

Unequivocally the best book on grief I've ever read. This reaches far beyond a typical textbook. It is extremely practical in addressing, with insight and compassion, what I've witnessed as a pastoral practitioner for over thirty years. This quote is worth the price of the book, "Death steals a person, every facet of them; grief steals living from the survivor." I wish I had this powerful resource in my earlier years as a chaplain. Every Christian chaplain, and everyone experiencing grief, needs a copy.

Rev. Dr. Alan T. "Blues" Baker,  
*CEO ChaplainCare and Rear Admiral, Chaplain Corps, US Navy (Retired)*

This exquisite book by Kate Meyer invites the reader into a reflective, authentic intrapersonal journey that elicits insight and healing. She provides a thoughtful approach to integrating sound theology with the inevitable aspects of understanding how the mind and body can be affected by loss and bereavement. She offers depth, breadth, and substance to a topic that is often overlooked. I highly recommend this wonderful book that fosters awareness, empathy, compassion, since it is such a gift and faith offering to those who are blessed to engage with this important resource.

Dr. Catherine Mueller-Bell, LPC, PhD,  
*Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

Grief is a long and winding road; a natural, but unpredictable journey. Meyer, demystifies grief—the greatest cost of love—and invites her readers to discover life and faith anew. She is a practical guide whose clinical wisdom facilitates restored identities, awakens hopeful living, and resists death's desire to undo the gifts of love. Be empowered to befriend your grief.

Rev. Jaco J. Hamman, PhD,  
*Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture, Vanderbilt Divinity School*

Kate Meyer has tackled a delicate topic with grace, giving the reader permission to feel grief that is free of guilt. Kate's writing style is beautiful and easy to understand. As a Christian and someone that has felt much discomfort with the comment, "They are in a better place," I appreciate Kate's candor and know that she is speaking with a loving heart to help ease that discomfort. In addition to being comforting, *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief*, is also filled with practical information about the stages of grief and healthy tools of emotional expression, just to name a few. As a therapist and executive director of a nonprofit counseling agency, I would recommend this book to anyone. Grief is a shared human experience and I think the true benefit would come from reading this book at any point in one's life.

Sarah Lewakowski, MA, LLP,  
*Executive Director, Mosaic Counseling*

Kate Meyer's compassionate, empowering new book on grief invites readers to embrace a both/and approach to the journey of healing and of finding renewed hope. In a world plagued by either/or thinking, this holistic model is deeply life-giving and will bless many with its engaging format and well-laid out, inspiring process. A true gift for believers and seekers alike.

Rev. Elizabeth Testa,  
*Women's Transformation and Leadership and Equity-Based Hospitality,  
Reformed Church of America*



Faith Doesn't  
Erase Grief



# Faith Doesn't Erase Grief

EMBRACING THE EXPERIENCE  
AND FINDING HOPE

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*Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.*

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If you are feeling suicidal, thinking about hurting yourself, or are concerned that someone you know may be in danger of hurting himself or herself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). You can also find help in locating a mental health professional by consulting with your health care provider.

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To my clients for their bravery, honesty, and vulnerability,  
and to my parents for their unfailing support

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Grief  
*does not go away*  
simply because  
**YOUR FAITH**  
*is a*  
central component  
of your life.

# Introduction

**F***aith Doesn't Erase Grief* is written first and foremost for the griever who is also a believer. Too often Christian grievers are “invited” or “encouraged” to rejoice that their loved one is in “a better place” rather than focus on their grief. Though well-intentioned, this general stance of the Church is flat wrong and inflicts damage upon all to whom it is presented. It is time for Christian grievers to be told the truth. Grief is not an indication of lapsed faith, and believing in the existence of heaven does not require grief to be pushed to the side.

I've found most Christian books about grief altogether ignore the truths found in psychology, so this book interweaves those truths with the Word of God to help readers recognize that, despite what might have been taught or preached to them, grief and faith do not have an inverse relationship. It's not either/or. Learning instead to embrace the both/and relationship empowers grievers, pastors, friends, and families to live into the natural state of grief and to do so with God's understanding.

This book can be read from cover to cover or broken up as needed, either alone or with others in a small group setting. A

special note to pastors, group facilitators, counselors, friends, and families: remember that each griever's journey is unique to that person. It is important to allow for different stories and experiences to be shared without fear of comparison or shame. If small group work is desired, I have found it works best to gather groups based upon the same type of death (i.e., spouse, child, sibling, etc.). I also find it most effective to group new grievers separately from those beyond their first year of grief.

The goal of this book is not to erase grief, because grief is a natural part of life. Instead, the goal of this book is to show you how to embrace the fullness of your grief, including moments of faith-related doubts and anger at God, and to teach you grief does not go away simply because your faith is a central component of your life. In fact, faith very often complicates grief. This book shows a way to face those complications and to explore your faith by finally being honest about your grief. In doing so, you will learn how to live with renewed purpose, a deeper understanding of self and God, and, if desired, a continued connection with your loved one.

It can be intimidating to begin this kind of process, to intentionally confront pain. Remember that it consumes more energy to avoid pain than to confront it, and numbing the pain only delays the inevitable. Dosing your exposure to the pain is okay, but try to do so with a plan for when you will return to continue your work.

Congratulations on taking this important step of acknowledging and honoring your grief. This is your road, so you choose the pace. Honor your pace and give yourself breaks when you need them. Remember, you do not walk this road alone.



Grief,  
*in its most*  
simplified form, is  
**NOTHING**  
*more than a*  
natural reaction  
to death.

# *One*

## You Can Hate This...

**Y**ou are a Christian. You love God and try to live your life according to God's leading and what the Bible teaches. And then, your world is turned upside down by death.

In the first few days, it seems almost bearable. The support system, including your faith community, is on high alert: arranging food, sending cards, calling, and offering assistance with cleaning or children. You make it through the funeral, and when someone compliments your strength, you smile and quote Philippians 4:13. The person smiles and nods before offering, for the thousandth time, to do anything you need. Then, you return home to give your true feelings space to breathe.

As days turn to weeks, you notice it is increasingly difficult to keep up the façade. Tolerance for clichés and Bible verses about heaven is waning at a significant rate. Yet, because you couldn't come up with another believable excuse to say no, you finally agree to go to lunch with a friend. While preparing, you try to talk yourself into a positive outlook, and by the time you reach the restaurant, you're cautiously optimistic about the experience.

And then it happens. It comes when you least expect it and without any way for you to stop it: the dam breaks, and the friend seated across from you is on the receiving end.

I'm not strong, this isn't okay, and I don't care about heaven!  
I hate this. I hate everything about this!

Your friend looks at you—you know the way, head tilted with a pity smile—in stunned silence. Though there is a part of you (a small, miniscule part) that feels badly this one friend was on the receiving end of the full force of a pent-up reaction, the relief of finally speaking those words outweighs any guilt or embarrassment.

Until, that is, your friend regains the power of speech and responds with something along the lines of, “You don't really mean that. It's just the grief talking. I know when my...” You don't hear the rest of the story because you just can't dig deep enough to care about your friend's grief. Now you're stuck at a table with a full plate—who can eat?—and anger added to the mix of listening to someone else's story of their grief and perfect faith. Great.

If any part of the above resonated with you, there is something important you need to know: it is okay to hate grief. It is okay to feel far from God or not even care where God might be in all of this. You are not a bad person, and you are not a bad Christian. You are having a natural reaction.

## A Natural Reaction

Most people are quite young when they learn the hard reality that life leads to death. The truth is first taught subtly with something simple like the explanation of the seasons before it is more fully explained when a pet dies. For Christian believers, death is discussed openly each Church year in the season of Lent. Despite all this talk and education, though, there is very little preparation for what comes next



for those who continue to live after someone dies; that part is always rushed through. The trees die, but it's okay because spring will come. Jesus died, but it's okay because he rose from the dead and sent us the Holy Spirit. Your husband died, but it's okay because now he's in heaven.

Yes, trees do bloom again, Jesus did rise and send the Spirit, and your person now lives in heaven; but that is not the end of it. Those statements focus on the one who died and say nothing of you and how death impacts you.

Grief, in its most simplified form, is nothing more than a natural reaction to death. Someone you love was here and now they aren't. It is the absence of presence that is causing the deep pain you experience in all moments of the day and night. Grief is what happens during the in-between time, after someone in your world dies and before you learn to continue living in your new reality. As you learn about grief, you gain control over it; you attain the ability to shrink it and relocate it to a less primary place in your existence. As you practice grief work, the raw, persistent, and tender nature of the pain diminishes and fades to the background. In short, as you work through the remaining chapters of this book, you will progress and heal.

Grief is the greatest cost of love. It is a risk we take because we are beings created to be in relationship, because we thrive in community. So, though we know *one day* we will come face-to-face with grief, we take the risk and develop relationships based on all kinds of love.

And then that day comes. In the beginning we survive thanks to the numbness God built in us as a defense against the pain, but that numbness only lasts so long. And when it fades, and the pain

becomes real, that is when feelings of hate towards grief can begin to build.

## I Can Hate This?

If you were raised like me, then hate is a word you were told not to use. Perhaps this is because the feeling summarized in this one small word resulted in murder and selling a relative to the Egyptian slave trade. Esau hated his brother Jacob for stealing Esau's birth-right, and from that hatred Esau plotted to kill Jacob.<sup>1</sup> Then, in the next generation, Jacob's sons hated their youngest brother Joseph, a hatred born out of jealousy, to the point of throwing him in a well and selling him to the highest bidder.<sup>2</sup> In just these two examples we see that hatred can, in fact, lead to disastrous consequences.<sup>3</sup>

There certainly is wisdom in not allowing hatred to rule or drive decisions, but there is something to be said, too, for channeling it into something positive. It is good, for instance, to hate injustice and to use that hatred to propel you to speak and act for change. Maybe that is too big of an example, though; after all, we know that as Christians we are to fight against injustice; let's return, then, to grief.

In the first days and weeks, grievors are protected from feeling the *full* weight of grief. They have enough presence of mind to tend to many of the basics, like eating and drinking and, maybe, bathing, and are often aided in other tasks by people in their community. As

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1. See Genesis 27.

2. See Genesis 37.

3. Chapter 4 will further engage this discussion.

time marches on, however, that numbness begins to fade. The full reality settles in and numbness is lost.

As a homework assignment, I once asked an adolescent child to draw a picture of grief personified. To this point in the counseling relationship, the child was able to talk in vivid detail about the death—moment by moment, in fact—but was unable to emote anything. Though younger children are the best at unabashed emotional expression, adolescents can often still call it up when given the opportunity or when pushed to the limit. This is why some parents of grieving teens might witness a tantrum the likes of which any toddler would be proud. Since this child was unable to give voice to grief emotions within talk therapy, art therapy was enlisted. The result from that single homework assignment is the best personification of grief I have found to date.

The most obvious part of the drawing was the masked figure the child called a thief: a burglar, complete with a bag on his back. The child and I discussed this figure before moving the discussion to the bag. On paper, it was simply the outline of a large bag, no bulges or details of any kind, but the implication was there. As we discussed the items hidden in the bag, the child finally felt free enough to share emotions, and it became clear the child hated that burglar, though not for the reason I anticipated. My assumption was that the burglar was death, but as the child described the contents of the bag, it was revealed the burglar was actually grief. Death steals a person, every facet of them; grief steals living from the survivor.

Grief steals different things from different people, but there are some general similarities no matter the loss or age. We'll visit these at length throughout the book, so for now here is a sampling of the

essential items that can be stolen from us: routine, safety, comfort, love, and hope.

This is why it is okay to hate grief. It slinks in the dark; it strikes when least expected; it steals from your world everything that brought you a sense of safety and familiarity. Like a thief, grief often leaves people feeling violated and distraught in a world that will never be the same, no matter what is done to make it so. Grief changes the world, it changes the body, it changes the mind, and it changes the spirit.

The changes mentioned will be discussed more in later chapters, so for now we'll focus on just two of them: world and spirit. To say the world changes with grief might feel extreme, but it is one of the first things clients report. Their world looks different and/or feels different, as if the color, taste, and smell have been drained out. Additionally, griever often report a change in other relationships because of how griever are treated.

Although grief is inevitable, American culture today is generally terrible at it: terrible at recognizing it, validating it, naming it, and giving it space.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for instance, current cultural norms. First, society has placed a timeline on grief. Most companies provide *three* paid days of bereavement leave to their employees when the death is of sufficient importance, as defined by human resources. Three. After those days, a griever is expected to return to work with the same focus and productivity as before. As early as three months after a death, griever have reported being asked questions such as, What's wrong? Did something happen? Why are you sad? Shouldn't you be better now? These questions are but the tip of the iceberg. By

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4. Notably, these norms primarily represent the white experience. Many cultures in this country are more open to engaging in initial grief and grief expressions.

the time twelve months and one day rolls around, people are expected, by society and close friends alike, to truly be “over it.” Being “over it” is perhaps one of the greatest misnomers in the world of grief. How does one “get over” the death of her spouse? How, by day three hundred and sixty-six, do parents “get over” the death of their child?

Another cultural norm relates to how we express grief. The Bible references tearing one’s clothes, weeping, and wearing ashes for mourning.<sup>5</sup> One need not look all that far back in even American culture to find adaptations of those practices, such as wearing black or using an armband for several months, even up to a year, to publicly indicate the wearer is grieving. Today, however, things have changed. It is not uncommon to see griever in mourning at the initial learning of death, in the early days, during the funeral or memorial service, and at the graveside. By the time those early days have passed, though, the allotment of time for acknowledging grief expression publicly runs out, and suddenly griever feel the pressure to privatize their mourning. Unfortunately, silencing grief expressions results in griever feeling isolated and shamed.

Finally, there’s the cultural norm of silence about the deceased. Those who’ve lost a person to death have a natural need to talk about the person who died. They want to speak the person’s name, to hear stories about them, even to laugh with others about memories of the person and to cry with others who miss them too. Logically, this need will surge and wane over time. Yet, when a griever attempts such conversations, often they are met with a change of subject or utter silence.

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5. Mourning is the outward expression of grief. See chapter 3 for a more complete definition.

If you are a helper—a counselor, pastor, family member, or friend—reading this book to better assist someone through their grief, listen carefully: you will not cause additional pain by empathizing or talking about the deceased if griever initiates it. If they mention the person, they're okay talking about it. You will, however, cause additional pain if you are unable to sit with their tears or if you change the subject to a topic more comfortable for you. Every single bereaved client I've worked with has said at least once how much they miss hearing their loved one's name. If you are unsure if it is okay to talk about the departed with your grieving friend, ask them; I promise, they'll be honest in their response. If it is a bad day, they'll tell you so, but that doesn't mean to never talk about their loved one, it just means not that day. Ask again the next time you're together, and stay open to what they say.

Grief changes your world, and for a while you must work every day to keep up the strong front until you're back home. But the changes grief creates in your spirit? Those cannot be controlled. Suddenly, even the place that has consistently provided community, connection with God, and support can now feel like the last place you want to be. Maybe you feel judged for feeling sad and not rejoicing because your loved one is now free of pain. Or perhaps you feel like an outcast because you are no longer a pair and people don't know how to handle singles. You might even feel like a fraud because you no longer know what you believe—about God, death, heaven, or other questions of faith. Whatever the reason, Sunday mornings are now equally challenging and exhausting. Then, in what is thought to be the safety of your home, you may find yourself experiencing doubts, feeling angry at God, or wondering why you should even bother with faith at all.

## You Are Not a Bad Christian

Throughout this book I hope to help you trust that engaging in the questions you have is okay and that hating grief and feeling distant from God is okay and doesn't mean you love God any less (although it may feel like that for a long time). Grief changed you, yes; but nothing can change who you are at your core. Grief can help you better understand who you are created to be, but it can't take that away from you. Who you are as a beloved child of God is something permanently protected from the masked burglar of grief. It might feel far away or out of reach; it might feel unimportant; it might even feel like something you'd rather never again consider, but who God created you to be and how God sees you doesn't change.

Even if you spend the first eight months telling God how angry you are. Even if it takes you three years to return to your faith community. Even if you lose the ability to pray. Even if you wrestle nightly with God. Jacob may have come out of it with a permanent limp, but he still came out of it, and he did so as a child of God.<sup>6</sup> You will too; and if you can't have faith in that right now, it's okay. I have that faith for you.

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6. See Genesis 32.

## Conclusion

Grievors hate grief. Why? Because it is the natural reaction to death. Something terrible happened and you need time and space to react to your changed environment. Beginning with chapter three, this book will guide you into and through that space. Think of it as a friend for the journey, a journey that no one should walk alone. Before that, though, it is important to pause and consider what it means to hate grief *and* believe in God. It is important for you to know that how you are feeling and what you are experiencing does not mean your faith and love towards God is absent. In fact, it can be argued that what some view as a turning away from God often results in a deeper awareness of one's relationship with God defined by a new depth of love, appreciation, and trust.



## Pause for Whisperings

At the end of each chapter, space is provided to ponder the Spirit whisperings you experienced in this chapter. A Spirit whispering refers to those moments the Holy Spirit alerts you to something important just for you, something to spend time considering and, eventually, acting upon. Use these questions to help identify your whisperings in this chapter: What spoke to you? What challenged you? What gave you hope? What do you want to make sure you remember?

Whatever the whisperings are, take time to record them either here or in a separate journal. By the end of the book, you'll have a treasury of what you and God wrestled with and maybe even a better glimpse at who you are created to be. Fight the urge to skip this part and take some time right now. Feel free to keep your thoughts secret if you're worried someone else might find them. But capturing what the Spirit is doing is an essential part of the experience of this book. You might also include the date on each entry so you will have a record for future reference. It can be so rewarding to see how things have changed and, hopefully, how far you've come.

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Doubt  
*can be an*  
**ESSENTIAL**  
part of  
**faith.**

## *Two*

# ...And Love God

**B**efore we go any further, there is something you need to know. Maybe pick up a highlighter or some other way to mark this so you can come back to it when you doubt yourself. Right now, in your grief, it is okay not to delve into a study of the referenced passages in this book. Most references are intentionally limited to footnotes so you can choose to use the information or not. You have enough on your plate trying to navigate faith and grief. This is your journey, and if you don't have the energy to muddle through the texts, that is okay. Keep note of sections you want to return to and come back when you are able.

## God Loves

To begin, consider the solid foundation upon which everything else in this book is built: we love because God loves us.<sup>1</sup> As a believer, churched or unchurched, it is likely this is something you already consider truth, or did at one point in your faith. Because of that

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1. 1 John 4:7–21.

mighty thief also known as grief, it is important to pause to assess the *ways* God loves us. How do we know?

First, God loves intimately. Yes, God created the world and everything in it, yet while doing so God paid attention to the tiniest of details. We see this illustrated in Psalm 139:1–6, shared here from The New Living Translation<sup>2</sup>:

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD. You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!<sup>3</sup>

Even if it's a struggle to believe at times, God knows every aspect of us, spoken or left unsaid. God knows the things about us from which we choose to hide and still prepares the path as we take each faithful step. God's protective hand and watchful eyes are ever present no matter where this road of life might lead, even when it leads to valleys of grief. God examines hearts and words, and, no matter what is revealed, finds nothing worthy of removing that love. And we can know this because of the second characteristic of God's love: it's unconditional.

No doubt is big enough, no abandonment too lasting, no sin too egregious; not even denial of God causes God to look upon a created being with anything other than love. The lasting nature of this truth

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2. Try different translations to absorb God's Word in new ways, which can lead to spiritual growth.

3. See also verses 13–16.

is found in the person of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> As you walk through your grief, you might have moments of deep anger that you need God to hear. You might be filled with doubts that rattle the very core of your faith. You might need to take time away from God as you try to sort out what happened to the world as you know it. All these things are okay, and they are all normal; more importantly, none of them can remove God's love from you. The only way a person survives grief is to face it, and part of facing it means being brutally honest with expressing emotional truth. God's love is inescapable, no matter where we need to go with God in our darkest moments.

The psalmist who penned Psalm 139 writes about this third characteristic of God's love in the latter half; in fact, in some translations this psalm is titled *The Inescapable God*. In grief counseling a spiritual assessment is completed to help the bereaved begin to evaluate what they believe about death and what, if anything, comes after life on earth. It is normal and expected to consider, explore, and even reevaluate faith during grief. In fact, those who endure a significant loss without engaging those questions may have some work to do later. Unfortunately, related guilt may forestall or even prevent their ever engaging the loss deeply.

Generally speaking, Western Christianity does not support questioning God, let alone speaking doubts. Guilt builds because some people find it easier to walk the road alone than risk being shamed for their thoughts; that guilt can grow as the person remembers God's love is inescapable. This is opposite of what God desires. God did not inspire Psalm 139 to frighten believers into silence or shame followers into fake faith. Rather, regardless of where we need to go, regardless of the questions and doubts that need to be

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4. See Romans 8:31–39 for Paul's words on this subject.

expressed, God is there, loving us through it all. Doubt can be an essential part of faith, questions can be what leads to deeper acceptance, and unrest can be turned to peace. Rather than hiding in shame, be bold in approaching God with the fullness of grief, and be comforted in the love that is always waiting for you.

Finally, God's love is abiding, meaning it will remain, continue, and stay regardless of any human action or inaction.<sup>5</sup> God's love remains, even when your world implodes. When you cannot imagine enduring for one more day, God's love stays with you. In your doubts. In your anger. In moments or seasons of unbelief. God's love stays with you.

In summary, God's love is intimate, unconditional, inescapable, and abiding. As we move forward, hold onto that truth and return to it when someone attempts to shame you for your grief. Cling to it, feel your feet on it, and protect it from those who try to destroy it. It is your promise through Christ, and it cannot be taken from you.

## We Love

We love because God first loved us, and we now know the ways in which God extends love. How, then, do we use that information to guide the love we extend to God? The short answer is to look at how God loves and emulate it. Of course, we fall short of loving God intimately, unconditionally, inescapably, and abidingly. Some might even say it is impossible. Fortunately, we have the Spirit as our guide, and we have the Word as our teacher.

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5.1 John 4:16.

Jesus' entire life is an example of what it means to love God. Jesus loves God, so he abides in God through prayer. Jesus loves God, so he invests in the lives of others to shelter them, feed them, uplift them, and introduce them to God. Jesus loves God, so he speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. These are examples from which we can learn to love God.

"That's all well and good," I can hear you saying, "but my person died. I can't think about any of that right now." You are right; "grief brain" is real, and you don't need anything so complex. Thankfully, because of how God loves us, we have a clear answer in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally this passage is understood as a directive on how to love others, and there is merit in that. But grief is a time in life when it is necessary to focus on yourself, when self-love is greatly needed. First, then, think of these words as a directive on how to love yourself in this season of life.<sup>7</sup> How can you be patient with yourself? In what ways do you need to extend forgiveness to yourself for something you have said or done since your person died? You may need to use these each day, especially early in grief. Second, know that there will

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6. If this passage is a grief trigger for you because it was used at your wedding, or for any other reason, take a few moments to let your reactions pour out. We are going to stick with this passage for a bit, so give yourself permission to take this section at your own pace. If you need to, skip to the next section of this chapter but come back. The work is difficult, but I believe the result will be a powerful aid for your journey.

7. See appendix 1 for a more detailed practice of self-love guided by 1 Corinthians 13.

be stretches of time during which some of this will be difficult or all but laughable to you. Rejoicing in the truth? Not being irritable or resentful? Those emotions are Grief 101. Love yourself *despite* feeling irritable or resentful. Love yourself *despite* your powerful ability to feel hopeless.

Of all the things grief steals, the ability to feel love, either from God or towards God, is perhaps the greatest loss. Use these words from 1 Corinthians 13 as the antidote. Be patient with God in this process, especially as you cry out for answers or relief. As you work to extend kindness to yourself, try to do the same for God. Notice the word *try*: there will be moments and days when kindness towards God is the furthest thing from your emotional reality. That is okay. Try. If you don't feel it, don't force it, but do try again another time. Remember, there is room for the inability to love God in grief. God's love cannot be shaken and will not change.

I spent several summers during college working in camp ministry. God shaped, challenged, and grew my faith as much as the campers'. In fact, I had several faith-shifting conversations and encounters during those years. One of the most impactful happened on the deck of the pool at Camp Manitoqua in Frankfort, IL, when talking with a fellow counselor about my inability to pray. Inability to pray remains a challenge for me at times, and I don't recall what prompted it at that time in my life. But I will always remember what this wise sister in Christ said to me: *"It is clear how much you love God by how worried you are about your inability to express that love."*

That was a faith-changing moment for me. She reminded me that talking with God is one way we show our love to God, but not the only way. She showed me that worry about my inability to do so was also an expression of love because I was being honest about the



longing of my heart. The same can be said to griever's filled with shame and added grief at their inability to feel God's presence or to pray. We show love to God when we lament our limitations honestly. You love God best when you want the disconnection to end or long to again feel God's presence.

Grief is difficult enough by its very nature. Do not make things worse for yourself by complicating what it means to love God/retain faith/stay connected. The act of picking up this book was an act of love. You are already doing it.

## God Validates Grief and Teaches Ways to Grieve

There is a meme circulating around social media that, in part, says something like this: "He cried. He knew Lazarus was dead before he got the news. But still, he cried. He knew Lazarus would be alive again in moments. But still, he cried." Clients have recounted terrible stories of how they were maligned for crying over the death of their loved one. If that has happened or is happening to you, know this: there is nothing biblical about telling you not to cry or otherwise express your grief, and there is nothing biblical in encouraging you to shift your focus from loss to heaven. There is also nothing *pastoral* about those things. In fact, God is quite clear in the Word about supporting the act of grief.

It is legitimate to struggle to love and look for God amid your grief, but if you want to see biblical evidence that hating grief doesn't mean you don't love God, then take a few moments to explore two different teachings on the act of grieving.

When it comes to Bible trivia, "What is the shortest verse in the Bible?" and "Who is Lazarus?" are questions easily answered.

Without turning to John 11, most people answer, “Jesus wept” and “the man Jesus raised from the dead” or “Mary and Martha’s brother,” and those answers are correct. Beyond that, though, the full passage is overlooked. We tend to jump immediately to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and that this miracle points to him as the Messiah. When we do this, we miss the gifts tucked into the middle of the story.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus’ reaction to Martha is the first gift God gives. Martha hears that Jesus is on his way and runs to meet him, and the first thing she does is express her frustration that Jesus did not come earlier to heal her brother. We cannot be certain, of course, of the emotion she expressed. Given the context and the words, though, it seems frustration is a fair starting point. Anger or exasperation are just two other possibilities. The point is that Martha knew Jesus well enough not to hold back the truth of what she felt towards him in that moment. God’s next gift to grievers is found in Jesus’ response. Jesus did not scold Martha or shame her for wishing her brother alive. He did ask her beliefs about resurrection yet did not shame her. Jesus said many different things to Martha in that moment but never reacted negatively to her expression of grief.

Further in, there’s another gift of insight from a Jewish tradition surrounding death. Lazarus had been buried four days, and Mary remained surrounded by people comforting her. It is likely the crowd included several fellow believers, and not one of them told Mary to stop crying. No one asked why she did not go out to meet Jesus and waited until Martha returned to get her. Instead, the passage says many people stayed by her side, offered her comfort, and expressed their own grief.

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8. See John 11:17–36.

Mary does go to see Jesus when he asks for her, and she too expresses her disappointment in Jesus not preventing Lazarus' death. Here again Jesus does not react with shame or scolding. God's character and knowledge of each individual is revealed in Jesus' treatment of Mary. Jesus engaged Martha in dialogue, but knowing Mary's needs were different, he changes his approach. He observes her tears and the tears of the others who followed her to him and does not speak. Jesus is moved by what he observes; it breaks loose his own grief. He weeps.

Scholars debate the cause of Jesus' weeping: whether he is grieving his friend's death or the pain of people dear to him. I believe it is both. Jesus cries because his friend died *and* because people he loves are mourning that same death. In those two simple words, "Jesus wept," believers are given one of the greatest teachings scripture has to offer on grief. No one knows better than Jesus the great defeat of death that's to come, and even still he does not skip his grief.

The next time a fellow believer shames you for feeling pain at your loss, quiets your disappointment in God, or tries to rush you through your grief to focus on heaven, remember the gifts hidden in the middle of John 11. You are invited to go to Jesus and tell him what you feel, without censure. You are safe to weep or wail or be morose and can be assured Jesus will see the struggle in you and join you. He will join you because you are in pain, and he will join you because he too is in pain over the loss of your person. Jesus will not rush you to focus on life eternal and the resurrection; he will sit with you in shared pain.

During one of my pastoral care and counseling classes in seminary, we were charged with writing a funeral service. I remember how intimidated I was seeing that assignment in the syllabus, and I also remember how much I ended up enjoying the project. When it

came time to perform though, I was at a loss for where to begin, and my paper was nowhere to be found. Since I am the second of three ordained ministers in my immediate family—my brother, then me, then my dad—I reached out to my brother for help. I don't remember all he advised, but to this day there is one passage of scripture I use for every funeral: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. I liked the passage as a chaplain and have come to appreciate it even more as a bereavement counselor.

The temptation for pastors preaching this text at a funeral, or in general, is to skip to the closing verses that describe resurrection. But doing so misses the boat. We can't skip straight to the end because doing so invalidates a very real human experience. Grief is a natural reaction, a God-given reaction, and you are allowed to experience it without being rushed out of it. In this passage God uses Paul to validate grief by naming it and sharing one way to deal with it.

Paul opens the passage: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."<sup>9</sup> Thank you, Paul! He might be wordy, but when you sift through, golden nuggets appear. First, be informed, he says. This is important, and it's somehow being missed by the Thessalonians. Paul writes on many better known topics in his letters, yet of all the topics, grief made the cut. Next, notice how Paul specifically names grief as the intended focus for his readers. In naming grief specifically, Paul validates its existence and normalizes the experience to his hearers then and to his readers now. On a large stage to captive ears, Paul shares his heart on the reality of grief. Don't rush past this; you might want it in the future.

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9. 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Paul continues by encouraging believers to grieve *with hope*. There are times we all feel hopeless, particularly in early grief. But with time and effort these usually grow fewer and farther between. Even still, there are people who do grieve without hope. I've met them. To grieve without hope is to face the journey of grief utterly alone and without any navigation aids. Removing hope from grief is like locking a bereaved person in a room and removing all contact with the outside world. It is suffocating. To grieve *with hope*, though, is very different.

Hope is difficult to define. For me, it falls under the category of "you know it when you feel it," but Merriam-Webster has this to say: "to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment"; "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true." Paul goes on to say hope comes from the promised reunion with those who have died that awaits all believers. It is that hope that's at risk of being lost, and that's why it's so important to remember the first verse of the passage.

Note that God desires us to have hope mixed in with our grief, not hope that *replaces* grief. Paul does not write that he wants readers to be informed so that they can hope *instead of* grieve. No, he wants his readers to be informed so that they can grieve *with* hope. The hope of Jesus one day returning to join with him those who have died with those on earth does not remove the reality of current grief. That hope changes grief, but it does not remove it.

Practically speaking, then, what does grief imbued with this hope look like? It is the tiny pinprick of light, far off in the distance, that you see as you stare down your grief journey. One tiny pinprick that does not lessen your current darkness but does remind you that, eventually, light will shine again. Grief imbued with hope is felt the first time you laugh after your person's death. You feel yourself laugh

and you wonder at the sound of it. You know it will be a long time before you laugh again, but you laughed, and just knowing that gives you the strength to continue.

There is comfort in the longing to be “okay” again. It is sensing a peace deep within that is waiting to spread throughout your being. You don't yet feel the peace, but knowing the desire for it is within you settles and empowers you to keep moving forward. It is recognizing that tomorrow may be better than today. Do not accept the pressure of choosing hope over grief; instead, grieve and allow hope to sustain you.

## Conclusion

God loves you intimately and unconditionally in a way that is both inescapable and abiding. On the days you cannot summon love for God, God's love for you is unchanged, and in simply wishing you could connect with God, you are loving God.

God created you with the ability to grieve and will stay in that grief with you. God can take your hatred of grief; in fact, God welcomes it because God understands it. Fellow Christians will try to rush you, but remember you do not need to listen to that word. You have the Word on your side.

## Pause for Whisperings

After you record any new Spirit whisperings you encountered in this chapter, or if you are unsure where to begin, reflect on these questions: How is your grief imbued with hope? Do you have even a tiny pinprick of light? Maybe you can sense a stillness deep in your soul. Spend a few moments considering how you see hope sustaining you in your grief.

[illegible]

Your  
*grief is*

**REAL**

and deserves  
**attention.**



## Three

# Setting the Foundation

Grief theories are numerous, so we will not exhaust all the options; to do so would be overwhelming and detract from the end goal of learning to embrace grief while maintaining faith. With that goal in mind, I will provide a brief review of just three common approaches to grieving and discuss the pros and cons of each so that you may construct a lens through which to understand and process your grief. Finally, I will also introduce you to three helpful metaphors for understanding grief.

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her new friends eventually find themselves in the presence of the Wizard. His voice is loud, and his presence conjures fear in all who dare to face him, until, that is, they get a look behind the curtain and discover the truth. The wizard is nothing more than a man using trickery. In many ways grief is like the wizard. People often approach it with fear and despair. It is loud and overbearing, and it is a bit of a mystery. But, if one looks behind the curtain, grief is nothing more than a reaction to loss.

I submit to the reformed ideal that all truth is God's truth. God created humanity with intentional gifts and skills given to each person, instilling in each person her or his own calling, purpose, and talents. Working from this premise, then, we can understand that those who are

called to psychology are led by God to that field, and the discoveries or connections they make are also led by God. This is what it means that all truth is God's truth. When we discover truth, we can rest assured that the Spirit worked to reveal it at a God-appointed moment. The Spirit is at work guiding the hearts and minds of those engaged in all areas of learning; therefore, all fields of study, including the sciences, continue to grow. Sometimes God works through the non-believer as well to share God's truth. The proof of this is found in theories that reflect biblical principles without naming them as such.

All truth is God's truth. The grief theories shared in the next section reveal that truth in the positive impact they have on those who utilize the theories as well as in the shared reception of the theories among psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors.

## Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was a psychiatrist and best-selling author who introduced the idea that grief besets those who know they are going to die. After interviewing a population of terminally ill people, she identified common threads of experience despite the unique personality and situation of each person. The result of those interviews is what is known as The Stages of Grief, arguably the most well-known and most misunderstood of currently used grief theories. The initial five stages of grief she named are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

### *The Cons*

Since the time her work was released, many people have misunderstood and misapplied Kubler-Ross's good and well-intentioned

work. Those popular misconceptions in and of themselves are the most significant con of trying to understand your grief through this lens.

First, she did not intend for these stages to be understood in a linear fashion, starting with denial and moving in an orderly fashion through all emotional reactions until one arrives at acceptance. Because this is how the theory is interpreted, however, many are led to try to do just that. Therefore, when griever do not experience one of the five stages or become permanently entrenched in one of them, they can feel as though they are “doing grief wrong”, adding an unnecessary burden to an already challenging time of life.

A second misconception is that these stages are prescriptive, meaning that anyone who is grieving will, without question, experience all five stages. It can be daunting at the onset of grief to look at the five stages and believe that you will need to experience all for healing to occur. This is not the case, nor is it what Kubler-Ross intended when she first published. Rather than locking someone into a progressive plan of what to expect, the stages are meant to normalize common experiences.

Third, the stages of grief are not meant to be all-inclusive. Kübler-Ross did not intend to convey that grief is *limited* to the five stages but rather that each stage is an umbrella term for many emotions that can occur within a given stage. The con here, then, is two-fold. First, a griever might be negatively impacted if the primary emotion in their grief is not one of the listed stages. Additionally, the five stages appear at first glance to be brief and uncomplicated, but when looking beneath the surface, we see the details that might overwhelm a griever.

In addition to misconceptions that serve as cons of this model, the five-stage approach has other cons. Consider, for instance, the

fact that this model was born out of conversations with terminally ill people, not bereft people. The needs of the terminally ill as they prepare for and face the end of life are much different than those who recently lost a someone to death and now need to determine how to continue living. Also, the terminology might serve as a barrier for people to embrace this model. The word depression, for instance, carries with it many connotations and fears. If a griever were to look at the model without knowing depression is not a foregone conclusion, the model could overwhelm them and prompt them to avoid it. When people do not have access to a grief model that resonates, grief becomes easier to avoid altogether.

### *The Pro*

All that said, Kübler-Ross's five-stage model remains well-used by griever, particularly by those not seeking professional, psychological help through grief. I believe this is because the model is approachable and helps normalize grief. Grievers find complex systems and daily choices nearly impossible to navigate especially in early grief. The five-stage model gives structure to a time people often describe as chaotic. Some people do find an emotional progression helpful as it guides their thinking and feeling and helps them discern whether or not they have progressed.

## The Dual-Process Model

Margaret Stoebe and Henk Schut shifted the focus in their grief model to what griever can do with their grief symptoms, thereby creating a greater sense of control. Initially presented in the mid-nineties to the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and

Bereavement, this model is accessible to the trained and untrained, the bereavement counselor with the client, or the client alone.

### ***The Cons***

If the five-stage model of Kübler-Ross is too prescriptive, Stoebe and Schut's model might swing too far in the other direction. It breaks the process of grief work into two broad categories of orientation between which the griever will vacillate: *loss orientation* and *restoration orientation*. Loss orientation captures the time when a person's thoughts and emotions are focused on all that was lost as it ties directly to the person who died. Examples that reflect time in this orientation include processing the loss of the specific relationship, being consumed by thoughts of the person, and relocating the place that person now holds in their heart and life.

Restoration orientation focuses instead on what comes next. Within this orientation a griever will consider things such as intentionally seeking out her new identity after the death, trying new hobbies, or engaging in acts of self-care. It is stated that a person will alternate between the two orientations, but with no indication as to how often or even guidance for when a griever may have remained too long in a given orientation. The five-stages model focuses on emotion without action, and the dual-process model is centered on action with little attention to emotions.

The dual-process model also risks adding more chaos to a process that is already often experienced as chaotic. To convey that grief is neither predictive nor linear, this model can give the impression of continual bouncing between two orientations.

### ***The Pros***

The dual-process model succeeds in confirming for grievers that grief will not be confined to a specific path. Grief is fluid, and what

one person experiences at the death of a spouse is not identical to what another experiences. Seeing that captured in a model respected in its field can be an encouragement for someone who wonders if what they are experiencing is “normal.” Clients often ask “Am I going crazy?” after describing a day in the life of their grief. The dual-process model provides concrete evidence that the back and forth they experience is both normal and expected, and that kind of validation and normalization is priceless.

Additionally, the action steps of the dual-process model are important. Emotional expression in grief is non-negotiable, but having solid actions to cling to when you feel everything is crumbling has a marked positive impact. Though the actions in the dual-process model are not clearly defined, they are hinted at and leave a lot of room for personalization.

## Four Tasks of Mourning

William Worden provides the bereaved with four different tasks on which to focus the individual journey of grief: accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing the pain of the loss, adjusting to the environment without the deceased, and finding an enduring connection to the deceased while living one's new life. Worden is clear in his teaching that people can work simultaneously on multiple tasks and will likely revisit certain tasks more than once.

### *The Cons*

Worden's task model places the onus entirely on the bereaved. In later grief it is helpful to have action steps, but in the early weeks, and even months, some griever's do not have the ability to focus on

any action. For some, simply getting out of bed is too much. For people grieving in that way, seeing a list of tasks that need to be accomplished just to feel better is overwhelming and can lead to inaction rather than forward movement. I believe Worden intended this as a gift for griever, to give concrete suggestions when a person can't find any answers on what to do or how to keep going, but in certain situations it can serve as a barrier.

Another potential con of the task model is the name itself. Having tasks to accomplish can be off-putting to a griever, especially in the early days. Those first days and weeks are overrun with tasks demanding attention and completion, especially in situations of spousal loss, so adding yet another to-do list might be too much to handle.

### ***The Pros***

The task model has a lot of general appeal. For many, having the responsibility of action within their grief is encouraging and provides a sense of purpose in a time when it is easy to feel all purpose is lost. In a season of life that feels out of control, it is beneficial to have categories of guided action that can result in, at minimum, the perception of control. Regaining a sense of control lends to a clearer mind, an increase in optimism, and increased motivation, all of which combine for an improved sense of self. This has significant benefits for the progression of healing.

Because Worden is so clear that people can be working on multiple tasks at one time and that some tasks will be revisited multiple times, this model also provides space for a person to allow the day to determine what will be done. If, for instance, a griever wakes up raw in her pain, she can choose if she will explore and experience that pain, the second task mentioned above, or if she will instead spend

her day finding ways to connect with her person as indicated in the third and fourth tasks. The model normalizes the layers of grief that need to be expressed and provides a gentle framework in which to do so.

Finally, and most importantly, this model does something the other two models do not in that it provides a clear goal that creates room for a permanent connection with the deceased while also honoring the need to continue living. God created us with all our emotions—with the ability to love *and* the ability to grieve. But we are not meant to live in grief 24/7/365 for the remainder of life; instead, we need to be able to find a way to continue growing and becoming the people we are created to be. There is more to learn, more to do, and more people to love. That doesn't mean your connection to your person disappears; it means that connection changes, evolves into something new that leaves room for your life to continue.

The above are only three models available to help guide you through grief, either alone or with a trained professional. You might not be ready to pick one; you might need pieces of all three models to help understand what you're experiencing and to find your way through this thing called grief. Find what you need, and then do it. That is the key. If you think you need help from a trained professional, give yourself that gift without delay.

## Metaphor 1: Grief Is Like Snowflakes

Living in the Midwest, I see a lot of snowflakes, and it seems impossible that each individual snowflake is unique. But if you captured a few in your hands and kept them frozen long enough to inspect,



even with the naked eye, you would see that not one mimics another. Grief functions in the same way.

The experience of grief for one person is not going to be identical to that of another, no matter the circumstances. Say, for instance, a husband and father of two dies. That man's wife will grieve in one way, his eldest son another way, and their youngest son still a third way. Why is the grief so different if all three are grieving the same person? Because each person had their own relationship with the man and each has their own personality. Also, the type of grief related to the death of a spouse is different than that of a parent death because the relationship dynamics are so varied. One son might be an optimistic extrovert with a large circle of friends and a firm belief in God. The other might be an introvert who sees the glass half empty and has limited friends.

Support, beliefs, and personality traits can all be predictors of how a person might experience the grief journey. Things like mental health, addictions, and access to basic needs and care are additional factors that influence how a person grieves. Note that while these are factors that influence grief, they do not determine how a certain person will experience grief because the relationship with the person who died—quantity and quality—are significant factors as well. If you are struggling with how the grief of your family and/or friends compares to your experience, remember that although you all lost the same person, you will each go through this journey in your own unique way. You are an individual with your own personality, and you are the only one who had your relationship with the deceased, so looking to someone else's grief experience to understand your own is futile. Try to stop yourself from being drawn into the trap of comparison; nothing good ever comes from it, and it can have a negative impact on your own progress.

Grief is also unique in that how you grieve in this current situation is not determined by how you grieved a previous loss, nor does it dictate how you will grieve future losses. You are always changing and growing, and grief adds to those changes. With each loss you learn new things about yourself and often make changes, large or small. Since that previous loss, the way you view life evolved, and your purposes and passions changed. If you find yourself thinking you should be handling this better or are surprised by how you are coping with this loss, pause and remind yourself you are a growing person and the grief journey changes with each subsequent loss. Just as comparison with another's grief is a trap, comparison with your own grief experiences is also a trap. Stay in the present and allow yourself to experience this grief; it is big enough on its own.

## Metaphor 2: Grief Is Like a Prism

Imagine holding a crystal in your hand on a sunny day. As you stand in the sunbeam, you rotate the crystal and observe the different colored lights projecting around you. With each turn the light bends and projects another color. Similarly, grief changes depending on what part of it is exposed to light. With each turn of grief a different emotion becomes the focus, and if the prism is held at the perfect angle, many emotions are refracted simultaneously.

Emotions are central to grief, and it is important during the grief journey to be intentional about trying to view your grief from new angles. Perhaps your loved one died suddenly and without any prior indication. It is easy to examine your grief and see emotions of shock and anger reflected. But other emotions might also be

present, and those emotions also need to be brought into the light for inspection.

As you work on your grief, do yourself the favor of looking at it from new angles to see what can be learned. Just as a prism can reflect a beautiful rainbow of light beams, so grief, when viewed in light, can produce an array of emotions that bring unexpected patterns of beauty into the pain.

### Metaphor 3: Grief Is Like a Trail in the Woods

The county in which I live has a vast trail system open to exploration. Some trails are minimally maintained, and others have been paved; some end at a beach on the shores of Lake Michigan, and others are entirely wooded. Imagine the grief journey as a part of that trail system. One trail might be paved and free of all debris. It begins smooth and remains smooth for the duration, and it has limited risk of harm. Another trail starts on flat, level ground and appears well-carved and maintained. Further into the woods, though, that trail becomes less defined. Tree roots break the barrier, causing the wanderer to trip when caught off guard. Then, just as you have trained your eyes to spot the roots ahead on the path, the terrain changes yet again; what was flat is now an uphill climb with little to cling to for support.

Yet another trail marks its difficulty at the entrance. One begins the journey knowing the road is going to be hard and finds he or she was not wrong. Wet leaves pile together to cause slips. Roots and sticks and pine needles carpet the floor and so require all focus to be on safely navigating the trail. The body tenses as it remains on high alert, doing everything it can to protect itself from pain.

Grief journeys are unpredictable. It doesn't matter whether you had advance warning of your loved one's death or if you had the opportunity to say everything that needed to be said and have no regrets: until you enter the trail, you don't know which type of trail you will walk. Most likely your grief journey will be a composite of the examples above. But just as there are items available to help you safely walk trails, there are tools to ensure you safely navigate your grief, and which might even help you find some beauty along the way.

This book is one such tool. In learning about grief, you discover what to watch for on your journey and how to avoid hazards along the way. Support yourself with friends or family who can walk alongside you and help you get back up when you trip. Find a trained professional to journey with you who will remind you to look up and notice the beauty around you, help you remember the smooth parts of the journey, and point out scenic overlooks where you can pause and reflect on where you have been and where you're going.

It can be tempting to study a map before starting on a hike. In the preparation you learn how long it might take, what you are going to need with you, and where you'll end up. That is a great plan for a true hike in the woods, but grief is different. The grief journey does not have a map; there is no indication on distance, time, or destination. Instead, you enter trusting that signposts will guide you from one turn to the next. You observe and learn and participate in each section as best as you are able, and when the next section begins, you leave behind whatever you no longer need so you are ready to pick up what awaits you.

Several trails in my area are built within the dunes, which means a lot of hard work. It is a challenging terrain with few respites from an

uphill climb. But at the end of that work, a breathtaking glimpse of the horizon is waiting to greet those who endure. The road of grief is often like hiking in a sand dune. It is long and challenging with no indication of relief. But as you near the water, you feel a breeze, and you come over the final hill to something unexpected and beautiful. The horizon greets you with a promise of continued life, renewed purpose, and the hope that you will carry your loved one with you into your next adventure.

## Managing Expectations

People have a host of goals related to grief, some healthy and others not, and these people will not be shy about impressing those goals upon you. To that end, we will pause here to create a shared understanding of the goal of grief work. This book is the result of numerous clients' confessions of their continued grief with a sense of shame. That shame was often the result of a current or previous pastor who laid on the griever a burden that grief is meant to come to a true end, never to return, because in the end we have the gift of heaven to look to.

That burden is unfair and untrue. You do not need to "get over it" or try to explain to someone why you "still" are so sad about your wife's death. Those statements are hurtful and are formed from harmful positions that God does not support. The goal of grief work is for you to find a place to hold your grief so that it does not impede daily life or your continued living. When grief begins, it is big and sharp; it is triggered by everything and everyone and there is no escape. As you do the work of grief and continue to embrace it rather

than run from it, it begins to transform little by little into something different. The edges dull, and grief slowly deflates so that you can do more things and interact with more people without triggering it.

As a reminder, grief is the cost of love. For many people, that is true. We grieve because a person we love is no longer physically present. Perhaps, though, you are grieving because the death also causes the loss of the ability to repair broken love between the two of you or the loss of hope that you'll ever hear love expressed from the departed. Regardless, love is involved: love shared or love needing repair. Because of this, you will always miss your loved one to some degree, which means your grief will also always be with you in some small way. But that doesn't mean your grief will always control your emotions, thoughts, and actions. As you do your grief work, you will learn to control your grief. You will find coping skills and learn to give voice to your grief, to honor it, and in so doing, you will discover how to tuck the grief away to a place you can access it when desired without it preventing continued growth.

Moving forward, not moving on: that is the goal of grief work. Forward versus on. The words have similar meanings but vastly different implications. *Moving on* as it relates to grief conveys a sense of leaving grief behind or living as if the loss didn't happen or forever impact you. It implies there will come a day when you wake up and are simply done missing your person, that you no longer need to remember or connect with them. *Moving forward* is something different. It means looking at your grief and choosing what to carry with you as you continue to build your life. Grief changes a person, and that is a beautiful thing. Your person, regardless of the relationship you had, helped shape who you are in the moment, and those influences remain with you as you search out new learnings and new

passions. You can choose what influences remain with you and which you release because moving forward is a reinvention of sorts. Moving forward is about choosing what parts of the past come with you and what changes you want to make, all while carrying the memory of your loved one with you as you see fit.

## A Note on Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief can result from a death that is commonly not discussed, accepted, or validated by larger society or even close friends. Those who experience disenfranchised grief often receive even less support than traditional griever because of the way in which the deceased died, because of the identity of that person, or because of the type of relationship the griever shared with the deceased. Disenfranchised grief is frequently connected to the following situations: suicide, homicide, miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, sexually transmitted diseases, non-married partners, and LGBTQIA+ persons.

If you are a disenfranchised griever, I see you. Please continue through this book. What is in these pages applies to you because your grief is as real and valid as the more “accepted” forms of grief. Consider seeking professional help through this time. The lack of external support you receive needs to be compensated for somewhere, and a grief counselor can provide that for you. You deserve the same help because no matter the cause of death, you are grieving someone important to you. Your grief is real and deserves attention.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See appendix 7 for more detailed information and examples.

## Conclusion

In many ways grief does not end, but that does not need to be a negative reality; in fact, it can be quite beautiful. In the chapters to come the concept of a continued relationship will be explored and the benefit of such a connection will be revealed. Your grief will change. It will not always be raw and endlessly triggered. You will have relief. You will again experience joy, laughter, purpose, anticipation, and connection. You will find desire to invest in all kinds of relationships despite the certain risk of future grief. Those things will happen; it is guaranteed. If those seem like impossibilities right now, it is okay. It is okay to not even want to think about laughing again or feeling joy without your person there experiencing it with you. This is your road, and you are the only one who gets to direct what happens. This book is a help for that road that you walk, because though it is your road, you do not need to walk it alone.



## Pause for Whisperings

There is a lot to digest in this chapter. To focus your reflections, take a few moments to review any highlights, notes, or markings you made while reading. What do you learn from reading them? Is there a certain metaphor that most resonates with you? Do you have the support, personal and trained, that you need for this journey? When you envision coming to the vista and looking out over the horizon of your future, what do you see, and how do you get yourself there? If it is too difficult at this juncture to look that far ahead, that is okay. If you want to begin the process of envisioning your future, spend a few moments brainstorming what you want your days to be consumed with, or list how you imagined your future prior to the death and record all the things that remain accessible about that future even after your loved one's passing.

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Emotions  
*are*  
**NATURAL GIFTS**  
from  
God.

## Four Emotions

**H**ave you ever witnessed the full cycle of a child's tantrum? It begins innocently enough, doesn't it? Imagine a little girl playing happily on the floor. She is surrounded by her favorite toys, contentedly engaged in conversations with her stuffed animals, when she hears the word dreaded by children everywhere: *bedtime*! In a split second her smiling face is replaced with scrunched features, there's a distinct change of color in her face, and the adults in the room watch it all knowing they are helpless to prevent what comes next. And then it happens. The tantrum. Yelling, screaming, crying, stomping, pounding fists on the floor: any and all might be included. The little girl is opposed to bedtime and is making her feelings known.

Then, at nearly the same speed of adjustment, the tantrum passes. She is spent, physically and emotionally, and the moment is over. By the time she is in bed, she is telling her parents she loves them as if the tantrum never occurred.

Parents and other observers are often left baffled in the wake of such an episode. They witnessed the ramp up, explosion, and wind down, and they themselves had a similar experience, at least for the ramp up. What is often most difficult for onlookers to grasp is the wind down. The child fell asleep without further complaint and even

smiled through her bedtime story; meanwhile, the caregiver returns to what they were doing before the interruption but has lost the ability to focus. The caregiver's body remains in a state of high alert, energy bouncing to and fro within the confines of skin. It isn't until later, often much later, that the adults are able to relax, usually with the aid of television, a phone call, or a glass of wine.

What is the difference between the child and the adult in this situation? It isn't their varied attention spans or the fact that one cared more about the outcome than the other. It isn't that the caregiver was somehow more invested in the situation and therefore needed more time to process. The difference is the explosion.

What adults label as tantrums are, at their core, simple emotional expression. The little girl was engaged in something she liked and was told to stop to do something she didn't like. This filled her with a big emotion that was difficult to contain, so it rushed out of her in ways that felt appropriate to her. The tantrum did not end because she suddenly decided she was happy to stop her playing and go to bed; rather, it ended because she fully expelled from her being the emotion that the directive caused. The result of that expulsion was a natural, chemical release that served to further calm her and change her focus.

As children grow, it becomes increasingly unacceptable for them to have tantrums. They are told to "stop crying" or "let it go" or told their reaction isn't warranted because "it isn't that bad." Don't cry over spilled milk, right? While it makes sense that it is not healthy for a teenager to drop himself to the floor in the middle of a store and begin pounding his fists on the ground, the unintended consequence of helping children grow out of tantrums is that by the time we reach adulthood, most people are completely out of touch with their emotions and how to express them.

Countless side effects result from this disconnect, but for the purposes of this text, the most significant is the impact on a griever. Consider the remainder of this chapter Emotions 101. When a griever tries to navigate the grief journey without emotions, grief is almost certain to be stalled or delayed. If, on the other hand, a griever can summon the courage to face emotions, grief will be more easily handled and better understood.

## What Are Emotions?

Defining what an emotion *is*, is not an easy task. Simplistically, emotions occur in the core of the being—what some people refer to as the soul—and are reactions to situations and experiences. For example, I write with instrumental music in the background because it promotes a feeling of calm within me that leaves me open to creative influence. Many runners describe different emotions evoked within them before (anticipation, and maybe dread), during (alternating energy and fatigue), and after a run (endorphin release resulting in a “runner’s high”). Adults can typically name situations that raise in them feelings of sadness, anger, or fear. Doing the same for emotions like happiness or joy is a bit more challenging, and emotions like contentedness, peace, or acceptance are still harder to describe. Because emotions are central to the grief experience, their most important characteristics will be outlined here.<sup>1</sup> If you only have the capacity for a small piece of information right now, I encourage you to choose the section entitled “Emotions Are Neutral” below.

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1. This list intentionally is not exhaustive. Most adults have much to learn about emotions, but during grief is not the time to take that on. Learn what you need to help yourself through this part of the journey, then when you feel ready, continue learning.

## ***Emotions Are God-Given***

This needs to be our starting point for all further understanding of emotions. As believers in Christ, we may safely presume that we are united in the belief that humans are created beings intentionally formed in God's image. All that is within us—our ability to feel God's presence, our ability to see God's continued work in our lives and in the world, our empathy, our compassion—these things God knit within each of us, and emotions are included. God gave us emotions to aid in experiencing life and communicating with God and with others. And if we believe that to be true, then we cannot support the idea that emotions are to be feared or suppressed for any reason. If you're still unsure, take a general survey of scripture. It will not take long to find examples of the range of emotions on display by both God and God's people.

## ***Emotions Are Varied***

The number of basic or primary emotions depends on the source you choose, but regardless of whether you believe that number is four or ten or something in-between, the bottom line is that emotions are varied and nuanced. The basic emotions are but umbrella terms for the more nuanced emotions found within a certain category. If we use the basic emotion of happiness as an example, we will see that more nuanced emotions within that category include contentment, overjoyed, and excited, to name a few. You can help yourself through your grief by familiarizing yourself with the variety of emotions that exist.<sup>2</sup> Having a more specific focus and understanding of what you are experiencing will help you fully process and resolve that emotion.

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2. Many downloadable lists of emotions be found through a simple internet search for "list of feelings words."

## ***Emotions Are Neutral***

The most damaging misconception about emotions is that they are either positive or negative. Happiness, joy, excitement and playfulness are attributed to the positive column while anger, fear, disgust, and hatred are sent to the negative side to be shunned and ignored.

Certainly there are emotions that are more enjoyable to experience than others. People certainly find happiness more pleasant than anger, but that isn't because one emotion is "positive" and one is "negative." We perceive grief negatively because it means a person has died or loss has occurred but also because the emotions accompanying it especially early ones, are challenging and uncomfortable. Discomfort, though, is not necessarily a bad thing.

Another inherent risk of assigning emotions false designations of positive or negative is the extended connotation resulting from that label. If something is positive, it is automatically viewed as good and/or right. If something is negative, it is automatically viewed as bad and/or wrong. Adults then use those categories as guides for what emotions to allow in themselves—and others—and which to avoid, and that is a very risky pattern of behavior. Consider, for instance, the man who is told he has an anger problem. If he believes his anger in and of itself is wrong, that anger is accompanied by added emotions of guilt and shame simply because he is experiencing a strong emotional reaction. It is not wrong to have moments of anger. Conversely, always trying to stay happy for the sake of positivity and ignoring other natural reactions can result in you feeling like a fraud.

Changing your perception of emotions from positive or negative to neutral is central to continuing forward movement in grief, to

embracing *all* emotions, and to learning about the art of healthy and complete expression.

### ***Emotions Long for Expression***

Because of the central focus on emotions throughout the film, many therapists, myself included, rejoiced when in 2015 Disney/Pixar released *Inside Out*, a movie about a young girl who moves to a new town and whose emotions—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—create conflict in her brain. Throughout the movie viewers have a front-row seat to the inner workings of emotions, from the moment of initial reaction to an event and through to completion. Joy, Anger, Sadness, Fear, and Disgust are all center stage for each life event—large and small, mundane and unexpected—and they each send responses accordingly. It is a brilliant portrayal of how emotions function and of their need to be expressed.

Expression is central to emotions, and it is also the skill most commonly lacking by the time we reach adulthood. Children are taught not to have tantrums or express unwanted emotion, and unfortunately that is often internalized as “emotions are bad.” Instead, parents are attempting to teach their children that they have reached an age when a healthier, more appropriate expression of emotion is needed. It makes sense that we need to age out of full-on tantrums, and yet when emotions are simply stopped, alternative strategies of emotional release are not learned. The result of this is adult grievors who find themselves stuck with a body full of big emotions trapped with no appropriate release.

Though emotions are neutral, there are right and wrong ways to express them. Going back to the man who is labeled with an anger problem, it is not the anger per se that gets him in trouble. The issue



is in how he expresses that anger. When determining if the emotional expression you are utilizing at any given moment is healthy, follow this simple rule of thumb: ask if the expression under consideration causes harm to yourself or another being. If the answer is *yes*, you need to find a new form of expression.

All emotions long to be expressed, but the mode of expression does not need to be the same for each; in fact, some emotions demand specific actions for full expression. For example, contentment is an emotion that is expressed simply by the way it is experienced in the body. A person who is content has a relaxed body and a calm heart rate. A frightened person has a much different experience. Fear is a large emotion that takes up a lot of space in the body, mind, and soul, and because of that it cannot be fully expressed simply by sitting with it. Fear needs to be released with words and physical action as well as with something to foster a different emotion. It can take some time to determine what modes of expression best work for you, but it is worth the effort. Knowing how to express your emotions is what allows you to move through them and release them.

In grief it feels as if the griever has no control over anything. As it relates to emotions, though, that is only half true. Grievers cannot control the emotions that come, but they do have control over *how* emotions are released. Think of them not as positive and negative expressions, good and bad, but as healthy and unhealthy. Since grief can cloud judgement, Table 1 provides a few examples of each type of emotional expression. Take a few moments to read through it and indicate the forms of expression you tend to use.

What observations can you make from that list? Perhaps your expressions are largely healthy, but you see others that might also

Table 1

Healthy Tools of Emotional Expression	Unhealthy Tools of Emotional Expression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Crying</li> <li>❑ Writing in a journal</li> <li>❑ Yelling into a pillow</li> <li>❑ Hitting a pillow or punching bag</li> <li>❑ Running, walking, swimming, working out</li> <li>❑ Talking to friends or family</li> <li>❑ Popping bubble wrap</li> <li>❑ Writing a letter to yourself, parents, God, the deceased, caregivers, other sources of emotion</li> <li>❑ Lifting weights</li> <li>❑ Talking honestly to the deceased or God</li> <li>❑ Talking to your pet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Numbing with alcohol, drugs, or overeating</li> <li>❑ Isolating from your support system</li> <li>❑ Physical self-harm: cutting, hitting, pulling hair</li> <li>❑ Psychological self-harm: starving yourself or forcing yourself to eat when not hungry, neglecting self-care</li> <li>❑ Destroying personal, private, or public property</li> <li>❑ Reckless behavior (spending, driving, experiences)</li> <li>❑ Yelling or shaming</li> <li>❑ Making significant life changes without thought and discussion with a trusted person</li> </ul>

be beneficial. Try one or two the next time one of these emotions comes up. Or maybe seeing it in black and white, you now recognize that what you have been doing to express your emotions is mostly unhealthy. Extend yourself grace because none of us is perfect. Make a plan to check the healthy side of the list next time. Remember, it makes sense that your tools of emotional expression

are lacking or your methods are counterproductive; years of quashing emotions and their expression created a pattern. Grief is an unfair and difficult time to learn how to be true to your emotions, but it is also an ideal opportunity because you will get a lot of practice.

### ***Emotions Are Indicators***

In my clinical practice I function first from the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach for assisting clients in understanding and changing thoughts and behaviors.<sup>3</sup> In short, CBT posits that thoughts create a physiological feeling which then results in a behavior. Therefore, to create a lasting change to specific behavior, it is necessary to observe the underlying thoughts, the “why,” and their connected feelings. As a person does the work of learning their patterns of thought and related feelings and how those feelings default to a specific action, change can occur. Emotions are tied into the process at each point—thought, feeling, and behavior.

The most common roadblock to this kind of change is the unfortunate reality that most people are disconnected from their internal “recordings” and need to spend time learning their own new playlist, so to speak, before true change can begin. Furthermore, the physiological feelings associated with a thought and emotion, such as a racing heart or flushed face, are so common that the person no longer recognizes the connection.

I met a new client we’ll call Carla<sup>4</sup> about two months after her spouse died. She displayed everything I would expect in early grief,

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3. Always ask about a therapist’s approach. Most use a combination of approaches depending on the client but have a preferred or primary style.

4. This story is a compilation of several case studies. Carla is not the real name of a specific client.

but she was concerned by how angry she felt. Her blood pressure was high, and her doctor told her it was understandable given her husband's recent death. Still, she wasn't used to feeling angry, so she came looking for help with her grief.

As Carla shared her story, I heard several potential sources for her anger and could tell from the way she talked that she was not making the same connection. She knew she was angry but was at a loss as to why. When I mentioned some potential sources of anger that I'd heard, her immediate response was, "Well, that's no reason to be angry! Why would that bother me so much?" As she continued, Carla repeatedly invalidated her own emotion. She didn't believe she had the *right* to be angry, so she could not allow herself to feel it.

Emotions are indicators that begin as quiet murmurs, but if ignored and allowed to fester, they can grow into blaring sirens. Carla could name her emotion, but because she did not understand it, she brushed it aside and worked to ignore its growing presence. What the emotion indicates is variable, but you can be certain it is telling you something.

Carla and I worked together to get to the root cause of her anger. Once that was known, we were able to narrow down tools of expression she could use to uproot it. Because this was an unfamiliar emotion for Carla, it took some practice with a few different tools that I'll describe later, but she eventually succeeded. As she worked on it, she began to feel her body return to a familiar state of being, and when she returned to the doctor, she received a clean bill of health.

Emotions are natural gifts from God meant simply to communicate what is going on inside our brains. They clue us in to parts of ourselves from which we are often disconnected and give us the

chance to make lasting change. Grief is a season of life in which you will experience several emotions, often simultaneously. Listen to the indicators you receive and explore the root cause of what you're feeling, then determine how to successfully release the emotion.

Remember, your emotion is valid simply because you feel it. In grief, having energy for anything, including emotional expression, is hard to come by, so do yourself a favor by not wasting precious energy on trying to make sense of your emotions. Instead, take the time to name the emotion, speak it aloud, and release it. In the end, all emotions need is validation and permission to be processed appropriately. And processing emotions is the trick to no longer being controlled by them.

Processing and releasing emotions is an experience difficult to define and one better explained through example. So before we close, let's look at two different examples of emotional expression found in the Bible.

## Jonah

When Jonah received God's call to be a prophet to God's people, I doubt he anticipated going down in history as the prophet swallowed by a giant fish only to be regurgitated three days later. Although that time of his life is certainly memorable and worth exploring, Jonah is also deserving of another award: *Best Emotional Expression*. The book of Jonah is brief, but what it lacks in length it makes up for in emotional demonstration.

Take, for instance, how Jonah ends up in the belly of that big fish. God comes to Jonah with a clear directive, and as a prophet Jonah is

supposed to take that directive and run with it. Well, Jonah does run, just not in the right direction. Here we see Jonah's first emotional expression—or, in this case, lack thereof.

Jonah heard the message he was to take to Nineveh, and it did not sit right with him. We don't know why Jonah chose in that moment not to express that anger to God. Perhaps he didn't know what he was feeling, maybe he knew and was afraid to share the particulars with God in that moment, or maybe he believed his feelings were irrational. Regardless of the reason, Jonah held in his emotion, and that trapped emotion caused him to run hard. Rather than facing it in the moment, he tried to outrun it. Suffice it to say that did not end well.

During his time in the belly of that fish, Jonah reflects on his behavior and is again overcome with emotion. This time, though, he channels his emotions into the form of a prayer. See if you can identify the different emotions in these verses at the start of Jonah:

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,  
and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.  
...Then I said, ‘I am driven away  
from your sight;  
how shall I look again  
upon your holy temple?’  
...Yet you brought up my life from the Pit,  
O LORD my God.  
As my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered the LORD;

and my prayer came to you....  
But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”<sup>5</sup>

This prayer expresses distress, sorrow, regret, and guilt and ends with thanksgiving. Jonah holds nothing back. He does not minimize what he feels, nor does he offer explanation. He names his emotions poetically and with detail, all with the purpose of giving voice to what he is experiencing. At the start of his journey we see Jonah swallowed by a large fish because he ran from his emotion. Here in the middle of the story, Jonah relents to his emotions knowing that to continue running from them will not serve him well in the least. It is clear as the prayer continues that Jonah’s spirit lightens; as he faces his emotions, he is unburdened of them, and that allows his perspective to broaden.

His prayer is inspiring and a wonderful example of a way believers can express emotions to God, but the award-winning performance opens with this line: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.”<sup>6</sup> Jonah’s displeasure at the thought of the people of Nineveh repenting turns quickly to anger towards God. Having learned his lesson about holding back his emotions, Jonah proceeds with what I lovingly call a temper tantrum. Each time I hear the words of chapter 4, I can’t help but picture a little boy stomping his feet as he yells before he eventually tires himself and drops to the ground for a good old-fashioned, pout session. All of this is done without hesitation

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5. Taken from Jonah 2:1–9.

6. Jonah 4:1. See the full reading of Jonah 3 and 4 for context for the remainder of this section.

and seemingly without any concern about validity or about how God will receive this behavior. Jonah is overcome with emotion and pours it out.

Many emotions related to grief are mirrored in Jonah's story. The source is different, but the sentiments remain. In Jonah's story we see emotions so substantial that he has no choice but to express them. No matter the person, the first step in ridding the self of those emotions is expression. Jonah is but one example of what that might look like.

## Hannah

Hannah's story<sup>7</sup> can be easily overlooked, but those who know it are witnesses to grief and the expression of related emotions. Hannah is barren, but she is not allowed to deal with her barrenness in the privacy and safety of her own home and inner circle. Hannah is living in a time when a primary role of women was to bear children. It was also common practice for a man to have multiple wives. Life was difficult enough for Hannah as she tried to cope, month after month, with the reality that she, yet again, had not conceived, and it was made worse by her husband's other wife.

Not only did Hannah have to sit by and watch her husband rejoice at the birth of children by this other woman, she also had to endure the woman's presence and scorn. Already filled with a multitude of emotions towards her body and her God, Hannah endured shame from this woman who, for whatever reason, was not simply content to be a mother.

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7. See 1 Samuel 1 and 2 for the main part of Hannah's story.



The words of 1 Samuel 1 make Hannah's pain palpable and provide insight into how Hannah managed her emotions. In verse 7 Hannah is described as weeping and refusing food. There is not enough detail to know if her refusal of food was intentional or due to a lack of hunger resulting from her tears, but Hannah's tears are a clear expression of the emotions swirling within her. For Hannah, it appears withholding the emotions is not an option: her grief is simply too much to contain.

As the chapter continues, Hannah's grief reaches a new level, and weeping alone is no longer sufficient:

“She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly....As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk....Hannah answered, ‘No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.’...Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.”<sup>8</sup>

Imagine what Hannah must have been doing to appear drunk to an observer. This was not a simple prayer. She never uttered a word, but something in her demeanor signaled being out of sorts. It seems likely that Hannah's grief, comprised of several emotions listed in the text, overtook her and was likely expressed in her facial expressions

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8. 1 Samuel 1:10, 12–13, 15–16, 18b.

and body movements despite her not uttering a single word. It is clear she was expressing emotions held long and deep from her core to the only place that gave her hope of relief. She opened the doors of her pain and in the process finally felt free to air it all. Hannah's pain was real and valid and had reached a point of no longer being able to be contained. For this reason and many others, Hannah is a terrific example of the process of emotional expression.

Hannah's emotions were fueled by grief. Beyond her prayers to God, we do not know specifics of her actions or words, but we know her grief was big and intense. She dug deep and did not allow herself to stop. She has two other lessons for grievers today that are equally important. First, when Eli challenged her and accused her of being drunk, Hannah did not back down. She did not try to explain away her emotions or pretend all was well. She did not allow embarrassment at being seen in the depths of her grief to stop her process. Hannah looks at Eli and tells him what she has been talking about with God, and Eli listens. He sees her in a new way and hears what she is saying. In that moment, she could have turned and run or made up an excuse, but doing so would have invalidated everything she did and caused her to lose the ground she had gained in giving unfiltered voice to what she was feeling.

Second, Hannah shows what happens when we allow ourselves to face painful emotions: "and her countenance was sad no longer." After baring her soul before the Lord and being open with Eli, Hannah was again able to feel something other than despair. She was able to eat again. It is human nature to run from pain. We learn from a very young age to stay away from hot stoves because of the pain they can inflict if touched. Unfortunately, the same rule does not apply with emotions.

Certain emotions carry with them a level of pain, and the only way for the pain to dissipate is to face it. It is counterintuitive, yes; but time and again I have witnessed the truth of it. When painful emotions are fought against or ignored, they do not go away. In fact, they often grow stronger. But when a person can dig deep and find the strength to look at the pain, learn about it, and release it, healing happens. It is in the raw honesty that relief long sought is finally found. Hannah provides an image of one way to find that relief.

## Conclusion

By the time we reach adulthood, we have unlearned how to access our emotions, let alone properly value or express them. But this is not how we were created. God created humans with the ability to feel, and we need to utilize that ability because it is how we grow and connect with God, others, and self. Throughout the remaining chapters several different biblical stories and passages will be reviewed for their insight into grief and/or its expression. Emotions are central to any human experience, especially grief. Emotions need to be named, embraced, expressed, and released to find healing. If you are looking for further ideas on how to express emotion, look to the Psalms. God gave that book to teach us—or as the case often is, remind us—about human emotion. Anger, despair, joy, fear, depression, anxiety: these and many more are captured in the words of the psalmists. If you need more support for embracing your emotions, spend some time in the Psalms.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Appendix 2 and appendix 6 provide further instruction on utilizing the Psalms in grief expression.

## Pause for Whisperings

Where did God speak to you? Are you connected or disconnected from your emotions? What work do you need to do in the area of emotions? Are there emotions you have intentionally avoided that need attention?

[illegible]

Go  
*at your own pace,*  
take care of  
**YOURSELF,**  
*and ask for*  
help as you  
need it.

## *Five*

# Early Grief

**T**his chapter and the two that follow define common markers of grief in a framework of time. It is important to note that this framework is merely a guide used to normalize what you are experiencing, not a guide to define what you should be doing at a specific time in your grief. This is your process, and it cannot be measured or defined by someone else.

Bereavement counselors repeatedly report clients asking questions like “Am I Going Crazy?” or “Is This Normal?” Nearly one hundred percent of the time, the answer to these questions is unequivocal: you are not crazy, and yes, this is normal. But because of the way grief can manifest, it can be difficult as a griever to trust the normalcy of the specific thing you experience. The framework initiated in this chapter and continued in chapters 6 and 7 gives further encouragement that what you are experiencing is not only normal, it is expected.

## Early Grief Defined

On average, the period of early grief can last anywhere from one month to approximately five months and is the time when the loss

is still so new that it cannot be integrated into your daily reality, and impact marks of the grief are found in every facet of life. The lists below are simply a collection of the most commonly reported symptoms of early grief and are not exhaustive because symptoms are that varied. If something you are experiencing is not listed here, please do not worry. It is likely you will find a similar symptom somewhere in the list below, and that is your indication that you are exactly where you need to be. The goal of this section is to normalize what you are going through. Later in this chapter ideas for coping with these symptoms are provided.

## ***Physical***

Physical symptoms of grief can be some of the most difficult to acknowledge because there are other possible causes for them. If what you are experiencing is new for you, it is *likely* grief. If the pain is familiar but worsening, the worsening is probably caused by your grief. I recommend making an appointment with the doctor who treats your pain to confirm nothing more is happening. In fact, if you have not had a recent physical, scheduling one in the months after the death of a loved one is a good idea. Doing so establishes a baseline and allows time to discuss any concerns with a medical professional. A good rule of thumb for physical symptoms is this: if you are concerned by it, call and explain it to the doctor or nurse. They will talk it through with you and determine if a visit is needed to rule out any other sources of concern.

Table 2 below provides a list of physical symptoms often reported in early grief. Review the list, and for any that you have, ask yourself if it is new since the death or if it is pre-existing. Remember to listen to how the symptoms are manifesting. If, for instance, you have high blood pressure and notice a continued increase, then that is a good



**Table 2: Physical Symptoms of Grief**

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❑ Headaches	❑ Lack of appetite
❑ Hypersomnia	❑ Excess appetite
❑ Insomnia	❑ Fatigue
❑ Body aches	❑ Racing heart
❑ Tense muscles	

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time to inform your doctor to determine what you might need to be watching for.

### ***Cognitive***

This is an impact of grief that most surprises people, and sometimes in ways that are frightening. I once had a client start her session reflecting that she arrived in the parking lot with no memory of the drive from her home. She remembered getting in her car and then arriving at the office, but no interim details. She was visibly shaken by this and with good reason. She did not know if she stopped at every traffic light or stop sign, and she could not say with certainty if pedestrians were present for any part of the drive. Once she got into the cycle of fear, it was difficult to help her release it.

“Grief brain” behaves that way, especially in early grief. I worked first with my client to calm her racing thoughts and heart. As her body relaxed, she was able to gain a broader perspective and recognize that, on a smaller scale, she has had similar prior experiences. The more we talked, the more she recognized that an accident would have jolted her to awareness and that had she made a glaring traffic offense, those driving around her would have honked their horns or otherwise alerted her.

Grief interrupts logical thought and replaces it with emotional thought that is often fleeting and scattered, and griever's often report feeling disconnected from what is going on around them, or even from their own body. It can be difficult to focus or concentrate for any length of time, which is why that mountain of paperwork is so overwhelming. A new onset of memory challenges is also common in this part of grief. Losing keys, forgetting the birthday of a significant person, losing track of days, not completing an assignment or meeting a deadline: these are all normal, expected interruptions to cognitive processes for griever's. The normalcy does not make the symptoms any less frustrating, but hopefully in knowing it is normal you will be freed from worry about what is happening within you.

### ***Emotional***

Unpredictable. If emotions and/or mood could be summed up in one word in this phase, it would be *unpredictable*. The emotions of a griever can change instantaneously, and as that happens, the overall mood is also impacted. You might, for instance, wake up ready to visit with a friend who has been a consistent support to you, but then as you are making your breakfast, a news story comes on about someone who has the same disease that ended your person's life. You turn off the television and turn on the radio. It works. Your mood is restored, until *that* song comes on. You turn the radio off with a bit more effort than is needed and escape to the shower in hopes of washing it all away and restoring your earlier mood. But when another remembrance taunts you, you know meeting your friend is now completely out of the question.

Though the details may change, it is probable you experienced something similar in the early weeks and months of your grief. A sudden onslaught of emotion followed by a mood shift is an expected

occurrence during this time, and in the world of bereavement it is known as a grief wave.<sup>1</sup> Emotions come so hard and so fast in early grief that tracking them, let alone effectively releasing them, feels akin to climbing Mount Everest. The only goal here is to not lose your grip on the mountain. Climbing it doesn't come until later.

This is the time to begin the practice of recognizing your emotions. If you did not locate a list of feelings words when you read chapter 4, this is a good time to do so. I recommend having several copies available to you for tracking. Throughout each day, pick up a list of words (the lists that have faces are a good alternative if that better resonates with you) and indicate what you know you are feeling in the moment or since the last time you looked at the list. Circle them, date them; whatever mode of indication works for you is fine. In early grief the goal is to begin to establish patterns to your emotions and recognize those for which you have established tools of expression and those for which you do not.

Particularly in early grief, your emotions and moods are reliable only in that they are unpredictable. Your world was dealt a significant blow, and your emotions are working to catch up and make sense of it all. Be patient and gracious with yourself in this season. Things will eventually stabilize.

Everyone has a tolerance capacity. The specifics vary from person to person, but everyone has one. A tolerance capacity refers to the number of small annoyances, frustrations, etc., a person can handle before a reset is needed. Resetting the tolerance capacity can include expressing related emotions, but it doesn't always need to. Oftentimes engaging in self-care practices or taking time away from

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1. Grief waves will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. For now, just practice not fighting against them. If you can let them wash over you, they will pass more quickly.

the challenging environment is sufficient for the reset. One's tolerance capacity, however, is greatly reduced in early grief.

It is usually in the first or second session that a client acknowledges an increase in anger reactions or a general edginess to their demeanor. I have heard reports of an onset of road rage, a new intolerance of a pet's behavior, a rapid boiling of anger with no warning, decreased tolerance for a friend's tone of voice, and the list goes on and on. This is typically distressing to clients not only because the reactions are new, but also because the filter that previously prevented them from saying things aloud is now missing.

Here is what you, as a griever, need to know: especially in early grief, you wake up each day already at your capacity. All those things you previously tolerated are now the equivalent of last-straw nails on the chalkboard. But fear not: this will diminish. Often just in learning it is normal, clients can relax and not judge themselves for their reactions, which in turn lessens the impact these situations have. Second, the solution for this is manageable, even at the height of grief and here is also the solution for many other symptoms of early grief, so it checks a lot of boxes. Self-care is an oft-used phrase and sometimes mocked. Sometimes Christians discourage it, calling it selfish. Self-care, though, is the furthest thing from selfish, and we see that in the person of Jesus. When Jesus was overwhelmed or needed a break, he distanced himself from the crowds and the disciples to go and pray.<sup>2</sup> He did not push through it or pretend all was well; he took inventory of his need, and he protected the time to get it. As followers of Jesus, we can learn from the example he set and engage in similar practices.

Throughout early grief and possibly into middle grief, you will likely wake up at capacity with little ability to tolerate what normally

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2. There are several examples of this in the Gospels, especially in the last days of Jesus' life.

would barely phase you. Be honest with others about this, and ask in advance for their grace. Be honest, too, with yourself. If you recognize this is happening, extend yourself grace, and engage in practices that help you reset your tolerance capacity tank. Several practices within the survival kit at the end of this chapter will apply here, so be sure to take a few moments to note what practices you want to try in the future. It is not selfish to take care of yourself, but if ever there is a time in your life to risk erring on the side of selfish, this is it. Grief consumes your being, and you need time to learn how to cope and adapt. In reading this book, you are doing that, and you will learn more skills as you read. Be patient with yourself on this road. You deserve it.

### ***A Special Note on Mental Health Disorders***

Western Christianity is improving in its recognition of the validity of mental health disorders, but not rapidly enough. Too many people of faith continue to believe and perpetuate the belief that diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are false.<sup>3</sup> However, such things cannot simply be prayed away as if the person experiencing them can *choose* to no longer be impacted. If you have one of these diagnoses or a mental health diagnosis not listed, please hear me: your diagnosis is real, what you battle is real, and grief can make it more difficult to manage. Though these things can become more difficult to manage, that does not mean it is impossible.

Do you remember the image from chapter 1 of grief as a thief? Well, one of the things grief often steals from people is the ability to view situations logically without emotion. For instance, if you are

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3. These three are commonly impacted by grief. What is said in this section, however, can be applied to all mental health diagnoses.

treated for depression through medication and/or counseling,<sup>4</sup> you likely have a list of go-to coping skills to manage the symptoms. When grief strikes, it is common to forget to use those proven skills, despite the similarity of symptoms. If you battle with depression, anxiety, OCD, or another diagnosis, place reminders wherever you need them to utilize the tools you already have. You might notice an increase in your need of them, and that is okay.

If you've relied on tools to manage symptoms prior to the loss, don't be surprised if during early grief you need to do so frequently throughout each day. Try to look at this with logic, not emotion. Grief raises stress levels and decreases the ability to see the larger perspective, so expect a short-term increase to your anxiety. You are not imagining it, and you are not choosing to make things worse. You do have a choice in this situation, though. You can choose to be intentional about talking openly with your doctor about medication and utilizing your tools. You can also increase your counseling support to refresh your coping skills.<sup>5</sup>

Stress is a component in most symptoms of mental health, regardless of diagnosis, and grief is at the top of the list of life stressors. Therefore, it is only natural that in grief, especially in early grief, you may notice an increase in symptoms. Because grief is also a liar, it can take that truth and run with it, leaving destruction in its wake.

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4. Medication corrects chemical imbalances but cannot give you tools, guidance, or understanding for what you're experiencing. Counseling is always recommended. Many organizations provide quality counseling without causing a financial burden. You can also find several tools to assist you in the appendices.

5. A note on medication: If medication works for you, that means it is correcting a chemical imbalance in your brain—nothing more, nothing less. Talk with your provider about a *short-term* increase to assist with clarity in early grief and middle grief and a plan to return to your baseline after assessment. If you have managed without medication, consider consulting with a doctor to start for additional professional help. You can return to your baseline after you've adjusted.

For instance, a person with OCD, has a need for control that can trap him in a cycle of repetitive behavior. Through a lot of hard work he learns to manage his thoughts and behaviors to cope with daily life, though some days remain a significant challenge. Then one of his parents dies. The parent provided reassurance and structure even though the man suffering from OCD lived alone. Now he faces grief as well as trying to assist his remaining parent, which further compounds his stress. His OCD behaviors return, and when a close friend draws his attention to this, he finds himself thinking all hope is lost and that he may *never* regain the abilities he once used to cope. That is a lie of grief, and it extends to those with anxiety and depression as well. People notice their symptoms increasing and begin to feel they have lost control that can never be recouped. If, however, logic and support can be introduced to the equation, the sufferer can regain perspective and hope for an eventual return to what had been the norm.

All self-care is essential throughout grief and will take the most effort in early grief, and caring for your mental health is no exception. Be kind to yourself. Be intentional about following all directions related to prescriptions. Utilize your tools. Seek professional help the moment you wonder if you need it. Wondering is usually a sign of something we need though we are resistant to it. Because of the way grief clouds the mind, it is better to act early and leave it to the professionals to determine what you do and do not need throughout your journey.

### ***An Important Distinction: Not Wanting to Live Versus Wanting to Die***

Many clients in early grief have reported a sense of not wanting to live. They describe a sense of not feeling the desire to move forward without their loved ones or of no longer understanding the purpose of their lives. When such clients are asked if they are having suicidal

thoughts, the answer is always a definitive *no*; they just cannot see a way to continue on and don't have much desire to find one.

Not wanting to live is different than wanting to die and contemplating how to do so. If you have a history of suicidal thinking, contact your providers and inform them of your loss. They will help you formulate an action plan to keep you healthy and safe as you work through your grief. If you are having suicidal thoughts of any kind, stop what you are doing and reach out for help.<sup>6</sup>

## *Spiritual*

In grief counseling clients are often asked about their spiritual or religious beliefs and how they are experiencing those beliefs after their loss. Though it might seem strange to take a spiritual assessment when someone is newly grieving, people inevitably review what they believe about death and what comes next after a loved one dies. Often the death of a significant person shakes the foundation of beliefs that have carried you to this point in your life, but with proper attention, the shaking does not need to result in crumbling; it might even result in a stronger foundation.

As you consider your loss, it's good to reflect its impact upon your spiritual life. Did the death draw you closer to God and make you more secure in your faith? Maybe you find you are drawing closer to God not because you are more certain of your faith, but because you fear faith could be lost if you don't. Or, perhaps, you are aware God remains present in the distance, but you are unable to feel as connected as you once did. You might experience something not listed here. Whatever you experience, know that the possibilities in

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6. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number to call or text is 800-273-8255. Alternatively, go to your nearest emergency room or call 911.



this area of life vary as much as in the others. In early grief it is worthwhile to try and name where you are with God and decide if you are content with that or if you want to change it.

If you are content with where you are spiritually, continuing your faith practices will help to maintain your contentment. It is important to note that being content might include feeling disconnected from God; that is okay! The source of your contentment is not the point—the point is embracing that contentment as a source of comfort as you begin to adapt in other areas.

However, if you are spiritually discontented, for whatever reason, it is valuable to plan to reverse that. Ponder your discontent and examine the source. Are you angry? Withdrawn? Do you feel abandoned? Numb? Generally disconnected from God? Notice the word *plan*. Between emotions, tasks, and paperwork, you have plenty happening in early grief, and taking on one more thing might be too much. You do not need to change your discontentment at this moment, but starting a plan to make it happen is helpful.

To begin, write down the person or people in your life who are safe on this topic. Who will let you be honest about the current state of your faith? Who will make room for you to ask questions, express doubts, and voice true emotions without challenging or shaming you? Consider contacting a pastor or counselor to assist you. You might want to set a goal for your faith in this season of life. For many of my clients the goal is to maintain their faith. Knowing their faith will go through challenges, they aim to arrive at the other side of grief with faith intact. Either now or before starting the next chapter, spend a few moments considering if you have a goal for your faith, and if you do, record it somewhere for easy reference.

There is no denying that grief impacts the spiritual aspect of life, so it is important to go into grief aware of that and open to it.

In early grief try to focus on maintaining spiritual contentment or a plan to change discontentment to contentment as well as on documenting the overall goal for your faith throughout the grief journey. The survival kit at the end of this chapter includes a suggestion for this process.

As seen in the areas above, early grief is all-consuming, and therefore it is the time to be vigilant in self-care and attend to your needs. If you have dependents, children or otherwise, that require periods of focus, trust that God will provide what you need as you need it. Early grief is also the time to lean on your support system and/or seek professional assistance. Be it help with the mountains of unexpected paperwork, respite from childcare, reminders to eat, or something else, if you have a need for help, keep working to find it.

Also consider being open with your employer about your grief. Full-time employees are lucky to receive three days of bereavement leave after a family death, and typically those three days are consumed by service preparations, family/friend visits, and the service itself. By the end of bereavement leave, people have often not had time to reset or even begin to process. The situation is bleaker for part-time employees, contractors, etc., and for anyone when the death is a non-family member. Bereavement leave for best friends, second parents, children of friends, and the like is often nonexistent. Many employers might support a person taking time off in those situations, though it may be designated as vacation time.

No matter the type of work you do or the hours you put in—paid or unpaid—your focus and motivation will be impacted for some time, regardless of financial pressures to work. It is okay to ask for help. If you work in a formal setting, explore with the human resources team what options you have. Co-workers might be able

to donate paid time off to you, or you might be allowed to take a leave of absence. Options are available, but often only if you ask. If your work is not formally recognized as such, as in the case of a stay-at-home parent, consider asking for help from family and friends to take breaks where you can to focus on your adjustment. It is difficult to summon the energy to ask for help, especially in the early days, but dig deep to reach out. It will serve you well both now and in the season ahead.<sup>7</sup>

## An Object Lesson: The Grief Ball

My two chocolate labs love their toys, and we happily continue to buy them more. If someone drops by our home without warning, they are treated to toys strewn throughout the main area of the house without apology. Our boys rule the house; we know it and have no desire to change it. Except, that is, for a toy ball with spikes (rubber or plastic). That one we want to eliminate, especially when it finds its way into our path on a 2 A.M. trip to the bathroom.

Think of that ball as grief. It is currently trapped *within your body*. During early grief you cannot make a single move without the ball also moving. The trouble is, every time the ball moves, the pain is triggered again. You might reach a point of wanting to stand completely still to stop the constant pokes, but in trying that, you quickly learn the pressure and pain remain. They are inescapable.

As my dogs chew their toys, those points become nubs, and the pain they inflict decreases. Similarly, the grief ball changes

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7. The considerations of when to begin removing your loved one's belongings, move homes, and more are found in chapter 7. It can be best to wait to explore those questions, but you might benefit from dealing with one or more of them sooner rather than later.

throughout grief; more on that in chapters 6 and 7. For now, know that it's normal to feel your grief triggered at every turn *and* that it will not always be that way.

### ***Joseph's Early Grief***

Many know Joseph for the multi-colored coat that he receives as a gift from his father and that sets his life on a troubled course. The coat and what comes next are an important part of Joseph's story, though there's a piece of it that is less known that perfectly exemplifies early grief. Genesis 50 opens in this way: "Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; they spent forty days in doing this, for that is the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days."<sup>8</sup>

By way of recap, Joseph's father is Jacob, later renamed by God as Israel, through whom the twelve tribes were born. Jacob fiercely loved his son Joseph to the point of providing him with a robe that caused a sibling rivalry that still lives in infamy.<sup>9</sup> After years of separation, Joseph was finally reunited with his father and given the gift of time before the end of Jacob's life. In these opening words of Genesis 50, readers are shown the raw grief Joseph felt as he watched his dad transition to life with God.

Joseph and his father had reconciled their differences, and Jacob had had the time and energy to share charges with each of his sons; Joseph also knew Jacob experienced the joy of seeing his sons reunited. The point of this is that when Jacob died, we have every reason to believe Joseph was free of any guilt or regret. And yet, his

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8. Genesis 50:1–3.

9. For the full story, begin in Genesis 37.

grief was immediate and without restraint. For believers who are also griever, Joseph is proof positive that having faith in God does not eliminate grief. Furthermore, his story shows that grief does not need to be refined or limited in any way.

Many men in American culture today feel it is somehow not masculine to express emotions, especially in public. Crying is frowned upon, let alone weeping. And full-body expression of emotions? Forget it. But in this picture of Joseph, God sends griever, male and female alike, a reminder of the normalcy and accepted reality of emotional expression. Joseph is shown falling on the body of his father, kissing him, and weeping over him. Joseph's dad, arguably his greatest champion, died, and Joseph was overwhelmed with emotion at this new reality. Rather than tamping that emotion down for show, Joseph opened himself to his emotions and allowed them to wash over him.

Beyond that, notice the time given: seventy days of grieving. Previously in this chapter early grief was defined as lasting anywhere from one to five months, and this illustration supports that. In those seventy days of grieving, Jacob's body was prepared for burial but not yet buried. Also note the end of the third verse: Joseph was not alone in his grieving. Two- and a half-months after Jacob's death, Joseph remained surrounded by people who grieved alongside him and supported his grief. Amazing.

At this time in his life Joseph was living in Egypt and working in the upper echelon with the pharaoh, so he asked to be released to make the journey back to his father's land to bury him as Jacob had requested. Permission obtained, Joseph set out on the journey and again was not alone. Joseph, his servants, servants of the pharaoh, the households of his brothers and his father, and many others all traveled together for this important task.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Genesis 50:7-9.

“When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father seven days.”<sup>11</sup> Here is yet another example of grief supported by God, and isn't it spectacular? Joseph and countless others gathered to express their emotions and support one another in the process. After seventy days of grieving at his home, in part while waiting for the embalming to be complete, Joseph had cleared enough of his emotion to create space to plan his travel to fulfill Jacob's last request.

During the travel itself, Joseph might have had moments of grief, but he was able to keep his focus on the immediate journey. Then, after arriving and knowing he had succeeded in meeting this request, Joseph was again able to let go and allow his grief to wash over him. For seven more days Joseph mourned with others. Remember, mourning is defined as an outward expression of inward emotion. It is likely that Joseph did not spend those seven days in isolation but rather regularly sat together with his traveling companions, weeping and sharing stories.

Only after the travels and period of mourning did Joseph finally bury Jacob. We do not know how much time was consumed by the trip from Egypt to the burial site near Mamre, but it is not unlikely to have averaged three to four weeks, given the size of the caravan. By the time Jacob is buried and Joseph is ready to begin the trek back to Egypt, it is likely that nearly four months have passed since Jacob's death. That means nearly four months have passed before Joseph is ready to begin his return to work and life as he knew it.

The first lesson is *set* your emotions free. It is how you move forward. Your emotions are nothing to be ashamed or afraid of, and feeling deep sadness that your loved one died is not an indication of a lack

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11. Genesis 50:10.

of faith. Furthermore, the deep sadness does not mean you don't believe your person is in heaven. One does not cancel out the other. Third, take your time, especially in early grief. There is a lot to process in those first days and weeks. Whether or not you were prepared for your person's death, the reality is often something other than what you expect.

In this story we see that the funeral didn't take place for about three months, and the burial was another week after that. Society might have guidelines, but if you are not ready for a funeral/memorial/celebration of life three days later, that is okay.

Fourth, embrace your community and seek those who can join in mourning with you. It is a significant help to have proof you are not alone, to remember that others miss your person too. If you do not have other family, seek out those who knew your person and ask for stories. Doing so will help all involved in the work of grief and will give you good comfort down the road. Finally, be bold in seeking what you need. If you need more time than is initially offered to you, ask for more. At worst the answer will be *no*, at which point you can seek professional help to assist you in coping with grief while you work. At best, your employer will find a way to support you or will work to find a compromise.

## Early Grief Survival Kit

As part of my work as a bereavement counselor, I facilitate spousal loss support groups. Though each meeting has a loose outline, it's good to leave room for a special need that might arise. The guarantee at each meeting is that participants will receive a handful of worksheets to place in their binder that I have come to call "Rescue

Folders.” We don’t always complete the worksheets in group, but each is explained. Participants are encouraged to keep towards the front of their binders those worksheets that are most helpful so when they have a day where grief is especially heavy, they will know right where to find help.

What follows are brief descriptions of nine tools to aid you in early grief and begin building your survival kit. Turn down the top corner of the page, slip in a bookmark, or otherwise indicate this part of the chapter so you have it when you most need it.

## ***Lists***

Especially in early grief the ability to focus is interrupted and short-term memory is unreliable. There is also a lot to sort and address. Calls to lawyers, banks, insurance companies, thank-you cards, financial planners: it is all overwhelming. Even if you have never needed a list to keep things straight, I encourage you to do so now. Ask for help organizing and prioritizing the lists, too, so that bills and other items with deadlines do not get missed. If you need to use a print calendar for a few months, do it. I promise your brain will return to its previous capability, but for now creating lists is a gift you can give yourself that will allow your brain more rest.

## ***Basic Nutrition***

In the first few weeks after a death people are often overrun with casseroles and sweets. Since appetite is usually diminished during those days, the proffered food lasts for a good amount of time. Unfortunately, dinner and dessert are often not sufficient. Your goal in early grief is three balanced meals a day. The meals do not need to be large, but try to eat something that provides a balance of protein and carbohydrates. There are decent options available if you do not have the desire or energy to cook. Meal delivery services, frozen meals, or even



prepared nutrition shakes can be good options. Remember this is only to see you through to when your appetite and the desire to prepare food returns. Eventually you will want to go back to what is familiar, but for now if you need to change the way you eat, do so. It's important to find the healthiest option you can.

### ***Exercise***

Grief consumes one's entire being, and the body is no exception. Movement of any kind will help express and expel your grief. Go for a brief walk, go for a run, take your bike out, cross-country ski, swim, hike, roller skate, hit a punching bag, do yoga, stretch. The movement does not need to be complicated; the point is to engage your body in some kind of activity. Doing so has physical health benefits as well as emotional and cognitive benefits. It will be difficult at times to motivate yourself, but remember the sessions do not need to be long or intense; just get moving in some way as regularly as you can. You might find you feel best if you do a few minutes at a time.

### ***Sleep Aid***

Sleep is as important to healthy functioning as nutrition and exercise. If you find yourself struggling to either fall asleep or stay asleep, take note of it. If it becomes persistent, contact your doctor and/or your grief counselor. Non-medicinal treatment exists, but you cannot get help if you don't ask. There will be more on journal writing in middle grief, but for now consider keeping a notebook and pen by your bed. When you wake in the middle of the night and cannot return to sleep, turn on a lamp and write out the thoughts that are keeping you awake. Oftentimes pouring out your thoughts onto paper is enough to tell the brain it no longer needs to keep track of them because they are safely recorded.

### ***Mood Assistance***

If you were taking medication for depression or anxiety prior to the death, you might notice a need for an increase. Track all your symptoms for a week, both those that occur at the usual rate for you and those that are increased. After that week of tracking, contact the prescriber of your medications and explain your grief and change in symptom management. Talk with him or her about a *short-term* change if you feel it is necessary to assist you in the early months. It will be helpful for that conversation if you are also already involved with a grief counselor for additional support.

If throughout your life you have managed a low-level, undiagnosed anxiety or depression, you might discover that in early grief you are no longer able to self-manage as well as you did before. Contact your primary doctor to talk about the recent death and what you are noticing about your anxiety or depression since that time. If you are comfortable, talk with them about a short-term regimen of a low-dose medication. The goal of this medication is *not* to numb you or remove all emotion; rather it is to calm things enough that you are able to focus on needed emotional processing. Also, as difficult as things are right now, they *will* return to what is familiar, so know that this change is not permanent. Some clients take medication for six months, others for a year. You will know when you feel ready to transition off it; however, it is important to not make any reductions or other changes in your dose until you first talk with your doctor so you know how to do so safely.

There are non-medicinal approaches to manage your mood as well. In early grief your best approach is to track your emotions and practice releasing them. If you find yourself more irritable, introduce self-care into the mix. If you are weary of crying, watch a favorite movie or television show that is guaranteed to make you laugh. It is not a betrayal of your loved one to do so. Additionally, this is a good

time to contact a grief counselor (often also known as a bereavement counselor). If your loved one died in hospice, you likely have services already available to you. If not there are many other agencies to help you through grief. Local funeral homes, hospitals, and hospices are good places to look for a starting point.<sup>12</sup> Finally, if at any time you find your thoughts going down a path that is abnormal or scary, do not delay in reaching out for help. Call your physician's office, and they will assist you in finding the help you need.

## ***Relaxation***

Grief is at the top of the stress list because of the significant impact it has on your life, and stress unreleased wreaks havoc on the body and the mind. Due to the demands of grief, adding something extra to do is not ideal, but it remains important to relax your mind and body as often as possible. What follows is an easy exercise you can repeat as needed throughout the day. Try it at different times of day to see what best serves you; it can also be a help on the nights you wake and need to get back to sleep.

To begin, get in a comfortable seated or lying-down position. From your diaphragm, inhale through your nose, and silently count to five as you watch your belly expand. Hold that breath for another count of three or five, then slowly release the breath through your mouth for a final count of five as you watch your belly return. Repeat this two times. Already you will feel looser and calmer.

Next, do what is known as a body scan. Take a mental look at areas of your body, starting with your feet and scan up to the top of your head. Anytime you hit a roadblock of tension, stop and do the following: consciously tense the area for three seconds before you

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12. You can go to [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com) and click on the Find a Therapist tab. There you can set filters for your local area, insurance, and specific need. Most therapists offer a free phone consultation so you can talk with them before even committing to a first session.

relax the area for three seconds. Repeat this process two or three times before you resume scanning. When the scanning, tensing, and relaxing is complete, finish the session with another three deep breaths using the pattern of slow inhale, holding the breath, and slow exhale. By the end of this process, which usually takes no more than five minutes, you will likely feel a significant reduction in overall tension and anxiety with an increased sense of calm and energy.

### ***Gather Your Crew***

Throughout the duration of grief you are going to need support. Be bold in asking for what you need. Be it help with shopping, folding the laundry, coming to appointments with you, sitting by your side while you make phone calls, or taking on the role of grief distractor, find people and let them into your inner circle. Make sure they know you consider them valuable to your journey. Gather them around you and lean on them as you need.

### ***Ask People to Keep Calling***

During early grief people are wonderful at reaching out and trying to connect with you. Despite the wrong things they might say at times, the connection is well-intentioned. Regardless of good intentions, though, you will have more days when you say “no” to invitations than those when you accept. This is perfectly fine, and it is good to listen to your needs; it is also good to be clear with people on the reason for your *no*. Practice saying something like, “Today isn’t a good day, so I’m going to pass, but will you please call again? I do want to [do the activity] at some point. I don’t have the energy or brain space to remember to call when I am having a better day, so it will mean a lot to me if you call again next time.” The point of this is to let them know that you do want to connect again, that you appreciate their call, and that you know you cannot be responsible

right now to call back. People respond well to this, especially because it gives them a concrete action.

### ***Create a God Jar***

After the sudden death of her husband a woman in my church took a proactive step in her grief and faith journey. For her retaining faith was a main goal in grief, and she knew a key factor in that would be to notice God's hand in her life every day. To help with that, she created what she calls her "God Hugs" jar. Each day she intentionally looked for God to show up in a real way, and when it happened, she wrote it on a colorful slip of paper. Each paper was placed in a clear jar that was kept in a prominent place. Throughout her grief that jar was an anchoring point for her: a reminder of God's presence in her life at moments when it was difficult to remember and a celebration of God's faithfulness the rest of the time.

This type of intentional awareness of God is significant in early grief. Consider how you might do something similar, especially if you are at a point of feeling disconnected from God. Keep your eyes and heart open, and God's hand will be revealed.

### ***Talk to Your Person***

They say you can never forget how to ride a bike, that the muscle memory is so well entrenched that even if years go by, you can jump back on a bike and start riding. Muscle memory is something that needs to be addressed in grief as well.

You and your person had a routine of communication. Regardless of the frequency or mode of conversation, the point is that you did communicate. You had things you shared between the two of you. When someone dies, expectedly or not, your being longs to continue that conversation. Many people feel that longing but ignore it because they either feel it is "silly" or "wrong" to talk to a person

who is no longer here. Your brain and heart, I assure you, do not care that your person is no longer physically present; they want what they want and will not let up until they get it.

The good news is that there's a variety of ways to do this. One of my clients wrote a letter to his spouse every morning and sometimes a second one later in the day. Another visited the gravesite as often as possible because it is where they felt safest to speak openly to their spouse. Some people talk to a picture, some to a special item; if the person's text or email remains active, that can be used as well. No, you will not receive a clear, audible, physical response. But you will have the satisfaction of releasing what you need to say, and that has undeniable benefit. Try it in a few different forms; I promise you God does not frown on it.

## Conclusion

Early grief is so named because it represents the stretch of time immediately following a death to when the numbness begins to fade and you have accepted, at least on the surface, the reality of the loss. This period of grief can last up to five months. The theme of early grief is practice. Practice expression of emotions, practice asking for help, and practice self-care; you will have plenty of time to perfect these, so there is no pressure to get it all right. Focus on the clear tasks at hand and taking care of your daily basic needs.

When you no longer need to think about getting dressed or forcing yourself to shower every few days, that is one sign you are transitioning to middle grief. You might also notice a change to the grief ball you carry with you; this too is a sign of moving into middle grief. Remember this is your road and there is no rush. Go at your own pace, take care of yourself, and ask for help as you need it. Then when you're ready, leave early grief behind.

## Pause for Whisperings

There is *a lot* in this chapter that you will need to return to again. Be sure to go back and review what you marked or what caused a connection for you. Which symptoms most reflect what you're experiencing? Which of the tools provided in the survival kit are new to you? Which are you willing to try? Write about that here or in a journal as well as anything else you felt God saying as you read through the chapter.

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Grief  
*waves are*  
**EMOTIONAL**  
gut  
punches.



## *Six*

# Middle Grief

**T**he transition from early grief to middle grief is not obvious. There is no line to cross or a marker to highlight that it has happened: in fact, it doesn't necessarily occur all at once. Sometimes the change is gradual with one foot in each stage, and sometimes a person just wakes up one day and realizes the signs of early grief are gone. The subtlety of the shift is due to the commonalities these two stages share.

First is the overlap of time frames. Early grief can last up to five months, and middle grief can begin as early as two months. A variety of factors influence this overlap, including, among other things, a person's support network, level of resiliency, ability to accept the new reality, and experience with emotional expression. The griever who transitions to middle grief in the earlier months likely has a strong support system, a healthy connection with his or her emotions, and a life pattern of adapting well to change. The latter two features are especially important since personality is a key. Remember, though, that you can still successfully navigate grief even without these things. It might take more time and possibly more intentionality, but if you do the work, you will come through to this next phase.

Another overlap between the two phases is a majority of the physical, cognitive, spiritual, and emotional characteristics. Early grief is about learning and acknowledging what challenges you experience in each of these areas whereas middle grief takes that a step further into processing and accepting certain things and changing or releasing others. Many of the physical symptoms of grief will begin to resolve as you work through middle grief. The cognitive struggles naturally resolve as you continue moving forward, but those symptoms will not necessarily be removed before you enter this next segment.

As indicated, middle grief can begin anytime between months two and five after the death and last through month ten. In other words, if early grief is a sprint, middle grief is a marathon. Thankfully positives are introduced to the equation to give you needed glimpses of hope. The remainder of this chapter delves into some markers of middle grief and provides more tools to add to your survival kit. Go at your own pace, taking a break after each section if needed. It is okay to skip around, take notes, and revisit; you might come upon something that doesn't resonate right now but will in another month or two.

## The Changes

Middle grief has its own unique markers that can be summarized with one word: *change*. Given that it was a significant, unwelcome change that forced you onto this road called *grief*, hearing that more change is coming can be, to say the least, aggravating. I will not lie to you and say that all these changes are for the good, but I can assure you that some of them are. The others, the ones that feel like an additional burden or loss, are needed to keep moving. Later in

the chapter you will learn about the risk associated with fighting against forward movement; for now try to open your mind and heart to the changes. Though difficult at the start, most of them result in an easier road.

### ***Changing Goal***

The focus of early grief is survival, plain and simple. Every tool is about learning to recognize, name, and embrace the experience you are in. In middle grief the focus shifts to adaptation. Grief does not have a roadmap, but it might be helpful at this point to review the trajectory of grief. We've already established that the goal of grief is not to "get over it" or "move on"; rather, it is to move forward, not with the goal of forgetting, but with the goal of *relocating* your person in your life as you continue living. Middle grief is one stop along the way, helping you move from early grief (struggling to believe your person is dead) to lasting grief (acceptance).

Remember the grief trajectory is not a fixed course with detailed steps. Instead it is a path with general markers that allow you to judge your position within the bigger picture and be reminded that where you are in this moment is not where you will stay. Noting your particular trajectory is a concrete way to explain the abstract concepts of bereavement and hope within loss. The common trajectory of grief, then, is a reminder that you are adjusting, moving, and changing to reacclimate to a new place.

If we were to zoom in on middle grief, the focus word would be *improvement*. In early grief you survive, in middle grief you improve and some even begin to thrive. That word *improve* is a bit easier to believe than *thrive*, but that is the point of observing this grief phase: to give you hope of what will be if you continue moving forward.

It is potentially discouraging to look at the larger trajectory of grief and see the length of time typically spent in middle grief. Given that you can enter it beginning in month one or two after the death and not leave it until month ten, middle grief can seem daunting. But be encouraged: your emotions will not be as raw in middle grief, as we will cover in the next section. Middle grief is about continuous adaptation and growth. If you look closely, you will see small victories on nearly a daily basis. Keep a list of those victories to revisit on the days you need a reminder.

Each step forward is a step closer to healing. Healing, remember, is not about removing the grief but about accommodating and eventually befriending it to gain control over it. With each day you will gain more control over your grief and how it manifests in your day-to-day life. What's more, middle grief will eventually end. At the start of early grief it is difficult to imagine ever feeling differently, but eventually you can look back and see how things have changed. In middle grief it's good to regularly pause and consider how your grief is different than the last time you examined it. Even with days that feel like a backslide there is potential for continued forward movement. Look for it and celebrate it and remember that you are not alone. Beyond your support system—church, friends, and/or family—God is present in your grief to help you along the way.

I do most of my reading via audiobooks; I love being able to pop in my headphones and listen to a book while walking my dogs, getting groceries, and doing chores. I appreciate that tasks are more enjoyable and typically feel faster while I'm listening to a well-performed book, but I also sometimes hear something I previously missed. Once while listening to a fiction book, for instance, I heard one of the characters read Psalm 23. As a hospice chaplain and bereavement counselor, I have read those words aloud countless times, but this time I heard them differently. I don't know if it was the

actor's inflection or emphasis, but one word resonated with me in a new way:

“Even though I walk *through* the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”<sup>1</sup>

Did you catch that? The psalmist captures here two important truths for griever. The first is that believers will face dark valleys, grief being chief among them. The life of faith is not a life free of darkness. Yet no matter how many dark valleys a believer faces, she will always come through to the other side. The writer does not doubt he will arrive safely on the other side of the valley to the other; rather, he assumes he will find a way out if he keeps moving. Usually reserved for people at the end of life and funerals, it was a profound realization for me that the words of Psalm 23 are also deep encouragement to griever. It normalizes the dark valley of grief, and it reminds griever that the Shepherd is in that dark valley with them.

As you continue in middle grief, remember that with each step you are moving *through* and that there is something waiting for you on the other end.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Changing Emotions***

The focus of emotions in middle grief changes from simple acknowledgment to appropriate expression, so discussion of what it looks like to face and release these emotions is forthcoming in this chapter. Middle grief is also the time when griever notice an expansion of the emotions they experience. In part this is due to what I term “the numbness fade.”

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1. Psalm 23:4, emphasis on “through” is mine.

2. See appendix 2 for a worksheet on how Psalm 23 can help you to reflect on and find God as you walk through your dark valley. This tool is also explained in the middle grief survival kit.

God created humanity with many amazing, imbued abilities and defenses, and primary among them is the emotional numbing that happens in early grief. Yes, griever's feel sadness and pain immediately following the death of a loved one, but not to their full extent. If we lived in the full reality of grief, the full pain all the time, we would not be able to withstand it. Thankfully that also is not what God wants for us. Instead we are given the gift of numbness as grief begins. It is that numbness that allowed you to move forward with planning the service, attending and enduring visitation, organizing travel, and completing paperwork and sending death certificates. If you had felt the full weight of your grief all that time, those terrible, necessary tasks would not have been possible.

Unfortunately, the numbness does not last because we are not meant to live free of feelings. On average it is between four and eight weeks after the death that clients report feeling like they are “going backwards” in their grief. These people respond identically: they have experienced an increase in grief emotions. There is variety in the specific emotions named—sadness, loneliness, pain—but the experience is unanimously described as a sudden influx of emotions. People enter grief with the belief that time will make it better—that as more time passes, the pain will relent, and so when the opposite happens, it can be devastating. But it doesn't need to be.

First and foremost, hear that you are not losing the progress you made. It is in feeling these unpleasant emotions that we move forward. The instinct to run from pain has kept us safe in many areas of life except for emotions, especially when those emotions are propelled by grief. What is viewed initially as backsliding is a decrease in numbness and an increase in overall emotion, which is normal and necessary for moving forward. To get to the other side of the pain, you need to face it and progress *through* it.

Second, though it seems counterintuitive, an increase of emotions is a sign of progress. It means you are beginning to integrate the loss and that your acceptance of reality is deepening. These are necessary processes if you are going to find purpose and reengage in active living.

Third, it takes more energy to avoid pain than it does to feel it, and the more we try to avoid something, the larger it becomes. Therefore, in learning to face emotions and express them, you also learn to regain energy and free yourself of difficult emotions more quickly. Middle grief includes a lot of learning when it comes to emotions, but the good news is that once you know what works for successful release of one emotion, that you can often successfully use that same release for a similar emotion. For instance, if you best release stress through running—the chemical release of exercise, the physical speed, pounding of the pavement, and swinging arms—the same activity can provide similar benefit for any anger, frustration, guilt, or betrayal you may feel.

Fourth, and best, with the fading numbness comes the returned capacity to feel *all* emotions. Numbness is a necessary armor in early grief, but as you probably noticed, numbness does not only apply to the more painful emotions. Clients often report a longing to again feel joy or experience laughter by the time they enter middle grief; and the protection afforded by numbness has cost them more pleasurable emotions. As challenging as the numbness fade can be, take comfort in the return of your capacity to feel those longed-for emotions. They won't return all at once, but the return is imminent; I'll share more on that in a bit.

Another aspect of changed emotions in middle grief is the capacity to remember the whole person. That may seem strange, but stick with me. When someone dies, people tend to talk about

them as if they were perfect. No one wants to talk about a person's negative traits or the challenges of loving them. Often early grief is spent talking about how much a person is missed because of how perfect the person was and how equally perfect the relationship you shared with that person was. By middle grief, though, reality returns to remind you that you loved a human being, flaws and all. No relationship is perfect, and no human being reaches perfection on this side of heaven, so it is not true to the memory of your loved one to hide the fullness of your grief. You loved your person despite their annoying tendencies, irritating habits, and opposing views. You loved them despite those things, not because those things disappeared.

To love a person with all their flaws, as you see them, is a central gift of love. Therefore, we must properly grieve these parts of our loved ones as well. It is not disparagement to write in your journal, talk to your grief counselor, or talk to a trusted person about no longer missing certain things about your person. It is not a sign of reduced love to feel relieved to no longer need to be a caregiver or deal with certain quirks. You are a human being who loved another human being. It is well and good—it is expected—to no longer miss certain pieces.

Feeling relief or acknowledging things you do not miss does not mean you didn't truly and completely love the person. You are being honest about the full range of your grief emotions. There is nothing there worthy of guilt or shame. In fact, allowing yourself to think about and acknowledge the things you do not miss, big or small, serves as a break from the pain. Remember it is not possible to live in grief every minute of the day. The breaks are needed, and this is just one way to do that. The survival kit at the end of the chapter will have more ideas on how to take breaks from your grief.



The evolution of grief changes emotions. The starting point of the grief trajectory, as found in early grief, is the point during which the emotions are fully entrenched in the awareness of death. Sadness, loss, and emptiness are commonly expressed, and it is difficult to feel or even hope for other emotions. As one moves towards middle grief, more emotions are introduced. Initially in the transition grief remains the prominent source of emotions, but as one moves further into middle grief, it begins to share space with memories of the person before the end of life.

The goal of the trajectory is lasting grief, when awareness of death no longer dominates consciousness and the positive memories about the deceased return. Remember the trajectory of grief is just a general guide providing a bigger picture. The rate at which you move from one phase to the next is unique and dependent on the closeness of the bond you felt and the effort you put into the full expression of all the related emotions about the life you shared.

### ***Changing Relationships***

Grievors are typically never better or more widely supported than during the first month after the death. Phone calls, cards, emails, texts, drop-ins: people are usually most proactive during that first month in checking on grievors and offering support. This first month of strong support is why bereavement services are not typically initiated until at least the third or fourth week. After that first month, however, things begin to change.

Slowly but surely, the phone stops ringing, the mail dries up, and you no longer need to get inventive about freezer space for meals. Family and friends go back home and return to their daily lives while you remain in your changed life. As time goes on, you notice additional unexpected changes to friendships.

One such change is that the person or people you expected to be your greatest supports are not reaching out while people you barely spoke to prior to the death are now showing up in ways you never imagined. The people you thought knew you best and vice versa appear to have disappeared, and people who were better classified as acquaintances may become your true friends.

Know that all of this is normal. Most friendships are seasonal, after all. The length of the season varies, but the end result is the same. Oftentimes we do not know in the moment if a friendship is seasonal or lasting and, unfortunately, grief is a time when this comes to light. There are friendships that last through decades of life and every possible change or disagreement during those years. Your lasting people aren't going anywhere; they will be your constants through this process, showing up with what you need when you need it. What is important in middle grief is that it is okay to let some of your seasonal connections go. You do not need to spend your minimal energy on maintaining those friendships, especially when what you receive from them in your grief is not sufficient. If you desire to fight for a specific friendship, do so, but you do not need to. Go with your heart on this. Your lasting friends will show up, and you will make new friends along the way. Grieve the loss of whatever relationships you need to mourn, and then allow yourself to move forward.

### *Changing Self*

At some point in middle grief people begin to regain a connection to self and life beyond grief. For months grief consumes every waking thought and lurks in dreams; it is inescapable. But as grievers engage the process, the mind slowly begins to expand both focus and awareness to include other topics. Seemingly out of nowhere a person feels

ready to again embrace a hobby, go out for a meal, or sit down with a book for a reason other than distraction from grief. Initially this is encouraging, a sign that you do in fact still have not just the capability but also the desire to live. The novelty of this return to active living may begin to fade, however, as it becomes clear you have changed.

Grief changes you. It's inevitable. If you can know and embrace that, you will save yourself the frustration of trying to fight against it. By middle grief the physiological changes that happen in early grief due to the natural stress response and resulting release of chemicals in the body have resolved; but the other non-physiological changes that began immediately following the death continue to surface at this time. The good news is that, for the most part, the changes are parallel shifts. For instance, the person who used to find great enjoyment and self-care benefits from knitting can no longer summon the desire to knit, but the need to create remains. Walking through the craft store, she remembers a long-ago interest in painting and decides now is the time. With joyous surprise she finds a reawakened desire and has no difficulty finding the motivation to paint. Through painting she begins to grow and engage and discovers even her grief is indirectly processed in the painting. Or consider the person who prior to the death found both enjoyment and mental health benefits in running. Since the death running feels purposeless and too hard, but his body is demanding a physical outlet. At the suggestion of a friend, he tries martial arts and finds excitement in learning something new in addition to the familiar physical and mental benefits.

These parallel shifts are a direct result of a person's grief, though sometimes it takes awhile to find that connection. Especially with a spousal loss, the activities a person does are often tied to the spouse in some way. Maybe your husband was the biggest champion of your

quilting. Maybe your wife made it so that you had the time to run every day, no matter what else was happening. Maybe you discovered your love of crafting while on a girlfriends' getaway that your husband sent you on; he didn't participate in the crafting with you, but in sending you on the trip, he showed you his understanding of your need for your own independent and creative life. Maybe your library is stocked with every book in a specific genre because your wife gave them to you for every birthday and Christmas to indulge your passion. In relationships, spousal and otherwise, lives and interests become intertwined to the point that when one part of the relationship is no longer physically present, it becomes unimaginable to return to that activity, place, or even food ever again. This is why the parallel shifts are so beneficial: they represent something new you can do on your own yet remain tied to key parts of yourself that your person helped foster in you.

For some grievors the changes continue beyond such parallel shifts to include major changes in interests and focus. Such life changes often result from an awakening after the death. For instance, a mom who endures the still birth of her son spends the first six months after his death working at her job as an accountant. She goes to work, day in and day out, and waits for her interest to come back. Her skills remain; she is just as good as she ever was; but her enjoyment of the work is gone. Through conversations, she comes to realize she no longer finds purpose in her work. Or a counselor's sister dies after a drunk driver hits her, and each session becomes increasingly difficult. They need a change in focus, maybe duties or clientele, and maybe new jobs entirely.

Sometimes, too, the change is spiritual. Lifelong believers in God begin to question everything they learned and believed or turn away altogether from their faith. Lifelong non-believers can also find

themselves on a spiritual journey as they try to reconcile their lack of belief with a deep need to know the fate of their loved one after death. It is okay to go on these searches. Even if you need to step away, God does not. Go on your search and ask your questions. Remember in asking questions we show a desire to understand, which is an expression of love. God understands this and extends grace to believers on this journey.

While the smaller parallel shifts are easier to understand and embrace, more significant life changes can be very challenging for both the griever and the friends and family of the griever. If you find yourself in this situation or have a loved one who is, remember these changes are normal. When someone significant dies, a life reevaluation is a part of that process. Unless the change is causing significant, lasting harm—financial, physical, or emotional—it is good to allow the exploration. If you are the one experiencing changes, ask a trusted person to hold you accountable to prevent any harm you might not be able to see. If you are supporting someone, express your concerns as you have them.

These changes do not need to be permanent. Your enjoyment of the hobby you once loved may one day return as you recognize that the person who died is not the only reason it was important to you. Some life changes are permanent, which is why there is much to consider before making those changes. If you are the griever, you can skip ahead to chapter 7 where this is discussed more completely. If you are supporting a griever, talk with them about their motivation for the change, and ask if they have considered the permanence of their choice. If the change is caused by a desire to run from grief, that is unhealthy. If, however, the change is motivated by a new passion resulting from the death, it is more likely to have a healthy outcome.

There is no rush. If a change sounds appealing now, write it down. Share it with trusted friends. Research it. Pray about it. If it still sounds good in another month, take a step towards it, and sit with that for another stretch of time. Keep paying attention; you can always change course if it ever stops feeling right.

I am an unashamed proponent of writing in a journal. It is a process people tend to either love or hate, but when it comes to grief, journaling is one of the best tools available to engage in self-discovery. Writing about the changes you begin to recognize, or the changes others see in you, provides a way to explore your motivations safely and honestly. It also provides a place to track the results of any such changes. Seeing the information in black and white tends to give a better perspective than simply talking it out or thinking it through.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Changing Camera Roll***

Memories provide a readily accessible camera roll in the mind of images that are called up when a memory is triggered, we hear someone's name, or that we call up with intention. In grief that camera roll is dominated by recent events. Grievers can recall in vivid detail the entire scene from the moment of death or the notification of death with greater ease than any other image, but in middle grief that begins to change. Like the changing of emotions, your internal camera roll slowly begins to call up images from outside your person's death or disease progression.

In early grief, when you hear your loved one's name or think about them, the same pictures may replay over and over no matter what you do. As you transition into the increased acceptance found in middle grief, those same pictures now get interspersed with

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3. See appendix 3 for more information on journal writing.

images from other times of life. The further you get into middle grief, the more your mind calls up images outside of the death story, and the pictures related to the death take longer and longer to appear in the camera roll. Eventually, in lasting grief, the images of illness or other reminders of death need to be intentionally called to mind; they are not gone, but they are no longer the dominant images. Your heart is now able to reconnect to the fullness of your person, and that allows you to remember those things as well. The changeover is slow, but it is consistent. As it is comfortable, surround yourself with pictures that trigger good memories to help move those images up in the line of your mental camera roll.

## Grief Waves

I grew up in a lakeside town in Wisconsin and now live in a lakeside town in Michigan; I have also been blessed to have the opportunity to stand on ocean shores on a few different occasions. If I need a quick reconnection with God, my first impulse is to go to the shore of a lake and witness the workings of it all: the vastness, and the power. Whether the lake is perfectly still or roiling, the show of power is undeniable.

Waves of grief are just as powerful, aren't they? On calm days when the water is flat with no waves in sight, the griever is often left speechless at the possibility of a day of enjoyment not tainted with a wave of grief. At times a front begins moving in, and the griever can prepare for the slow, steady build of coming waves. There are also days when you wake to a storm. The waves are relentless, and it takes all your strength to keep standing and let them wash over you. You stand there knowing this storm could last for minutes, hours, or

even days, and you must actively choose to cling to hope as you wait it out.

Last but not least is the sudden change that can come without warning. The waves are present, lightly lapping at your feet, but tolerable. The sun is shining, and you are in good company, so those waves are just a quiet, subtle presence. Maybe there's an obvious shift in the wind; maybe there is no warning at all, but suddenly you are standing in deep water with waves crashing all around you. As the wave crashes over you with strength enough to knock you down, you catch yourself wondering if it will ever stop.

Grief waves are a central trait of middle grief. Now that you have begun to adapt to the loss and all urgent needs have been tended to, you begin the work of peeling back the layers of impact the death has had on you. It is good and necessary work, yet unfortunately it also often includes the side effect of grief waves. Learning to cope with grief waves should begin with demystifying them to remove some of their power by defining what they are: rushes of triggered emotion. It might be a smell that takes you back to a memory, a drive by a meaningful place, or even a favorite item, and suddenly you find yourself crying in the grocery store. Grief waves are emotional gut punches.

Sometimes the waves are gentle, and it is easy to allow them to wash over with minimal interruption to the day. Other times the waves crash with such potency that to remain standing is impossible. Waves are powerful, unpredictable, and inevitable, but you are not powerless. Your power rests in viewing each wave as an opportunity to stop, listen to your emotions, and give them the attention they need. The waves might knock you down from time to time, but they cannot consume you if you practice your power over them.

Step one to practicing this power is identifying the source of the wave. When you find yourself suddenly overrun with grief, take a



moment to assess your five senses to determine what was triggered and how. Take stock of where you are and what you are doing in the present moment to narrow down the exact trigger. Step two: investigate the source of the underlying emotions. Look at the source honestly from all angles. Remember it doesn't matter if the emotions are logical or "right." Emotions are neutral; you feel what you feel, and to move through the feeling, you need to properly identify it.

Several emotions might compete for attention, including sadness, anger, and relief. As you observe your emotions, don't judge, and remember your response is just a response. Do you know what percentage of caregivers—parent, spouse, sibling—feels at least a morsel of relief after their loved one dies? One hundred percent. Do you want to know how many willingly acknowledge that emotion to themselves, let alone others? According to my experience, less than a quarter. All feel it, but few name it; it is the lack of naming and validating that results in becoming stuck in grief.

Relief is valid because to be a caregiver or to watch a loved one fight for quality of life can consume every aspect of life. It is only natural to feel relief when you can again take your time at the grocery store, choose when to return home, eat your meal first, or sleep through the night without one ear open. It is normal. It is also only one emotion. Relief is not the only emotion you feel, but until you give it validation and expression, it might seem the only emotion. Be honest with yourself about whatever you feel. Name it, validate it, and you gain control over it. One emotion is simply that, and there are many others. Try not to waste your precious energy on judging what you feel.

Step three happens alongside step two. As you investigate the trigger and discover underlying emotions, name each one in an "I statement": "I felt jealous when I saw that couple walking down the

street. I feel sad and angry we don't ever get to do that again." These statements can be said aloud or in your mind, or, better yet, written down. Once all identifiable emotions are named, you can move to release them, which is the final step.

Releasing emotions is not as complicated as our minds make it. Remember the primary thing emotions want from us is to be acknowledged and expressed without judgment. Experiencing the emotion is the same as releasing it, and if the first three steps are done thoroughly and with complete honesty, then this last step does not take a significant amount of time. The most common emotional expression associated with grief is crying, and its benefits are significant.

One of the best benefits of crying is that it is a release that can cover many emotions at once, and it often happens without conscious thought because the emotion is so overwhelming. Sometimes people realize they are in a grief wave because they suddenly feel tears on their face. In such situations the release happens on its own, and little else will need to be done, though the process of naming and validating the emotions behind the tears is still important. Other forms of emotional release or expression are detailed in appendix 4.

Beyond the expression of emotions brought on by grief waves, it is necessary to have a filled toolbox of coping skills at the ready. Such tools will be used after the emotional release to help change your focus and thoughts away from pain. Coping skills are discussed in the middle grief survival kit later in the chapter.

The key to grief waves is to remember they are nothing more than a normal indication that something needs to be expressed. Honor your emotions, no matter how illogical they might seem, and you will come to learn that grief waves do not need to be feared.

## Be Empowered

Grief can steal a person's sense of capability, making her suddenly feel her knowledge and skills are gone and she is helpless to make a good decision on her own. Therefore, it is crucial for a griever to learn to empower herself to *do*, to *speak*, and to *educate*.

### *Do*

One of the fastest ways to learn self-empowerment is through action. Because of the way grief impacts cognition, the phrase "I can't" is often on repeat in the minds of grieverers to the point that the griever no longer recognizes his or her innate capabilities to make necessary decisions. By way of example, consider the woman whose husband took care of all outdoor maintenance. When he died in the winter, she didn't give it a second thought.

But as spring came, the grass began to grow, the house began to show the toll of winter, and she quickly realized she had two choices: do the work or choose to hire it out. That was it. Her husband wasn't there to do it, and it needed to be done. She debated with herself, and with her husband, on what to do, knowing he would tell her to hire it out. But part of her wanted the satisfaction of making her own decision. In the end she compromised with herself, hiring out part of it and doing part of it on her own. She empowered herself and it made a significant difference in her grief. Once she had that small victory, she had an answer for the "I can't" record in her mind and a reason to believe she could continue to learn and succeed.

### *Speak*

"How are you?" By the time middle grief is reached, most grieverers want to run screaming when they hear this question. A variety of

responses run through their minds, but rather than speaking them, people tend to withhold and give the socially acceptable response of “fine” or “good.” It’s an automatic human response, a social dance constructed over years, and it benefits no one, especially in grief. As an alternative to avoiding certain people or responding in a potentially harmful way, empower yourself to be honest, just not brutally honest.

The next time someone asks the dreaded question or a different iteration of the same, try answers like these: “Today is a good day, so I’m choosing to hold on to that while it lasts”; “In this moment, I’m okay”; “Today is a bad day, so I’m doing what I can to deal with it.” The point is to find responses that are brief and honest without causing harm to the other person.

It is also important to empower yourself to speak your needs. Value yourself enough to ask for what you need in a situation or moment. No, you might not always get it, but in asking for it you prove to yourself and others that what you need is valid and worth asking for.

## ***Educate***

It is unfair that you are now in the club of people forced to educate others about grief, but the choice you are faced with is to take on that role or deal with repeated missteps, missed action, and misunderstanding. While doing and speaking are forms of educating people, there are instances when overt education is needed.

When it is time to update the church directory, a church notices a picture of a family whose child died in the last year. Rather than contact the family to ask if they want to keep that picture or retake it, the church takes it upon themselves to simply photoshop the person who died out of the picture. As if that isn’t terrible enough, the

deceased was standing close enough to the person next to them that a sliver of his or her shirt remains visible. When the new directory is released, the surviving family members feel helpless and have many immediate reactions. Instead, they wait for their emotions to calm and make an appointment at their church to educate the staff on the impact of their choice and on alternative options. Educating others while you're grieving can be frustrating and painful, but in taking the time to do so, you are helping to make sure the mistake is not repeated with you or with any other griever.

Empowerment is about drawing from forgotten inner strength to remind yourself that though your life is now different because of a death, your skills, knowledge, and capabilities remain unchanged. Adapting to a new life will have difficult moments, but it is not impossible. Be empowered. Do, speak, and educate. You are capable, and you deserve to give yourself every possible chance at success.

## Try

Try. Just try. This is the motto of middle grief. You don't know what you can or can't do until you try. You don't know what you are ready for or how something will feel until you try.

When I talk with clients about this concept, the immediate response I get is "But what if...?" I don't usually allow them to finish that sentence. Instead I remind them that to try something in no way conveys a commitment or lifelong, permanent change.

One of the most common activities griever avoid trying is returning to a place that represents their relationship with their loved one. While insisting they will never again be able to go to that restaurant, destination, or store, it is evident that as badly as they want to avoid it,

they just as deeply long to return. Enter *try*. What is the worst-case scenario in trying to go to dinner alone? Arriving and not being able to walk through the door? Being seated and ordering, and then crying through the meal? Seeing the other Tuesday night regulars and knowing they will want to talk to you about the death? Running into someone who doesn't know your significant other died?

Without question, each of these scenarios is uncomfortable and painful. The alternative is to give up on returning to the restaurant, which is absolutely okay if that is truly what you want. If, however, you do want to go, then the way to do that is to try. Maybe the first attempt will be terrible. That's okay, because one bad result is not a forecast of the rest of your days. One bad result is just that. Take more time to work through your grief and to learn more coping skills. Maybe break down the steps a bit more by trying a different restaurant first or inviting someone to go with you or ordering your favorite meal via takeout. If it's important to you to regain the experience, keep trying. Give yourself some space and time to recover, continue working on your grief, and then when you feel ready, try again.

As always, you are the expert on your abilities, needs, and wants. As central as it is to forward movement to try, it is equally important to retain control over the decision. In other words, well-meaning people in your life will try to "lovingly" push you into their timetable, but you get to be the one to decide when you're ready. Take time to explore the offer before you commit to anything.

## A Unique Risk

With all the talk about forward movement in grief, it is imperative to acknowledge that it is possible to become *stuck* in grief, and middle

grief is when that risk is at its highest. Becoming stuck in grief is precisely what it sounds like. If there is an aspect of grief you are either unwilling or unable to acknowledge, it can remain lodged in your heart and mind. It is equivalent to getting stuck in the snow or mud: without traction the tire just spins and spins, unable to move the vehicle. Getting stuck in grief has a similar outcome. No matter how hard you try to keep moving down the road, the wheel just spins, never gaining traction.

To get a car back on the road requires force and sometimes a shovel to dig up and level out the area. Similarly, to unstick yourself from grief requires intentional force and digging up what has been avoided. Only then can you be freed.

A person can be stuck in grief for days, weeks, or even years, depending on how long that person denies that a part of himself or herself is stuck in the past despite appearing to move forward. The good news is that the work to get free is not as challenging as it might seem.

As mentioned, it takes more energy, physical and mental, to avoid something than to face it. And the longer we avoid something, the larger it becomes, eventually dominating thoughts and feelings. When we instead view something under a spotlight, we can pour all our energy into it, thereby unmasking it and turning it into something that can be released.

I once had the privilege of witnessing the breakthrough of a woman we'll call Sue who remained stuck in her grief for more than a decade by avoiding the one thing that eventually broke her free and moved her forward. In the months following the death of a family member, Sue allowed herself to cry and give voice to missing this person. She also actively supported other family members as they grieved. She returned to work after just a few weeks and believed she was adjusting well to the death and resulting grief. What Sue didn't

realize was that her increasing depression and health changes were trying to tell her that a significant part of her grief remained stuck in the past.

Over the years she experienced a steady decline in her mental and physical health until she reached a point of crisis. Her mental health had deteriorated to the point that she was now her own worst enemy. Thankfully, people in her inner circle recognized the downward spiral and were finally able to speak in a way she could hear. Only then did Sue finally admit to herself that she held a significant amount of guilt and fear tied to the person's death, and if she didn't deal with it soon, she too would lose her life.

As soon as Sue gave herself permission to be honest, to investigate her grief, and to face her fear, she made significant and immediate progress. She verbalized the things for which she felt responsible, and as she gave those feelings voice, she was able to hear "the untruth in what she had believed." Using role-play, Sue talked through her guilt and was able to hear the deceased extend genuine forgiveness. The fear Sue felt was tied to a letter her person had sent her prior to the death. In all the years since, Sue had not opened it for fear of what it said. She brought it to a session and asked me to read it silently and then, if I felt she could handle it, tell her what it said. I read the letter and, instead of telling her what it said, handed it back to her to read. In it Sue read the words she had longed to hear for more than ten years. That entire time Sue had had relief available to her, but fear had taken over and stopped her from getting to the truth.

The letter could have said something else, but the fact remains that in knowing the truth, we find power and healing. If the content had been different, Sue at least would have known definitively what was true and could have worked on the resulting impact. Instead, she found herself stuck in a part of her grief for a decade, with her mental and physical health paying the price.



If a someone is stuck, there is an aspect of grief that person is avoiding. It always—every single time—takes more energy to avoid something than to face it, and the consequences of avoiding it are never minimal. If you suspect you are stuck in an area of grief, love yourself enough to seek professional help to work through it. Facing it will be difficult but not impossible, especially with help, and the outcome of facing whatever you have been running from is a guaranteed step towards healing.

## An Object Lesson: The Grief Ball, Part 2

In middle grief the grief ball mercifully begins to change. In early grief the surface of the ball is covered in spikes. When you enter middle grief and continue working through your grief, the spikes continue to drop off, reducing the trigger points; imagine the difference that creates! Instead of needing to stand still for fear of setting off a grief wave, you may feel a bit more freedom to try new things and notice that, in general, you can do a lot more without grief stopping you in your tracks.

In addition to spikes dropping off, the spikes that remain also change. As a knife blade dulls with repeated use, so the spikes that remain on the grief ball dull with each encounter. Sharp edges are rounded, and because of that they lose the ability to penetrate as deeply. They still cause pain, but the pain is lessened in both intensity and duration.

Finally, the size of the grief ball also begins to change during this time. In early grief it is the size of the body from head to toe, but now it steadily deflates to become something more manageable and controllable. As it shrinks in size, it also loses power in its ability to overwhelm the griever.

Remember the goal of grief is not for it to go away, but for it to become something to which you adapt and that you can control. As you do the work of grief, the grief ball rewards you in reshaping itself not to entirely remove pain but to allow you to live a lot more life between each trigger of grief.

## Middle Grief Lessons from Job

Throughout the Bible there are many examples of early grief, including David and Bathsheba, Ruth, Mary and Martha, Jesus, and Rachel to name but a few. God desires to help us understand it is okay to grieve and that to grieve does not disappoint God nor does it reveal a lack of faith. It can be argued, in fact, that to grieve wholeheartedly and without shame is one of the greatest available signs of faith. Middle grief does not have as many examples within the Bible, so I will draw several lessons from Job's story.<sup>4</sup>

### *Lesson One: Be True to Your Process*

Job's causes for grief are numerous: loss of health, loss of animals, and greatest of all the deaths of his children and servants. These were sudden deaths that also happened in quick succession. If anyone deserves to grieve, it is Job, and that is exactly what he did: "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped."<sup>5</sup> Job's immediate reaction to all this death and destruction is first an outward sign of mourning and then

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4. Job's story is lengthy, and it can be difficult, but it supports griever and helps build trust that God loves us in our grief and is present whether or not God is actively sought.

5. Job 1:20.

worship. The order here is important: Job first expressed his grief in overt ways, and only then did he worship.

This act of worship can be easily misconstrued, so it is important to pause here for clarification. Many believers who are in grief struggle to return to church. Some do not want to grieve in public, others are struggling with God, and still others find the music makes the experience too intense. Regardless of the reason, the idea of worship, corporate or personal, is difficult when grieving. You do not need to rush yourself through the process. Furthermore, Job's worship is not an indication that he quickly moved through his grief and suddenly chose to focus on God's goodness. Rather, a case can be made that Job's worship is born out of desperate necessity.

Job's entire world was shattered in moments. No warning. No explanation. Disaster followed by disaster followed by disaster. Perhaps Job saw he had two options in that moment: give up on his faith and lose even more, or find a way to cling to faith and "double down," despite being surrounded by death. For Job, not losing the faith he had was as essential as continuing to breathe. To him faith was his only chance of surviving the unimaginable.

Job's worship is twofold. Though he expresses continued acknowledgment that nowhere does God promise a life free of suffering or pain, in so doing he also begins a thread that continues throughout the book: Job is suffering, and it is impacting his understanding of God.

### ***Lesson Two: Silence Is Often the Best Response***

In time word of Job's grief travels through the community, and friends decide to go together to "console and comfort him."<sup>6</sup> Now when the

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6. Job 2:11.

friends arrive, they begin strong: “When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”<sup>7</sup> Here the friends show wisdom in offering the best possible support to give a griever. They engage in outward signs of mourning before sitting with Job, not saying a word, and paying witness to the intensity of Job’s grief. For a solid week they sat with him, allowing their silence to speak what words fail to provide, and it was the very best thing to do for Job. If you are trying to support someone in grief, choose this part of the story of Job’s friends as your cue, and sit with your friend. Offer your presence and empathetic support. If you are a griever longing for support yet resisting it because of the painful things that have been said to you, be clear with people about your need for them to simply be present with you.

### ***Lesson Three: Grief Is Not the Time to Cast Judgment***

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar started strong in their support of Job, but as soon as they opened their mouths, their level of support steadily declined. In short, each of these men cast upon Job their perspective of the situation, trying to explain it away by blaming Job for a variety of actions that they suppose resulted in his current situation. Theological discussions aside, what the supposed friends missed is that they do not have complete understanding of Job’s life. Judgment under the guise of comfort is judgment nonetheless.

If you are a supporter, restrain yourself from casting judgment on someone for how they are grieving. If their actions are causing

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7. Job 2:12–13.

harm to themselves or someone else, help them find professional assistance and safety. If you are a griever, it is okay to protect yourself and not engage in debate or try to justify what you are experiencing. Your road is yours alone; though there are people who can empathize with you, no one knows the nuances of your exact journey. If you want to keep those details between yourself and God, that is your right.

### ***Lesson Four: Beware of the Why***

The “why” question is a prominent player in middle grief, and the same is said of Job. Once the initial impact of the series of deaths and other losses begins to diminish, Job is overcome with the weight of *why*. Between the criticisms from his friends and his own understandings of the workings of God, Job begins to look for some reason, some explanation for what he is experiencing. As he learns, there is no answer that will bring resolution to this question.

It is a human tendency to want to understand what is happening and to find an explanation for it, but this tendency can trap grievers in an unending spiral. Ask yourself this question: Is there an answer God can give me that would suddenly make me say, “oh, well, okay, if that’s the reason this person died, then I’m okay with it”? Of course not! The Church is filled with clichés about this: “He’s in a better place”; “God needed another angel”; “At least she isn’t suffering anymore.” Not one of those statements or the countless others thrown at grievers changes the reality that you are here and your person is not. There is not an answer to the question of why that changes the reality.

Since there is no satisfactory answer, seeking an explanation to *why* serves only to trap someone in his or her grief with no hope of ever moving forward. For Job resolution came when he let go of the

question and worked towards acceptance. That is the answer for griever today as well. If you are burdened by the *why*, ask God to release you from it and shift your intention to acceptance of the reality. In acceptance you find the ability to continue moving forward.

### ***Lesson Five: Total Transparency***

Job withholds nothing in his charges to God. He makes bold requests no matter how often his friends try to dissuade him. What Job is experiencing is contrary to his understanding of God, and he wants answers. He never gives up on his belief in God, and because of his belief Job needs to express his reactions. Eventually God responds to Job in a series of questions that challenge Job's perspective and result in a broader understanding of God's character and promises. The point is not where Job ends but how he gets there, and his willingness to be raw and honest before God is a significant part of the equation.

## **Middle Grief Survival Kit**

Below are twelve new tools to pick up and try as you navigate your grief. Some will fit well; others you will want to leave behind, and that is okay. The important thing is to try each one. Push yourself beyond your comfort level and give it a chance. You might be surprised at the benefit something provides. Continue marking items or creating your own centralized list of tools so you know where to find them when needed.

### ***Grief Dosing***

As you've read, we are not built to live in grief every minute of the day. Because middle grief is a test of endurance, it is important to

allow yourself breaks from your grief. Escape into a movie or book, connect with friends without talking about your loved one, or treat yourself to an experience that has nothing to do with your person or your grief. Dosing your grief does not mean you love or miss your person any less; it is simply a recognition that we need breaks from grief to recharge. Make a list right here on this page or in your journal of activities you can do to take a break from your grief. Then commit to doing one soon.

### ***Set Intentional Times***

There are two reasons it might become necessary to set intentional times to grieve. The first is for those moments when you consciously stop yourself from releasing grief emotions. Grief has a tendency of presenting itself at inconvenient times, and it is okay to stop yourself from feeling the emotions in the moment; not many want to experience a grief wave in the middle of a grocery store! Eventually, though, that grief wave needs to be revisited. Due to the nature of a grief wave, it is easy to push it aside and not go back to look at it, so setting aside time each day or every few days for reflection is essential. It does not need to be a significant amount of time or include anything beyond simply letting your mind go back to the moment and attend to the emotion, but it does need to be done. To not go back is a sure way to get stuck.

Second, as one progresses through middle grief, the emotions and symptoms of grief level out and therefore become easier to ignore. Intentionally reviewing your day or your week for signs of grief is a way to ensure you are not avoiding grief.

### ***Soft Plans***

Eventually you will begin accepting invitations as gatherings with friends and family and other activities regain appeal. This is a good

step forward in grief and is something to be celebrated. It is possible, though, that on the day of the activity you realize today is not the day; this might happen the moment you wake up, hours before you need to leave, or even at the moment you need to leave. Often in those situations people will force themselves through their instinct and continue with the plans to avoid the discomfort of canceling. In middle grief the solution to this is making soft plans.

When you make plans with someone, do so explaining that you want to participate and that you also know your grief is unpredictable right now. Ask ahead of time for understanding that you might need to cancel or leave early, further explaining that if you need to do so, it does not mean you don't want future invitations. To lessen the potential inconvenience, follow these guidelines: don't pre-buy your own tickets, or if the tickets must be bought ahead of time, pay for yours separately; drive separately so that if you cancel, no one else's plans are interrupted; park in a parking lot or street, not a driveway where you can get locked in; offer to host activities if you are most comfortable in your own space, which also allows you to control the timeframe.

### *Say Their Name*

By middle grief you will notice the number of people who remain comfortable talking about your person is diminishing at a rapid pace. This typically reflects the other person's discomfort in believing that talking about your person will cause you pain or ruin your good day. You know the truth. You know that a "good" day is not free from grief. You know that it is usually more painful *not* to talk about your person. You know that something causing you to cry is not reason enough to not do it. This is unfortunately one of those times you need to be the educator. Speak your person's name



whenever you need to. If you want to hear stories about them, ask. Show your friends and family that your tears are normal and will continue and that the presence of those tears does not stop you from wanting to talk about or hear about your person.

### ***Create Your Call List***

If one person could be all things, then we each would only have one friend; but that isn't the case. Each important person in your life serves a different function and provides different support in certain situations. Write down the names of each of your go-to people. Then, one by one, reflect on the unique ways each person can support you. Who is the one you can call when you need a laugh? Who will say the things you need to hear, even if those things are painful? Who will let you rant and rave without trying to stop you or fix the situation? Who will sit in silence, even on the phone, because they just know you need to feel connected to someone? Who will accept your call at two in the morning?

What other needs have you experienced that aren't captured in this list of questions? Write those down as well along with the name of the person who can help. Some people's names might be repeated, and some will only be written down once. The details of the list are not important. What is important is that you have a list ready so that when you have a need, you can quickly determine who to call.

### ***Victory Wall***

It is easy in grief to begin to believe all capabilities have been lost or that you will never again feel engaged in life, so collecting evidence of successes or engagement is an easy way to introduce hope into a situation that feels hopeless. Choose a place in your home that is free from observation from others where you can post victories. Your closet

door, the bathroom mirror, a notebook on your nightstand: wherever it is, just make sure it is a place where you can keep the victories posted as long as necessary. Remember that victories are defined as such by you, and what represents victory to you might not be the same to your friend or family member. Focus on celebrating *your* achievements, and let them propel you forward in your grief.

To give you an idea, some sample victories include taking the car in for service, setting up online bill pay, buying the family gifts, decorating the house for the holidays, getting groceries, making it through a full shift at work, or hiring someone to take care of the leaky faucet. Any time you accomplish something on your own for the first time, it is worth celebrating. Not because the feat itself is significant but because in completing it you prove to yourself that *you can*, regardless of how often your grief brain tries to tell you that you can't.

### ***Connection Corner***

One of the goals of grief is to create a new, lasting connection with the person who died. Middle grief is a good time to begin the transition from focusing on the lack of physical presence to opening up to the possibility of connecting with your loved one in other ways. Especially when the rest of your world wants to move further away from your person—stop talking about them, cease sharing memories, or even stop acknowledging his or her death—having a place of retreat becomes central to continued healing.

Consider the five senses as you create your connection place. What tactile things do you need? Maybe an extra soft blanket, an item of the person's clothing, or a special pillow. Consider scent. You might want a bottle of his or her lotion, perfume, or cologne available, or perhaps there is a candle scent that is meaningful to them or your shared relationship. Taste is a fun one. What can you keep in the space that brings comfort and pleasure? Perhaps your person's

favorite candy or something that you enjoy to ease difficult moments. And what will you want to hear in this place? You might want silence or a specific music or a saved voicemail; there is no wrong choice. Finally, sight. Do you want that one particular picture, a photo album, or the flexibility to change things?

The possibilities are endless. Make the space what *you* need it to be. If you live with others who are also grieving, work together to find space for each person who desires it; some families desire both individual spaces and communal spaces. Bedrooms, offices, basements: I even once had a client who connected most with her person in the car. The purpose of the connection corner is to have a guaranteed space for you to go be with and talk to your person whenever and however you desire. It might not last much beyond middle grief, or you might want it to become a permanent fixture. You will know if and when you are ready to let it go. Keep it for as long as you need, and allow it to help transition you back into active living.

## ***Mindfulness***

Mindfulness is the step beyond relaxation that was introduced in the early grief survival kit. The purpose of mindfulness as it relates to grief is to help a person come back into the present moment when stuck in a past event, to cope with the short-term changes in focus associated with grief, and to quiet the brain when trying to sleep.

Sometimes in the effort to make sense of a death, the brain continues to replay certain aspects of it to the point of intrusion into daily life. This is a detriment to engaging in life and can significantly impact mood. One way to address these repeated, intrusive thoughts is to practice mindfulness.<sup>8</sup> Follow these steps when there is a distressing scene on repeat in your mind. Consciously feel your

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8. This is a basic introduction. More teaching and examples for multiple areas of life can be found at [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com).

feet on the floor and notice your breathing and heart rate. Look in your immediate vicinity and speak aloud three things you see, three things you hear, and three things you can feel. Then speak aloud two more things you see, two different things you hear, and two different things you can feel. Next speak aloud one more sight, one more sound, and one more touch. Finally, observe your breathing and your heart rate again. By the end of this process your mind will be returned fully to the present moment, and the physiological signs of distress in your body should return to their resting rates.

In a public setting you can complete the steps internally. It takes a bit more focus, but it can be done. Rather than touching items, describe the sensation you imagine a certain texture would give. If the memories come while driving, you can pull over or use descriptions and markers to pull you into the present rather than actual touch. For example, you might see a blue car, a green road sign, a crack in the road, hear the sound of your hand tapping on the steering wheel, the rumble of the tires, your turn signal, and feel the gear shift, the seats, the windshield.

Mindfulness can also help you stay focused in the present moment, and the technique is not complicated. Let's say, for instance, you are trying to get through your last few hours at work, but your mind continues to draw you into thoughts of your person. The thoughts are not negative or intrusive, but you know you will not be able to finish your work if your concentration does not improve. Whenever you find your mind wandering, tap your feet on the floor. Sometimes this one step is all that is needed to remind your brain that you are at work, not in your connection corner or in the memory of that special trip. If tapping the floor is not enough, add a sentence like: *Right now, I need to finish this spreadsheet. When I get home, I can think about that trip to Florida but right now I need to do*

*this*. Then say the steps of the work task as if you are teaching someone how to do your job. Again, doing this aloud is ideal, but saying it in your mind will also provide positive results.

Finally, mindfulness can also be used on those nights when sleep is elusive. The reason the brain seems to turn on when you lie down for the night is because the walls you put up all day trying to avoid these thoughts are finally down. The thoughts need to be attended to, so your brain is taking advantage of the quiet. Ideally before engaging in this mindfulness practice, you will first write notes to yourself so that you have them for later review. This does not need to be a complete journal session but can instead be as simple as key words so that in the morning you can remember what kept you awake or woke you. Taking the few minutes for this step gives your brain permission to let go because the thoughts are safely captured.

Once the thoughts are captured, you can turn to mindfulness for sleep. For this you first will need a mantra to pair with your breathing, so it is best to choose a short phrase that is easily divided into two parts. You will say or think the first part as you slowly inhale on a five count, then say or think the second part as you slowly exhale to the same count. Many people find Bible verses work well for this because of the added comfort the words bring to the soul. See table 3 for sample wording.

To put this into practice, begin by lying in your most comfortable position. Feel your body settle into the pillow and mattress. Are there any places of tension? Relax them as you notice them. When you are comfortable and settled, slowly inhale for a count of five while saying the first part of your mantra, then as you slowly release your breath, say the second half. Anytime your mind begins to wander, start the process anew. Eventually your mind will empty, and you will fall asleep. If you wake again, return to the process. As you

Table 3: Sample Mantras for Inhale and Exhale

Inhale	Exhale
Spirit, give me peace	And remove my worry
Be still and know	That I am God
I breathe in healing	And exhale (fear, pain, etc.)
I breathe in acceptance	I release control
You are the potter	I am the clay
Create in me	A clean heart

practice, you will notice a decrease in the amount of repetition it takes before you find relaxation and sleep.

*Write the Story*

The fear griever's consistently expressed fear is forgetting the person who died. I assure you, that will never happen; there is too much of that person in you and in the lives of those around you to forget, but hearing that from me does not resolve the fear. This tool, on the other hand, will resolve that fear and has the added benefit of connecting you to the fullness of your person.

Writing the story is exactly what it sounds like. It is taking the time to go back to one of your connections with the person who died and telling the story of your relationship, taking special note to tell the story of how this person influenced your life. Your life is one of the most concrete ways that person's impression lives on in this world. Be honest with yourself in the retelling: include the good, the bad, and the ugly, because those things also shaped your relationship. As you write, reflect on which parts of the story you want to keep and carry with you into the future and which, as you write them, you choose to leave behind.

This can be completed by writing on pen and paper typing, or speaking into a recording device and can be done for whatever length of time you need. Many who complete this exercise later come to see it was a transition point in their grief that helped them relocate the place grief holds in their life. There is also no pressure or prescribed format for this. You can start at the beginning and go straight through. You can write using themes of personality characteristics or quirks. You can write it as a story or as one giant thank-you letter. You can even do a mix of the above or something totally different—whatever you need to make sure you capture the very things you fear forgetting. Even if you are the only one who ever reads it, it will be a treasure for years to come.

### ***Psalm 23***

Psalm 23 is often read during times of illness or distress and at funerals. For believers who are also grievers, this psalm is also an image of the places to look for God during the journey of grief.

Do work through the worksheet in appendix 2, but here a few tips to help increase the benefit to both your faith walk and grief walk. First, try reading it in different versions of the Bible. Websites like Bible Gateway are a great resource for this as it allows you to view multiple versions simultaneously. Just as listening to scripture allows us to hear things differently, so reading different versions of a familiar passage increases the likelihood of gaining a new understanding or finding a richer depth of meaning.

Next play with the imagery. In the worksheet you are invited to reflect on specific words and the relationship of those words to your grief journey. During that process take the liberty of personalizing the language to learn how that changes your understanding. For instance, the word “enemies” might be replaced with “death,”

“cancer,” “COPD,” “dementia,” or “stillbirth.” The word “walk” could be replaced with “turtle’s pace” or “crawl.” The Word tells the story of God’s people in a specific time and culture; it also speaks to believers of every time and culture. Changing words to contextualize to your experience is okay to do, especially for this purpose.

Third, the worksheet provides a starting place of several words on which to reflect, but there are many others within the text that might strike you as significant. Using the format as your guide, review the psalm another time and indicate the words that jump out at you. How you interpret God’s Word and see God’s presence will change as you move ahead. Revisit this exercise, dating it each time, so you can see the changes and God’s faithfulness to you along the way.

### ***Guided Free Association***

*Free association* is a commonly known technique to assist people in “identifying” or “discerning” unconscious thoughts and connections that are at the base of emotions, thoughts, and actions. Though helpful on its own, I developed guided free association to focus the examination and allow for completion without assistance from another person.<sup>9</sup> This tool can be used by a griever at any time, especially when stuck in an aspect of grief.

By way of illustration, a person who is moving forward in most areas of grief yet remains burdened by guilt would be a good candidate for this tool. Though she is aware that guilt is the reason she is stuck, she can’t get at the source of the guilt, which in turn prevents her from releasing it. Utilizing guided free association, she will be able to push through fear and other emotions creating a barrier between her and that source and arrive at a place of

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9. The technique itself can be completed without assistance, but the results are always best discussed with a grief counselor.



understanding about the guilt. Often without even needing to go back and read what she's written, the act of writing alone will serve as a release.

Complete details are found in appendix 5. Here are just a few considerations for using this tool. First, this can be exhausting. Though you are not necessarily aware of what you are writing, the process of writing unconscious thoughts can be emotionally draining. To help combat this, plan to keep the exercise brief, and follow it with something soothing, such as a shower or bath, or distracting, such as time with friends, a funny movie, or aerobic exercise. Second, it is up to you what you do with this. After taking a break from what you wrote, consider how you feel. Is the feeling less but still present? You might want to do the process again. Is the feeling gone, and you do not have a need to know what you wrote? If so, hide or destroy the page as a final act of letting go of the emotion. Or maybe you have a desire to know what came out in the process. To do so, contact your grief counselor or a trusted person to review it with you. Finally, guided free association can be used for more than emotional release. If you are stuck, for instance, in finding your new purpose, go through guided free association with that as your focus.

## Conclusion

The work of grief does not stop when you reach middle grief; it can be argued, in fact, that this is when the difficult work truly begins. Early grief is akin to triage. The focus there is a scan of all symptoms before moving to the ER to deal with the most critical presenting concerns. Middle grief, then, is the transition to inpatient care. The purpose of the admission is to continue treating the obvious, critical

wounds as well as the less obvious hurts. It is the time to look deep within to make sure nothing is missed and the time to practice new adaptive behaviors that prepare you for discharge. Length of stay is variable and is directly correlated to effort extended and total transparency.

There is overlap in tools that are helpful from early grief to middle grief, and middle grief also has some of its own due to the unique needs of this segment of grief. Remember the trajectory and the goal: this is a time to dive in and do the difficult work so that you are well prepared to move into lasting grief. Middle grief is a long section, not a sprint. Reminders to be patient in this segment will serve you well, and if you'll allow it to naturally carry you through to calmer ground, this stage will serve you well.

As you continue working on expressing and managing your grief, it will continue to change. You will notice less attention is needed to exert control over your emotions and triggers, and you will have longer intervals of time during which grief does not dominate your thoughts or emotions. For this reason it is good to regularly check in on your grief and coping tools to assess if your grief is changing or if instead you are actively avoiding the grief. If it is changing, be encouraged by that forward movement. If you notice signs that you are avoiding parts of your grief, give yourself the gift of tuning in and facing them. As noted, avoiding expressing the full range of grief emotions will lead to potential long-term damage to your psyche and will likely result in becoming stuck in grief. Use the tools provided in this chapter to attend to all areas of your life impacted by grief, to perpetuate moving through the difficulty, and/or contact a grief counselor to help you resume your emotional and psychological work.

## Pause for Whisperings

Where did God speak to you in this chapter? Review any notes you made and reflect further on them in your journal before moving on to the next chapter. Consider one or more of the following questions for additional reflection and growth: Why is it helpful to know you are in middle grief? Are there any parts of your grief where you feel stuck? Is there an emotion or two you have avoided up to this point? If so, review Sue's story and consider whether your freedom might be found in what you're avoiding.

[illegible]

Don't  
*try to fit*  
**YOURSELF**  
into their  
shoes.

## *Seven*

# Lasting Grief

**A**t face value the title of this segment is daunting, but I hope you know by now that it need not be. People begin the transition into lasting grief sometime during months eight through twelve after the death and in many senses never leave it. Yet as you have learned to this point, this does not mean how a person feels in month one is how they will feel at month eight, twelve, twenty-four, or forty. As you engage in grief work, the grief itself will continue to become less intense and intrusive, with waves lasting for moments rather than days or weeks. By this point in grief the griever has reached full acceptance of the reality of the death and is focused on returning to living life while still holding onto their memories of their loved one. And most wonderfully, there is now a growing commitment to focus not on the lost physical presence of the person but instead on living into the continued purpose God has in store for the griever.

## The Major Shift

In lasting grief the trajectory takes on a new theme that will be expanded upon later in the chapter. Lasting grief is unique in that it

doesn't have a specific end point. There are some markers to indicate your arrival in it, but beyond that is simply horizon.

Imagine for a moment a painting of a path through the woods to a clearing. In the foreground the path is obscured by trees and branches, but the course is clear. Due to the density of the forest there is little light in the foreground, but as you gaze further down the path, brightness increases. As the path twists and turns, the density lessens, and with the increased sunlight the path begins to look almost inviting. Eventually the path flows through the woods into a clearing full of sun and rolling hills. It ends in the horizon and, though you can't see it, you are certain it continues for miles to come.

This is lasting grief. You can't know where it will take you and you cannot be certain there won't be more trees or turns or clouds, but you know that staying on that road will serve you well for years to come. The more you stick with it, the more you trust it and feel prepared to walk on.

Lasting grief is the time to keep tools nearby but not constantly at the ready because your focus has changed to the next chapter of your life. There is peace and relief here in knowing that the lessons you learned come with you in a way that is comforting rather than burdensome. You are back in somewhat familiar territory and once again content to move forward without a detailed understanding of what comes next.

### ***An Updated Camera Roll***

Your mental camera roll undergoes two significant changes during lasting grief. First, the trend begun in middle grief continues so that you are now able to say or hear your loved one's name and recall numerous pictures before the return of images tied to the end of

their life. This is a welcome change, and it is okay to feel relief over it! As with cloud storage, those pictures are never erased; you can access them any time you need or desire.

The second change often feels entirely new. In lasting grief not only do you have increased control over recall, you also gain the ability to add new images. Whereas in the first two segments of grief the focus of the camera roll is on the past, in lasting grief current images are able to be added to the catalog. This feature of the camera roll of the mind is restored as you learn to trust that the images of the past are not lost and can be easily recalled as you engage more regularly in life. *Engaging* in life is the key. Routine, insignificant activities won't be the first added to the camera roll. Rather it will be the time you go out with friends and realize upon returning home that you stayed present with the group the entire time. This is a victory, and victories deserve room on the mental camera roll.

## Settling In

Lasting grief is maybe best described as a “settling in,” a time of learning how to get comfortable and adjust to changes, how to build your life around your grief, rather than of letting your life be guided by grief. You have adapted and adjusted and are continuing with a new focus. The markers below are not exhaustive but are some of the more notable features. As with the other segments, you'll know lasting grief when you get there.

### ***Symptom Resolution***

A primary marker of this segment of grief is the resolution of grief symptoms. Assuming grief work is ongoing, by this time in the

experience a griever tends to have restored focus, memory, motivation, desire to engage in life, and a sense of anticipation of what is to come. People in lasting grief also report finally returning to their baseline of former capacity for work and personal and community engagement. The resolutions of the grief symptoms are gradual and typically aren't noticed until complete. For instance, a griever often does not notice energy returning bit by bit; rather, it is experienced as a sudden desire to return to exercise, no longer needing a nap, or the regained ability to make it through an entire workday without longing for escape. Finally you can again linger in a store without fighting the urge to run and can drive from one place to the next without battling road rage.

There is not a prescribed order to symptom resolution, and some symptoms will require more time to resolve. As with all things in grief, do not rush it. Just check in with yourself and observe the changes. If you find that you have a symptom or two that will not resolve, such as fatigue, it is possible those symptoms have another underlying cause unrelated to grief or are related to a part of grief in which you are stuck. If you have symptoms that show no signs of relenting, contact your primary care physician to schedule a physical. This is also a good time to check in with a counselor if you have not been doing so throughout your grief. While you wait for those appointments, go back to chapter 6 and review the section on being stuck in grief.

People tend to experience the greatest relief in their changed mood and the return of pleasant emotions. It has been described as feeling lighter, experiencing laughter or joy without needing to create it, and the ability to hold a positive outlook. Again, this does not mean the grief is gone, just that it has changed and moved. Enjoying the results of that does not indicate a decrease in your love of the



person or that you now are happy without them; it means you have grown to accept his or her death and that to hold on to the pain and stay in that moment is to cheat yourself of what lies ahead for you. Your person died and they are in heaven, but you are here and need to continue living. Your choice is to either do so willingly or fight against it and hold yourself in the past, which your person would not want for you. Acceptance of this new reality is a significant step towards willingly, albeit reluctantly, engaging in life without his or her physical presence.

Finally, it is at some point in lasting grief that spiritually related symptoms are also resolved. If a griever allows herself to be honest with God—taking breaks, voicing anger or doubts, etc.—throughout the first two segments of grief, she has set herself up to return to a place of peace in her faith. Note the word *peace*, not *restoration*. It is inevitable that faith will change in grief, whether that change is in depth of understanding, quality of relationship, or some other way. For some this symptom will be the first to resolve, and for others the last. Trust that the Spirit will continue to guide you through each bend along the way.

### ***Engaging Life with a New Focus***

Clients often ask how I listen to people's grief stories every day, implying that it must become overwhelming. I do not deny that there are difficult situations to witness. Stories that include trauma, suicide, or stillbirth are at the top of the list of ones that stick with me, sometimes long after the client discharges from care. I have sessions in which I experience intense sadness, anger, resentment, or betrayal listening to a client describe the same. For a counselor to be effective, I believe, a marked level of empathy is necessary. That being said, it would cause a fast burnout if I only worked with

people in early grief, but thankfully that is not the case. For each difficult story I witness, I have evidence of someone on the other side of the story: someone who endured early grief, worked through middle grief, and landed safely in lasting grief. In those moments the good balances the bad, and I have hope to take from one client to give to another. Topmost among those hope-filled moments is the session when a client reaches a long-awaited destination: purpose.

For months after the death of a loved one, grieverers are plagued with wondering what comes next for them, how to continue without the deceased. The beauty of believing there is continued purpose in living after loss is that we can see each new discovery and layer as revealing itself the moment we are ready to receive it. Believers see beauty in the image of God as potter and human as clay. God shapes and molds us, refining us as we grow in our relationship. Grief is one such time.

A person is thrown into grief, broken and unsure how he will regain an identity, purpose, or sense of self. On the way *through* grief, as he embraces the work, he shakes off all that no longer serves him. He soon realizes it is impossible to return to the precise form he was because the work of grief continues to shape him, but in that he recognizes potential for something new. He knows this new form will have many aspects of the former one and that some areas will be reinforced, stronger than ever. As he travels towards lasting grief, he embraces this new person he is becoming, not because he didn't like who he was or what life was like but because embracing the new allows him to return to fully engaged living, including the evolved purpose that awaits him.

Understanding this new purpose tends to begin with easy changes, ones that in no way dishonor your person or erase the imprint of their life on yours. With some amount of trepidation

clients eventually voice their readiness to find a new purpose, a new focus in life as evidenced by thoughts like “I’m ready to move on” or “I need it to be different now.” This transition is often a transformational moment.

A woman’s husband died and during her marriage she’d been content to create space for her husband’s beloved collection of photography. The images weren’t any source of pleasure or comfort to her, but she had treasures he did not care about, so it seemed a fair trade. After he died, she vacillated between avoiding his photography room at all costs and entering it just to feel his presence. She battled internally and with her children about how to handle the collection, always fearful of doing “the wrong thing” or somehow upsetting him.

Then one day something happened. Suddenly she was certain of two things: The first was that to relocate his collection, either to another area of the home or to a stranger’s home, did not relocate her husband’s presence. He knew she derived no pleasure from the images, so he would not expect her to hold on to those things for the rest of her life. The second realization was that she needed to continue living and that it was okay to do things in her home that she didn’t before out of an agreed compromise. She realized that the house served their marriage and life well, but it no longer served *her* well. She needed her home to be a place of comfort, respite, and restoration, and it could not become that until she changed that room. Her focus finally shifted from holding tight to the past to moving towards the future in knowing her husband’s presence would come with her in ways of her choosing.

Another example: a family knew moving was out of the question, though that was the very thing some of them wanted to do after the death of their youngest child. Sure, it was possible to avoid that

room, but it was still *there*. As each family member worked their own grief, they had varied relationships with the room, sometimes avoiding it and sometimes clinging to it as a place of connection. But as time continued marching forward, one family member at a time began to wonder if it was time to give new purpose to that room. The more they talked and shared ideas, each person realized that the need to change the room reflected their own lives. They were ready to move their individual and collective grief to the background, not to make it to go away, but to return to their lives. They sensed it was time to fully return to jobs, friends, and school, allowing space for new desires and interests. And it was time to make decisions and realize they could never forget the one who was now with them in a different way. Making this change helped them recognize it was time to no longer live solely to honor that person's life.

These two stories hopefully display that making such changes is nothing more than a reflection of a readiness to change the focus from solely grief to the next phase of life. In no way does it convey the removal of the person from your heart, nor does it signify that grief is done. Instead, it is a sign of intentional forward movement, a decision to engage in life despite the ever-present grief.

On my website I've included the saying "Your past does not define you, your past simply informs you." Too often we allow the past to dictate the future, and that is not necessary. If we make the conscious choice to not let the past define us, then past actions, words, inactions, and silences can serve as experiences from which to grow and learn. Similarly, this also applies to death and grief.

For the family referenced above, it was important each of them learned that though the person's death would forever impact them, that day did not need to define the remainder of their lives. They would always remember it, but they could continue forward with

their dreams and hopes. They could choose how to incorporate the person's memory and influence in their lives without needing to consider what the person would want them to do.

As you enter lasting grief, you may recognize you do not need to live your life basing every choice on whether or not your loved one would support you in it. You are your own person. You learn from your past actions, choices, and desires, but if the decisions you make now are different, that is okay.<sup>1</sup> Who you were as a couple, a mom, a son, a sister, a best friend is a part of your past, and you decide what parts of that identity you retain and what you release.

## The "When" Question

The question of *when* (to remove a loved one's clothing, make a major purchase, change jobs, move, or make some other significant life decision) comes second in frequency only to the question of "Am I going crazy?" As common a question as it is, the answers are always unique. It is likely you have many sudden experts in your life who have no problem telling you what you should do, but do not let that stop you from following your instincts. Beyond that, use what follows as a guide to help determine if now is the right time to make a change.

### ***Need versus Want***

First and foremost, consider if the change is a need or a want. If your spouse died and you can no longer afford the mortgage, there are related needs and choices to be made. If something is deemed a

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1. Clearly, anything dangerous that may harm you or someone else would not be advised.

need, the source of that need can be defined. In other words, finances, loss of a job, needing to increase from part-time to full-time work, or the need to vacate an apartment or room are all sources of needs that would prompt a decision to be made sooner than perhaps desired. Unfortunately, in such situations waiting is often not an option. If possible, ask a trusted friend to talk through the decision with you. They will be able to help you determine if the change is truly need-based and, if so, what options might exist.

A want holds a different weight and can be guided by the rule of permanence. If there is a change you want to make but are unsure if the timing is right, do a trial run of a non-permanent change. If the pictures of your loved one are too painful right now, rather than getting rid of them, you can take them down and store them in a closet until you want them back. Or rearrange them; oftentimes changing the location is enough.

Wants are also well managed by lists. Start making a list of changes, big and small, that you want to make; include changes at home, at work, at school, and personal. Once these are written down, you begin to view them in a new light and give yourself permission to think through the options and ramifications. Over time the changes can be prioritized and completed with confidence because you know you thought through them.

### ***Your Timeline***

One year. That is what most people will tell you: no major decisions for one year. There is undeniable wisdom to that, but it is not a hard-and-fast-rule. The heart of that guidance is twofold. First, grief is a significant stressor, so to introduce another stressor into the equation is a risk. Second, grief impedes the ability to think logically and clearly, both of which are important when making a change. The

bottom line is avoiding regret as it relates to the rule of permanence. If, for example, you remove all your loved one's clothing during a grief wave, there is a strong potential of regret. Emotional decision making *can* match with desire and logic, but it often does not, especially in grief.

The grief journey is individual and that includes what changes to make and when, but it is good to include a trusted friend, family member, or counselor in the process, especially in early grief and middle grief. It will benefit you to introduce voices that see risks for regret that you are unable to see in the moment. If you find a decision might be purely emotion-based, choose to think on it. Write it down and explore why you want to do it. Ask yourself if you are ready for whatever permanent consequences there might be.

It is also helpful to plan to make changes in doses. It will serve you better emotionally to take steps bit by bit, rather than all at once.

### ***Personal Belongings***

The two extremes when it comes to personal belongings are removing all signs of the person's existence from the home in the first month and forever keeping everything the same. Each extreme is unhealthy and reflects unprocessed grief. The middle ground is to begin removing and/or packing up the personal belongings of your person as you feel ready.<sup>2</sup>

Socks and underwear are always a safe start. Typically, the personal, sentimental attachment to either is minimal, and that allows for swift, visible results. Then, as you're ready, move to the rest, reserving the most difficult for last. Some people don't mind the

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2. If your person died while living in an apartment or extended care facility and the timeline is not completely up to you, pack the belongings as required and wait to sort through them until you feel ready to do so.

clothes in the closet but can't imagine removing the clothes in the dresser. Others can easily pack up the belongings in the room but cannot bring themselves to move the pair of slippers by the couch. Listen to your emotions in this process. Leaving a pair of slippers by the couch might be what you need to continue to feel a connection to your person, and it is okay to make that choice.

There might come a time when seeing them is painful or no longer comfortable, and you can decide how to handle it if that happens; until then, move forward with the other items and let the slippers remain. Also consider holding onto one or two important articles of clothing or accessories. Eventually you might feel ready to part with those as well, but hold onto them while you need to.

What you do with the items is also completely at your discretion. You can box the items and move them to a different room so you know where they are in case you change your mind about something. Alternatively, you can give clothing to relatives or special people or donate items. It is also okay to throw away certain things if the condition is bad or if it seems to be something people will not want. Remember you are discarding an item or article of clothing, not the person or your connection to the person who used it.

### ***Some Ground Rules***

As you look around your home and see changes to be made, write them on either the *need* list or the *want* list. There is no rule about the order in which things are accomplished, so it is important to not put off things that will lighten your heart while you try to summon the energy to tackle the more mundane, necessary projects. Unless there is an urgency or deadline to something on the needs list, you



can choose to complete the entire wants list before ever completing a need. Alternatively, you can assign the needs to specific weeks or months to take off the pressure while allowing yourself freedom to complete the wants as you desire.

In addition to lists the quadrant rule can be used to make large tasks more manageable. Say, for example, you need to clean out a home office. Prior to your spouse's death you had little to do in the office and were content with that. Now, however, you have needed to be in there several times, and you now see it is time to make it more functional for you. This can be overwhelming for a few reasons. First, your spouse's things are everywhere in the space. Second, you don't want to mistakenly discard something important. Third, it is a large space. Fourth, your spouse intentionally kept everything in the room, so it is difficult to choose to now let those things go. These are all valid concerns. The problem is the concerns are overwhelming to the point of preventing you from being able to act. This is where the quadrant rule comes in. Divide the room into fourths, or even smaller if it will help, and talk yourself through just one section at a time. This helps view the project as manageable, especially because progress is more readily seen.

Finally, listen to your impulses, and then sit with them for a bit. Talk choices through with someone or write them out in your journal. If a decision is permanent, be sure you are willing to accept that before acting. If it is not permanent, reassure yourself you can put things back or change them again if needed.

### ***When They Stop Seeing***

It begins in middle grief, but in lasting grief the silence can become deafening. Over time people stop saying your person's name, stop

telling stories, and, even worse, appear to also not want you to do those things. There is an associated unwritten rule that somewhere around month six, a griever should no longer need to talk about his or her loved one because he or she needs to “get on with life.” What I hope you are learning is that those things are not mutually exclusive; you will always have times of wanting to talk about your loved one, and you will move forward. One does not negate the other.

This is one area where the Church tends to make the most mistakes. In the weeks after a death cards pour in, elders call, and the pastor visits. For a month or two casseroles are delivered, and your name remains on the prayer list. As time continues, though, people stop checking in on you. Your small group no longer prays for your continued adapting to the death. And when you try to bring your person into a discussion, the subject is changed. If, say, eight months after the death you talk with your pastor and are honest about struggling in your faith, the first question the pastor asks might be “What happened?”

To others who do not know, eight months seems to be a long time, certainly long enough that any resulting faith struggles would be resolved—but you know the truth. You know that even in lasting grief there are remnants of things you still need to work through. You know the truth that especially in lasting grief you need people to talk about your person and say his or her name because you do not want them to be forgotten.

When people stop seeing your grief or, worse yet, begin to silence your grief, empower yourself to speak into that space. Tell the story, say your loved one's name, voice the emotion; your grief is different, and it no longer dominates every piece of you, but nonetheless it remains. Part of lasting grief is learning to ask for what you need, to claim that power, and to be proactive when you need to be.

## Grief Waves

Unfortunately grief waves are not limited to middle grief. They do, though, continue to change in lasting grief. The most welcomed change is the steady decrease in intensity and frequency as you continue to do grief work and engage in the next chapter of your life. Grief waves also become a bit more predictable in lasting grief. To be clear, there will still be waves that catch you by surprise, but with each one you will gain more control and know what to do to let it wash over you. Just as you can see a front roll in, in lasting grief you begin to recognize the signs of an impending grief wave.

Watch out for significant days, both obvious and personal. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other significant markers of time run the risk of bringing on a grief wave. Again, though, by lasting grief those waves are weaker, and you are prepared to face them. The fear of anticipation is removed, and you now understand grief waves are nothing more than an acknowledgment of your continued love and missing of the person who died. You do not need to stand on the shores of your life watching for them. Continue living and trusting that on the other side of each grief wave is the opportunity to think about your person in a way you might not have for some time.

## One Year: Debunking the Myths

“This should not be called an anniversary. An anniversary is something to celebrate, and I don’t want to celebrate this.” The man was right, of course: calling it an anniversary is misleading and feels trite. And yet the day is significant, especially the first one. With clients I now talk about it in terms of a mark or landmark. That might feel a

bit too sterile, but it also is the first step in breaking through the myths to create healthy expectations.

### ***Myth One: It Is Magical***

On day 366 after your loved one's death, it is as if people in your life expect you to come out of your house shouting "Ta-da! I'm all better now!" There is nothing magical about that 365<sup>th</sup> day, though. Your person still died, and you still need to continue living without his or her physical presence. Of course in many ways you will be in a better place than you were in the beginning, especially if you engaged in the work. The pain is different. The intrusion grief makes in daily life is different. Your acceptance of the reality has improved, and your focus has shifted. But none of that changes the reality. For 365 days the world dared to continue without your person, and for 365 days you have fought to do the same; the challenge of doing so is different, but it isn't gone.

Here is another myth that needs attention: don't relish the end of the first year because the second year is worse. When clients voice this anxiety to me, my first response is to explore the source of it, and inevitably it came from a friend or acquaintance who either had that experience or knows someone who did. Here is the kernel of truth: the first year can insulate you somewhat from noticing the full weight of your new reality because you are subconsciously constantly alert, waiting for what else might be coming. In the second year, thanks to the settling in of lasting grief, you return to a base level of awareness and are able to enjoy day-to-day life without constant fear of what is next. When that happens, the full reality hits. For the first year part of the brain holds onto hope that it is all a dream, but when that year has ended, such hope can no longer be held, and that can be a difficult pill for some to swallow. In that sense only the second year can feel more challenging than the first.

I'd venture to guess that most grieverers for whom the second year is harder than the first did not do their grief work. A piece of avoided grief became stuck, or they still felt reluctant to return to living. The more reality is fought rather than accepted, the greater effort it takes.

To be sure, there will be challenging times in year two or year fifteen. But if you move towards acceptance and embrace life, if you do the work, you *will not need* to repeat that work in subsequent years.

The one-year mark is not magical. You will not wake up on day 366 and be forever free of your grief. Instead, the one-year mark is significant because you arrived at it. You put in the work. You faced grief. You learned. You re-engaged in life. On day one it was near impossible to envision surviving an entire year, and you did. Now that is worth celebrating!

### ***Myth Two: It Will Be Traumatic***

Perhaps the largest source of anxiety surrounding the one-year mark is that the day will be spent re-living the day of death. Mixed in with the acceptance of the reality of death there can be a quiet fear that you will again need to endure that loss. Note that sentence does not say endure that *kind* of loss, but that *particular* loss. As the calendar continues to turn and the month of a person's death draws near, it is natural to begin to remember, sometimes in vivid detail, what happened in the months and weeks prior to death. The brain begins to replay events, making a final effort to find someone or something to blame. Fight against that trap. By this point in grief it is clear there are no answers or interpretations that change the reality, and to continue to search for an explanation only serves to delay your grief.

When those replays begin, and especially when the day has reached its close, remember the day your loved one died is already done. You never need to do that again. Yes, other people in your life

will die, but this person already died. The one-year mark of that death does not need to be a day of reliving and re-traumatizing. When you begin to feel anxiety about that day creeping in, reflect on the source of it. If fear of going through it all again is part of it, remind yourself, preferably out loud, that last year is done and this year is different.

Rather than thinking of the day as a reliving, then, consider it as a day to both remember and reflect. Create space to remember the fullness of your person's life; he or she was more than the day of death, and you can choose what parts of the story to remember. On the one-year mark set your intention to reframe the day from one focused on your person's death to a day set aside to honor and remember all your person was and all your person contributed to this world and to your life. There is a prayer from the funeral liturgy of my denomination that expresses gratitude to God for all in the person that was "good and kind and faithful."<sup>3</sup> If you are wondering how to frame your remembering, consider beginning there. Additional suggestions for honoring and remembering can be found in the lasting grief survival kit.

The reflection part of the day goes in a slightly different direction, shifting the focus from your person to you. Yes, the day is about your loved one, but it can also be about reflecting on all you accomplished in the last year. Before you laugh off the idea that you accomplished anything, consider what it took to get you from how you felt and experienced life on day 1 of grief to day 365. You faced and overcame something that once felt impossible and unimaginable. Take some time to reflect on how you have grown in your understanding

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3. "Order for Christian Burial: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection," Liturgy of the RCA, Reformed Church in America, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.rca.org/liturgy/order-for-christian-burial/>.

of self, your relationship with God, your work, your passions, and your purpose. In what ways did your person contribute to that growth? As you realize that even after death, they can continue to influence you, thank them.

Will there be pain on the one-year mark of the death? Yes, and likely heightened pain from the intensity you have come to expect. But it is a pain you know, and it does not need to be feared. When anxiety tries to take over, remind yourself that this day is about remembering and reflecting with no need or expectation to relive. You endured the worst of the adjustment and do not need to go back to it.

### ***Myth Three: There Is a List to Follow***

There is no wrong way to spend the one-year mark. As with most situations in grief, people tend to have many opinions to share and expectations of both how you should feel and how you should act. You might even find yourself thinking “I should make a plan,” or “I should feel more than I do.” Step one: stop the *shoulds*.

This gets a bit at the previous myth, too, in that it cannot be unequivocally said the one-year mark will be traumatic because there is no expectation of what a person should feel on that day. Emotions are neutral and grief is individual. You feel what you feel, and you do not need to justify your feelings to yourself or anyone else. One of the best gifts you can give yourself that day is to let your emotions evolve and wash over you organically and without expectations.

At most gather a list of possible activities to do solo or with significant people. As in middle grief, create soft plans recognizing that you will not know how the day will be until it is here. Creating the list gives you a resource to draw from regardless of how you feel throughout the day while also giving the freedom of not being locked into a firm structure.

There is no wrong way to spend the one-year mark. Simply allow it to be whatever you need it to be. In other words, the only wrong thing to do that day is to ignore it. As with the rest of grief, the key is to accept and embrace it. Don't run from it. It will come each year, so now is the ideal time to prove to yourself that the day will not unravel all you have done in the last twelve months.

### ***Myth Four: This Day Is Forever Ruined***

If someone you love died on the twelfth of the month, your love of that person does not mean you now need to spend the twelfth of every month grieving. You can love your person and let the twelfths go by without a dedicated activity to remember or honor your person. You can love your person and enjoy the twelfths separately.

If your loved one died on a significant day, be it a holiday, a wedding anniversary, their birthday, or yours, it is daunting to imagine celebrating that day in the future. Wanting to celebrate it seems impossible, and there might even be a temptation to skip the day altogether.

I assure you, though, that the time will come when you do want to celebrate, even if only for a brief portion of the day. Listen to your desires and needs, letting them guide the way. It is not an expression of diminished love to want to celebrate your birthday or a holiday. Yes, there will likely always be a component of grief on that day, but there can be a larger component of remembering and reflecting, which leaves room for enjoyment. You are allowed to have fun. You are allowed to have days when you do not think about your person or when remembering them does not cause pain. Do you remember the passage referenced earlier about grieving with hope? Allowing the day of death to take on different, additional significance is a part of that—not to remove the death from that day, but to instead add



something different because as a follower of Christ you have the assured hope that July 12th, for example, was not the final word in the story of your person; more is to come for them, and for you. As you are able, allow yourself to embrace and celebrate that.

## An Object Lesson: The Grief Ball, Part 3

The grief ball begins as the size of your body. There is no escaping it or its sharp edges; it is your bodysuit in early grief. Slowly, as you move towards middle grief and the ball mercifully changes, it no longer envelops you in an inescapable way. What was once a giant boulder is now a small stone. It stands in your way, but navigating around it with minimal impact is possible.

By lasting grief the grief ball shrinks further still. Most of the spikes are gone entirely so that when you do come up against it, more often than not it brings a warm memory instead of pain. And when a spike is found, the impact is fleeting. Its size is now completely manageable. Rather than a boulder that blocks your path or a stone that needs circumventing, it can now be carried in your pocket. Instead of being controlled by it, you can choose when to pick it up and look at it and even determine how doing so impacts you. It still does at times impact you without warning, but since you know it will happen from time to time, that is no longer cause for concern.

The grief ball is something that you will carry with you throughout life. Now, though, instead of it consuming you, it is an integrated part of *your* story. Grief does not define your new life, but it does inform it. As you move forward, what you learned in grief and how you changed through the process will guide actions, choices, and decisions. And as your days become increasingly focused on the

activities of life, the grief ball will go with you so that, at any moment, you can pick it up and remember. Through the segments of grief it transformed from an unknown to a tolerated presence, to a familiar part of you; though it causes pain from time to time, you may even find you are grateful for its presence and all that it signifies.

## The Bible on Lasting Grief

### *The Psalms*

The Bible is comprised of many different genres of writing and this, I believe, is an intentional gift from God so that no matter the circumstance there is a part of the Bible that will resonate. When you are seeking guidance on expressing emotion, start with the Psalms. The writers of this book engaged emotional processing for celebrations, laments, and everything in between; there truly is a psalm for any situation.

In early grief emotions are powerful, and there is minimal room for exploration of anything other than immediate needs. Middle grief often remains consumed with looking back or seeking answers, not staying in the present or looking ahead. Finally, by the time a griever arrives in lasting grief, they are usually ready to reengage in his or her faith walk.

The Psalms are intimate reflections of believers struggling with faith, prayers from the depths of the soul for safety, healing, rejoicing, depression, hope, abandonment, anger, questioning, and more. These varied experiences reward readers. Read through them and start to indicate the ones that resonate with you. If you have a lifelong favorite or two, reread them now and reflect on whether the meaning has changed through your grief journey. Appendix 6 guides you

through the process of writing your own psalm and provides a list of psalms that might resonate well with you in lasting grief.

### ***The New Testament***

For his three years of earthly ministry Jesus walked among the people with a devoted crowd of followers that included his twelve disciples. Their early grief is displayed to varying degrees at the ends of the Gospels, and in a sense the remainder of the New Testament is a tribute to their lasting grief.

Those who walked with Jesus had a choice to make with their grief, especially given what they were up against. Jesus was dead and, after walking with them for a time in his resurrected body, now ascended to heaven. They knew the resurrection was real, and they knew the opposing story also being told. The choice was clear: continue what Jesus started and live as he taught, or give up the fight.

I'm certain seeing Jesus in his new body eased their grief, but I am equally as certain that it did not erase their grief. In fact, losing Jesus then seeing him again only to lose him again likely intensified their grief. Imagine the bond these people would have created with each other and with Jesus over those years of moving together, living together, and growing together. Knowing Jesus was again alive and in heaven was not enough to remove from them the lingering awareness of the absence of Jesus' presence. He was their leader, their teacher, their counselor, their challenger, and their friend; missing him would not go away because they knew the end of the story. Knowing the end of the story does not magically place you *at* the end; it might help to know where you are headed, but there remains a lot of road to walk to get there.

The easy choice would have been to let it all go. With Jesus gone, what was the point? How would they know what to do or say? Not to

mention the clear risks involved with continuing to profess allegiance to a man whom most believed was a convicted insurrectionist. There were a lot of people at the ascension and at the time the Holy Spirit was poured out. *A lot*. But in the grand scheme it was a very small percentage, and the story was not easy to believe. Could we blame them if they had chosen to let it all go in their grief? Thankfully that is not what happened.

Jesus' early followers entered lasting grief ready to engage in life with a changed focus and new perspective. Jesus was physically absent, but they each quickly learned that he would remain present with them in so many ways. Jesus lived on in the ways their hearts drove them to continue fighting against oppression and injustice. He lived in their passion to take what he started and build on it through establishing early churches. And Jesus lives on today in our impulse to clothe the naked and feed the hungry.

These early followers of Jesus are one of the greatest examples we have of lasting grief. Instinctively they knew that returning to what life was before was no longer an option. Jesus was with some of them for only three years, but his impact was so significant that, despite the pain of his death and what it took to integrate that loss into their lives, they knew they needed to continue living to honor him.

There is an important nuance here that needs to be seen. Too often people try to continue the work of the person who died—a good impulse—and fall into the trap of trying to do it exactly as they did—a bad assumption. The early believers understood that to honor Jesus they needed to use their own unique, personal gifts and talents to continue the spirit of the work Jesus began. The same is true for us today. It is well and good to continue a piece of your person's story, but do so with your skills, your perspective, and your personality.

Don't try to fit yourself into their shoes; instead, fit their cause, passion, or belief into your shoes.

After the Gospels the New Testament is an example of how to live in lasting grief remembering the person who died and all that he taught you and helped you become. Reflect on what you learned through your relationship and time together. Reengage in your life, perhaps with new motivations and passions, in a way that is true to you and honoring to the person who died. In time it becomes clear that the person who died has a lasting impact on your life despite being physically absent and that you can connect with him or access your grief whenever doing so feels important.

## Lasting Grief Survival Kit

These grief survival kits build on each other, so what helped you in early or middle grief will remain helpful in lasting grief. What follows are a few more tools to add to the kit.

### ***Annual Markers***

As indicated earlier in this chapter, there are a variety of options when it comes to recognizing the annual mark of your loved one's death. Of utmost importance is choosing activities that are meaningful for you, not what you think your person would want you to do in their honor. For it to be beneficial for forward movement in grief, the act needs to hold significance for you.

Such activities can be done alone, introspectively or overtly, or with others. Since your needs for the day might change from year to year and you may not know until the day arrives what your needs

Table 4: Activity Suggestions for Annual Markers

<input type="checkbox"/> Tie a written note to a balloon and release it	<input type="checkbox"/> Look through old pictures and tell the stories they evoke
<input type="checkbox"/> Visit the gravesite or other meaningful location to talk to your person	<input type="checkbox"/> Cook your loved one's favorite meal or treat
<input type="checkbox"/> Plant a tree or favorite flower/plant	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer somewhere meaningful to your person
<input type="checkbox"/> Commission a paver in memoriam	<input type="checkbox"/> Light a candle by a treasured picture

might be, it is wise to create a list of activities you have heard of or researched and continue gathering ideas. These activities can be used to honor the annual marker of the death or any other annual reminder (birthday, anniversary, etc.). Keep your list in a place you are sure to remember so that when a particular day approaches, you know where to turn for ideas. See table 4 to get you started with ideas.

*Changing Your Internal Record*

To fully move into lasting grief, a person needs to be able to engage in their new life without being paralyzed by fear or anxiety. The reason fear and anxiety can have such a large hold in one's life is due to subconscious thoughts or the internal record of that person's mind. These records began to be written the moment we were born, forming and shaping our beliefs. Over time, for good or bad, those beliefs become set. Indeed, changing our beliefs in adulthood is the name of the game, but the work requires effort and certain skills.

In reaching lasting grief, you know it is time to move grief to a lesser focus and begin engaging in the next chapter of your life. This

can be scary, and for not completely invalid reasons. Often by this point in the journey old friendships have run their course and new ones have blossomed; previous interests are being rediscovered, have shifted, or have fallen away completely; and though the desire to reengage in life is substantial, there may also be fear that to continue on will mean either losing connection with your person or opening yourself to more grief. To move forward it is necessary to be intentional about the things you say to yourself to summon courage and motivation.

Over the course of a few days listen intently to the things you say to yourself about starting this next chapter. If you notice any that are counterproductive, take some time to write them down. Anytime you catch yourself downgrading your ability to parent your living children, discrediting your competence to start towards a new dream, or making excuses not to take the next step for fear of what could happen, write those things down. Get to know your thoughts and see them clearly. This is your internal record. It has been changed by grief just as you have, and it is time to ensure the changes are healthy.

To make the changes, choose one of the unhelpful statements you recorded and write it in a helpful way. For instance, if you say to yourself, "I can't go back to school now. It's too late and will take too long to get where I want to be," one way to change it might be, "Going back to school is going to take time and money. But each class is one step closer to where I want to be, and I can change direction later if I need to. I am doing this for me." Make the statements healthy reflections of your capabilities. Then surround yourself with those new statements. Whenever you catch yourself thinking an unhelpful statement, follow it immediately with something helpful. If you practice this repeatedly and with intention, your internal record will

begin to change. You will soon notice the difference reshaping your internal record creates in your approach to life.

### ***Good and Kind and Faithful***

As indicated earlier, one of the greatest fears in the journey of grief is that others will forget your person or that you will one day forget them. This tool and the next one are ways to soothe those fears.

Borrowing the line from the previously referenced prayer, take time to remember the ways in which your person was good, kind, and faithful. Embrace the nuance of the three different words and collect memories for each. In the end you will have three different logs of ways your person impacted you and the world around you. You can add to them as you remember more or as people tell you things and pull them out on special days or when the missing is heavy.

### ***Gather Stories***

As the one-year mark approached, a former client reached out to friends and family asking for stories of the spouse. The invitations went out to mutual friends and friends the spouse knew prior to my client as well as family members with the request that each person share a story or two of how the spouse's imprint remains. When they had finished, they sent their stories back to my client, who gathered them together in a scrapbook. It was that scrapbook that carried this client through the one-year mark as she heard anew stories from their shared past and learned things previously unknown. Not only does such a project ensure your person will not be forgotten, it also provides the opportunity to learn new things and get to know your person in new ways.



## *Identity Mapping*

The purpose of this tool is to assist you in recognizing how you see yourself, how grief changed any of those views, and which, if any, you want to change. To begin, list as many “I am” statements as you can think of. These can be roles, relationships, traits, skills—whatever comes to mind. Get them all out on paper without stopping to reflect on them. Once the list is complete, go back through it item by item and indicate whether that item is something you like, something new since the death of your person, or something you no longer want as a part of your identity. You do not need to be trapped with a particular trait because it has always been; you can take steps to change it to something else, but to do that you need to name it. Finally, once you have reacted to each statement, create a plan to let go of those parts of your identity you no longer want and a plan to fully engage with those you do.

You might learn your journey of grief changed the way you view yourself in ways you did not anticipate or previously notice. That is okay. Sit with the changes, and remember what you now see does not need to remain; you can change it. You are informed by your past, not defined by it. Furthermore, you are a created child of God, always growing more into the person God created you to be. It is good to stop and take stock of how you identify yourself, especially as you enter lasting grief. You just might see something that helps you find the next step.

## Conclusion

Returning to the hospital metaphor, lasting grief is the discharge planning phase of treatment. Injuries—external and internal, major and minor—have been attended to and are healing. There are some scars, but that is to be expected. Everything is back in working order. You have practiced with different therapies, tried new medications, and demonstrated that you can continue the work on your own at home. You might need accommodations for a time, but the protection of the hospital is no longer needed; it is time to return to life.

The road of grief is long and winding, filled with hills and valleys and even a few cliffs. But when lasting grief is reached, there is a sense of relief that takes over. Though the road never truly ends, one reaches a point when they recognize they have all they need for whatever comes and that knowledge makes all the difference.

## Pause for Whisperings

Look back through this chapter and choose a place or two where you indicated that you should spend time reflecting. Are there specific actions you need to take, or is more reflection needed first? What do you most want to start with, and what, if anything, are you challenged by? How do you feel your person would advise you? Would they be proud of the progress you've made? Are they celebrating with you now? As you've dared to reach across the chasm of death to joy and love on the other side, you've proven yourself courageous and that is one way we become more fully ourselves. You have earned that wisdom, and you can claim it now. Spend some time reflecting on that.

[illegible]

The most  
*difficult piece of the*  
**GRIEF PUZZLE**  
for believers is  
heaven.

## *Eight*

# A Changed Relationship

**R**egardless of the type of loss, there is one thing every client is certain to hear by the end of his or her first bereavement session: your relationship with your person has *changed*, not ended. In other words, though your person is no longer physically present, there remain available ways to connect with them and for them to connect with you. The ways you connect with them are discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter changes our attention to the possibility of you feeling your loved one reaching out to you.

Clients who do not affiliate with the Christian faith are encouraged by this, but the reactions of Christians tend to vary. Some resist it offhand, believing it is not acceptable to talk to their loved ones who have died or that somehow continuing a relationship with their person elevates that person above God. Others resist it because of what they have been *taught*, not because of what they believe. Still others visibly relax when hearing this as it offers a sort of permission to embrace what they were already experiencing.

Before reading on, determine where you fall on this spectrum and explore why. If you embrace a changed rather than discontinued relationship, why do you feel that way? Is it tied to your faith, something you were taught, or a longing? Similarly, if you feel resistance

to this concept, explore that. Is the resistance based on something you read in the Bible, something you were taught, something you simply feel is wrong? Whatever you believe and whatever the reason, it is important that you know it for yourself. As has been taught throughout this book, this reflection is not to analyze or judge your perspectives but instead to know them and observe them. Once you have done so, you'll be freer to move through this chapter with your mind open to what you might discover.

### ***A Caution***

This relationship has changed because one person is no longer physically present. As difficult a reality as that can be to accept, it is necessary to stress that the changed relationship in no way indicates denying the reality of the death or pretending the missing person will be back. If you find yourself struggling with this, a grief counselor can assist you in addressing that distinction and making the transition to a healthier mindset.

### ***Your Timeline***

The changed relationship is like every other aspect of grief in that it is something available to you as long as you need it. It might be heavy in the beginning and fade as you grow in acceptance, or it might remain an important part of your new life. What matters is that you remain open to what you need throughout this process.

Some grieverers need this changed relationship a lot in the early weeks and months, and then as time passes and they engage again in life, the need for that connection diminishes. For some grieverers the relationship continues to grow and change over years through all of life's ups and downs. Pay attention to what you need and how the

changed connection feels. If it begins to feel heavy or cause pain, it might be time to release it or shift the relationship one more time. Conversely, if the connection helps you feel grounded or empowers you to take forward steps, then allow it to remain. You'll know when you are ready to tuck the relationship away deep in your heart where it can be kept safe until you need to access it again for a special date or memory; until then, do what feels right for you.

### ***The Spiritual Realm***

In general, Western Christianity does not talk about or even acknowledge the spiritual realm. Despite the presence of angels throughout the Bible,<sup>1</sup> Western believers in many denominations tend to set aside matters of spiritual warfare, the battle of good versus evil, and the activity of angels. Many American Christians in particular believe angel encounters are limited to people like Mary and do not continue today.

This lack of awareness or flat-out denial of the spiritual realm is part of the reason believers struggle with the concept of some form of a continued relationship with a deceased person. Consider, though, the Holy Spirit, sent to us by Jesus for guidance and learning. This person of the Trinity does not have a physical body yet is equally as real and active in this world both corporately and individually.<sup>2</sup> Not acknowledging the spiritual realm does not make it less real. Though it is not easily understood and though it does not make logical, scientific sense, it is real. Allowing yourself to be open to that

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1. Look up "angel" in your Bible's concordance or on a web-based service such as [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) for passages that describe the real presence of angels within the world.

2. See Acts 1 and John 14 as starting points to learn more about the person of the Holy Spirit.

is an important part of the process if you hope for a two-way changed relationship.

### ***A Two-Way Street***

Your side of the changed relationship is definitive. Talking to your loved one, verbally or in writing, has spiritual, emotional, and even physical benefits. It is one of the tools that assists grievers in moving through the segments of grief and is often used throughout lasting grief. The communication tends to evolve over time, beginning with a simple “good morning” or “I love you” and growing to full-on conversations to update the person on the latest happenings. This type of continued, changed relationship is healthy and, for most, necessary for movement through the segments. For some, though, the connection does not end there.

Before working as a grief counselor, my ideas about the spiritual realm were abstract at best. I had a limited understanding of how God intercedes in this world in ways that are extremely personal and intimate. During my time as a hospice chaplain, I regularly witnessed God's grace become palpable as a person in the last days or hours of life saw or talked to his or her loved ones waiting for them in heaven. My understanding of grace further deepened when I witnessed one who, against all outward medical signs, lived long enough for a specific person to arrive to say his or her goodbyes. The instances of such moments have been numerous, and in each I reached a broader understanding of the connection between heaven and earth. Not until my work as a grief counselor, though, did I truly begin to see God's grace unfold in such ways.

One such instance happened when a widow shared with me her recent encounter. While driving, she experienced a particularly



difficult grief wave. Rather than pull over and wait for it to pass, she began praying for God's help. As she sat across from me and told me what happened next, she did so with a mixture of hope and embarrassment: Hope that I would accept her story and join her in celebrating it and embarrassment that she believed it happened at all. She proceeded to share that for just a few seconds during that prayer, her husband appeared to her. He did not speak to her, but she could see him clearly enough to see his smile and recognize what he was wearing. Because of the way he died, this moment of a clear picture was a gift to her: One more time to see him, whole and happy.

I also think about the woman who regularly felt her son's hand on her shoulder and sensed his thoughts about different situations she faced. She didn't hear his audible words, but she sensed them deeply and believed wholeheartedly those words were from her son. Or consider the people who hug their loved ones in a dream, especially when the person had died suddenly and/or unexpectedly.

These are only three examples of countless clients who have reported different ways they have experienced their loved ones connecting with them: sensing their words, feeling their touches, or seeing them. Whether awake or dreaming, such connections are treasured by the recipients and indicate a changed, continued relationship. Did God provide each moment? Did each person somehow imagine it? We do not know, but not knowing the *how* does not invalidate the reality of the encounter.

### ***Let It Be***

Many aspects of God are beyond human understanding, but our lack of knowledge does not invalidate God's existence. If it did, what

would be the point of faith? I posit that something similar is at work surrounding the concept of grace specifically as it relates to grief. Rather than try to understand in the mind, it seems more advisable to let grace wash over you, to let it be something felt instead.

We can hear stories like the ones above and argue they are not real or even that such moments somehow go against God. Rather than casting that judgment, we can hope and wait for it to happen to us. I have had dream conversations with a couple of grandparents since their deaths, and shortly after one of my grandpas died, I woke to see someone sitting on the edge of my bed. They did not stay long, but I felt in my soul a certainty that the presence was of God and was there to bring comfort. It saddens me to think of what I might have missed if I were not open to such possibilities.

Non-Christian grieverers are typically able to accept such moments at face value and receive something positive from them. Believers, however, unfortunately can have more difficulty. I once worked with a client who did this regularly. She told of moments of feeling her husband's hand on her shoulder or cheek with such peace and joy and in the next moment would disqualify it. In doing so she stole from herself a gift God very well might be trying to give her. As she adjusted to her new reality, God provided her moments of a connection she missed deeply. If God gives that gift—and I see no indication of it coming from anywhere else—why should she steal it away from herself? The grief thief steals enough, does it not? Try not to give it these precious moments as well.

If you have experienced a moment like those shared, do yourself the favor of holding it as a gift from God to help ease you into this new reality in which your loved one is no longer physically present.

Fight the temptation to diminish it and seek to quiet the voices of those who shame you for acknowledging the experience.

## ***Heaven***

Perhaps the most difficult piece of the grief puzzle for believers is heaven. What is it? What is a resurrected body, and when does one receive it? Is my loved one already in heaven or in some sort of temporary waiting place? What do they look like? How will our relationship be when I get to heaven? The questions go on and on and on.

I hope it is clear by this chapter that questions are good, that God welcomes the expression of questions regardless of whether the motivation behind them is doubt, fear, anger, or mere curiosity. What I also hope is clear, though, is that asking such questions can become detrimental if it is the sole focus of grief. In other words, ask the questions you have, but try not to allow yourself to be consumed by the need for answers. Remember the power is in giving voice and thereby validation to a question, not in receiving an answer. Energy and focus are precious commodities in grief, so it is better not to waste either on seeking answers that will not be found on this side of eternity.

## ***Final Cautions***

One of the arguments against the idea of a continued, changed relationship comes from pastors who equate such a relationship with elevating the person who died above God. As a reminder for pastors, the journey a person takes, particularly after the death of a spouse or child, is one that needs to unfold at its own pace. Yes, early on people might give voice to longing to be in heaven solely to reunite

with their loved one. If a griever is brave enough to voice that, do not quash it. Let it be. After all, God can handle it. God knows the person's heart and soul and understands the underlying desire is simply to be with his or her person again. Location is not the central focus. It isn't that the griever prefers to be with the deceased *instead of* God; rather, there are times in grief when it is impossible to long to be with anyone other than the one now absent.

I believe reactions to such feelings is one of the primary reasons grievers leave the Church. Grief is heavy enough to hold; adding the weight of guilt, judgment, or shame is far too much. If you are a pastor or helper and a griever tells you they want to go to heaven to be with their person, I implore you to please just sit with them in that. If the silence is too much, ask what specifically they are missing in that moment, but please do not shame them for giving voice to the honest longing in their heart. This can be another time when grievers are called to be educators to those trying to help them. If you as a griever have left the church, consider explaining what prompted that decision. Your honesty in that situation might help the next griever have a different experience with that pastor.

Finally, while it is important to not steal these moments from yourself by explaining them away, it is equally important to not conjure them into existence. I believe these glimpses and sensations are gifts God gives to ease us as God's children through the transition of living life on earth without those who have died. I do not believe they are meant to be permanent fixtures or consistent

contacts. Being open to receiving such an experience from God is one way you can help yourself move through grief, but remember these moments are meant to help transition you to life. In other words, when you are given a moment of connection, take it, enjoy it, feel it, and learn from it, then let it be. If you allow yourself to sit waiting for the next one, you run the risk of becoming trapped in grief and interrupting your relationship with God.

## Conclusion

There's a television episode early in season one of *This Is Us* in which the doctor is seated at his dining room table telling his wife about his life at that moment. What made that scene unique is that his wife had died several years prior. As a bereavement counselor and Christian minister, I found a lot of joy in that scene because it normalized the idea of a changed and continued relationship. Whether it's one week or ten years from the death, there will be moments you need to share with your person. Why? Because part of you is so deeply connected to them that to *not* tell them feels wrong. As time moves forward, you might notice a decreased need to speak to or write to your person. This is expected and normal. It is also equally as expected and normal to have a resurgence of need to talk to them, especially with significant life events. Embrace those moments and allow them to be what they are. Eventually you won't even need to think about it; it will just happen.

As time moves, you'll also see the delineation between your changed relationship with your person and your relationship with God. Those in your life who do not support the concept of a continued relationship of any kind likely feel that way because they fear you have replaced God with a longing for your person; you might hold that same fear. Trust that those relationships are different and that the difference between them will become clear as you learn this new life.

## Pause for Whisperings

Before moving to the final chapter, take a few moments to reflect on the concept of a changed relationship with your loved one who has died. Do you want that? What did you feel the Spirit saying to you as you read? Have you had any moments you've been afraid to share with anyone? If so, take some time to write down the experience so you always have it.

[illegible]

Moving  
*forward is a*  
statement of  
**OWNERSHIP**  
*over grief, not a*  
removal  
of it.



## *Nine*

# Moving Forward

**D**o you remember the reference in chapter 6 to the word *through*? In Psalm 23 the concept of the dark valley is a place people walk *through*, not a place of entrapment or abandonment and not a place where we are meant to spend the remainder of our lives. The dark valley is real in the moment but not permanent reality because something waits on the other end. That other side is reached by faithfully clinging to life through early grief, crawling through middle grief, and walking through lasting grief.

Imagine an open field on a beautiful, sunny day. The weather is ideal for strolling, and the nature that surrounds you gives new understanding of God's work in creation. Then without warning your next step drops you down the side of a hidden hill. You lose your balance and fall, rolling down until you land at the bottom. You're stunned. How did that happen? How could it have been flat one moment, and the next you are at the bottom?

You scan your new surroundings and immediately realize two significant things. First, there is no way you can scale back up the hill from whence you came. Second, it is dark and cold here, and the only light is a pinprick far in the distance. You have no idea what is in front of you or what it will take to reach that light, but you know

staying where you are is not the right decision. With that light as your new north, slowly but surely you take steps, spurred on by an invisible yet palpable sense of safety, peace, and security.

As you continue walking, the warmth again increases. Suddenly you hear birds, rustling leaves, and the branches under your feet instead of the deafening silence. Soon you see new growth bursting from the ground, and somewhere along the way you notice you shook off the weight that was holding you down. Now you're lighter on your feet. Even when a branch trips you, you're able to get back up.

With that still invisible yet very real presence attending to you, the light grows larger as you approach it. At times you look back only to realize you no longer need to understand what happened. With each step you feel more like yourself even while recognizing new aspects of your being. Then, just as suddenly as you were thrust down into the darkness, you find yourself standing once again in full light.

Surprised in a new way, you pause to take in these surroundings. A sign in front of you reads "Moving Forward" with an arrow pointing straight ahead. When you turn to see where you've been, you notice that you are again up. You didn't notice the incline and do not know how you came out of the valley, but you know now without a doubt that you are in fact out of it. You scan beyond the sign and immediately understand there is no way to know the terrain ahead of you, but this does not give you pause because you know you are not alone. You also know that you take with you everything you learned about yourself while walking through the valley.

Without knowing how or when it happened, you know that you are ready: ready for whatever might come; ready to have others join you as you navigate the next segment of the journey; ready to feel and observe and participate. Eager to begin, you sort through the things you've gathered while in the valley, tuck some away for

safekeeping, and leave the rest behind because you no longer have need of them. Then, with the ever-present awareness of the One who accompanies you, you step onto the road ahead.

## Defining Moving Forward

If you are in either early grief or middle grief, it might be best to save this section until you reach lasting grief. If the curiosity is too much to bear, read this section with the understanding that moving forward often does not happen until one has been in lasting grief for some time.

### ***What It Isn't***

Sometimes it is easier to define a thing in terms of what it isn't rather than what it is, and this is one of those times. Beyond that, I hope in understanding what moving forward *isn't*, any remaining fears of what might be asked of you in the future will be assuaged. Though only three anti-characteristics are listed below, you will see they cover the most common fears.

First, moving forward is not moving on. In other words, there is zero expectation that you will one day live as if the death of your person no longer impacts you or as if you no longer have moments or days that are hard because of grief. As was discussed in chapter 7, there are aspects of grief that do not end. Moving forward does not contradict that; it embraces it.

Second, moving forward is not a sign of letting go of your person. There is not a magic date in the future by which you need to stop talking to your person or about your person. There is not a pre-determined time when you need to pretend your relationship with

them didn't happen or that it didn't have a permanent impact on you. Third, moving forward is not governed by time. As with every other category of grief learned about to this point, the entrance cannot be marked on a map or guided by a timetable.

### ***What It Is***

The foundation of moving forward is laid by first filling in the blanks created by the anti-characteristics; from there it can grow and expand based on each individual situation.

First, moving forward is represented in the moment or series of moments when a griever decides they are ready to be impacted by his or her grief rather than defined by it. We already know that grief changes people in significant and lasting ways, but in early grief and middle grief it can tend to dominate and define a person's existence. As a griever enters the third segment, however he or she is often ready to be done carrying the complete weight of grief everywhere they go. In the beginning the grief is a companion of sorts, a connection to the one who is now gone, and therefore not being wrapped up in it is inconceivable. But as a person adapts and learns what a changed relationship looks like for them, he or she recognizes that remaining wrapped in grief is no longer needed to feel connected to their person.

Carrying the weight of grief daily or being wrapped in it are equivalent to being defined by it. The grief controls the person rather than the person controlling the grief. Alternatively, to be impacted by grief means a person is open to daily influences wholly unrelated to his or her self while also recognizing grief waves happen. When moving forward, a griever can control grief waves with confidence backed by knowledge that the griever has what is needed to conquer what is coming.

In moving forward, it is finally understood that grief waves simply mean the person who died remains an important fixture in the lives of others even after death. Moving forward is a statement of ownership over grief, not a removal of it. Moving forward creates space for new hobbies and reengagement with friends to take center stage.

Second, a griever will know he or she is moving forward when a shift in focus is noticed from being preoccupied with the loved one to a healthier focus on self. Again, this does not mean forgetting or letting go of the influence they had on your life. Rather, it is an awareness that the time has come to embrace continued living, and to do that necessarily includes a focus on self. Beyond the self-care that is needed throughout the phases of grief, the focus on self in moving forward expands to getting to know one's new self. Instead of making decisions based on what the deceased would want, one who is moving forward makes choices based first on what is right for her at that time.

People new to moving forward talk a lot about guilt: either guilt for what they are doing or guilt for not feeling guilty. I want to pause here to make something clear: there is no reason—zero, zilch—for guilt in moving forward. To bring things full circle, moving forward is a natural reaction. It is needed if one is going to continue living. It is impossible to embrace life and continue growing into the person God created you to be if you're consumed with regaining a life that's no longer possible. A piece of embracing life is learning—again or for the first time—to think about your own wants and needs. This is not selfish, nor is it forgetting everything your relationship with your person taught you. Through middle and lasting grief you choose which continued influences from your person you will keep, and those influences aren't going anywhere. The difference is that in

moving forward, you are integrating those influences into you, fitting them into you, rather than forming yourself around them.

Finally, a griever cannot be told when to begin moving forward. Most people reach lasting grief before moving forward is experienced as a permanent state, though how long a person is in lasting grief before this occurs varies. You will know once you have begun to move forward, but until then it will feel far off. Some grievers also experience short-term glimmers of moving forward before fully engaging in it. If you are one such griever, know that stops and starts don't mean you're going backwards. You've simply paused until you are more prepared to continue.

Moving forward is defined by the present and the future, *not* the past. A griever who has entered this zone is again able to remain present in conversations with others, read a book without losing focus, and fill days with more than one task or activity. A griever who is moving forward is also able to look ahead and plan a trip with a friend, envision what the next chapter of life might look like, and create goals. Simply put, moving forward is a general readiness to leave the past where it is and only bring it up when there is need to do so.

## Moving Forward

It is common when grief strikes to press pause on the remote control of life. The barest minimum is the goal for each day, and basic activities of daily living such as bathing and doing the dishes are a significant struggle. It is not so much a period of living as it is a time of existing, a time of reorientation to your new world. This pause persists throughout early grief and begins to wane somewhere in

middle grief. During the waning period griever alternately press play and pause as they practice engaging in life. Then at varying points in lasting grief, griever are ready to press play for a final time, prepared to engage with life to a degree that does not remove, ignore, or forget the grief, but rather moves the grief to an unobtrusive location in heart and mind. Below are a few signposts that indicate you are moving forward. When you reach this point, allow yourself to celebrate your *through* and feel excitement for what awaits.

### ***Signpost One: Living Space***

Moving forward is about taking back control, and that extends to the house itself. This is the first signpost because it is the most recognizable and because many find it enjoyable. If the person who died lived in the same house, this might include redecoration, remodeling, or moving.

For example, I worked with a widower who had a strong connection to his spouse in two certain rooms of the home. When he recognized that those connections were no longer benefiting him and in fact were harming him due to the increased pain he experienced when in those rooms, he created a plan to change the rooms. One room was a simple redecoration. He didn't want anything removed per se, just moved around, shifted enough that when he walked into the room, he wasn't flooded with images of life before. He intentionally created space to receive images and mementos of new memories. In the other room he took things a step further to remodel it for an entirely new purpose. For him moving forward meant changing the function of a room to something that better suited his new life.

Sometimes people do decide to move, either out of financial necessity or because the house no longer feels right. A financially motivated move might be a sign of moving forward, though it is more

likely one of those transition experiments when a person presses play just long enough to get through the move. When a person chooses to change location based on a feeling in his or her being, though, it is a sure sign of moving forward. A move like this can be motivated by a variety of situations. Maybe the home feels too large. Maybe the location was chosen by the person who died and was never preferred by the griever. Regardless, when a person is ready to make this type of change, it reveals a deeper acceptance of his ability to make different choices apart from the person who died.

When the deceased was not living with the griever, moving forward as it relates to living space is different. Because there was already a disconnect, griever in these situations tend to create in their own home an area of connection after the death. Some might call it a shrine or memorial space. Items found in those places include ashes, pictures, favorite items, and other sources of memory. The purpose is for the griever to have a place in his or her own home to go and connect with their person. Moving forward in these situations necessarily is different and often includes a sort of reversal. The griever feels ready to deconstruct the area, removing and dispersing the items to other locations.

Home is meant to be a safe place, a place we can go to decompress and recharge. After a significant loss, what it takes for home to feel that way is different. Moving forward is merely another change, another moment of recognizing that what was done to focus on grieving one's loved one no longer needs to be the focus of the space.

### ***Signpost Two: Engagement***

Another sign of moving forward is an increased level of engagement in activities that are not tied to the person who died. Until this point



grievers focus their energy on necessary tasks, work, and activities that can be done to honor the one who died. In moving forward, the griever begins mixing in things of personal interest. The options here are vast and include things like signing up for a cooking class, planning a dream trip, going to new restaurants or movies in a genre the person didn't like, or participating in an exercise class. These choices are based upon the griever's personal interests and could be long-held desires that didn't work in shared relationship but do now.

For example, a woman was her mom's caregiver for many years. She has a love of gardening but could never participate in the local gardening club because of her mom's care needs. For her, moving forward may include joining and participating. Perhaps a husband always wanted to spend the summers traveling by RV, but since his wife was not an educator, they were unable to do so. For him moving forward might include planning one such trip.

### ***Signpost Three: Community***

Finally, moving forward includes reconnecting with community. Most grievers have a small inner circle of trusted individuals who help them progress through the segments of grief. By the time someone is ready to begin moving forward, they will notice that circle has expanded to include people who never knew the deceased or people who only met the griever after the death and so know nothing of his or her life before.

## **Identity**

Perhaps the most exciting shift that occurs during moving forward is in the identifier one uses. Throughout this book identifiers like

“the griever,” “grievors,” and “the bereaved” are used to describe those who are working through grief after the death of a significant person. At some point, though, that identifier no longer fits. What once gave freedom to explore feelings and to take time to adapt now feels almost confining and limiting. Grief changes from being something you are in to something you experience as needed, and you now understand that is an entirely different situation.

A primary aspect of this book has been teaching and empowering you to name, express, validate, and embrace all aspects of grief. If you are moving forward, you are ready to take the next step of creating a new identifier for this next chapter of life. Before you move on from here, pause and decide what it will be. Liver? Dreamer? Practitioner of life? Maybe gardener, runner, world traveler, or volunteer? The possibilities are endless! Let me know your choice; I'd love to hear what you choose and why.

## Conclusion

People fear moving forward due to misconceptions about what it means and what it will require. If you're not ready yet, that's okay; this is your journey, and there is no rush. As you find yourself thinking about it or ready to take those first steps, though, remember that moving forward is about returning to living; it is about resuming the process of seeking to become a more complete picture of who God created you to be. You do not enter this segment alone. Never alone. Jesus made sure of that in sending us the Spirit.

## Pause for Whisperings

In addition to recording whatever whisperings you captured as you read this chapter, reflect on the phrase *moving forward*. What does it raise in you? Excitement? Dread? Hope? Fear? Where is God in your moving forward?

[illegible]

Remember that  
*God's love for you*  
cannot be lost,

**NO MATTER**  
*how distant*  
you might  
become.

## A Final Word

Whether you are a griever or a helper, there are a few final reminders you need before leaving this book behind. First—and this, I hope, is by now clear—finishing this book is not an end to this chapter of grief. On this side of heaven grief is inevitable, plain and simple. We grieve because we love, and loving others is the DNA God implanted in us. To avoid relationships out of fear is to deprive the self of connection, which is one of the most basic needs we have.

That being said, coming to the end of this book remains cause for celebration: celebrate the hard work you've done, celebrate that the Potter is still at work, and celebrate that you again *feel*. Helpers, you too can celebrate: celebrate that you educated yourself to become a better helper for future grievers, celebrate that when you enter your own season of grief you will be more prepared, and celebrate your renewed awareness of God's image in each person you meet. Also as I said earlier, unmasking something strips it of its power and eliminates the source of fear. Grievers and helpers alike unmasked the Grief Thief by reading this book. Well done! Though the Grief Thief will likely reappear, you know you are ready to face it.

Also, consider the appendices and survival kits as your rescue plan. Keep what you learned somewhere accessible. There might come a time when a wave is so strong or so sudden that you do not have time to think through how to handle it. In those moments turn to your rescue plan for guidance.

Finally, whether you read through this book cover to cover or took several months to read it piece by piece, my prayer and hope is that the journey has been one of learning, healing, and discovery. Regardless of what others may preach, teach, or say, remember that grief is nothing more than a natural reaction, an expected response to the death of someone you love. You do not need to rush through to the other side, and moving forward and continuing to live does not mean letting go of your person. Most importantly, sisters and brothers, remember that God's love for you cannot be lost, no matter how distant you might become; God's love for you is intimate, unconditional, inescapable, and abiding.

## *Appendix 1*

### 1 Corinthians 13 and Self-Love

Usually 1 Corinthians 13 is understood as a way to love others or as an insight into how God loves us. But grief is a season of life that requires an unusual amount of self-love, and 1 Corinthians 13 is a perfect guide for that as well. Beneath each trait printed below or in a notebook or journal where you'll have more space, list as many ways you can think of to extend that trait to yourself in grief. For instance, for patience you might write something like "I will love myself by being patient with my grief process." Or for *kind* you might say, "I will love myself by being kind in the things I say to and about myself." If you are a helper, write down ways you can tailor the trait specifically to serve grievers.

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Patient	Kind	Not envious
Not boastful	Not arrogant	Not rude
Does not insist on its own way	Not irritable or resentful	Rejoices in truth
Bears all things	Believes all things	Hopes all things
Endures all things	Never ends	

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## *Appendix 2*

### Psalm 23 and Grief

Psalm 23 is a familiar psalm to many and is often read in times of distress as a reminder of God's presence. Grief is an example of such a time. Below you will find some of the words from the New Living Translation of the psalm in bold. Take time to reflect on each of these words in the space provided on the next page, or write your reflections elsewhere. How might each word influence your journey of grief?

The Lord is my **shepherd**;  
I have all that I need.  
He lets me rest in green meadows;  
he leads me beside peaceful streams.  
He **renews** my strength.  
He guides me along right paths,  
bringing honor to his name.  
Even when I **walk**  
**through** the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,  
for you are close beside me.  
Your rod and your staff  
**protect** and **comfort** me.  
You prepare a feast for me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.  
My cup overflows with **blessings**.  
Surely your goodness and **unfailing love** will pursue me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the Lord  
forever.

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Shepherd:	Protect:
Renews:	Comfort:
Walk:	Blessings:
Through:	Unfailing Love:

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## *Appendix 3*

### Journaling

The impact of journaling cannot be overstated, yet many people avoid it out of fear or association with keeping a diary. Unlike diary writing, journaling is much more than simple record keeping. It is a way to go under the surface for self-discovery, it is a way to increase receptivity to what God might be saying, and it is a way to process emotions that cannot be spoken. Below are just a few formats of journal writing that are helpful in grief (and many other life situations).

#### ***Scripture/Quote Journaling***

Start with a favorite Bible passage or other quote and write it at the top of a page. Take a few moments to meditate on it and read it aloud. When you're ready, begin writing about why you chose that particular passage or quote. What in it speaks to you? How does it capture what you're experiencing in life at this moment? What might the Spirit be teaching you? How does the quote speak into your grief, and what do you learn about yourself when you read it? What do you feel in your body, mind, and heart when you hear it?

## ***Letter Writing***

Letter writing is best used when there is something left unsaid. The wonder of the human brain is that it does not care if the person is going to physically receive the words; it cares that we put the words out there to be received. The theory also applies when there are things we need to tell ourselves. Consider areas of grief where you remain stuck. To whom or what are they related, and what needs to be said? Write a letter to that person and say it, no filter needed. This also works well when there are feelings of anger or injustice or similar emotions towards those involved in your loved one's care. In that scenario write the letter but don't send it, at least not the first draft. If you do want to send a letter, use the first draft as your time to release it all, no holds barred. From there you can rework it as needed until it is more appropriate for public consumption. Remember, though, your brain does not require the letter to be sent to benefit from the writing, so it is okay to simply write it and then destroy it.

Letter writing can also be used to complete conversations with your person. This often feels odd, so stick with me on this. You know your person and know how they would respond to you or what they would say, and when that isn't the case, you have hopes of what they would say to you. For this approach you write out what you long to hear from the perspective of your person. Either form it as a letter they have written to you, or write out both sides of a conversation; both will provide good release. For added benefit write the other person's words with your non-dominant hand or, if typing, in an alternate font.

## ***Picture/Storytelling***

This approach to journal writing is especially useful when you need to live in a good memory for a break from the grief. Choose a favorite picture of your person and attach it to a page in your journal,

then tell the story. Why is this a treasured picture? What about your loved one is reflected here? What was happening before and after the picture was taken? Tell the story using as many senses as you can. Or take it a step further and go back to day one of your relationship with the person and tell the story of your life with them, incorporating pictures as desired.

## ***Emotions***

Sometimes words fail or are not sufficient to express what we need to release, yet release is still needed. In those times try the emotions journal technique. To begin you'll need colored pencils, markers, or crayons, and a list of feelings words. As a reminder, lists of emotions are easily accessible with a quick internet search. First create a color code key by drawing a line or other mark of a color and then listing by it the emotion(s) that color represents for you. Repeat this for several of your most frequent emotions, and be sure to leave room for future additions. Then, when your key is complete, use it to guide you as you fill a new page. If, for instance, you're having a day when the grief is heavy, yet you notice a sense of calm underneath it all, you might cover most of the page in blue and have bursts of yellow to convey the peace. Or if you are feeling angry, color the entire page red, maybe even shades of red to reflect the complexity of your anger. Or maybe you feel mostly content with pockets of loneliness. Your color for content dominates the page, and the loneliness is reflected with a small shape of a different color. Allow yourself to get creative with shading, shapes, light or heavy lines, and anything else that flows from your heart through your hand. Pour out your emotions, and let the colors do the speaking.

## ***Traditional***

Journaling is a classic tool in psychotherapy because it works. I challenge you to try just basic journaling at some point in your grief

journey. Start writing about your day by answering questions such as: What was the best part of today? The worst part? What were my primary emotions today? How did grief show up? etc. Just write and let it evolve naturally. Some days you will have a lot to say and others maybe only one or two sentences. Quantity doesn't matter; what matters is getting the thoughts out of your head in a non-judgmental, validating way.

## *Appendix 4*

# Get Creative with Emotional Expression

Chapter 4 touches on the importance of releasing emotions and the fact that many of us do not know how to do so beyond shedding tears. What follows are suggestions for emotional expression categorized by outlet type. Again, feel free to add your own based on experience or what sounds appealing.

### ***Physical***

- ❑ Cry.
- ❑ Run.
- ❑ Hit a pillow.
- ❑ Pop bubble wrap.
- ❑ Scream into a pillow, the wind, or the waves.

### ***Written***

- ❑ Write a letter to the source of your emotion. Keep the letter or destroy it.

- ❑ Write out the scenario with honest, no-holds-barred emotional expression directed at the person you view as the root cause of it.
- ❑ Write a letter to yourself about why what you are feeling is valid. Give yourself permission to feel it. Then give yourself permission to choose to feel something else if it is not an emotion you want to hold.

### *Creative*

- ❑ Play music to match your mood. If you need to introduce peace or calm, find a song that creates it for you. Then lie on your back and match your breathing to the song, taking long, slow, deep breaths. If you have big emotions to rid from your mind and body, play songs that match what you're feeling and sing along. For bonus benefit, create a dance for bodily expression.
- ❑ Draw or paint your emotions. What colors are they? Do you feel them all with equal power, or is one more dominant? See your emotions expressed. When you're ready to be done with them, you can write the word "goodbye" over the colors, crumple the page and throw it away, rip it up, or burn it.
- ❑ Use erasable writing or dissolving paper. When you have an emotion you cannot seem to release, write it on a chalkboard or a piece of special dissolving paper (find this on Amazon and other online retailers). If using the paper, fill a bowl or your sink with tepid water. Write the emotion on the paper using "I" statements, and tell yourself why it is okay to feel what you feel and why you are ready to let it go. Plant your feet firmly on the ground to bring yourself into the present moment. Then, when you're ready, erase the words from the board, or place the paper in the bowl and swirl it with your finger. Say goodbye as you watch it dissolve. If the emotion later returns about the same



situation, remember the moment you let it go and remind yourself you do not need to give it any more attention unless you want to. Example “I” statements: I am angry at you for leaving me such a mess to clean up. I am angry that you didn’t think about me being stuck to deal with it all. I know it is okay to feel this way, but I don’t want to feel it anymore. I am choosing to release this anger because I don’t like how it feels and because I want to be able to feel love for you, not anger.



## *Appendix 5*

### Guided Free Association

Free association writing is a tool that has long been used in psychotherapy to access our deeper thoughts and feelings that we otherwise resist or ignore. Guided free association takes the practice a step further by setting your mind on a more narrowed path before you begin writing. Especially in grief this exercise is particularly known to help grievors finally release emotions and thoughts they might not have even known they were fighting. The process below can be completed on your own, though it is recommended to review the outcome with a grief counselor or other trusted person.

- 1) Determine the focus word you need or want to explore; this could be an emotion or concept. Examples include the following: anger, forgiveness, dream, longing, lonely, God, sad, death, guilt, relief, hope, etc. Review the Pause for Whisperings section of each chapter for clues of where you might need to begin.
- 2) Find a comfortable place to write undisturbed. Maybe you prefer to write, maybe you prefer to type; whichever it is, find a place

where you can be alone and write without distraction. Light a candle or set the mood of the atmosphere in some other way.

- 3) Set a timer. Especially if this is your first experience with guided free association, set a timer for 10-15 minutes. You might find this to be an emotional experience; just as engaging the practice is self-care, so limiting the time we spend in that space is also self-care.
- 4) At the top of a blank page write your focus word from step 1. Take some time, no more than a minute, just to think on that word. Don't think *about* it or about what you'll write, just think *on* it. A helpful way to do so is to silently repeat the word in your mind.
- 5) Start your timer and begin writing. Don't worry about what you're writing, the words you're using, or grammar and spelling mistakes; just let yourself write until the timer goes off. If you find yourself controlling what you are putting onto paper, go back to silently repeating the focus word for a few seconds.
- 6) When the timer signals, choose if you will review what you've read or put it away without further consideration. There is no wrong answer. Evaluate how you feel at the end versus at the beginning. Though you might eventually choose to destroy what you wrote, take some time away from it before doing so. You want it available in case you later decide you want to know what you wrote.
- 7) Now go do something rejuvenating—you earned it! Take a walk, lounge in a bubble bath, read a book, call a friend, or watch a funny movie. Determine what you need and give yourself that gift.
- 8) Once a day has passed, consider what you want to do with it. How do you feel? Is the feeling gone or changed a little? Do you need to read what you wrote? Do you feel free of the emotion and ready to let it go for good? You can tuck what you wrote away for later reference, destroy it, hide it, or read it. You will know what is right for you and can trust your instincts.
- 9) Repeat as needed.

## Appendix 6

### Psalm Writing

I believe one reason God gave the Psalms to us was to prove the importance of expressing emotions to God and about God. Of all the categories recorded, lament psalms are among the most valuable to grievors because of the model they provide for pouring out raw truth before God. As indicated in chapter 7, below is a list of psalms to reference anytime in grief that might be especially helpful as you settle into lasting grief. Be sure to continue reading beyond the references as well for a note on the practice of psalm writing. As a reminder, look up these psalms in your go-to Bible translation as well as in alternate versions. The differences in the way various translations capture nuances can be very powerful. While you are reading, it can also be helpful to change out words that do not fit your situation. For instance, consider replacing the word *enemy* with *grief* or *cancer*.

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Psalm 4	Psalm 27	Psalm 43
Psalm 6	Psalm 28	Psalm 61
Psalm 10	Psalm 40	Psalm 139
Psalm 13	Psalm 42	Psalm 142

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Reading through the psalms above is a helpful way to process with God what you experience on a given day. Sometimes, though, translating a psalm into your present circumstance does not feel sufficient. On those occasions I recommend trying to write your own psalm guided by the formula presented in the Word: Generally speaking, lament psalms begin by praising or stating a quality of God, move to a statement of distress or complaint, express certainty that God will act, and end with a statement of praise. Note, however, that there are some that skip the statements of praise or certainty of God's action. Make your psalm true to where you are in the moment.

## *Appendix 7*

### Special Considerations

What follows are seven particular areas of consideration that occur in many grief experiences yet are not broadly applicable. Note that their relegation to an appendix is simply due to the unique nature of each consideration, not because it is in any way less important than what is addressed in the body of the book.

#### ***Trauma***

When a death includes a traumatic element, either because of the nature of the death or the experience of the griever, it runs the risk of complicating the grief process. It is important to begin with the understanding that the presence of trauma does not necessarily result in complicated or extended grief. Since it can, though, here are a few key things to keep in mind.

First, two people can experience the same event while only one experiences it as traumatic. In other words, if you feel the loss was traumatic for you, that is what matters, even if no one else shares that same perspective. Second, trauma includes both psychological and

physiological responses that result from a situation in which a person's safety or life was perceived to be threatened. To clarify, your life need not have been in direct danger for your brain and body to have a trauma response. Third, when a griever's experience includes trauma, it is almost always necessary to address trauma recovery *before* grief therapy. Trauma recovery should always be assisted with professional, preferably specially trained help. Some bereavement counselors do have this added training. Finally, once the immediate trauma responses have been addressed and both your body and brain understand you are safe, you can begin addressing grief. Understand, though, that continued trauma work will likely be necessary.

Once a griever acknowledges the trauma component of his or her grief story, they can move through grief in a more healthy manner. It is at this point that the survival kits in chapters 5-7 may become most helpful.

### ***Disenfranchised Grief***

Any death not recognized or validated by larger society, one's faith community, or one's family and friends is a "disenfranchised grief." It can be due to the nature of the relationship or the manner of death. See the following list for what to do if your grief is not accepted as valid.

*LGBTQIA+ people and/or relationships.* The risk of disenfranchisement here is double. Family and friends of LGBTQIA+ persons who die are less likely to encounter validation of their grief. Spouses or significant others in non-heteronormative relationships are less likely to receive full recognition as grievers experiencing spousal loss. Adding to the harm, many who disenfranchise grief for these sufferers do so with the Bible as their weapon.



Let me be clear here. All people were created by God. *All*. Humans have no right to remove this truth from another child of God. If your grief is being limited or ignored, please know you are seen and loved and valued. Your grief is real, and the impact it is having on you is real. You do not need to rationalize your grief to anyone.

*Non-married partners.* Regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, when a couple is not legally married, many around them do not appropriately recognize the griever after one partner dies. First remember that grief is not hierarchical, nor is it a game of comparison. Second, you are the only one who defines your grief. A marriage license is not needed for the spousal bond to be known, and therefore that same piece of paper does not determine if a person experiences spousal grief. This principle extends as well to those who were engaged at the time of death. Third, if you are a griever in this situation, recruit a trusted friend to help advocate for you as decisions are made that impact you.

*Estranged relationships.* When a person dies from whom the griever was estranged, a presumption is often made that the griever will in fact not need to grieve. In reality, these situations result in the need to work through the death of a person *and* the death of hope, reconciliation, forgiveness, etc. There might even be elements of trauma to be processed.

*Non-blood family.* Bereavement leave policies are typically limited to blood or legally acknowledged relationships (i.e., adoption). Non-married partners will need to justify why they deserve the benefit. Additionally, the policies do not account for instances of “like a parent” or “like a sibling.” In the early days of their grief, then, grievors in these situations are forced to justify their relationships or take

earned vacation time simply to have a few days to grieve privately. If you find yourself in this situation, I encourage you to advocate for yourself with your Human Resources department. Non-traditional does not mean fake or invalid, and you deserve the space to grieve, especially as you work through grief in the months ahead. It is worth the effort to acknowledge you might need extra understanding from your co-workers and supervisor.

*Pregnancy death or infant death.* Medical professionals have significantly improved in their recognition of the impact these deaths have on parents and extended family members, though there is less recognition of the continued grief impact outside the medical community. The death of a child, regardless of age or cause, is a unique and significant death. In some situations parents are left to grieve in isolation because others were not yet aware of the pregnancy. In some cases, in the midst of their shock, parents need to somehow return home to explain to their living children and family that the baby has died and will not be coming home. In other situations the baby is carried to term with the mother knowing her child will live only hours after being born. There are, of course, many other situations that fall under this umbrella category. The triggers and significant days are more nuanced, and the differences between grief experienced by the person who carried the baby and the other parent are heightened. In the case of adoption or surrogacy, the layers of grief are still more unique and complicated. When a death is unseen or multi-layered, it is all the more necessary to continuously validate for yourself that the grief is natural, real, and lasting.

*Death resulting from homicide or suicide.* In both of these cases the level of intent (i.e., accidental or premeditated) is not relevant to how grief is experienced by survivors. Among the reasons for disenfranchised

grief are shame and guilt, both real and imagined, and the fear of contagion. Survivor shame and survivor guilt are best explored with a trained therapist as griever experiencing them are less likely to believe assurances from those inside the situation. Fear of contagion is a real, albeit baseless, fear that takes hold in communities after a death by homicide or suicide. People avoid the survivors for fear that if they get too close, someone in their family might be next, and this avoidance results in further isolation of the bereaved.

Oftentimes the need for justice is also mixed into such situations, and the search for justice can result in delayed grief; see below for more on that. The need for justice when someone is murdered is significant and time-consuming. When those fighting for justice are also doing so against a system inherently biased and blind, it is even more time-consuming and emotionally draining. If you're able, start grief counseling while seeking justice.

To help validate your grief in these situations, speak your person's name and story with love and with pride. Help others and yourself remember that your person is more than his or her manner of death and his or her *whole* life deserves to be honored and remembered.

*Death by transmissible and/or preventable disease.* When a person dies from a disease that resulted from his or her behavior or a choice, even primary grievers (those directly impacted by the death) can get caught in the trap of invalidating grief. For instance, if a person dies from an Agent Orange-related disease, the family is extended sympathy. If, however, someone dies from alcoholic cirrhosis or smoking-related COPD, emphysema, or lung cancer, there is a temptation to focus on behavior and blame the person for his or her own hand in the disease. The same temptation is present if a person dies from a disease correlated with high-risk behavior. Again, a person's life is

not limited to his or her death or death story. They had a disease, but the disease was not his or her identity. To process grief, it is important to address and release feelings of anger and blame as early as possible in the grief journey. Surround yourself with reminders of the fullness of your person's life, and share those with others who ignore or minimize your grief.

*Delayed grief.* When a griever engages in numbing behavior or persists in denial of the reality of death, delayed grief can result. Both are usually born of fear of the full weight of the pain. Yet whether it's a year later or a decade, eventually the survivor will have to confront reality. A father whose child died in a car accident might cope by focusing energy on supporting his wife. Over time his wife recovers while he remains stuck. If years after he is forced to choose between losing his wife or confronting his grief, beginning the process of unraveling the avoided grief can present a long road, especially if he doesn't receive support.

Unfortunately, delayed grief tends to be difficult for friends and family who expect the griever to be done with grief within a certain time frame, usually the first year. If you find yourself in delayed grief, reach out to a professional today, and get started unpacking your grief. As you do, the therapist can assist you in repairing relationships and/or finding new support as you build towards full engagement in life. You will need to be vocal and honest about your needs so that others can come around you in the ways you need.

Beyond what's indicated in each scenario above, the antidote for disenfranchised grief is first naming it. Do not be shy about speaking your person's name or telling his or her whole story. Talk about the imprint they leave on your life. Share stories that reflect his or her significance, and name the impact his or her death is having on your

world. Remember that it is okay to step away from relationships with people who are not patient with you or who somehow invalidate your experience, even if those people are fellow believers or members of your faith community.

### ***Pandemics, Natural Disasters, and Mass Casualties (PDC)***

COVID-19 is not the last pandemic we will face, and it certainly isn't the first. Scientists predict an increase in natural disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. Pandemics and natural disasters introduce additional types of disenfranchised grief but are given their own consideration here because of their unique mass impact. COVID has taken too much from too many, so I'm taking a bit of the power back by turning it into an acronym.

*Community.* Because of the mass scale of these occurrences, it can be helpful when grieving a PDC death for griever to come together for support. It is rare in grief to have a large group of people who understand this kind of loss to such a significant degree; utilizing that will benefit all involved. Nuances such as the type of relationship and the personalities of the deceased and of the griever of course remain, but having manner of death as a commonality is significant and should not be overlooked.

*Open.* After a PDC it is important to keep eyes open for things often unseen or left behind. For instance, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all areas of our lives even when we have not personally known someone who died from it. Most people in this pandemic have therefore encountered grief, though the source of the grief varies. Be careful when interacting with others to remain open to someone else's experience. What is insignificant to you might be significant to them and vice versa. Another overlooked

occurrence during PDCs are deaths not directly related to the PDC. Such grieverers are often less seen and supported in their grief during a PDC.

*Validate.* This word has been used a lot in the pages of this book, so I hope by now you know how crucial validation is to a healthy grief process. Human death from PDCs are typically, though not always, inherently validated; however, other non-death losses are often not given the same level of validation. See Non-death losses for more detail. Another risk in a PDC situation is for grief to become invalidated over time as the newness and attention wears off. Grief resulting from a PDC is complicated and lengthy and lasts far beyond the attention span of the general public. Finally, validating the existence of general, secondary grief is necessary. Much like secondary trauma, secondary grief is what is seen when the nation comes together in grief over such tragedies as the lives lost on 9/11. Only some had a direct connection to a person who died that day, yet we all gathered and grieved with and for those families.

*Individual.* A risk with PDC grief is that individual grieverers may lose sight of their own grief. It remains necessary in these situations to seek individual support, tell your own story, and personalize your experience.

*Decide.* It is easy in a PDC situation to become so emotionally drained or fatigued that the idea of grieving is too much to bear. In those times, decide to give your grief the attention and intention it deserves and needs.

## ***Pet Loss***

The death of a pet results in grief that is substantial and unrecognized by most. The majority of the tools provided in the survival kits

can apply to this type of grief, and you are encouraged to use them accordingly. I am sad to say that many grief counselors will not take on a client solely for pet loss; yet if you need it, advocate for yourself to get it. Consider if there is another concurrent loss you might also be able to process with a counselor.

### ***Non-Death Losses***

Death is not the only experience in life that results in grief, though it is the only event that is commonly recognized as such. Bereavement leave for a divorce, move, or loss of a friendship sadly do not exist. Here's a simple rule of thumb: if it is a loss to you, you are experiencing a degree of grief. The tools in the survival kits can be adapted to these grief needs as well. Most importantly, surround yourself with a person or people who can extend empathy and validation to your non-death-related grief.

### ***Dating***

If you are a widow or widower, you are likely to have people ask if you intend to marry again. You might even find yourself entertaining the same question. I tell my clients to apply to dating and marriage the same rules as to moving and/or getting rid of items: Recruit a trusted person or two whom you allow to ask you questions and who can help you discern if you are ready for romance or running from your grief. Do you accept that you will always love your first spouse? Does the person you're dating accept the same? Can you say with confidence that your new partner is not a replacement for the one who died? These are but a few of the important questions that need consideration before you enter a new relationship. Seek assistance from your pastor and friends. It is not wrong to desire a new relationship, but it is necessary to ensure you've done initial grief work and arrived in lasting grief before you begin dating. Waiting

until you're in lasting grief gives you and your new relationship a far greater chance of being healthy.

Children of any age, including adults, tend to have a variety of reactions when a parent begins dating after being widowed. To have the best chance of children being supportive, keep an open line of communication with them, including making them aware of your grief journey. Don't assume they know how you feel or what you are going through; parent loss and spousal loss are not the same. If you are the child of a widowed parent who is now dating or married again, I encourage you to ask for time to talk to your parent about his or her journey as doing so might help you understand things from his or her perspective. A lot of patience and empathy will be needed all around.

### ***Children and Teens***

This book is written for adult grievers, yet many of the principles outlined also apply to children and teens. It is important to note, however, that the way children and teens understand and process grief is different. Thinking processes and vocabulary are only two factors worth considering. A good rule of thumb is to speak honestly and clearly with appropriate terms, not euphemisms. For instance, saying a deceased person is sleeping poses extra confusion for a child who is too young to know the difference between true sleep and death. Similarly, telling a child he or she "lost" someone or that a person is "gone" can be very confusing and lead to frustration when the child is not allowed to go searching. Finally, saying things like "God needed another angel" can result in a child or teen abandoning God.

Instead, it is best practice to tell a child or teen that their loved one died. When addressing a young child, be prepared to add



explanations about what death means, including that the deceased is unable to return. Seeking the help of a trained professional will be very helpful, as will informing the child's teacher(s), youth leader, and parents of close friends. Allow those people to be an added support for your child and for yourself.



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## *About the Author*

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