I changed my thinking and desires around soda, I created a different result.

Even writing this workbook came from my thoughts and desires. It has been something I've wanted to do for a while, but I was working on my book, *Miracles in the Darkness: Building a Life After Loss*, which was my priority for a time. I finished that book and some other things happened and my desire to write this workbook increased until it led me to action.

You have the same opportunity. You can start to educate your desire around grief and healing. You wouldn't be reading this if you didn't have a desire to feel better and to heal. As you continue through this course you will be educating your desire. You've seen evidence of what's possible regarding healing which has increased your desire to seek greater levels of recovery.

Questions to Consider

1. Do I desire healing? How great is my desire to feel better? Has my desire to heal changed over time?

2. What benefits have I experienced because of my grief? (Examples may be: People expect less of me. I don't have to show up for others. People feel sorry for me. People take care of things for me.)

3. Healing may require me to think differently and to give up old beliefs. Am I willing to let go of the benefits of grieving and hanging onto the pain?

I believe that healing from grief is available to everyone who desires to be healed, including you. But you must desire it enough to lead you to the actions of searching for the truth about healing, of finding the needed support, and of doing the work.

I understand that it's not easy. Dr. Joe Dispenza speaks to the way our minds work and how trauma affects us and creates our state of being.

“Let's face it, we've all had traumas, shocks, and betrayals in our life which have created strong emotional charges. It makes sense then that the stronger the emotional reaction you have to someone or something, the more you pay attention to the cause. When something with such a strong emotional quotient occurs in our life, the brain freezes the scene and takes a snapshot of the event. Now the picture becomes holographically embossed in our neural circuitry. This is the normal process of how a long-term memory is created. Our problems begin when we continuously think and feel within the boundaries of that past experience's circuitry and feel within the chemicals of that past emotion. When we think and feel for long enough within the confines of the event's neurochemistry, it ultimately becomes our state of being. That's because how we think and how we feel becomes our state of being.” (Dr. Joe Dispenza, *Let Your Past Life Be a Past Life*, <https://drjoedispenza.net/blog/change/let-your-past-life-be-a-past-life/>)

Your emotional reaction to your losses and your traumas is so profound that it can keep you stuck in the past, and reliving your pain repeatedly, until it becomes your normal state of being. But even if it has become your state of being, healing is still possible. To desire healing you must feel that healing is possible.

Dr. Benjamin Hardy addresses the importance of environment in his book *Willpower Doesn't Work*. During the Vietnam War, nearly 20 percent of U.S. soldiers developed an addiction to heroin. But when they returned home a massive 95% recovered from their addiction. Why? Their environment. Their environment in Vietnam made it easy to be a heroin addict but when they got home, they were surrounded by people and places that made it difficult to be an addict. (*What Vietnam Taught Us About Breaking Bad Habits*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2012/01/02/144431794/what-vietnam-taught-us-about-breaking-bad-habits>)

This isn't about overcoming a drug addiction but remember you can become addicted to your own grief and pain, as Dr. Dispenza suggested. It's a tricky tight rope to walk. Grief is normal. It's the normal reaction we have to loss and grief. Grief can be the pathway to healing as your mind and body adjust to the loss. But the chemistry produced in the body by grief can be addictive. While grief is normal and there is no timeline for how long it can last. Without intervention and your personal involvement, you can get stuck in grief. The chemistry of emotions, and specifically grief, is the scientific reason you can become stuck.

As Dr. Hardy proposes, your environment is important. I'm not suggesting you move to another country to change your environment. Sometimes we're tempted to just leave the place where we've experienced our pain. While some situations may warrant leaving your circumstances that's not usually helpful.

Your environment is not only your physical surroundings, it also includes visual, and auditory stimuli. Are you spending all day reading unhelpful posts on Facebook or Instagram that reinforce the falsehood that you must grieve the rest of your life? What do you have around your house? Do the pictures, quotes and environment encourage healing or keep you in the past? That doesn't mean you have to take down pictures of a loved one who has died, or anything similar, but do be aware of your environment. When you evaluate your environment and create an environment that promotes healing, you are educating your desire to heal.

Questions to Consider

1. What things in my environment keep me stuck in the past?

2. What things in my environment encourage and inspire me?

Louise Hay wrote in her book *You can Heal Your Heart*, “while no one can change the physical reality of a loved one dying, how we hold the experience after a loss makes all the difference in the world. How many of us put a negative interpretation on the day our loved one died? Do we talk about how a special day or holiday was forever ruined by their passing? We have such a profound way of affecting our inner world by the words we choose?”

She suggests that you practice affirmations that can aid in healing. For example, here are the affirmations she suggested to a woman who lost her mother on her own birthday, “I remember my mother with love. I celebrate my birthday with gratitude and love. My birth and life were made possible by my mother.”

Here are some affirmations you can practice. You can also create your own that speak to your circumstances.

Healing is available to me.

I choose healing.

I am whole and I always have been.

I am worth the effort to heal.

Write your affirmations here: _____

I invite you to look around your house, your social media, your work, and anywhere that you spend time and start to clean up the messages that aren’t helping and start to include hopeful input that does support your healing.

In summary

1. You make choices according to your desires
2. You can educate your desires
3. Changing your environment to a healing environment can assist you in educating your desires.

Prerequisite #2: Hope

The most important feelings you can generate in your journey through grief is desire for healing and hope of healing. Hope is essential to healing.

What is hope and how can you nurture your hope?

This explanation of hope from a religious text is instructive:

“The word *hope* is sometimes misunderstood. In our everyday language, the word often has a hint of uncertainty. For example, we may say that we hope for a change in the weather or a visit from a friend. In the language of the gospel, however, the word *hope* is sure, unwavering, and active.”

Active hope is sure and unwavering. This is the type of hope we’re referring too. In the 1828 Webster Dictionary, hope is described as “confidence in a future event” and “the highest degree of well-founded expectation of good.” As you think of hope and increasing your hope, hold onto these words of confidence and expectation.

Hope is a choice. You can choose to have hope for the future. The idea of using the power of choice in this way may be foreign to you, but choosing hope is available to you. The following ideas will help you to build your hope in your future.

Recognize your wins. Recognize that your actions matter and your thoughts matter. Celebrate the little things every day. In fact, Shawn Achor, a speaker and a happiness researcher, suggests that each day you write down one positive experience from that day. He says doing this practice allows your brain to relive it and generates again the positive energy of the event. In general, we are far too hard on ourselves. When you start to acknowledge successes, even your small wins, you begin to get better at recognizing your goodness, progress and success.

Look for Role Models.

A Psychology Today article suggested that you “look for role models who have found solutions. There are many, many people who have overcome tremendous adversity. Reading their stories and surrounding yourself with supportive messages and people can help you build hope.”

Looking for role models is important. I hope I can be one of those role models for you. If you don't have hope for your future right now, start to build it with an affirmation like “If Julie can heal, perhaps it's possible for me too.” Look for hope around you through other people in your life and through their examples. Then use it as a steppingstone.

Stair stepping beliefs can be immensely helpful. This looks like starting with a new belief that is easier for you to believe and then stair stepping into greater belief in the possibilities. In other words, growing your hope.

As an example, it may look like this:

If Julie (or fill-in another role model) can heal, perhaps it's possible for me too.

It's possible I could heal from the pain of grief.

I'm learning the steps of healing.

I can heal.

I am healing.

I am healed.

Each belief leads to the next possible belief. Start with the first one and practice it until it feels true then move to the next one. Each time, you are stretching your hope and belief in your future.

Questions to Consider

- Who are my role models of overcoming challenging circumstances? What did they overcome and how is their experience an example for me?

- What do I want to believe is true? What three progressive thoughts that can lead me to greater belief and hope?

In the same Psychology Today article, they explained learned helplessness, which was discovered by Martin Seligman, one of the founding fathers of positive psychology. When you go through difficult, challenging experiences that are out of your control, you can start to feel like you have no control anywhere in your life which can create a situation where you stop trying.

I was working with a client recently who is going through a tremendously challenging divorce. I noticed he was repeatedly saying, “I have no control.” That’s an extremely dangerous message for the brain. If you repeatedly tell yourself, you have no control, you will start to live as if you have no control. But you do.

You may not have control in some situations, but there are always areas where you do have control. I pointed this trend out to my client and invited him to make a list of what he does have control over. This increased his awareness of the control he did have in his life, and he started to make incredible, positive changes because of it.

When words come out of your mouth it’s because it’s in your mind. Pay attention to the things you say. You may have never paid attention to your words before, but your words are clues to your persistent thoughts. Do you like those thoughts? Is there a better way of thinking that would serve you better? Start paying attention to your words and then follow the next recommendation.

Be kind to yourself and others.

How can you express kindness to yourself today? Can you take a break for a warm cup of tea and listen to some quiet music that’s uplifting? I love a good cup of peppermint tea! Can you read something inspiring? Can you practice some kind messages? Messages such as *I’m whole and I always have been. I am enough. I am loved. I follow my intuition. I totally love and accept myself.* What statements can you practice that would uplift you?

Check in with the affirmations you wrote previously. Practicing affirmations will create an affirmative mind. This practice will strengthen you as you face the challenges of grief. Write down 1 or 2 affirmations and post them in a couple of places where you’ll see them often. Practice saying them out loud. Repeat them in your mind several times a day. You will find it easier and easier to be kind to yourself when you are practicing good thoughts about yourself.

Be kind to others too. Who do you know who would appreciate a kind word from you? Text them today or pick up the phone and call them. Smile at someone in the grocery store. Compliment the next person you meet. Find ways to lift others in simple ways and you’ll lift yourself.

Lean on your faith.

If you have faith in God, a higher power or the universe, that is a wonderful source of hope. Do you have a daily spiritual practice? As you practice your spirituality it will open your mind to learning and hope. Your perspective will change, and you'll be able to avoid learned helplessness referred to earlier, because you will gain a perspective that you are truly never alone. There is always help and hope from a higher power to build you and support you.

To illustrate the importance of our spiritual wellbeing here is just one study that shows the power of one specific spiritual practice. There are similar studies that show the positive impact of prayer, meditation, being in nature, etc. The Center for Bible Engagement studies people's engagement with the Bible. From their website what they have found in their studies is that "the life of someone who engages in the scriptures 4 or more times a week looks radically different from the life of someone who does not. In fact, the lives of Christians who do not engage the Bible most days of the week are statistically the same as the lives of non-believers." Part of the research suggests that those who engage in the Bible 4x or more a week are 59% less likely to view pornography (and I would imagine this would extend to other risky behaviors also) and 30% less likely to struggle with loneliness."

These statistics speak to the importance of continuing or strengthening your spiritual practices whatever those practices are for you. What are your current spiritual practices? This could include meditation, prayer, inspirational reading, sitting in nature or a myriad of other options.

Write about what you want in the future.

When you have a major loss that turns your world upside down, everything changes instantly. The early days are really spent in so much turmoil and anguish but as you start to heal you may notice that what you thought you wanted in the future is not what you want now. That's ok.

You get to redefine your future. Remember you are not your past. Your past and your losses do not define you. It's never too early to practice dreaming again. Practice imagining what you want for your future.

It's nearly impossible to move into the future when you can't picture the future. When you leave the future blank in your mind, it's like turning on the GPS and asking it to show the direction when you've never even put in the destination. It's not necessary to have a complete detailed picture of the future, but it is very helpful to identify 1-3 things that you would like to see happen.

If the idea of looking at the future right now feels daunting, that's ok. Everyone is on their unique path to healing. If it's something you want to try, keep this as uncomplicated as possible. For example, it may be as simple as saying I want to learn a new hobby. Or you can skip it all together and that's totally ok too. Be open to the idea of this being something you come back to later.

In summary, these are the 5 suggestions for increasing hope:

1. Acknowledge your wins each day. Write down something positive that happened today
2. Look for role models
3. Be kind to yourself and others
4. Lean on your faith
5. Write about what you want in the future

My life changed radically the moment my children Carrie and David died. Their death was devastating and painful for a long time, but eventually through seeking help and working through my pain I was able to overcome the pain of grief, shame and guilt. I enjoy a wonderful life now full of happiness and meaning. I'm not a unicorn. There is nothing unique or special about me. You can overcome the pain of grief, shame and guilt, too.

Prerequisite #3: Effort

Winston Churchill said, “Continuous effort – not strength or intelligence – is the key to unlocking our potential.” This applies to the work of grief too. You may have heard and believed that time heals all wounds. Depending on where you are in your grief journey this idea may be frustrating to you. You may feel that enough time has passed, and you wonder why you still feel terrible. If this is the case for you, remember it’s ok. There’s nothing wrong with you, you’re just missing good information and tools to help you through.

Once again, let’s debunk the idea that time is what heals us, because without focused effort, time will not lead to healing. Time with the right effort can lead you to feeling better along the way and ultimately to healing from the pain of grief.

Think back on something you accomplished. What allowed you to accomplish your goal? When I wrote my book *Miracles in the Darkness: Build a Life After Loss*, I had a desire to do it. My *desire* to write the book was fueled by my tremendous *hope* that it would be beneficial to others and then I had to put forth the *effort* and do the work. My *hope* and *desire* fueled my *effort*.

The work of grief looks a little different than some goals and accomplishments but not much really. Many of the goals and accomplishments you work towards are tangible. You know what it’s going to look like when you finish it. If you want to paint a painting, you know when the painting is done. When you want to finish a project at work, you know the steps and the end goal.

The work of grief is less tangible. Although I highly encourage you to think about what you want at the end of this course and beyond. What will it look like when you are no longer plagued by constant grief? What do you want it to look like?

The work of your grief might be willingness to learn and grow, and willingness to feel what you’re feeling and understand how to do that and practice feeling. It might be asking questions and seeking answers. It might be practicing loving yourself and giving yourself compassion and patience and room to grow. It might be saying no to less important things so you can have the space for your grief instead of avoiding your grief by staying overly busy.

It might be learning how to cope in ways that are more helpful instead of harmful. It might be crying, practicing gratitude or intentionally introducing some positivity into your day. It might be meditating, practicing affirmations, and slowing down.

When you sit and wait for the pain to leave you will be disappointed and you can easily slip into despair. Without little bits of progress, you will slip into despair. You never stand still. If you think you can wait out grief, you will find yourself falling further into your grief and sorrow. Don't allow yourself to fall into despair. You will look for ways to numb instead of ways to build. It's vitally important that you continue to put forth effort. That does not mean that you must spend hours and hours each day addressing your grief. You will be surprised that just a few minutes a day of continuous effort will make a vast difference.

When you think of effort or work you may picture plowing forward and ignoring your pain and just getting busy. This is not about getting busy. This is about getting real and facing your pain and not ignoring it. If you're willing to put forth the effort to learn and grow, the resources will show up for you. You will find the answers.

Our brains are master sorters. We pay attention to what we consider important and relevant. Think about the last time you bought a car. You may have never noticed that same make and model or color of vehicle on the road. You drive off the lot and the next few days you notice how many vehicles are just like yours! This is an example of your mind sorting. Before you bought your car that car was not top of mind. You had no reason to notice that car, so your brain never brought it to your attention. Your mind only brings to your consciousness what you're looking for and what you deem as important. Be selective about what you tell your brain is significant.

Give your brain some direction. Encourage your brain to pay attention to the resources, support and ideas that will help you in your healing journey. Then when you start to notice the many opportunities in front of you. Remember what Winston Churchill said, it's not about strength and intelligence it's about putting forth the effort.

Questions to Consider

1. How comfortable are you with the idea that grief healing requires effort?

Suggested Build a Life After Loss Podcast Episodes:

Ep. 6 Choose Hope

Ep. 67 Increasing Hope

Ep. 68 It Starts with Desire

Ep. 88 Continuous Effort