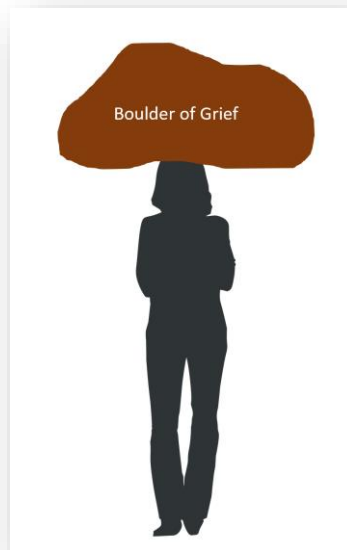


Chapter 6: Understanding

The Boulder of Grief

When loss hits you hard it's as if a boulder has landed on you – the boulder of grief. When we describe loss and grief, we use words like heavy, devastating, crushing, overcome, distressing, distraught and shattering. The heavy weight of loss and grief descends on you and overwhelms and overtakes you.



The boulder of grief is heavy; it flattens you and leaves you feeling battered, bruised, and weary.



The boulder of grief settles into your core. It becomes your companion day and night as your body, mind, and spirit work to assimilate the reality of your devastating loss.



Loss experiences stack up inside of you when grief is left unresolved. Because the process of resolving grief is so misunderstood or not even considered, many people carry around the heavy weight of unresolved grief for many years or even a lifetime. Left unresolved, grief affects your heart and your throat. You will shut off feelings and have trouble speaking and expressing yourself. You may even feel that it's hard to breathe. Notice how the boulders of grief are covering your heart and your voice.

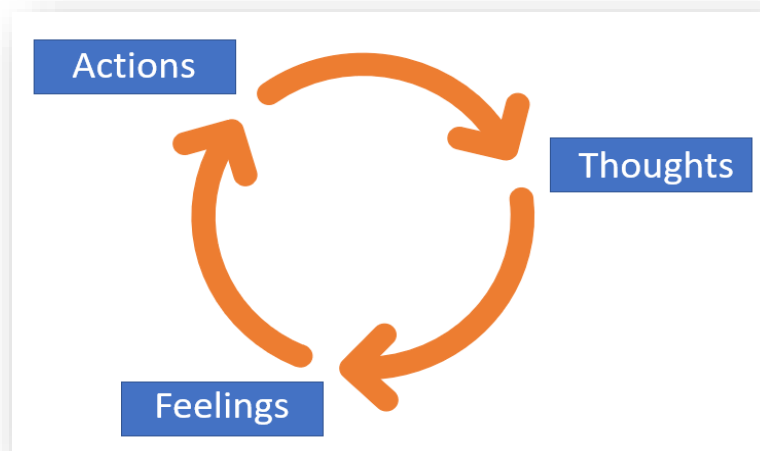


The Source of Emotion

Grief is a time of a surplus of emotions. It's also a time when you may be trying hard to not feel any of them because so many of the emotions that surface are unpleasant, difficult or painful. Your human nature is built to avoid pain and to seek pleasure, so it's built into your programming to try to avoid the difficult emotions. Unfortunately, ignoring them does not work and can create more problems for you in the long run, including physical or emotional ailments.

Let's look at where feelings come from so the smorgasbord of emotions that arise will start to make sense.

Perhaps you've heard of the think-feel-act (TFA) cycle. In short, the model shows that how we think affects how we feel and how we act; how we feel affects how we think and how we act; and how we act affects how we think and how we feel.



Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor, author and psychotherapist 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.”

In the space he's referring to is your thoughts and feelings. In between an outside stimulus and your actions is your thoughts and feelings. You may have been taught that you must feel your feelings and there's nothing you can do about them. Or you may have been taught to ignore your feelings or to push them down entirely. When you look at the triad model above, you start to notice that if you can't affect your feelings then you can't affect your behavior and therefore you can't affect the outcomes of your life since your results are tied to your actions.

Feelings are clues to what you are thinking and clues to why you act the way you do. Feelings can be the catalyst for change when you decide to get involved.

Because your results in life – whether positive or negative – are tied to your actions, you spend a lot of time trying to adjust your actions to get the outcome you want. But if your actions are influenced by your thoughts and feelings that's where you really need to get involved. Remember what Frankl said, "between stimulus and response is a space." The space is your thoughts and feelings.

Your feelings are a powerful motivator. How often have you said *I just don't feel like it*? If you don't feel like it, you're not likely to do it. Sometimes you think I should do this but then the feeling isn't there so you don't do it no matter how much you think you should.

Where do your feelings come from? There's a clue in the diagram. Your feelings come from your thoughts. Even your grief comes from your thoughts as you reflect on how much you miss someone or how it shouldn't have happened or any number of thoughts about your loss. Think about it – you are not influenced by every loss that happens in the world, only the losses that affect you personally. In other words, you are affected by the losses that you have thoughts about. Because you have thoughts about it, you have feelings about it. Every feeling can be traced back to a thought.

Sometimes your thoughts, feelings and actions are closely intertwined. There is so little space between these three elements that you can't even detect how the thought affected the feeling and then the action. In some cases, your model might look more like this.



However, with closer examination, even though the action felt automatic you can determine what feelings caused you to respond the way that you did. Then when you start to examine your feelings, you can start to track back to the thought that created the feeling. As you practice looking at the underlying feelings and thoughts that caused your actions, you will start to create more space between the stimulus and the response. This takes time and practice. Once you know the thought that created your feeling you can decide if you want to change the thought or keep it. It's up to you. The best news is that changing your thought, and therefore your feelings, is always an option. However, don't be in too big a rush to change the thought and the feeling. Feeling what your feeling will always come first.

Questions to Consider

- What action did you take recently that surprise you?

- What feeling were you feeling when you took the action?

- When you felt that what were you thinking?

Emotional Vocabulary

Susan David, Ph.D., author of *Emotional Agility*, says, “Our raw feelings can be the messengers we need to teach us things about ourselves and can prompt insights into important life directions.” Unfortunately, much of society has taught us to suppress our emotions, which blocks us from the very emotions that can help us to heal.

To begin understanding and allowing your emotions, build your emotional vocabulary. The first step in emotional management is being able to name your feeling. Perhaps you’re used to only hearing and saying common feeling words like happy or sad, mad, or glad, excited or disappointed.

In the very first section of this workbook, there’s a sample feelings wheel that will help to expand your emotional vocabulary. For example, on the chart you’ll find several words for sad including guilty, ashamed, depressed, lonely, bored, tired, remorseful, stupid, inferior, isolated, apathetic, sleepy. Each of these words are more specific emotions that can all be lumped into a description of sad. When you can find a more specific, descriptive word for how you’re feeling you have better clarity.

For the next week try the following exercise:

1. Ask yourself 2-3 times a day, *how am I feeling right now?*
2. Find a specific emotion on the chart that matches how you’re feeling. Consider exploring other feelings charts if you can’t find the word you are looking for.
3. Write down the time of day, the emotion and a very brief phrase about why you might be feeling the way you’re feeling. It might look like this: 2 pm, feeling bored because my friends just left and I’m missing their company.
4. To help you remember to log your emotions, set a timer for different times a day to check in with yourself.

Allowing Emotions

To allow emotion is to acknowledge the feelings you're feeling and to sit with it. An emotion is a vibration in the body. Emotions are energy in motion and if you allow the emotion instead of ignoring it, it tends to continue to move through you instead of becoming trapped. If you ignore it, it becomes more demanding, much like a toddler who isn't getting the attention they want. Continuously ignoring emotions will cause them to become trapped, which takes a toll on your emotional energy and your physical health.

To start sitting with the feeling and paying attention, take a deep breath, and go into your body. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What am I feeling? Name it.
2. Where do I feel it in my body?
3. What does the vibration feel like?
4. Does it have a color or a texture?
5. Sit with the feeling, noticing it, paying attention to it and allowing it to continue to move through you until it's run its course.

It's not always possible to take the 5 minutes to sit with a feeling and that's ok. Practice this during quiet moments once or twice a day to get familiar with the process. Avoid saying I'm too busy and not doing it at all. It only takes a few minutes and when you have more practice you may find that it takes less than 2 minutes.

Another temptation with emotions is to spin in thoughts. Remember our feelings influence our thoughts and our actions. When a painful feeling surfaces, you may find yourself ruminating on one painful thought after another. This can spin you into heavier and heavier painful emotions. If you find yourself doing this, try to go into the sensation in your body. This will take you out of mind and the thinking and spinning, and it will put you into your body, allowing you to focus on the emotion and processing it.

At first you will find yourself spinning in thoughts and remembering this tool hours afterwards. Don't let that discourage you. This is normal. Each time you remember you will be closer to being able to affect the process. The next time you might remember right afterwards. The time after that you might remember after 30 minutes of spinning in painful thoughts.

The next time you may remember 10 minutes in and so on until you catch yourself right at the beginning, a sign that you have integrated this skill. Be patient with the process of learning.

Questions to Consider

At the end of the week answer the following questions:

- What am I learning by paying attention to my feelings?

- Am I noticing any patterns?

Your Brain on Grief

On brainfacts.org they report that, “For the average adult in a resting state, the brain consumes about 20 percent of the body’s energy. The brain’s primary function — processing and transmitting information through electrical signals — is very, very expensive in terms of energy use.”

Your brain uses a lot of energy, and during a season of grief, your brain is using a huge portion of the brain power to cope with grief. A lot of your body’s energy each day is being used to process grief. It’s exhausting and draining. It’s normal if you feel tired or confused. With so much of your brain power going to grief you will have less available to solve everyday problems that you have easily handled in the past. You may feel overwhelmed because the energy for function is being diverted for grief processing. You may feel forgetful for the same reason.

Think of a computer processor. When the processor is overburdened with background processing the normal functions of your computer will slow down to accommodate the added load. The functional bandwidth is overwhelmed with additional processing. It’s the same with your brain. Even when you’re not actively aware of your grief or your grieving process your brain is in the background hard at work dealing with the added burden of grief.

Painful Emotions

Emotions create chemistry. That's why you can so quickly feel a reaction to something in your body. Your emotional and your physical body are linked together and inseparable. When you think the same thoughts over and over and you feel the same feelings over and over, you are repeatedly producing the same chemical reactions which creates what Dr. Joe Dispenza calls a state of being as you become connected to the chemical compound of the repeated emotions.

Joe Dispenza "Just as thoughts are the language of the brain, feelings are the language of the body. And how you think and how you feel create a state of being. Your personality is made up of how you think, act, and feel. It is your state of being. Therefore, your same thoughts, actions, and feelings will keep you enslaved to the same past personal reality."

This explains why you may feel like a different person after a tragic loss. Your chemistry has shifted with your new thoughts and feelings. While again it is the normal process to experience grief, it's also important to keep the emotions moving and not to stay stuck in the new state of being or the chemistry of grief. Inevitably, however long you are in grief will feel like it's too long. With effort, understanding and patience you are processing. Knowing that you are doing the work should give you assurance that you are not stuck in grief but instead you are doing the work to continue the healing process.

When you are feeling especially painful emotions like, guilt, shame, regret, and anger, remember that it's just chemistry produced by your body as a response to the vibrational quality of the emotion. Remind yourself, *I'm ok. This is just a chemical response; this is just a vibration.*

Guilt, Shame and Anger

Feeling guilty is a common response to a loss. You may feel guilty because you feel like you could have done something different to keep it from happening. You may feel guilty because you feel responsible somehow for what happened. But guilt is doing something with the intent to harm. Most of the time guilt is misplaced. Did you intentionally do something to harm someone? Or, with hindsight, do you regret an action or not taking an action?

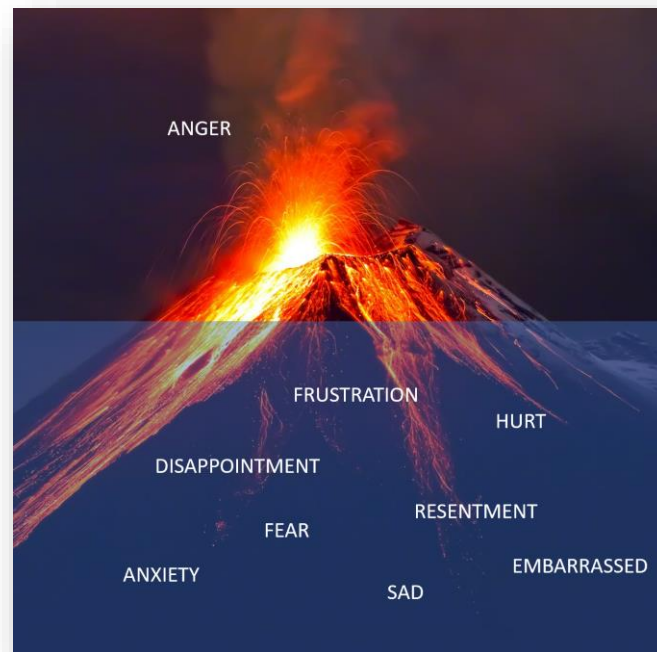
Seldom do we purposely do something to harm someone. Far, far more often, it's regret not guilt that you're feeling. You regret that you didn't do something or say something. Examine your guilt feelings and see if instead it's really regret that you're feeling.

Regret happens when you compare what you wished you had done with what you did do. What you wished you had done is based on new information that wasn't available to you when you made your previous decision. At the time you chose what you did, you were doing the best you could with the information you had. With new information, you may feel that you would have chosen differently but that information wasn't available to you before the events. It's unfair to try to make decisions for the past from the perspective of your new present. You're always doing the best you can.

Shame is especially damaging. Brené Brown wrote, "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. I don't believe shame is helpful or productive." By comparison, Brown suggests that guilt can be productive in that it leads to making changes to correct an error. Brown said, "the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the differences between "I am bad" and "I did something bad."

The antidote for shame is connection and expression. Brown again said, "when we find the courage to share our experiences and the compassion to hear others tell their stories, we force shame out of hiding, and end the silence."

Anger is another emotion that feels involuntary and out of your control. It demands attention. It can be internalized or explosive. Either way it's destructive. Anger is most often a secondary emotion. It's like the tip of an emersed volcano. Anger is what you show or express, but underneath is another painful emotion that has been hiding and anger is its expression.



Why do we so often choose anger instead of acknowledging that we feel hurt, lonely, frustrated, sad, fearful, anxious, disappointed, or embarrassed, to name just a few? One reason is anger feels more powerful. For example, you feel less vulnerable in anger than you do in sadness. It may feel easier to express anger and use your anger to release pent-up emotions, than it does to express how sad you are, how afraid you are or how very hurt you feel.

Assessing the underlying core feelings can help to dispel this fiery emotion. Anger can become a habit. If you find that you are frequently angry, ask yourself, what am I really feeling that I haven't wanted to admit or express?

Questions to Consider

- Do you find that you are frequently angry? If so, what is triggering your anger?

- What underlying emotions have you been expressing through anger?

Healing Resistance

Moving through grief and healing is not linear. It's not a straight path with no detours. It's a living, breathing learning process. During this process a dangerous detour is victim mentality. It's important to heed the warning of this detour.

People are sympathetic to your pain and often say things like "I have no idea how you are functioning." "How do you go on?" "How do you endure that?" You can see why it would be extremely easy to think of yourself as a victim. You have the sympathy and the pity to prove it.

A victim mentality causes resistance to healing. It is believing that your circumstances have made you the victim and therefore you have no choice but to view yourself this way. The truth is you have seen hard things which is why the slope is slippery to a victim mindset.

A victim mentality “is a method of avoiding responsibility and criticism and receiving attention and compassion.” This description highlights the benefits of being the victim. People will expect less of you. You won’t have to put yourself out there. It’s a reason to stay hidden in the shadows of life and not take responsibility for yourself. It’s a way to receive attention and have the right to complain. You may become addicted to the drama because it may feel better and easier to point the blame at someone else and feel the heightened emotions of criticism than it is to face your own discomfort.

You may have heard various opinions on the possibility of healing from the pain of grief, and you notice that many people, including some we consider experts, suggest that healing isn’t possible. Instead, they say the best you can hope for is to start feeling better but that you can expect to grieve the rest of your life.

Perhaps that idea makes sense to you because you can’t imagine how you could heal. I get it. I remember feeling that way too. While I kept the hope of healing alive sometimes the ember of hope was so tiny and other times it was a noticeable flame. Eventually, I harvested the fruit of my hope in healing.

I don’t believe you have to grieve the rest of your life. I believe healing from the pain of loss is available to you. Why? Because I’ve experienced it. I’ve felt the joy of healing. I have felt the lifting of the burden of loss. It’s not that the circumstances have changed, of course, but my connection to the circumstances have changed. I’m at peace. I’ve done the work of healing; the work that I share with you here. Open your mind to the possibility of eventually healing, of creating a life of purpose and joy, of being able to enjoy fond memories without the pain of grief and of being able to let go of the pain of the past.

In order to work towards healing, you’ll want to continue to take responsibility for yourself and your healing. This will include uprooting the tendencies toward being a victim. Victim mentality can be very subtle. Everyone experiences some level of feeling like the victim. The first step is recognizing it and asking yourself how you can take responsibility for your experience. You don’t get to decide how others show up in your life or how some things play out in the world around you, but you do get to decide how you are going to think, feel and respond to it. Healing includes refining your thoughts, feelings, and responses.

The Bridge of Grief and Pain

When you lose someone you love, you may feel like you can't let go of the pain of loss because letting go of the pain feels like letting go of the person. Moving on feels like moving away from the person you've lost. Moving forward feels the same. You may even hear that the pain of loss is equivalent to the intensity of your love; this is true. However, it does not mean that you must keep the pain to prove your love.

When someone you love dies or becomes estranged from you, it naturally changes the relationship. The relationship that used to include physical presence no longer includes the ability to be with each other in that way. You still have a relationship with the person, but the nature of the relationship has changed. Because of the strong emotions you attach to the loss of that person, you create a bridge of grief and pain to that person. This becomes the new connection. You still love and appreciate them, but the strongest bond is with the pain and grief which can detract from your feelings of love and gratitude. Thinking that your connection to the person can be measured by the extent of your despair makes it extremely difficult to let go of the pain and grief because that would mean letting go of the person or at least not "proving" your love by your suffering. Recognizing your current need to hold onto pain to hold onto the person is an important element of understanding your grief.



Before their death or the estrangement, you did not need a bridge of pain and grief to connect you. Chances are your connection to them before was love and gratitude. You loved who they were. You loved their presence in your life. You were grateful for them. You were grateful for your relationship with them and for your special bond. Love and gratitude for them and who they are is still available to you. As you heal, focus on strengthening the bond of love and gratitude between you and your loved one even in your new circumstances. As you focus your attention on those expanded feelings of care and thankfulness, you'll be more and more willing to let go of the pain of loss.

Gratitude and love are very powerful, uplifting emotions that will transform your life. Even when a romantic relationship ends in break up or divorce, you can find ways to love and appreciate the person that you were connected with previously in such an intimate way. This will take some work, but animosity will hurt you more than help you. As you open your heart to love you will feel the benefits of this powerful emotion.



As you work through the feelings of grief, you will rediscover your immense love and gratitude. One of the signs of healing is experiencing more love and gratitude. Another sign of healing is being able to remember the good times without them being overshadowed by feelings of sadness or despair. These are sign posts along the journey of healing that let you know you are heading in the right direction. Do not worry if you are still feeling a lot of grief.

This is a process and understanding what you're working towards will help you to shape your path to get there.

Eventually your bond to the person will be predominately love and gratitude. The pain of grief will have fallen away, and you may even discover that your love and gratitude for the person is even greater than it was before. While it may be true that the intensity of your relationship before the loss may have a correlation to the intensity of the grief after the loss, this natural response does not correlate to how you must experience the loss in the future. It is not necessary to prove your love by suffering for the rest of your life. Strengthening the bridge of love and gratitude allows you to hold onto the person *and* let go of the pain of loss.



When You've Been Wronged

Most often people associate grief with losing someone they love through death. But what if your loss is due to someone else's reckless and painful actions, resulting in abuse, significant financial loss or another awful event. When you feel wronged it's easy to get stuck in grief and anger. Unlike the bridge that was explained above, you may never have built a relationship of love and gratitude with this person that has caused you so much pain. Yet now you are tied to them with grief and anger.

You may feel like letting go of your grief and anger is letting the other person off the hook. You may have even heard it explained like this, "holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Your anger and resentment are painful, and you know it is hurting you but how can you resolve these two conflicting needs: the need to let it go and the need to see justice done.

First, remember if they are responsible for wrongdoing, they are responsible regardless of whether you are angry or not and it may not be your responsibility to hold them accountable. Letting go of the pain someone else has inflicted on you does not make them less accountable. Second, letting go will allow you to show up with a clear head if you are ever asked to explain your part of the incident. Strong negative emotions can weaken your emotional and physical state. It's always better to move through the negative emotions and work toward focusing on what's within your power than to sit in despair because of someone else's actions. This approach will take time, perspective, and effort. As with moving through grief of any kind, be patient with yourself in this process.

Letting Go

Healing is letting go of the pain of loss; it is not letting go of the person you've lost. You are never moving away from or separating from the person you love; you are only separating from the pain of loss. Also, letting go of the grief of the wounds someone else has inflicted on you does not make them less responsible. You are moving through the pain of the loss and moving toward the life that you want to build while carrying with you the warm memories of those you care about.

As Dr. Joe Dispenza said in his book *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself*, "A memory without the emotional charge is called wisdom."

Suggested Build a Life After Loss Podcast Episodes:

Ep. 7 What Others Say and Do

Ep. 10 The Magic of Gratitude

Ep. 21 Grief and Moving Forward

Ep. 94 Emotional Injury