Equanimity (upekkha) is said to be the hardest form of compassion to teach, and the hardest to practice. It's not, as is commonly understood, equanimity in the way of being unaffected by what's happened, but more a quality of clear, calm attention in the face of immoveable truth. When something cannot be changed, the "enlightened" response is to *pay attention*. To feel it. To turn toward it and say, "I see you."

That's the big secret of grief: the answer to the pain is in the pain. Or, as e. e. cummings wrote, healing of the wound is to be sought in the blood of the wound itself. It seems too intangible to be of use, but by allowing your pain to exist, you change it somehow. There's power in witnessing your own pain. The challenge is to stay present in your heart, to your heart, to your own deep self, even, and especially, when that self is broken. Pain wants to be heard. It *deserves* to be heard. Denying or minimizing the reality of pain makes it worse. Telling the truth about the immensity of your pain—which is another way of paying attention—makes things different, if not better.

It's important to find those places where your grief gets to be as bad as it is, where it gets to suck as much as it does. Let your pain stretch out. Take up all the space it needs. When so many others tell you that your grief has to be cleaned up or contained, hearing that there is enough room for your pain to spread out, to unfurl—it's healing. It's a relief. The more you open to your pain, the more you can just be with it, the more you can give yourself the tenderness and care you need to survive this.

Your pain needs space. Room to unfold.

I think this is why we seek out natural landscapes that are larger than us. Not just in grief, but often in grief. The expanding horizon line, the sense of limitless space, a landscape wide and deep and vast enough to hold what is—we need those places. Sometimes grief like yours cannot be held by the universe itself. True. Sometimes grief needs more than an endless galaxy. Maybe your pain could wrap around the axle of the universe several times. Only the stars are large enough to take it on. With enough room to breathe, to expand, to be itself, pain softens. No longer confined and cramped, it can stop thrashing at the bars of its cage, can stop defending itself against its right to exist.

There isn't anything you need to do with your pain. Nothing you need to do *about* your pain. It simply is. Give it your attention, your care. Find ways to let it stretch out, let it exist. Tend to yourself inside it. That's so different from trying to get yourself out of it.

The way to come to pain is with open eyes, and an open heart, committed to bearing witness to your own broken place. It won't fix anything. And it changes everything.

TENDING TO PAIN: WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?

Most people don't intentionally ignore their pain. It's not that we don't want to bear witness to it; we're just not sure what it takes to face it. Just because giving grief space is a nonlinear, and therefore somewhat amorphous, skill doesn't mean it doesn't *take* skill.

My friend and colleague Mirabai Starr, author of *Caravan of No Despair*, writes in a blog post on her website:

> As we breathed into the truth of what had happened in our lives, safe in the protective community we built together, we began to discover that the unbearable became bearable, that by whispering "yes" instead of screaming "no," an ineffable grace began to fill the space of our shattered hearts. . . .
>
> Try it. If you've tried it before, try it again. Find the smoldering ache of loss inside of you and soften into it. Allow yourself to gently and lovingly explore exactly what it feels like to hurt in this way. With compassion for yourself, disarm your wounded heart and breathe quietly inside the wreckage. No need for fancy formulas or prescribed affirmations. No goal. Just be. Right here. Inside the fire of grief. One breath in front of the other.[1]

Mirabai encourages us to seek out the "smoldering ache of loss," but facing that pain head-on, coming to it gently, truly feeling the intensity of weight and shape can feel daunting. Even the idea of softening into the pain can be scary. What will you find there? If you soften into it, will you ever find your way back out?

Part of this process is learning to trust yourself. Trust is really tricky when the universe has upended itself, so I'm not talking about trust that everything will work out, or trust that you'll do everything right. Not at all. I'm talking more about trusting that you won't abandon yourself in your pain.

Sometimes, you just need to know that you *can* care for yourself. That, no matter what happens, you will show up for yourself as though you're someone you love, caring for yourself as best you can. Doing that repeatedly helps you strengthen your trust in yourself, and that, in turn, makes it easier to face your pain directly. It lets you seek out your pain, with the intention of seeing it with compassion.

In trauma work, we never dive into discussion of the actual traumatic events until the person has a solid framework of support and a way to manage the feelings that come up. Part of building your trust in yourself lies in creating that framework, adding safety to the prospect of looking for pain.

In order to go looking for your pain, to feel it directly and with love, what would it take? What would need to happen for you to feel safe or strong enough to soften into your pain? Time? Privacy? Wine? An anchor on the other side? A guarantee of outcome?

> "If you want me to breathe in this wreckage, I have to lean into it, head-on. Place my whole weight in the wreckage, allow it to hold me up, hold me down. It means reliving every single moment. The hardest, darkest, sharpest ones. The happy ones before he died that bring a specific kind of pain. It means being pregnant all over again. Counting down the days. Filled with that exquisite excitement that is absolutely unique to the moment you meet your child.
>
> Sometimes I want to go looking for the pain. I want to marinate in it, allow it to soak into my skin. It's a tonic of sorts. A flush of the system. A way to demolish the foundation and start from nothing. Which sometimes—dare I say it—can make you feel good on the other end. It rewards you to taste fearlessness. To have nothing to lose. The grief is disarming, but sometimes the afterward is intoxicating. Because what can you do to me now? This cockiness was hard-won. I'm new land craving to be built upon.
>
> **KATE SUDDES, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her son, Paul**

SUPPORT IN THE WRECKAGE

Finding out what you need in order to feel, not "OK" with all this, but somehow companioned and supported inside the wreckage, is the heavy work of surviving grief. To explore your own needs, you might write your responses to the questions below. Or you might respond to something else in Mirabai's passage. Whatever calls you, write into that.

- What would you need in order to feel more supported inside your pain? How can we make an impossible situation more kind, gentler, and easier on your heart?
- You might address your pain as a separate being: "In order to feel safe enough to face you, I would need . . ."
- You might begin a free write with the line: "If you want me to breathe in this wreckage . . ."

This is also a great exercise when you have an upcoming anniversary, or a difficult event on the horizon. Often, we can get through difficult things if we know there's an end point. You can make that end point for yourself by setting an activity or a date with a trusted friend for directly after whatever it is you need to get through. For example, if you know it's going to be extremely intense and emotional to meet with the estate lawyers, plan to meet a friend for tea, or a walk, after the meeting is done. Pack yourself some nourishing food for after the meeting. Queue up a ridiculous movie.

Answering the questions in the above writing prompt can give you a sense of what you need in order to feel well supported inside whatever

crappy thing you have to face. Setting this up in advance gives you an anchor during the event and makes sure you have a net of support after the event. Taking care of yourself like this is like time travel—give your future self the support she needs now, so she doesn't have to ask for it later.

IT'S TOO MUCH!

The core "work" of grief really is learning to companion yourself inside it. But another equally important skill is in shutting off your grief, or your emotions, when it isn't safe to feel them. That might be because you're at work, or you're dealing with your kids/in-laws/parents/chatty neighbors, or you're trying to drive or operate machinery. Sometimes keeping your attention on the broken place is just too much to bear. I'm not talking about shutting down your emotions as a long-term solution (that *so* does not work), but shutting down in a moment where to feel the full intensity of your pain would not be beneficial. Denial is actually a kindness, at times. Distraction is a healthy coping strategy.

I remember the first Valentine's Day after Matt died. At this time, I was still so rarely eating, it was important to keep a lot of different quick-to-eat foods in the house, in case the urge to eat came up. I worked myself up to get to the grocery store. I noticed that the parking lot seemed especially crowded, but I pushed myself to go in. I was so completely detached from any events going on in the outside world, I had no idea it even *was* Valentine's Day. Once inside, I was instantly hit with couples couples couples everywhere. Couples in love, or seemingly in love, shopping together, arm in arm. Big signs proclaimed the romance of the day. Everywhere I turned, couples were lovingly discussing which wine to buy, or whether to spring for that expensive, organic, grass-fed steak.

Everywhere I turned, Matt was dead. Matt was dead. There are no more romantic dinners. There are no more mundane dinners. There is no more anything. And not only that, but each one of these loving partnerships will eventually end in death. The walls began to close in around me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't hold back my tears.

I ran from the store, found my car, and somehow got inside before the floodgates broke. I knew I was in trouble. I was frantic. I needed the

pain to stop. I knew I was not safe to drive. None of my normal support team picked up their phones or answered my texts. Of course not—they were with their partners or families on Valentine's Day.

Fortunately, my mind came up with an exercise I'd taught a million times in my practice before death entered my life: When your inner world is melting, focus on the tangible, external, physical world. Stop the meltdown. Calm your brain. Stop the spiral from continuing.

Instantly, old habits snapped into place. Find all the things that are orange, anywhere around you. Name them: Shoes. The printing on the odometer. The logo on that sign over there. That woman's jacket. Skateboard. Stupid, ugly bike. The background image on a stamp, poking out from a pile of mail on the passenger's seat.

I might have also chosen a letter of the alphabet and named all the things I could think of that started with that letter. Or counted the stripes in the parking lot. Or picked up the paper menu for the Thai restaurant that was on the floor of the car, naming the ingredients in my used-to-be favorite dishes. The objects themselves didn't matter. What did matter was that the objects I chose meant nothing to me, and looking for them, counting them, gave me an anchor inside an emotional storm I wouldn't be able to control if I turned to fully face it.

When your pain is too big for the environment you're in, it can turn into emotional flooding. Emotional flooding is not what we're going for when I suggest you make space for your pain. Pain is never going to feel good, but there are certainly times when the enormity of your reality is easier to tend to than others.

DON'T FOCUS ON YOUR BODY; DON'T TRY TO FIND YOUR "HAPPY PLACE"

When you need an anchor inside an emotional storm, it doesn't matter what physical thing you choose; it just matters that it be as benign and repetitive as possible. Sometimes, in situations like this, clinicians and teachers recommend focusing on your breath, or on sensations in your physical body. When you're dealing with death, injury, or chronic illness, however, turning attention to the physical body can make things much worse.

For the first year or two after Matt died, I couldn't follow meditations or visualizations that had me focus on my breath. When I tried, or was directed to do so, all I could see or feel or remember was that Matt's body had no breath. Putting attention into my body itself reminded me, viscerally, painfully, that Matt no longer had a body. That my own body could fail at any time.

Some teachings also suggest that you imagine yourself in your "happy place" when you're overcome with emotion. In early grief, a "happy place" is pretty well impossible to find. There is no place your loss does not touch. There is nothing that is not tied back to it. In my life before Matt died, my internal happy place was a spot by the river. My inner river was destroyed by the literal one; I could never go back and be soothed. For one client, any chance of imagining a happy place was obliterated by the fact that, now paralyzed, he could never actually be alone in a happy place, let alone get himself there.

When your life has been entirely imploded and rearranged, there is not one thing, not one happy, calming place, activity, or image that is not tainted, somehow.

I don't mean this as a downer but simply as a reality check: tools that work outside grief aren't always useful inside grief. That's why I have you focus on something mundane and ordinary: there is less chance of an exercise like this setting off more pain when you focus on what is boring, repetitive, and outside your body.

Remember that turning away from your pain when your pain is too big for the situation is a kindness. It's a way to pay attention, to tend to yourself with love and respect. Get yourself through the flood as best you can, and come back to your pain when you have the resources and capacity to do so.

KINDNESS TO SELF

I've mentioned kindness several times in this chapter.

Have you noticed?

If we boiled down everything in this book about how to survive intense grief, it would come down to this: show yourself kindness.

Caring for yourself, showing up with love and tenderness for your own excruciating pain—it won't fix anything that can't be fixed.

But for all you've lived, for all you've had to do—the phone calls, the decisions, the funeral plans, the life evaporated in an instant, all of everything you've had to live—you deserve kindness. You deserve the utmost care and respect. You deserve love and attention.

Try as they might, the people around you don't always show you that kind of love. The world itself, with its random acts of pain and violence and general stress, won't always show you that kind of love. But you can.

> Let me be to my sad self hereafter kind.
>
> **PETER POUNCEY,** ***Rules for Old Men Waiting: A Novel***

YOU CAN BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Kindness is self-care. Kindness is recognizing when you need to back off a bit. It's allowing your pain to exist without judgment, in trusting yourself, and in saying yes to what helps and no to what does not. Kindness means not letting your own mind beat you up.

Self-kindness is seriously difficult. We can talk all day about how other people deserve kindness, but when it comes to ourselves? Forget it. We know too much about our own short-comings, the ways we've messed things up, just how badly we're doing everything. We treat ourselves far more harshly than we would ever allow anyone else to treat us. Everyone struggles with this; it's not just you. For many people, being kind to others is far, far easier.

What if we loop back to the fourth form of compassion, upekkha, equanimity, that "calm quiet attention to what cannot be changed"? That describes kindness.

Grief requires kindness. Self-kindness. For all you have had to live.

Kindness-for-self might be allowing yourself to sleep as much as you need to, without yelling at yourself for it. It might be saying no to a social engagement. It might be turning the car around right after you've arrived in the parking lot, having decided that getting groceries is just too much for you to bear right now.

It might mean cutting yourself some slack, backing off of the demands you place on yourself. It might mean pushing yourself

sometimes, taking yourself out of the softer nest of distraction into the bigger landscape of pain.

What kindness looks like will change, but your commitment to it? That's where your safety is. That's where stability exists, inside this wholly bizarre and shaken world. Knowing you won't leave yourself.

Kindness won't change anything, but it will make things easier on your mind and your heart. So today, if even just for a little while, can you offer yourself kindness? Can you take a moment to ask what being kind to yourself might mean?

Turn toward it, even if you can't make it all the way there. Turn yourself in the direction of kindness. Hold on to it.

You might write your response to this question: What would kindness to yourself look like today? This moment?

THE MANIFESTO OF SELF-CARE

Because kindness to self is so hard to practice, it's important to have daily, tangible reminders.

In therapy, we often remind people of the airplane safety analogy: in times of trouble or danger, put your own oxygen mask on first before you try to help others. Inside your grief, you *have* to put yourself first. To survive, you have to become fierce about caring for yourself.

A manifesto of self-care is a road map for survival. It's short-hand and course correction when you feel overwhelmed and lost in your grief. It's support and encouragement to stay true to yourself, to follow your own needs, when the outside world insists that you do things their way. It helps you choose kindness over self-flagellation.

Calling it a "manifesto" maybe seems inflated and self-important. But seriously—being fierce about your own needs, putting yourself first, insisting on making space for what makes this better, easier, gentler—nothing else is more important.

A manifesto of self-care can be as short as two words: practice kindness. It can also be a love letter to yourself or a list of ten or so things that are important to remember.

SELF-CARE MANIFESTO

If you created your own manifesto of self-care, what would it include? Write it out. Post it somewhere. Post it everywhere. Practice daily. No matter how many times you've slipped into suffering, or allowed your mind to beat you up, you can always return to kindness.

May you, to your own sad self, be kind.

9

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY MIND?

Dealing with Grief's Physical Side Effects

Descriptions of the many ways grief impacts your body and mind are not always easy to find. This chapter covers some of the most common—and strange—effects of grief and offers tools to help support and nourish your body and mind as you navigate the new landscape of life after loss.

GRIEF AND BIOLOGY

We often think of grief as primarily emotional, but grief is a full-body, full-mind experience. You're not just missing the one you've lost; your entire physiological system is reacting, too. Studies in neurobiology show that losing someone close to us changes our biochemistry: there are actual physical reasons for your insomnia, your exhaustion, and your racing heart.[1] Respiration, heart rate, and nervous system responses are all partially regulated by close contact with familiar people and animals; these brain functions are all deeply affected when you've lost someone close.

Grief affects appetite, digestion, blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, muscle fatigue, and sleep—basically everything. If it's in the body, grief affects it.

In addition to physical effects, cognitive changes, memory loss, confusion, and shortened attention spans are all common in early grief. Some effects even last for years—and that's perfectly normal.

It's true on so many levels: losing someone changes you.

BEING "IN-BETWEEN"

Early grief is a liminal time. Liminality (from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold") is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs when a person is no longer who they once were and has not yet become someone entirely new and solid. This is one place where that commonly used transformation metaphor of a butterfly *is* helpful: we could say that while it's inside the cocoon, a caterpillar-butterfly is in a liminal state, neither caterpillar nor butterfly. In the same way, we are neither one thing nor another in early grief. Everything we've been—both physically and emotionally—is in a state of flux.

Your body and your mind are in an in-between state. Understanding what's going on can help you make choices that support your physical self as it reels from this loss.

EXHAUSTION AND INSOMNIA

Sleep—getting too much or too little—is a big thing inside grief. This chapter on grief and the body starts with sleep issues because not getting enough sleep, or getting consistently poor-quality sleep, affects the way your body and your mind process your loss. Sleep is a time of restoration for the body, and it's always the first place to look for improvement or comfort when things are completely falling apart.

In my early days, grief was on its own sleep schedule. I was often wide-awake at ten at night, or heading back to bed at ten in the morning, after only being up for an hour or so. When Daylight Savings Time ended that year, I didn't bother adjusting my clocks. The only thing they showed me during that first year (or more) of grief was that I seemed to wake up at the same time every night: 3:00 a.m.

I can't even count the sheer number of times I woke myself up by the sound of my own crying.

Getting "good enough" sleep is important, but grief rearranges your sleep: either keeping you up or reducing your "awake" hours to a short little window between long naps. When you do sleep, grief pokes its way

through no matter how exhausted you are. Some people find that they wake up repeatedly at the time their loved one died. Others are woken up reaching into the empty space, jolted awake by finding it, indeed, empty. Many people have a hopeful, hazy moment on waking, thinking maybe this was all a dream, only to have reality crash in on them as their eyes fully open.

If you're wrestling with sleep issues, you're not alone. Sleeping all the time and never being able to sleep enough are both entirely normal inside grief.

If you find you need almost constant sleep—as much as other life demands allow—it's OK. Sleep as much as you can, when you can. It helps your body restore itself, keeping your physical body as strong, well, and healthy as it can be. It's not avoidance, or denial: it's restoration and respite.

If you can't sleep or you're shaken by a dream, don't fight it. Your body and mind are processing so much emotion. It's hard to fall into sleep in that kind of pain. As much as you are able, rest when you can, even if you can't fully sleep. There are certainly things you can do to encourage falling asleep, but as we all know, grief doesn't always follow predictable rules.

This is one area where your medical teams—both allopathic and integrative—can help. Talk with your trusted providers about ways to support more restful sleep.

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Though sleep is even more necessary during intense grief than it is at other times, nightmares about your loss can make sleep something you'd rather avoid. Recurrent dreams, or dreams that have you delivering the news about death over and over, are actually a healthy and necessary part of grief.

They suck. I know.

And dream-state sleep is when our minds do the deep, heavy work of breaking down the reality of loss into absorbable pieces. Psychotherapist James Hillman writes, "Dreams tell us where we are, not what to do."[2] Nightmares don't bring solutions or offer portents for the future. They're the creative, associative mind trying to orient itself to this loss.

That doesn't make them any easier. Your entire system is working so hard to help you survive, and nightmares are often part of that process. It's healthy, and "healthy" just feels like shit sometimes.

I love what teacher Jon Bernie recommends here: Notice it; bring your awareness to it. But don't mess with it. Don't dive in and get sticky trying to analyze it. He's not talking about nightmares, but it applies. When you've had a grief nightmare, you might recognize it, name it, as your mind trying hard to process this loss. Something as simple as repeating to yourself, "My mind is trying to make space for this," can help calm your mind and soothe your nervous system when a grief nightmare wakes you.

PHYSICAL CHALLENGES: GRIEF AND THE BODY

Has the physical nature of grief surprised you?

I've heard from a lot of grieving people struggling with "mystery" pains and illnesses, all attributed to grief or stress. Heart palpitations, headaches, stomach pains, feeling faint or dizzy—while I am in no way a medical doctor, I can tell you these things appear to be quite common in grief, especially in the early days. (If you're concerned about physical symptoms, please do speak to your doctor. Just because they *can* be grief related doesn't mean they necessarily *are*.) After Matt died, I seemed to inherit his heartburn, his sciatica, his customary sore neck. None of these things were "mine" in my life before he died. Those adopted pains weren't the only changes to my physical body, either.

Going back into some of my journals from the early days of my own grief, I'm struck by how tired I was. How much physical pain I was in—sore muscles, headaches, phantom pains that could show up anywhere. I visited the emergency room no fewer than four times in the first two years—with violent stomach pains, chest pains, changing vision—and each time, tests revealed nothing.

Diagnosis: stress.

The effect of stress on the physical body is well documented. Out-of-order death, unexpected grief, massive life changes—it's the understatement of the century to say those things cause *stress*.

It makes sense that your physical body rebels: it can only hold so much.

Many people have noticed that it's their body—their physical reactions and sensations—that alert them to an emotionally heavy date on the calendar. You might not consciously know today is the seventeenth of the month, but you've been more exhausted and rather sick to your stomach all day. It's only when you look at the calendar that you recognize it: the seventeenth is when he entered hospice, or when you got the first phone call that she was missing.

The body remembers. The body knows.

In many ways, I think of the body as the vessel that holds this entire experience for you. That it cracks and breaks and otherwise shows signs of stress makes sense when we think of what it has been asked to endure.

WEIGHT CHANGES

"Wow! You look great! You've lost so much weight. Did you start running or something?"

"My partner died."

"Well, whatever you've been doing, keep it up! You look amazing."

There's no "normal" appetite in grief. Some people eat under stress; some people, like me, lose all interest in food. I dropped more than twenty pounds within the first few months. I simply did not eat. My nutrients came largely from the cream in my tea and the occasional cupcake. Every few days, I might eat a few bites of something more.

I was fortunate—there was no lasting damage to my physical body. I was also under my doctor's care at this time, and she let me know she would intervene if she felt I was in danger. Your body may respond differently. Some people develop serious, lasting physical challenges due to what we call "the grief diet." Complications from over- or undereating can include diabetes, elevated cholesterol, respiratory problems—all manner of things you've probably heard a million times. When you stop eating because food is nauseating, or eat constantly because you need *something* to do, your body has to work harder to stay level and grounded.

That said, I know there's not always a lot you can do about it. Encouragement to eat well always works better than shaming or force. Your body needs fuel to survive this. You might find that small doses of healthy, nutrient-dense food are more easily tolerated by your mind and

body than full-on meals. You might give yourself alternative options (a nap, a walk, calling someone), rather than continue eating past the point of being hungry. Do what you can.

SELF-CARE

Physical self-care often takes a backseat during grief. It's hard to care one bit for a healthy diet, or be motivated to practice meditation or any other stress-reduction techniques. There can be a cavalier sense of "what's the use?" in taking care of your physical body, given what you know about sudden loss or random accident.

The thing is, tending the organism—the physical body—is one of the few tangible ways you really can change your experience of grief. Finding small ways to care for your physical body can reduce your suffering, even if it doesn't change your pain.

Remember that caring for your physical body is an act of kindness (and you deserve kindness). Do what you can, as you can. Refer back to your answers to the questions and exercises in chapter 7 to help you identify any patterns or habits that might improve your physical well-being: what's helped a few times might help again. And please be sure to check in with your health care providers if you have specific concerns about your body.

GRIEF AND YOUR BRAIN: WHY YOU AREN'T THE PERSON YOU USED TO BE

When Matt first died, I lost my mind—and not in the ways you might think.

I used to be a person who could read books. I used to have a really great memory. I used to be a person who could keep everything straight without notes or a calendar. I used to be a person who could do all these things, and suddenly I was putting my keys in the freezer and forgetting my dog's name and couldn't remember what day it was or if I had eaten breakfast. I couldn't read more than a few sentences at a time, and I usually had to go back and reread those same lines many times. Once a person both skilled in and excited by deep intellectual debate, I could no

longer follow even the simplest of discussions. I didn't understand how to give a cashier the correct change.

My mind simply stopped functioning. Has that happened for you? Have you lost your mind?

In the widowed world, we often use the term *widowed brain* (though it occurs in many different losses)—it's a great term for the cumulative cognitive effects of grief. If grief has recently erupted in your life—and by recently, I mean anything from yesterday to a few years ago—you will most likely find that your brain just does not work. You may have been brilliant and organized before this loss, able to multitask, remember, execute.

But grief changes all of that.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: YOU AREN'T CRAZY

If your mind is not what it used to be, you're entirely normal.

You are not crazy. You *feel* crazy because you're inside a crazy experience. Grief, especially early grief, is not a normal time. It makes perfect sense that your mind doesn't work the way it used to: everything has changed. Of course you're disoriented. Your mind is trying to make sense of a world that can no longer *make* sense.

Because of the way grief impacts the mind and cognitive processes, you've probably also lost interest in things you used to enjoy, your intellectual faculties may have changed, and your memory and attention span may be virtually nonexistent.

Grief does that. It rearranges your mind. It takes away skill sets you've had since childhood. It makes even the simplest things hard to follow. It makes once-familiar things feel arbitrary or confusing. It impacts your memory, your ability to communicate, your capacity for interaction.

While all these are completely normal, it can make you feel like you've lost many of the internal, personal things that made you, you.

MEMORY LOSS

There's a clumsy forgetfulness, or absentmindedness, that often comes with grief. Misplaced—or weirdly placed—keys and glasses are seriously common. Frozen food gets put in the dishwasher upon return from the grocery store. You show up at the dentist on Monday when your appointment is next week, on Thursday.

No matter how your short-term memory worked before your loss, it has likely changed in your grief. Forgetting names, missing appointments, not being able to remember if you gave the dog his medicine this morning—all normal. It's as if remembering all those little details are "extra" expenses, and your mind can't afford them. Your mind can only retain so many things, so it simply drops what is not necessary for survival. It's like triage in the mind.

This is another of grief's physical side effects that does seem to consistently improve over time. As you live further from the event of your loss, your mind will make more space for memory. Order will more or less be restored (or re-created).

In the meantime, leaving yourself multiple reminders and notes is a good way to outsource your memory. Your need for multiple sticky notes, timers, and alarms is not a sign that you aren't doing well. It's proof that you're doing whatever you can to support your mind and make things easier for yourself. Cover the entire house in reminders if that's what you need to do. They won't help you find your keys, but they might help you remember other things.

MENTAL EXHAUSTION

You may have been a massively productive person in your life before loss. Now you can barely get one thing accomplished in the hours you're awake. You might feel overwhelmed at the sheer number of details needing your attention. Many people feel they've lost their competence, their drive, and their former confidence.

There's a reason you can't get as much done as you used to.

Think of it like this: Let's say you have one hundred units of brain power for each day. Right now, the enormity of grief, trauma, sadness, missing, loneliness, takes up ninety-nine of those energy units. That remaining one unit is what you have for the mundane and ordinary skills of life. That one remaining circuit is responsible for organizing carpools

and funeral details. It's got to keep you breathing, keep your heart beating, and access your cognitive, social, and relational skills. Remembering that cooking utensils belong in the drawer, not the freezer, that your keys are under the bathroom sink where you left them when you ran out of toilet paper—these things are just not high on the brain's priority list.

Of course you're exhausted. Your mind, like the rest of you, is doing the best it can to function and survive under very severe circumstances. Please try not to judge your current accomplishments based on what you *used* to be able to do. You are not that person right now.

TIME LOSS

As you look back on your day, you may not be able to articulate what you've done or accomplished. When asked, you likely cannot give any evidence of having *done* anything. Remember that much of the work of early grief is done inside your heart and mind, not in outward actions. That you have no idea what day it is, or can't remember when you last ate, makes perfect sense. It's in those lost, seemingly unproductive sections of time that your body and mind are attempting to integrate your loss: it's almost like an awake sleep cycle. You mind goes off-line so it can heal.

Again, we return to the idea of tending your physical organism: care for yourself as best you can, and know that the fog of daily time loss will eventually clear. Allowing the lost time, yielding to it, rather than fighting it, can make it all a little easier.

READING AND NOT READING

All my life, I've been a voracious reader. Books have always been my most constant form of support and kinship. But for at least the first year after Matt died, I could barely read a label, let alone sustain my attention for a whole book. When I did read, I found myself not understanding. Well, not exactly not "understanding." I recognized the words. I knew what I was reading. But nothing sank in. It often took several tries with one paragraph to know where I was. Characters confused me. Storylines

didn't make sense. I would get to the end of a line, forgetting what the first part had said.

I hear the same thing from just about everyone in grief's early days: grief obliterates their ability to read, comprehend, and sustain attention. Forget reading several books at once, as you used to. Reading one chapter—even one page—is emotionally and mentally taxing.

In fact, in writing this book, my team and I argued about how long the chapters should be. Knowing how difficult it is to read and comprehend, we went back and forth over the length of each chapter. There's so much to say about grief, and only so much capacity to take it all in.

No matter how much of a book person you were before your loss, your capacity to read has most likely been impacted by grief. There's not much you can do about that. For some, their comprehension returns, but their attention span never returns to its pre-loss state. For many others, comprehension and attention span gradually return, but their areas of interest in reading and learning take a completely new path.

If you're grieving this secondary loss of your reading ability, know that, in most cases, it is transitory. It just takes longer than you might think to regain (or rebuild) your reader's mind.

ON CONFUSION

Comprehension in reading isn't the only thing impacted by grief. In those early months, the world itself can become a bizarre and confounding place: I remember standing in the checkout line at the grocery store completely confused by the money in my hand. I'd lost the ability to count. I couldn't understand which bills meant what. I made a guess, tears streaming down my face, and handed a wad of money to the cashier.

Mental confusion and a sort of brain-fog feeling are extremely common. It's as if all our arbitrary human constructs—things like money, time, rules for driving (and other things), social expectations, levels of hygiene—seem utterly unrelated to anything we're living.

For a time, we are unhinged from the cultural forms we've laid down in human life. Things we agree to as a culture—like pieces of paper

being fair trade for groceries, or lunchtime being at noon—are revealed as empty symbols, unrelated to anything intrinsically . . . real.

Grief strips life down to its irreducible essentials. In that visceral state, your distance from the "normal" world can feel insurmountable. There's an uncomfortable truth here: you are not like other people. Not right now.

The world has been split open. Things "ordinary," non-grieving people do as a matter of course will not always make sense, or feel meaningful, to you.

Whether it lasts a moment, or feels interminable, your confusion is normal. It does tend to ebb and flow, in relation to other stressors in your life, emotionally heavy tasks you have to complete, and how well you're eating and sleeping. This is why we go back to tending your physical body as bedrock: supporting the body can help reduce the signs of grief's addling effect on your mind.

CREATING NEW COGNITIVE PATHWAYS

I'm not a brain scientist by any stretch, but the way I understand it, our minds work by creating relationships and recognizing patterns. New information comes in, and the brain connects it to what we already know. Normally this process is seamless: you never really notice it.

In grief, your brain has to codify and collate an impossible new reality into itself. The data presented doesn't make any logical sense. There has never been anything like this event, so there is no way to connect or relate it to anything else. It doesn't fit. The brain cannot *make* this new reality fit. Like your heart, your brain resists this loss—it can't possibly be true.

Those blips and gaps in your memory and thought process are the brain trying to make data fit into a world that cannot absorb that data. Eventually, it will understand that this loss can't fit inside the structures that used to be. It will have to make new pathways, new mental relationships, wiring this loss into the person you are becoming, every day.

You aren't crazy. You aren't broken. Your brain is busy, and it will simply take a while to come back online.

Eventually, your mind will realize that car keys do not belong in the freezer.

Eventually, you will read whole lines again, whole paragraphs, without having to repeat the words to yourself so you understand.

Grief itself won't make sense, loss itself will not rearrange into something orderly and sensible, but your mind, and your heart, will adapt. This loss will be absorbed and integrated.

It's what your heart and mind are made for: adapting to new experiences. Not good, not bad—it is simply what they *do*.

For a lot of people, it's a few years before their entire cognitive capacity comes back to any recognizable form. There are losses in that, too. Some of those losses are temporary and some of them mean your mind is just different as you move forward. The thing to remember is that your brain is working hard to make sense of something that can't ever make sense. All those mental circuits that used to fire so clearly are trying their best to relate to this entirely changed world.

Your mind is doing the best it can to keep a bead on reality when reality is crazy. Be patient with yourself. Remember that this is a normal response to a stressful situation; it's not a flaw in you.

You're not crazy. You're grieving. Those are very different things.

RECOGNIZE GRIEF'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SIDE EFFECTS

What physical symptoms have you noticed in your grief?

How has grief changed the way your mind works?

If you're outside that initial impact of grief, how have you noticed your mind changing, as you become more accustomed to the weight of grief?

Validation is powerful inside grief. What's it like to hear stories (here and elsewhere) that show you that your experience is normal?

10

GRIEF AND ANXIETY

Calming Your Mind When Logic Doesn't Work

Grief changes your body and your mind in strange ways. Cognitive capacity isn't the only brain function that gets wonky. Anxiety—whether it's new to you, or you experienced it before your loss—is a huge issue in grief.

I used to struggle a lot with anxiety.

Driving home from grad school late at night, my tired brain would conjure all manner of horrible, horrible images: things I was helpless to stop from where I was, still hours away from home. I'd imagine I'd left the stove on twelve hours earlier, and the house had burned down. Maybe it was burning right now. Images of my animals suffering flashed in front of my eyes.

It was awful.

With a lot of self-work, insight, and just plain irritation with that pattern, I found ways to manage those fears. In fact, I became so good at redirecting those thoughts that I felt I'd completely moved on. I hadn't had a freak-out like that in well over a decade.

In the months before Matt drowned, I noticed those fears coming back. I would leave the house and begin to panic that the cats would escape, get stuck somewhere, and die cold and alone and afraid. Or that our dog would get hit by a car, and I wouldn't be there to help. I started to worry whenever Matt was late calling. I'd spin off into imaginary negative fantasies instead of focusing on whatever was actually going on.

I caught myself in a fearful thought-spiral one day in early July. Out loud, I said, “Stop!” Out loud, I said what I have told myself a thousand times and have told clients over and over again: “Worrying about what has not happened is not useful. If something bad does happen, you will deal with it then. It is highly unlikely that anything awful will happen. If it does, you will deal.”

Seven days later, the highly unlikely did happen. And you know what? My fear sensors never made a sound. No panic. No anxiety that morning. Nothing. I’d felt entirely, perfectly calm. When I needed my acute sensitivity to all things dangerous and bad, it failed.

In the years following, my anxiety went through the roof. I imagined more bad things happening. I imagined everyone I loved disappearing in an instant, everyone I knew and loved (including myself) in danger, suffering, dead. I was alert for any small indication that things were about to go wrong. It didn’t matter that anxiety had proven itself highly ineffective in predicting or preventing catastrophe. Anxiety is an addictive drug, made all the more powerful by knowing that unlikely shit *does* happen, and there is nothing you can do.

I tell you this story because I bet you can relate.

Feelings of anxiety are normal for those who have survived an intense loss or trauma. Inside your grief, the whole world can feel like an unsafe place, one that requires constant vigilance: searching for early warning signs of trouble, guarding against more loss. You rehearse what you would do if you were faced with unthinkable trauma *again*.

If you’re struggling with anxiety inside your grief, maybe you’ve tried to calm yourself down by thinking positive thoughts, by reminding yourself of the goodness all around you, or by asserting the typical safety of everyday life. But those things no longer work when you’ve already lived the unlikely. Freak accidents, out-of-order deaths, horrible, nightmare events—these things happen. To us. To me. To you. Anxiety, grief, and prior experience are a tricky combination. You don’t trust your instincts anymore. Terrible things are possible. Constant vigilance can seem like the only route to take. Danger lurks everywhere. Loss is always waiting for you. You have to be prepared.

The problem is, rather than helping you feel safe, perpetual fear creates a small, hard, painful life that isn’t safer than any other life. Your mind becomes an exquisite torture chamber. The future rolls out in front of you in a stream of horrible things. You can’t sleep because of your

anxiety, and your anxiety gets worse because you aren't sleeping. It's an incessant hamster wheel of fears, attempts at logic, and memory of things gone wrong.

Anxiety is exhausting. It sucks. And it's not even useful, no matter how much it screams that it's real. Anxiety is patently ineffective at managing risk and predicting danger. Most of our fears never come to pass, and as I wrote above, in true emergencies, anxiety is often conspicuously absent.

If anxiety is such a poor predictor of reality, why do we do it? What is it about anxiety that makes is seem so real, so logical, and so impossible to turn off?

BRAINS DO WHAT THEY DO . . . TOO WELL

Here's the thing: our mind is *made* to imagine dangerous scenarios. It's actually quite brilliant: we're programmed to envision things in the safety of our mind that we could never risk with our physical bodies. We run scenarios to assess risk, to work out what we might do in a certain situation, to puzzle out how we'd solve a life-or-death problem, so that we don't have to try out those risks with our much more fragile physical selves. On a less life-threatening basis, our brains work out what we'd do with everyday problems as a way to reduce the stress load on the body itself: you think through a problem, finding ways to make things easier or more manageable.

The brain is an internal problem-solving survival mechanism. It's beautiful.

When there is clear and present danger, our brains unleash a cascade of hormones meant to help us quickly escape. The nervous system shifts into high alert. The healthy, well-functioning brain helps us either escape the danger or fight off whatever has threatened our safety. Once the danger has passed, the body is meant to return to its calm, non-anxious, low-stress state.

That cascade of hormones and the resulting flight-or-fight response can also be triggered when we *imagine* stressful, dangerous, or threatening situations. Sometimes imagining a realistic potential danger is useful. The problem, though, is that, especially when we've already experienced a truly dangerous situation, we overuse those great

imaginative skills. Each time we imagine multiple *potential* disasters, horrible dangers, all the ways the world can go wrong, we tell our nervous system that there is a current clear and present danger. We cue that flood of hormones that would help us escape. You can't run from an imagined danger, so those stress hormones never dissipate. You imagine more and more and more danger, cueing the body to spring into action it will never take; you never get back to "calm and relaxed."

We push our brains into exhaustion, trying to keep ourselves safe.

It's like a dog chewing at a hotspot—gnawing at the rash makes it itch more, which makes him chew on it more, which makes it itch more. Fear thoughts create a brain response, which creates a body response, which conditions your thoughts to come up with more fears, which starts the cycle again.

And this is why you can't talk yourself out of anxiety. It's also why you will never run out of terrible problems to solve: your mind is caught in a loop of its own making, always coming up with new threats to manage.

IMAGINING DANGER IN ORDER TO FEEL SAFE

If it's both ineffective and horrendous to live with, why do we do this to ourselves? It doesn't make logical sense, does it? Honestly, what we're looking for—in any kind of anxiety—is proof of safety. Whether that means physical safety or emotional safety, we all want to know we're safe, cared for, and won't be left alone, unloved, or unprotected. Our mind runs scenarios, often repeatedly, of *not* being safe—of being hurt in some way—so that we can find some scenario, some evidence, that proves we're safe.

In a weird sort of way, it's an understandable response: something in your mind says, "I'm scared," and your brain responds with a cascade of images and hormones to help you find safety. Because you've experienced the world as drastically unsafe at one point, when one fear gets resolved, your mind comes up with another fear, in a perpetual bid for safety: it's a natural survival tool on tilt.

Of course you're anxious. After a death or other massive loss, the whole concept of "safety" gets really sketchy. You can't rely on old comforts of believing that your fears are unlikely to come true. You can't

lean on the statistically low risk of certain illnesses or accidents happening. Just because you saw your people half an hour ago does not mean they're still OK *now*. When the ordinary safety of the world has already failed you, how can you ever feel safe here again?

It's not that anxiety is *wrong*; it's more that it's not effective in creating the safety you seek. Here's the thing: no matter what your anxiety tells you, rehearsing disaster will not make you safe. Repeatedly checking in with people to be sure they're *still* safe will never create a lasting sense of safety.

SHORT-TERM APPROACHES TO ANXIETY

Because anxiety is a survival mechanism run amok, it won't work to just tell yourself to stop it: if you deny your fears, they will get louder. You can't apply logic to a fear-based system. It also won't work to wrap up everyone you love in a protective bubble and never let them out of your sight. Rather than suppress your fears, or frantically try to make the world around you safe, there are other things you can do to enhance your inner sense of security while maintaining a state of alert calm.

Since you're reading this chapter, I assume you're dealing with active anxiety. During active anxiety, it's not always helpful to do some of the more complex practices later in this chapter. Those approaches will help you retrain your mind to a more stable, neutral pattern so that you don't get lost in anxiety as often. But what if you're already in it? Soothing your mind when you're already in an anxiety-spiral and practicing self-care can help in the short term.

Soothe the System

Remember that anxiety is a brain-based, nervous system response to imagined danger. It's not logical; it's *biological*. Studies in both trauma sciences and neurobiology show that modifying your breathing helps soothe your nervous system when it's agitated, as it is during acute anxiety. I could totally geek out on all the cutting-edge brain science here, but what's really important is very simple: lengthening your exhale

soothes your nervous system, shutting down the flood of stress hormones that trigger anxiety.

When you feel anxious, make your exhale longer than your inhale.

It really is that simple. And that's a good thing—because when you are actively freaking out, remembering one simple direction is far easier than remembering a whole slew of other interventions. Making your exhale longer than your inhale soothes the flight-or-fight response in the nervous system, and the focus on your breath gives you an anchoring thought in your mind rather than chasing one fear thought to the next. That it's simple is great: one option, under your control, always accessible.

During acute anxiety ("acute" meaning your brain is a tangled mess of fear) you might also consider some of the anchoring and calming exercises we talked about in chapter 8. If you pair one of those with lengthening your exhale, you'll help both your body and your brain find a still, calm place.

Did you just panic at the thought of being calm because you might miss something dangerous?

Remember that calming your anxiety is not one bit related to whether something unexpected happens or not. Calming your anxiety is about only that: *calming your anxiety*. The crazy train of fear prevents you from being present to what is, and it most definitely keeps you from enjoying whatever goodness is here in this moment. Anxiety also depletes your energy reserves, makes sleep difficult, and, in general, feels like crap. I don't want that for you.

If you take nothing else from this chapter, practice making your exhale longer than your inhale. It doesn't even have to be a deep breath: just exhale for a moment longer. Experiment with it. See how it goes.

Tend the Organism

Recognizing anxiety as a *symptom* of something rather than a predictor of reality is a useful distinction. For many people, anxiety increases when they're overtired, not eating well, or exposed to multiple challenges. If you know that your anxiety is connected to how you're feeling physically and emotionally, you can look for early warning signs —parallel markers—that let you intervene before it gets crazy.

The easiest approach is to refer back to the lists you made in chapter 7: that's where you'll find your early warning signs. As your thoughts become more anxious or agitated, it's a cue that you need to turn in, slow down, and care for your physical organism: sleep, eat, rest, move. Addressing these physical needs first can actually reduce a lot of your anxiety.

LONGER-TERM RESPONSES TO OVERCOME ANXIETY

Figuring out what to do when anxiety wraps you up in knots is important. When you're inside an anxiety spike, it's much more useful to help yourself calm down than it is to investigate the reasons behind it. Transforming your overall response and reaction to life from one of anxiety to a more calm and even state takes some practice, but it's not impossible. There are things you can do to help your overall system not fall into those anxiety habits so easily. Reducing the frequency and overall amount of anxiety you experience has three parts: learning to trust yourself, replacing disaster scenarios with more positive images, and finding a neutral place—neither denying danger nor succumbing to rampant anxiety.

Presume a Skilled Response

Anxiety is a manufactured feeling state that has nothing to do with current reality: it thrives in an imagined (negative) future. If you keep coming up with imaginary problems, your mind will keep providing imaginary solutions. Because the solution to each scenario is different, the anxious mind will try to cover all possible "what-if" situations, attempting to defuse each one in turn. In a relentless search for safety, it feeds on itself.

Here's an example: one of my clients is an intelligent, resourceful, calm, and diligent person. After her husband died, she began to obsess about things going wrong in her house, about changing jobs, about whether or not to travel, and any number of other things. She would lie awake at night wondering if she had set the heating system properly. If she had, was it actually working correctly? What would happen if it

failed? What if the smoke detectors failed, or the furnace randomly blew up?

One after the other, her mind came up with new disasters. If she solved one, another popped up in its place. That's the problem with anxiety: you never run out of potential disaster.

Rather than continue to run successive disaster scenarios, coming up with an action plan for each and every one, it's far more effective and efficient to . . . trust yourself. In the face of multiple challenges presented by your mind, you might say: "I trust myself to handle any problem that comes up with the house. If there's something I don't know how to solve, I trust myself to ask for help."

Self-trust is tricky, but no matter what, you've got a bank of success stories to draw from. Large or small, you've likely proven that you can face most kinds of challenges. There is no reason to believe you wouldn't be able to solve these problems yourself, or ask for help if needed.

There's also the fact that putting out imaginary fires does absolutely nothing to help you prepare for any actual fire. If you have anxiety over specific things, see if you can identify ways you can lessen the risk of those things happening. Do practical, realistic things, like changing the batteries in your smoke alarms, locking your doors at night, and wearing your bike helmet. Address your fears in concrete ways, but don't let your fears keep you captive. Until and unless an actual need arises, there is no reason to run disaster scenarios.

Instead of creating trouble out of nothing, you might tell yourself: Right now, as far as I know, everything is fine. If a challenge arises—of any kind—I trust myself to respond with skill. If there's something I don't know how to do, I trust that I'll ask for help.

Using a blanket statement of self-trust increases your sense of security far more effectively than running potential disaster-solution patterns. Over time, you can retrain your mind to self-soothe rather than self-implode.

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"But," you might say, "I seriously *failed*!" Self-trust can feel impossible when loss has shown up in your life. In cases of accident, suicide, prenatal loss, and other losses, it's normal to question yourself. What

doesn't help, though, is persecuting yourself from now through all eternity. Maybe you could have done something different. Maybe. And maybe you did what you could with the information you had at the time. And maybe this loss truly had nothing to do with what you "missed," and you couldn't have changed the outcome.

Regardless of what's accurate, it does you no good to move through the rest of this life afraid to miss something. Courting that kind of perpetual anxiety will only exhaust you to the point where you can't respond with any skill or insight when you actually do need it.

A calm mind and a well-rested body are your best chance at assessing a situation and responding with skill. Relentless self-interrogation, fault finding, and shame will not get you there.

Imagine the Best Thing Possible

Oh great, you might think, *now I have to be anxious about how anxious my thoughts are because thinking about disaster is making everything worse, and it's more likely to make me less skilled in the event of another emergency.*

Yeah. That's anxiety. It just keeps building on itself.

We've also got that pervasive cultural belief that your thoughts create your reality. A lot of our self-help books and false gurus tell us this, too—that if we were only more aware of our surroundings, if we were more attuned to *detail*, we'd not get into horrible situations. And if we're having a hard time, it's because we caused it somehow. With our thoughts. So there's a lot of cultural support for anxiety: you get what you think of, so you'd better be sure you're thinking the right thoughts. It's your own fault if something goes wrong.

"You create your own reality" is so patently untrue, and so cruel to the grieving heart. Many of us already feel responsible for what's happened, both the death of someone we love, and the fact that we somehow aren't doing our grief "well enough." While this adage might (and I mean might) have a bare thread of truth in it, for the most part, it's utter junk. Your thoughts can influence how you *respond* to what is, but your thoughts do not create what is.

You are many things, but you are not that powerful. You cannot manifest death or health or loss or grief just by thinking about it. Your

thoughts did not create this loss. Your continued anxiety will not make more loss happen. Not being anxious and on guard will not "doom" you to more loss, nor will it protect you from harm.

If thinking could keep people safe, none of us would be grieving. If thoughts alone could prevent illness, accidents, and suffering, we would not have any of these. Magical thinking doesn't control reality.

What your thoughts *will* do is influence how you feel about yourself and about the world around you. The best way to work with your thoughts is to harness your amazing powers of imagination—evident in all those imagined disaster scenarios—in voting for the future you actually want, not the one you don't. Basically, I want you to use your brain's native powers for good, not for anxiety. If you must imagine something, please try imagining the best possible outcome. Let that be your guiding image. Not because it's going to affect anything (in either direction) but because it makes living here easier on you, and I want this easier on you.

If you're scared, and maybe waiting to see how something will unfold, *you* get to decide how you imagine the whole scene going. Given that nothing has happened yet, use your brain to imagine something beautiful.

Let your thoughts create an internal state of calm, and hopeful (if mild) optimism. That's the reality your thoughts can change.

Find the Middle Ground

The key to managing, or even transforming, anxiety is not in finding a place of safety, but in finding a place of neutrality. We all need reassurance. We all need a sense of safety, and life itself is inherently not "safe." The next moment could bring any number of things, some glorious, some horrendous. The only way I've found to live inside that reality is to tell myself that, currently, I'm not safe, and I'm not in danger either. Every moment is neutral.

That neutrality is what Eastern traditions, and some earlier Western traditions, are talking about when they speak of "nonattachment," or the calm, clear center. It's a space of alert calm: neither rehearsing disaster nor falling back into a denial of life's risks.

In any moment, something bad and something good are equally possible. Peace-of-being is in what we train ourselves to expect. In early grief especially, it may become a process and practice of choosing to believe in a benign moment. Not good, not bad. Not safe, not in danger. Right here, now, in this moment, you are . . . neutral. Those spaces in between, where you can breathe, where there is space—those are the places you want. This is what the ancient teaching practices are about: living in that neutral spot. Which is not at all the same as having equanimity "no matter what," or about being "above" everything somehow. It's about seeing the current situation, the current environment, for exactly what it is, without embellishment or future fantasy. To paraphrase Eckhart Tolle: Anxiety is using your imagination to create a future you do not want. So let's not do that.

If you can't believe in "safety," aim yourself toward neutral. It's a much more stable place than fear.

THE BIGGER ANSWER TO ANXIETY: WHAT, EXACTLY, DO YOU NEED?

We have so much shame around anxiety; we often pretend we aren't feeling it. It's never effective to pretend you aren't afraid. Pretending you aren't afraid makes your interpersonal relationships come out wonky and makes you feel incredibly unstable. Hiding your anxiety makes it shoot out sideways: you *act out* of your anxiety rather than *respond* to it.

Again we come back to acknowledgment as the most powerful medicine we have. It may seem counterintuitive, but somehow telling the truth: "I don't feel safe in the world right now," or "I'm afraid my dog will die," makes things different. Anxiety changes. It softens. Your grip on the outside world relaxes a little bit.

Telling the truth allows you to relax enough to ask yourself what you need in that moment. When you catch yourself imagining disaster scenarios, tell yourself the truth: "I am afraid of more loss." Lengthen your exhale. Ask yourself what you're truly looking for: What do you need in this moment? Possible answers to that question might be: reassurance, comfort, attachment, a nap—anything that establishes a truer sense of safety, not a situational one.

If you identify a need of, say, assurance or connection, what other ways might you answer those needs rather than rehearse un-winnable disasters or relentlessly check in about the safety of people you love? You might need more information about a situation, or you might need to actually ask for comfort or connection, rather than manage your fear of losing it.

If you're out somewhere, feeling scared about imagined threats to your child's or pet's safety, maybe you need to head home in order to care for yourself, rather than ignore your anxiety and attempt to push through. That's another form of self-kindness. Remember that anxiety is often made worse by lack of food or sleep; you might see it as a signal to care for your physical self.

As with most things, there is no one right answer. The important thing is to let yourself ask, "What do I need right now, and how can I best meet that need?"

You won't always get what you need. But the practice of asking yourself what you need, and taking the most likely-to-be-effective course of action to meet those needs, actually *builds* a sense of safety in the world. As a longer-term approach to anxiety, telling the truth and asking yourself what you need is highly effective. It works where other things cannot.

The phrase "It's better to put shoes on your feet than to cover the whole world in leather" is what I'm talking about. Safety does not live in the world around you. You can't control things enough to guard against loss. Safety resides solely in self-advocacy, listening to your own needs below the surface of your fears, and responding accordingly. You cannot prevent loss. Your "safety" resides in your own heart, in how you care for yourself, in how you imagine the world.

Please come to yourself—especially the anxious, fearful, terrified parts—with love and respect. This kind of anxiety is normal. It's yet another way your mind is trying to reorder the world after your loss. Your mind is trying to keep you safe. Do your best to soothe your hardworking, overworking mind when you can. Tell yourself the truth about your fears. Ask. Listen. Respond. Commit to caring for yourself inside whatever comes. Above all, be *kind* to yourself. As author Sharon Salzberg is known to say, "You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection."

ANXIETY MAP

Are there patterns to my anxiety? When is it more noticeable? What are my early warning signs of exhaustion that may lead to more anxiety?

If you aren't sure what sets off anxiety, you might start logging the circumstances or situations that make your anxiety worse. Just as important, take note of what's been happening on days where your anxiety is lessened, or nonexistent. What's different on those days?

When you feel anxious about a specific situation, ask yourself what the actual need is under the fear. Most often, there is a need for connection, reassurance, or stability. What needs do you identify? What are some more effective ways to get those needs met?

What would kindness to self look like in response to your anxiety?

11

WHAT DOES ART HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?

I want to tell you that the creative process will be healing for you, in and of itself. But I'm a terrible liar.

I can't bring up the creative process without being honest about my own path. The arts, or any artistic practices, were hard for me in the early days of grief. I resented words and writing for a really long time. I resented any creative process for a really long time. Even as I needed them.

I've been a writer all my life, and a visual artist, too. Because I had both art and writing as parts of my professional life before I became widowed, I heard several times how *lucky* I was: Lucky because I could write and make art from my experience. Lucky because I could turn this death around and make it a gift for others.

As though this loss, *my partner's sudden death*, were redeemed somehow by the act of writing about it or by making art from it. As though our life, *his life*, was a fair trade for whatever work came out of it.

There's a deep cultural presumption that creating something out of grief somehow makes it all even out in the end: That your deepest call is to transform your grief into a work of art that touches others. That when you do that, when you turn to creative expression in the depths of pain, you are, in fact, healing your grief. Creativity is a way to transform pain. The results of your creativity, if they're good enough, can help others transform their pain. It all works out. At the very least, art and writing

will make you feel better, and you can get to "acceptance" of this loss faster.

That presumption does such a disservice, both to the creative practice and to you.

We need art. We need to create. It's part of being human. It's still a huge part of my life, and I don't want a life without it. A lot of my work draws on creative practices inside grief, so clearly, I haven't abandoned it. But when creative practice is pitched as a cure for grief, or as a necessary shattering in order to be of use, that's when I bristle, grind my teeth, start snarling.

Creating something good out of loss is not a trade, and it's not a cure.

Pain is not redeemed by art. Creating something out of what was is no fair trade for not being allowed to continue *living* what was. There is no fair trade. Whatever you might create in your pain, out of your pain, no matter how beautiful or useful it might be, it will never erase your loss. Being creative won't solve anything. Art is not meant to make things "right."

So this is tricky territory, both out in the world, and in this chapter on creative practices inside grief.

> "There's a secret to this. My written words draw you closer. It's a seductive dance on a whole other level. It makes me think of Rumi's love poetry, which is really about his relationship with the Unknown. Love is clarified, drawn through a veil of language and distilled into something that is closer to the divine. That's the best secret, my writing draws you closer. . . . I am clothing you with language, and you become more visible.
>
> **CHRIS GLOIN, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Bill**

WHY DO IT THEN?

If we don't use creative practices to make grief better, why do them at all? We engage in creative practices because our minds (and our hearts) run on them.

Pain, like love, needs expression. The human mind naturally goes to creative expression: it's the way we're built. We are storytelling

creatures. We look to art, and to story, to help us make sense of the world, especially when what's happened makes no sense. We need images to live into, stories to guide us in the new life that has come. We need the creative process to bear witness to our own reality—to reflect our own pain back to us. In a world that so often doesn't want to hear your pain, the page or the canvas or the sketch pad is always a willing companion.

When we separate the creative process from a need to solve or fix things, it becomes an ally. It becomes a way to withstand grief, a way to reduce suffering, even as it can't change the pain.

Creative practices can also help you deepen your connection with that which is lost. Death doesn't end a relationship; it changes it. Writing, painting, and other creative processes allow the conversation that began in life *Before* to continue in life *After*. The stories we create are a continuation of love.

And sometimes, creation allows us to connect and relate to the world again, in our own new ways, in this whole new life.

> "I don't usually put into words the ache in my throat, the knot in my stomach, the headache that I get from holding back tears. Words have limits, but pain doesn't seem to. So what's the point? Words are imperfect tools. They can and do let us down often. But at their best, words can build a connection between me and another person, and it's that connection that matters to me. When you're connected to someone, when they get you, they know that the words you speak are only the tip of a huge iceberg of feelings, regrets, dreams, and memories. I built a bridge with Seth over thirty-five years; it was a work of art. It takes more courage than I realized to risk starting over, building bridges again, with other people. The cynical part of me tells me to get over the idea that words can console me, empower me, connect me. But the part of me that daydreams and hopes and tells stories carries on, uncertainly, toward the bridge.
>
> **KATHI THOMAS ROSEN, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Seth**

While it's not pain's only role, pain often does call us into communication, even communion, with others. Without that call to express great pain, we wouldn't have images from Käthe Kollwitz. We wouldn't have Picasso's *Guernica*. We wouldn't get to feel our own pain reflected in the words of C. S. Lewis, or Cheryl Strayed, or Claire Bidwell Smith, or Emily Rapp. We take comfort from the company of our own kind, the people living deep loss alongside us, throughout time.

Creative practices are a balm, and a support, inside what can barely be endured. So while the creative practices in this chapter won't fix you, and can't bring back what you've lost, they can help you find a way to live what has been asked of you. They can help you tell the story of what is, in a way that makes things even just a tiny bit easier on both your mind and your heart. They can help you stay connected to who you've lost. They can help you connect to your companions inside grief. They can make things better, even when they can't make them right.

> At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then —and only then—it is handed to you.
>
> **ANNIE DILLARD, *The Writing Life***

ON WRITING

Recent studies show that engaging in as little as ten to fifteen minutes of creative writing can help reduce overall levels of cortisol, the "stress hormone," in the body. While the studies say other things about emotional regulation, increasing optimism, and decreasing hostility, I think the safest corollary is that writing, in its effect on stress in the body, can help your physical organism survive this loss. As I said in chapter 9 on grief and the mind, tending your body makes grief, itself, easier to bear.

And it's not just the physiological effects that interest me. Any creative practice, including writing, can help reduce your suffering by allowing you to tell your own story.

Honestly, I can't tell you why writing helps. When Matt died, I quit almost everything—except writing. I wasn't writing to heal. I wasn't

writing to communicate to others. I wasn't writing to find peace or resolution or acceptance. I was writing because I had to. Because words leaked out of me, whether I had paper in front of me or not.

In those early days, writing was how I connected with Matt, how I continued our conversation that was so abruptly stopped. It was how I recorded rare moments of calm, of feeling loved and grounded, places I could go back to and relive when everything had gone too dark to be endured. It was where I recorded those dark moments, too. On the page, everything is allowed. Everything has a voice.

In a podcast recently, I heard the speaker say something along the lines of writers live everything twice: once when it actually happens, and then again when they put it on the page. Writing this book, I've looked back on all those boxes and boxes of journals I wrote in the early days of grief. In them, I have a map of who I was back then, a series of entry points into the intensity of love and pain that marked those days. So writing can do that, too—it gives you a map. A topography of grief and love, a through-line to follow, should you ever need to return.

> "In losing Coll, I've noticed that my normal coping mechanisms of achieving the peace that is brought on from the release of intense emotions haven't worked. When I cry, I don't feel better. When I yell and scream in an empty house, I don't feel better. Many times when I speak to my therapist, I do not feel better.
>
> But writing—writing hasn't failed me. Writing has been healing when all else has failed. The edges of my emotions are still fairly jagged and raw, but they have been sanded down so they don't cut as deep with every breath. And that's all thanks to writing.
>
> **JENNY SELLERS, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her partner, Coll**

WRITING THE TRUTH (ALONE, TOGETHER)

Almost since the beginning of Refuge in Grief, I've run writing courses for grieving people. I never promise that writing will make anyone feel

better. On the contrary, I ask my students to dive fully into their pain. Nothing is off-limits; nothing is too harsh.

When I ask my students how writing has helped them in their grief, without fail, they say that writing the true reality of their loss has helped them survive. We have such censorship around grief—in the larger world, certainly, but even in our own hearts and minds. We've been so well conditioned to not say what hurts. There's a freedom in letting all your words out. There is freedom in being heard. On the page, everything is welcome.

> "Writing may not fix grief, but it may have given me the most important tool I have to live with it: a means to express the agony I've carried for fifteen years and a tribe of fierce and beautiful souls that not only honor that expression, but who also aren't afraid of it. They aren't afraid of it. By extension, they aren't afraid of me. Writing can't fix what happened. It can't undo what was done, rewrite history, or bring back my dead brother. It doesn't erase the pain, dull the grief, or make any of it suddenly "OK."
>
> Writing didn't fix me. It let me begin to honor myself, my own experience, and my own broken heart. My mantra through this time has been "The only way through is through." Through is what writing about my grief has given me. A tool to use to get through. Healing happened here. What a gift it is that no matter how heavy my words, they never, ever turn away.
>
> **GRACE, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her brother**

My students have shown me, over and over again, the power in simply telling your own story, as it is. Your writing doesn't have to be good. It doesn't have to be "right." Through writing, grief and love, horror and companionship weave themselves into this story of your life—the true story. You can write for yourself alone, or you can find places to share your words with others. What matters most is telling the truth, without censure, without apology.

Words may be small, but they contain your heart, and your heart is always welcome to speak on the page.

GIVE GRIEF A VOICE

Even if you don't identify yourself as a writer, please give writing a try. Throughout this book, you'll find writing exercises and prompts to get you started; there's also a prompt included below. Set a timer for ten minutes. Even if you have to write the prompt itself, or write "Why am I doing this?" over and over, keep writing until the timer goes off. Once you've finished, draw (or type) a line under your writing. Below the line, write a few sentences about what it felt like to write your response to the prompt.[1] If your grief isn't "fixed" (spoiler: it won't be), is anything different? What did you find in your writing?

This prompt is taken from the Writing Your Grief course. I asked my students to nominate their favorites, and this one was the clear winner:

If you were writing fiction, you'd want to know the voice of your main character. You'd want to know the way they walk, the kinds of food they eat, how they comb or don't comb their hair. They would need to be *real*. In a way, your grief is a character: it has a rhythm and a voice. It is particular to you. If we're going to be working with grief, let's find out who it is.

The creative tool is called *personification*. What we're really doing is giving grief, itself, a voice. When it has a voice, it can tell us things. Let's think of this exercise as inviting your grief to introduce himself or herself to you. Here's an off-the-cuff example:

> Grief rocks, slumped in a corner, spent drink in her left hand, dirt smeared across her forehead.
>
> She hums and she cries; her hands flit against things I don't see. As I come near, she looks up, startled but clear-eyed:

"What do you want?" she asks, adjusting the straps of her dress.

She pats herself down gently.

"What is it you most want? Maybe I have it. Maybe I have it somewhere . . ."

If your grief is a character who can come forward and speak, what kind of voice does it have? Don't tell us about it; let them actually speak. Write in grief's voice. To get there, you might begin by taking just a few moments to quiet yourself. Close your eyes. Take a few breaths. As you feel yourself center, pick up your pen or set your hands over the keyboard. Take another breath, and on the exhale, imagine you ask your pain this question:

"Who are you?" or *"Tell me who you are . . ."*

"My words don't fade; they won't. I'll form a stronger rock, a sculptural force from which I will continue to build myself, a mother without her child. I will. I will shape my words with soft taps from my mothering mallet. I will carve these deep troughs of love into my life.

The powerful lyrics of death were unknown to me "before," though I sing them as mother tongue now. My words. Utterly heartfelt expressions of love for my son. My dead son. My son who died before I gave birth. These are my words. This is my truth. My son died. He is dead, and I love him. I've learned a new vocabulary.

CARLY, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her son, Zephyr

MORE THAN WORDS: GRAPHIC NOVELS

Matt was in incredibly good physical shape. This led my mother to suggest I write a comic book about him, a graphic novel, entitled *Mr. Universe*. It could follow his adventures beyond this earthly plane, out there in the galaxies somewhere, flying around . . . doing things.

Now, that kind of narrative is not my style. However, she had a point. The graphic novel has some fantastic creative elements. It's not a format

I've played with, but it's definitely on my list. A graphic novel with an incredibly dark storyline sounds wonderful to me.

There are a number of examples out there if you'd like to explore this medium with some guidance. Writer and artist Anders Nilsen's books *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* and *The End* follow his fiancé's, Cheryl's, illness and death, and his life after these events. *Rosalie Lightning: A Graphic Memoir* is a graphic novel written by Tom Hart on the sudden death of his two-year-old daughter, Rosalie. One of my favorite grief books, Michael Rosen's *The Sad Book*, illustrated by Quentin Blake, doesn't make sadness pretty, or cast loss in a romantic, it-works-out light. It is, simply, a book of Rosen's heart after the sudden death of his eighteen-year-old son, Eddie.

Even if you don't go full-on graphic novel, maintaining a sketchbook is a great practice. Sometimes, pictures and gesture drawings are far more accurate than words can ever be. Whatever your medium, don't be afraid to be as dark as you are. This is your life—your creative practice gets to reflect that, in fact, *should* reflect that.

COLLAGE

Sometimes, I simply cannot handle words. This was true before Matt died, and is even more true since. Words can be so vexing. Language can be so small. Although writing is a creative practice, it does still use parts of the mind used for logic and reason, and logic and reason simply do not play well with deep grief.

In my early grief days, there were times I stabbed through my journals, frustrated with the constraint of words. Frustrated that words were what I had left of our life. Enraged that I was supposed to fit this impossibility into syllables and sentences. Stupid, stupid words.

As an antidote to my word-heavy mind, I often went back to my old practice of making collages. There was something really satisfying about tearing apart magazines, destroying words and images and making them into something new, something mine. Much like the found poetry we'll talk about next, using other people's images to create a new narrative is deeply satisfying. I still do this. When I'm really into it, I do a collage a day, keeping them in a small art-paper sketchbook. Doing it as a daily practice helps me understand where I am, how I'm feeling, and lets me

put things on the page that I simply do not care to write. And because I'm borrowing other people's images, I don't have to start from scratch.

As a daily check-in, making a collage is a fantastic practice: no words, no thought. You can use your collage practice as a way to check in with yourself, a way to center yourself inside the swirl of grief. It's a way to acknowledge what is real, what is true in this moment, no matter what this moment holds.

COLLAGE

Gather a bunch of magazines and newspapers, decent scissors, glue sticks or other adhesive, and heavy sketch paper. I prefer shiny-paper magazines, the ones with more photos than text. There's no reason to buy them: look on Craigslist for someone giving away magazines rather than throwing them out, or check recycling boxes during an early morning walk around your neighborhood. There's never a shortage of magazines. I prefer small sewing-type scissors for this, as the cut work can get pretty tiny. Use heavy paper rather than thin, printer-type paper; that stuff will buckle and get wavy with the weight of glue and paper. You might even get a sketchbook specifically for this purpose.

Flip through your magazines, pulling out any image that calls you. Let your mind wander through the pages. It's normal to get caught up in an article from time to time, but do your best to drag yourself out of the narrative and focus on the photos.

You might look for larger images that can serve as a background, and several smaller images that you just like. Or find images you feel repelled by but cut out anyway. None of this has to make "sense." None of this has to be "art." Tear or cut out whatever you'd like. Once you've got a good assortment, start arranging and rearranging them on the paper.

When you have the basic background and larger images where you'd like them, start gluing.

Remember, this isn't about making sense of anything or making something pretty. The images themselves will often dictate what the final form will be. If you find yourself getting too fiddly and perfectionistic, try setting a timer; knowing you need to finish soon can help you make decisions in a looser, more impulsive way. In collage work, impulsive = good.

FOUND POETRY

If you'd rather stick with words, or would like to add words to your collage practice, found poetry is a great collage-like tool.

FOUND POETRY

Find a newspaper, or any printed something—a book, flyer, catalog. Online text doesn't work as well. Open the paper to a full spread, one with lots of articles and words, not a bunch of photos. Get yourself a highlighter or colored pen. Close your eyes for a moment, take a good deep breath (as deep as you can). Exhale, and begin to lightly scan the paper, underlining random words from all over the page.

Let the available words dictate what is written, but don't feel stuck to one article or column. You can ramble all over. When you feel finished, write down the words and phrases you've underlined. You can rearrange the words, or leave them in the order they were found. Try it a few times; you'll be surprised by what you find.

There is no "topic" for this. In fact, if you're feeling overwhelmed or burned out on grief, make a ridiculous found-word story. Use different colors for different stories, or

> turn to a whole different section of the paper. Play with it. See what you find. You might even add your found poetry to your photo collage work: finish your collage, then search for a found poem to write the story of the visual image.

As with everything, please consider these to be experiments. Does creating an image or word-based collage change or shift something in you? Do you have even the tiniest breathing room as you do this? Does it soothe your rabid mind, if only for a time? Some people simply feel softer, or less tense, after these practices.

Much like the wellness-worseness exercise in chapter 7, messing around with collage and other processes can give you information about how you might carry your loss, or how you might live here with as much kindness to self as you can. Or maybe, as I often say, things like this don't do anything positive at all, but they do suck less than other things. Sometimes, that's your best metric: this sucks less than most things do. If you must do something, or you're driving yourself nuts with overthinking, borrow someone else's words or images for a while.

PHOTOGRAPHY, SCULPTURE, MACRAMÉ, AND THE CULINARY ARTS

There are a million different ways to be creative. I've focused mainly on writing and drawing here, but whatever feels right to you, that's the thing to do. I used to be a sculptor. I think working with clay is one of the most creative, cathartic, and healing activities there is. Many of my widowed friends turned to photography after their partners died. Some dove into knitting or other fiber arts. At least one person poured her creative energy into food, creating beautiful things to feed others in her life when her chosen family no longer had need to eat.

Whatever you do in your grief, please remember that it's yours. No one has the right to dictate what your art should look like, or that it should make you feel better. Creative exploration is a companion inside your grief, not a solution. As a mirror of your own innermost heart, let it be whatever it needs to be.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

All creative practices can help you see your life, see your heart, for what it is now. For some, especially those outside your grief, that might sound like a terrible thing. But really, hearing your own self speak, seeing your true reality out there, on the page—in writing, in painting, in photographs—shifts something.

> "That first year, my grief-year, I could hardly believe what had happened. I carried my story outside of me, like a heavy, sharp, awkward object. It was impossible and ungainly, always scratching at my hands or dropping with an ugly thud on my big toe. I lugged that tale through the heat of summer, the colors of autumn, the snows of winter, and the rebirth of spring before I made enough space for it inside of myself.
>
> It's not a puzzle, you know. No amount of shoving can make that huge pointy weight fit into a neat little empty space, and no amount of turning could fit back together the pieces of my shattered heart. I had to learn to see it as a sculpting project, working the clay of my loss and the clay of myself until I could build something new from it, then, standing back, accept the work-in-progress as me.
>
> **KATE CARSON, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her daughter, Laurel**

Your life, and your grief, are a work in progress. There is no need to be finished. There is no need to be perfect. There is only you, and the story of the love—and the loss—that brought you here. Find ways to tell your story.

12

FIND YOUR OWN IMAGE OF "RECOVERY"

Talking with people in new grief is tricky. During the first year, it's so tempting to say that things get better. I mean, is it really a kindness to say, "Actually, year two is often far harder than year one"? But if we don't say anything, people enter years two and three and four thinking they should be "better" by now. And that is patently untrue: subsequent years *can* actually be more difficult.

Then again, if we only talk about the deep realities of grief—the way it lingers and stays and sets up camp—then people have no hope. You can't just say, "Yes, this is horrible and awful, and it will be for a long time," without offering some kind of light in the distance.

We need a way to talk about both things—the reality of deep, persistent pain *and* the reality of living with that pain in a way that is gentle, authentic, and even beautiful. To do this, we need to talk about the words we use, and how we mean them.

> "And now there is this, what has come after the death, after the sorrow: a softer loss. Not a churning in my gut, but a settling of stones. I sleep softer, and when that is elusive, I don't fight it. I am still learning about this other side of sorrow and loss. Where I ended and my grief began is no longer a place. My sorrow and I are the same, there is no separation. The Great Divide that cracked opened when he died, it's a crevice that runs deep, but it has a bottom that

> curves up toward my future. It is a gash that I fill with our love, a scar that I wear on my soul. I'm incredulous, when I think of it, how this thing came into me and found a place to live. I wish I could tell him about it, how I carry him now.
>
> **MICHELE SACCO DWYER, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Dennis**

YOU CAN'T RECOVER FROM "DEAD"

I am super particular about language. The wrong word choice grates on me, even in the best of times. So when I was first widowed, hearing words like *recovery* and *better* really bothered me. Getting better sounded ridiculous. Exactly what was going to improve?

How can you get better when the one you love is still dead?

Honestly. A loss of this magnitude is not something you simply *recover* from.

Recovery, as defined in the dictionary, means to restore oneself to a normal state, to regain what was lost, or to be compensated for what was taken. I hear from a lot of people grieving the loss of a child, or grieving the loss of their best friend, sibling, or partner, grieving someone who should have had twenty, thirty, eighty more years. I hear from people who became paralyzed in accidents, or who survived large-scale acts of violence. The whole idea of recovery is just plain strange in this kind of grief.

That hole torn in the universe will not just close back up so that you can go back to *normal*. No matter what happens next in your life, it will never be adequate compensation. The life you lost can't come back. That loss can't be regained.

By definition then, there is absolutely no point in time when you will "recover" from such a loss.

And that makes it tricky. If there is no "healing" in terms of being as good as new, if we can't "recover" any more than someone who has lost their legs can simply will them to grow back, how do we go on?

In order to live well with grief—in order to live alongside grief—I think we need new terms.

> I don't want time to heal me. There's a reason I'm like this. I want time to set me ugly and knotted with loss of you.
>
> **CHINA MIÉVILLE, *The Scar***

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "MOVING ON"

We are changed by things that happen in our lives. This is always true. That we should be expected—even required—to return to normal after a devastating loss is even crazier when we realize that there is no such expectation in any other major life experience. As I've stated earlier, that insistence on returning to normal says far more about the speaker's discomfort with pain than it does about the reality of grief.

You will not "move on." You will not return to "who you used to be." How could you? To refuse to be changed by something as powerful as this would be the epitome of arrogance.

I love what researcher and author Samira Thomas has to say about this in terms of "resilience" and returning to normal:

> There are some events that happen in life that cause people to cross a threshold that forever changes them, whether they seek out their transformation or not. Life is ever unfolding, and people are ever in a process of becoming. Resilience holds the etymological implications of resistance to crossing thresholds, and instead adapting an old self to new circumstances without offering space or time to be completely changed by new realities.
>
> Unlike resilience, which implies returning to an original shape, patience suggests change and allows the possibility of transformation . . . It is a simultaneous act of defiance and tenderness, a complex existence that gently breaks barriers. In patience, a person exists at the edge of becoming. With an abundance of time, people are allowed space to be undefined, neither bending nor broken, but instead, transfigured.
>
> **SAMIRA THOMAS, "In Praise of Patience"[1]**

We are changed by our new realities. We exist at the edge of becoming. We don't recover. We don't move on. We don't return to normal. That is an impossible request.

A dear friend of mine spent a good part of his early life working in mine restoration—the environmental practice that attempts to heal landscapes polluted and destroyed by intensive mining operations. This is such an intense—and often failing—prospect that many environmentalists have written off the restoration of mine sites. They are simply too damaged to be restored. My friend worked with, at the time, the only person who had found a way to restore these sites. It involved collaboration with native tribes, research into mineral and biological needs of various landscapes, and patient study of the land itself—watching the wounds, using them to inform the ecological changes moving forward. The work itself is intensive, backbreaking labor. It takes decades to see the results: flourishing ecosystems, the return of native plant and animal species, a landscape healed.

My friend says that people visiting these restored sites see only the beauty there. There is no obvious evidence of the destruction that came before. But for those who did the work, for those who saw what lies beneath all that new growth, those wounds are clearly evident. There are whole lifetimes buried beneath what now appears so beautiful. We walk on the skin of ruins.

The earth does heal—and so does the heart. And if you know how to look, you can always see the ravages underneath new growth. The effort and hard work and planning and struggle to make something entirely new—integrated and including the devastated landscape that came before—is always visible. That the devastation of your loss will always exist is not the same as saying you are "eternally broken." It is saying we are made of love and scars, of healing and grace, of patience. Of being changed, by each other, by the world, by life. Evidence of loss can always be seen, if we only know how to look.

The life that comes from this point on is built atop everything that came before: the destruction, the hopelessness, the life that was and might have been.

There is no going back. There is no moving on. There is only moving *with*: an integration of all that has come before, and all you have been asked to live. Samira Thomas continues, "From this landscape, I take the lesson that I need not be who I once was, that I may hold my scars and

my joy simultaneously. I need not choose between bending or breaking but that, through patience, I may be transfigured."[2]

"Recovery" in grief is not about moving on. It's not about resilience or a return to "normal" life. Recovery is about listening to your wounds. Recovery is being honest about the state of your own devastation. It's about cultivating patience, not the kind that implies waiting it out until you return to normal, but patience in knowing that grief and loss will carve their way through you, changing you. Making their own kind of beauty, in their own ways.

Recovery inside grief is always a moving point of balance. There isn't any end point. While it may not always be this acutely heavy, your grief, like your love, will always be part of you. Life can be, and even likely will be, beautiful again. But that is a life built alongside loss, informed by beauty and grace as much as by devastation, not one that seeks to erase it.

If we talk about recovery from loss as a process of integration, of living alongside grief instead of overcoming it, then we can begin to talk about what might help you survive.

Given what cannot be restored, what cannot be made right, how do we live here? That's the real work of grief recovery—finding ways to live alongside your loss, building a life around the edges of what will always be a vacancy.

BUT WAIT—I DON'T WANT TO GET *BETTER*

I remember the first time I truly laughed after Matt died. I was horrified. How could I forget him, even for an instant? How could I find anything funny? It felt like a betrayal, not so much of Matt but of myself.

The whole idea of getting better—or even integrating your loss—can feel offensive, especially in early grief. Getting better might mean that the person you lost, or the life you no longer get to live, isn't as important anymore. For many people, their grief is their most vital connection to that which is lost. If happiness returns to your life, what does that mean about what was lost? Was it really not all that important, or special, if you can simply move forward with your life?

In my own early grief, I wasn't worried that I would always be in so much pain. I was worried that I one day wouldn't be. How could life

possibly go on? And how could I live with myself if it did?

What I can tell you, several years down the road from my own loss, is that things get different; they don't get "better." In some ways, I do miss those early days. I miss being able to reach back and touch our life, miss finding his smell in the closet, being able to look in the refrigerator and see things he'd bought. Our life was so close to me then. And in that ripped-open state of early grief, love felt so close to me. It didn't fix anything, but it was there; it was present. There was no mistaking the power of that time, dark and painful as it was.

I don't miss the dry heaves, nightmares, distressing family politics, or the torn-open sense that there was nowhere left for me in the world. I look back at that earlier self, that earlier me, and, honestly, the pain I see there is incredibly hard to witness. While there are parts of those early days I almost even long for, that visceral pain is not something I miss.

That pain and my love for Matt were—and are—connected, but they aren't the same thing.

It is true that the pain you feel now is intimately connected to love. And—the pain will eventually recede, and love will stay right there. It will deepen and change as all relationships do. Not in the ways you wanted. Not in the ways you deserved. But in the way love does—of its own accord.

Your connection to that which you've lost will not fade. That's not our definition of *better*. As you move forward in this life, your grief, and more important, your love, will come with you. Recovery in grief is a process of moving *with* what was, what might have been, and what still remains.

None of this is easy.

Grief, like love, has its own timeline and its own growth curve. As with all natural processes, we don't have complete control over it. What is in your control, what is under your power, is how you care for yourself, what qualities of love and presence you bring to yourself, and how you live this life that has been asked of you.

HOW DO YOU "HOPE" INSIDE THIS?

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, it's a particular challenge to talk about the realities of grief while also offering some kind of

encouragement. When I talk about how difficult and long-lasting grief can be, outsiders often say, “But you have to have hope!”

By this time, it’s probably not a surprise that I have issues with the use of the word *hope*. Whenever I read or hear somebody say, “You have to have hope,” I always add, usually in my head, “Hope in what?”

Hope is a word that needs an object: you have to have hope *in something*.

Before a loss, many people “hoped” for a good outcome (for example, cancer remission or that their friend would be found alive and well) and can no longer believe in the power of hoping for anything.

Inside grief, some people “hope” that they’ll survive whatever has erupted in their lives. They might hope to be happy again someday. Or they hope that their lives will get better from here on out, even better than they were before this loss happened.

Especially in my early grief, none of those definitions worked for me. Hoping for a better life just felt wrong. I loved my life. I loved who I was in my life. It felt wrong to think that Matt’s death could make anything *better*. Hoping to be happy again felt like I was leaving part of myself behind.

I could not hope in survival, in improvement, or in happiness. The hopes I had at the riverside evaporated when his body was found.

That’s the problem with hope. It’s so often presented as end-goal focused: hope for how things will look, how things will turn out later. It’s tied to a sense of control over the physical outcome of life: what you hope to *get*.

Insisting that we have hope in some kind of positive outcome is just another way our culture’s insistence on transformation and a happy ending shows itself. I can’t hope like that.

If we change our orientation to hope—moving from what we might get, to *how we might get there*—then hope is a concept I can get behind. We might not hope for a specific physical outcome, but instead hope to live this experience of loss in a way that is beautiful and personally meaningful.

There are so many ways to live inside this ever-changing relationship with grief, with love, with the person you lost, with yourself, and with life.

The most authentic hope I can offer you, or ask of you, is that you find ways to be true to yourself inside of this, inside all those changing

things. I hope that you keep looking for beauty, hope that you find and nurture a desire to even *want* to look for it. I hope that you reach for your connection to love, that you seek it out as your anchor and your constant, even when all else has gone dark.

MOVING WITH: WHAT'S YOUR IMAGE OF RECOVERY?

There's a great book called *Elegant Choices, Healing Choices* by Dr. Marsha Sinetar. It outlines exactly the kind of hope I'm talking about: in any situation, we can reach for the most elegant, well-skilled, compassionate path. Wanting that for yourself, reaching for it, even if you don't always attain it, is, to me, the foundation of both hope and recovery inside loss.

Recovery is less about becoming "good as new," or even moving past your intense grief, and more about living this experience with as much skill, self-kindness, and peace-of-being as you can. Recovery takes patience, and a willingness to sit with your own heart, even, and especially, when that heart has been irrevocably shattered.

In your own ways, and in your own time, you will find ways to stitch this experience into your life. It will change you, yes. You may become more empathetic, as you know how the wrong words can cut, even when well-intentioned. It may also make you more short-tempered, with a severely shortened fuse for other people's cruelty or ignorance. In fact, that happens for a lot of people: in loss, we often become protective of others' pain, correcting and redirecting others who would inflict more pain by trying to take it away.

Grief changes you. Who you become remains to be seen. You do not need to leave your grief behind in order to live a newly beautiful life. It's part of you. Our aim is integration, not obliteration.

ON SOVEREIGNTY

Whether we call it recovery or integration or some other term, what's most important is that you choose this path for yourself.

With so much outside pressure to do something different in your grief—more of this, less of that, you should really try this, how about

you start a foundation or run a marathon?—it can start to feel like your life is no longer your own. Everyone has an opinion. Everyone has an idea for how you might make meaning of this loss.

Before Matt died, and even more so now, sovereignty has been my personal bandwagon. Sovereignty is the state of having authority over your own life, making decisions based on your own knowledge of yourself, free of outside rule or domination. We're such an opinion-giving culture; it can be hard to remember that each person is an expert in their own life. Other people may have insight, yes, but the right to claim the *meaning* of your life belongs solely to you.

Because I am so sensitive to ideas of sovereignty and self-authority, any outside person telling me what my own recovery might look like is going to be met with irritation. But if I do the asking, if I wonder—*for myself*—what healing or recovery might look like, then it becomes a very different question.

It comes down to this: If you choose something for yourself, as a way of living this grief, it's perfect and beautiful. If something—even the very same thing—is foisted upon you by an outside force, it's probably not going to feel very good. The difference is in who claims it as the "correct" choice.

This is your life. You know yourself best. However you choose to live this life is the right choice. One of my teachers used to say, "It doesn't matter what choice you make; it matters that the choice be what is most true for you, based on who you know yourself to be."

Staying true to yourself, holding fiercely to your own heart, your own core—these are the things that will guide you.

MADE IN YOUR OWN IMAGE

It's important, especially in such a disorienting time, to give yourself an image to live into. Something to hope for. Something *yours*.

Remember, this isn't about improving you. You didn't need this loss. Recovery inside grief is entirely about finding those ways to stay true to yourself, to honor who you are, and what has come before, while living the days and years that remain. Recovery lies less in what you'll *do*, and more in how you'll approach your own heart, how you'll live this life that's asked of you.

If you are very, very new to this grief, this may not be the time to even wonder about healing. But if it feels right to gently question, asking yourself about your own recovery can be a genuine act of love and kindness.

IMAGINE RECOVERY

There are many ways to craft an image of your own recovery. To get started, you might write your responses to these questions:

Given that what I've lost cannot be restored, given that what was taken cannot be returned, what would healing look like?

If I step outside of the cultural norms of "rising above loss," what would *living this well* look like?

How will I care for myself?

What kind of person do I want to be, for myself, and for others?

While you can't know what events will happen in your life, you might wonder about how you want to *feel* inside your life. Do you hope for peace-of-being, or a sense of connection to self and others? What's the quality of heart and mind you'd like to cultivate? What can you reach for? What do you find hope in?

If you move your mind to the future, what does your grief look like? How have both love and loss been integrated? What does it feel like to carry this with you?

On a more practical level, what parts of early grief will you be glad to leave behind? Is there anything you can do, now, to help those parts soften or release?

You might write through your answers to create an overarching guide for this time in your life, or you might choose to ask yourself some of these questions on a daily basis, checking in with what might feel like recovery in this moment, on this day.

There certainly aren't easy answers to these questions. The answers themselves may change over time. But wondering about your own path forward is a gift you can give yourself. It starts when you ask yourself: If I can't *recover*, what would healing really be? What life do I want for myself?

If you need ideas of what recovery could look like, you might refer back to what you wrote in chapter 7: the wellness versus worseness exercise can give you clues.

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Throughout this part of the book, I've tried to give you tools to use to reduce your suffering and tend your pain. Remember that grief itself is not a problem, and as such, cannot be fixed. Grief is a natural process; it has an intelligence all its own. It will shift and change on its own. When we support the natural process of grief, rather than try to push it or rush it or clean it up, it gets softer. Your job is to tend to yourself as best you can, leaning into whatever love, kindness, and companionship you can. It's an experiment. An experiment you were thrown into against your will, but an experiment all the same.

Keep coming back to the exercises and suggestions I've shared here. As you live forward in this loss, your needs will likely change. Revisiting these tools can keep you in touch with the ways your heart and mind shift inside your grief.

In the next part, we turn from the internal process of grief to our needs for community, support, and connection. It's in that wider community that we find both our deepest comfort and our largest disappointments. In telling the truth about how our support systems fail, we begin to create communities capable of bearing witness to pain that can't be fixed.

PART III

WHEN FRIENDS AND FAMILY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

13

SHOULD YOU EDUCATE OR IGNORE THEM?

If you're like most grieving people, the response from people around you has been clumsy at best, and insulting, dismissive, and rude at worst. We talked about the deep roots of pain avoidance and the culture of blame in earlier parts of this book. It's also important to bring it all back to your personal life, to help you understand—and correct—the unhelpful support of the people around you.

Being dismissed, cheered up, or encouraged to "get over it" is one of the biggest causes of suffering inside grief.

There's a catch-22 in grief support: because we don't talk about the realities of grief in our culture, no one really knows how to help. The people who can best tell us how to help—grieving people themselves—don't have the energy, interest, or capacity to teach anyone how to be supportive. So we're stuck: friends and family want to help, grieving people want to feel supported, but no one gets what they want.

If we're going to get better at supporting each other, if we're going to get what we all want—to love and be loved—we need to talk about what isn't working. It's not easy, but it's important.

> "Showing up at my door ten days after my daughter died with a package of Pepperidge Farm smiley face cookies and telling me to smile, while you inanely grin at me, will not endear you to my broken heart. Expecting me to support you because the nature of our friendship has changed since my child has died

is more than I can handle. When I tell you I am not up for big social gatherings (by *big* I mean more than one other person), please believe that I know what I can and cannot deal with. My instinctive need to cocoon, to swaddle myself in this horror is what I need to do right now. And I can't do that with you being all judgy over my shoulders, telling me I am angry all the time. Fuck, yes, I am angry! MY DAUGHTER IS DEAD! So come back later when you are willing to be silent and listen and watch.

And then there is this:

My tragedy is not contagious; you will not catch your children's death from me. I know you don't know what to say. I wouldn't have a few months ago, either. A little advice? Don't platitude me. Do not start any sentences with the phrase "at least," for you will then witness my miraculous transformation into Grief Warrior. I will spout grief theory at you, tell you that Kübler-Ross was misinterpreted, that there is no timeline, no road or path in grief. We are all on our own here, in the gloom. I will ask you to please talk about my daughter. That I am terrified that she will be forgotten, that I will somehow forget her. I will remind you that I might tear up, or sob, but it's OK; this is my life now. This is how I exist, in the here-and-not-now.

LAURIE KRUG, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her daughter, Kat

BUT I'M JUST TRYING TO HELP!

"Everything happens for a reason." What a ridiculous, shame-based, reductionist, horrible thing to say to anyone—let alone someone in pain. What reason could there possibly be?

"He had a great life, and you were lucky to have him for as long as you did. Be grateful, and move on." As though a great life lived makes it OK that that great life is now over.

"At least you know you can have a baby. I can't even get pregnant." When did the death of my baby turn into a story about your life?

"Cheer up! Things can't possibly be as bad as your expression makes them seem." Why do random strangers insist on telling me I should be

happier?

The things we say to one another. The things we do, insisting that we're trying to help.

It's the most common, most universal, feedback I get from grieving people: the way they're treated in their grief is horrendous. People say the most incredibly insensitive and cruel things to people in pain. Sometimes they mean to. Sometimes people are mean and insensitive and cruel because that is who they are. Fortunately, those people are easier to ignore. But the ones who truly love you, the ones who desperately want to help? The things they say, the ways they entirely miss the pain you're in, they're much harder to deal with.

We know they mean well. We can see it on their faces, hear it in their voices: they want so badly to make this better. That they can't make it better just makes them try harder.

But you can't say that. You can't tell them they aren't helping. That just makes it worse.

JUST BE POLITE

When I talk about how badly we support people in pain, I get one of two responses: from grieving people, I hear "Thank you for saying this!" and from those outside others' pain I hear "We're only trying to help! Why are you so negative?"

The backlash is inevitable: "People mean well!" "They're only trying to help!" and even "You're clearly not evolved enough to hear the message underneath their words." The angriest letters I receive are from people trying their best to support someone they love, and here I am telling them that they're doing it wrong. Telling them that the words they use somehow *imply* hurtful, mean, dismissive things, when the very last thing they intend is to cause more harm. How can I be so heartless, so negative, so unable to see that they're doing their best? They mean well. I need to start looking for the good, be more grateful and more gracious, stop sounding so angry and mean.

Here's the thing: I tell the truth about what it's like to feel unsupported and dismissed inside grief. I tell the truth about how much we fail each other. I'm not afraid to say what grieving people all over the

world think to themselves a million times every single day. I'm not afraid to say, out loud, "You are not helping."

I'm not being negative. I'm telling the truth.

We have a gag order on telling the truth. Not just the truth about grief, but the truth about how it feels to be a grieving person in our culture. We're trained to be polite. We're supposed to smile and nod and say, thanks for thinking of me, when inside, what we really want to do is scream, *"What the fuck are you thinking, saying that to me?"*

When I open a new community space for the writing course, I'm always struck by the number of people who say, "This is the first place I can be completely honest about my grief. No one else wants to hear about it, or they tell me I'm doing it wrong."

Many grieving people have told me that rather than tell people their words aren't helpful, they've chosen to stop speaking altogether. When you stop telling the truth because other people don't like it, that's a gigantic, unnecessary injustice on top of your pain.

No one likes to be told they're doing something wrong. But if we can't say what's true for us inside our grief, what's the point? If we can't say, "This doesn't help," without being shamed or corrected, how are people supposed to know what we need? If we don't say anything, if we instead smile and nod and excuse people because they "mean well," how will anything ever change?

Having your truth dismissed always feels bad. I didn't like it when it was done to me, and I hate it when it's done to you. I'm not immune to fits of anger when it comes to this.

Personally, I believe in what the mystics call "holy outrage"—the anger that fuels truth telling. It's the anger that points out injustice and silencing, not just to make a scene, but because it knows what true community *might* be.

Holy outrage means telling the truth, no matter who gets offended by the telling. And equally important, it means doing so in the service of more love, more support, more kinship, and true connection.

I spend so much time talking about the reality of unhelpful grief support because I want it to get better. I need it to get better. And so do you. So do the millions of people who will enter this grief world after us. It has to get better. So we have to start telling the truth.

It's not enough to say, "They mean well." It's not enough for someone to say they want to be of comfort, but insist on using words that

feel dismissive or rude.

If someone truly wants to help you inside your grief, they have to be willing to hear what doesn't help. They have to be willing to feel the discomfort of not knowing what to say or how to say it. They have to be open to feedback. Otherwise they aren't really interested in helping—they're interested in being *seen* as helpful. There's a difference.

No one knows the right thing to say. That's why it's important to have these dialogues. Not so that we get it right, but so that we do it better.

DECIDING WHO WARRANTS CARE AND EFFORT

Educating people about the reality of grief is important—and sometimes you just don't have it in you to care if they get it or not. Sometimes it makes it easier on you if you simply stop trying to explain. At least stop trying to explain to most people. The trick is deciding who warrants your time and energy and who can be safely ignored. Once you've decided who deserves attention, the next step is helping them to help you—without adding more stress to your mind and heart.

None of this is easy.

If what I say here helps you educate and inform the kind-hearted, well-intentioned people in your life, great.

And if you can't find the energy to educate and inform, here: let me. Use this chapter, and the next (and the "How to Help a Grieving Friend" essay in the appendix), to help the people in your life understand, if even just a little more, what it's like to be living this grief. We can educate them, together.

ASSUMPTIONS. EVERYBODY'S GOT 'EM

How many times has someone come up to you and said, "You must feel so (fill in the blank)" or "I saw you standing there in line, thinking of your husband—I could tell by the way you looked off into space."

Or you find out, days or weeks after the fact, that someone's feelings were hurt when you didn't respond to them in a certain way, or that you

didn't seem to want to talk to them. Meanwhile, you have no recollection of even seeing them at all.

Or people launch into long speeches about what you should do to fix your pain because this is what they did when (fill in the blank) happened to them. How stunningly odd that is, to hear that you might just need to go out dancing after your child dies because that's what the speaker needed after their divorce.

I remember how often people outside my grief would go on and on about my finding someone new, that my life would be great again one day, and that Matt would want these things for me. They would talk for such a long time, giving me pep talks, solving problems for me—problems that I hadn't articulated and wasn't actually experiencing.

So often in grief, we're told by people *outside our experience* what the experience is like for us: what it means, what it feels like, what it *should* feel like. They take their own experiences, their own guesses about what we're really wrestling with, and offer their support based on their own internal views. People take our social reactions—or nonreactions—personally, ascribing meaning to them without ever checking out their assumptions.

Making assumptions is normal. Everyone does it.

In our everyday lives, our own lived reality is usually far different from what others assume. In grief, that gulf between assumption and actuality is even wider. There is so much room for misunderstanding, and so little interest, or energy, in the griever to track down or correct those misunderstandings. It all adds to the exhausting experience of grief.

Just as in regular, non-grief times, there's likely a range of people in your life, from the truly kind and loving to the indifferent, self-absorbed, and strange. There are people who don't care one bit about your pain, and people who are far more concerned with being seen as helpful and important than they are in actually *being* helpful. Trauma and loss also bring out voyeuristic responses from some people, especially if your loss was made public with a "news" campaign.

All these people, even the great ones, are weird and awkward in the face of grief. They just show it in different ways.

It's tempting to write everyone off—no one gets it. No one understands. Living in grief can feel like you've moved to an entirely different planet, or make you wish you could.

It would be so great to be able to just transmit, without speaking, the reality of this loss in your life. To have people feel—just for thirty seconds—what it is you carry every second of every day. It would clear up so much misunderstanding. It would stop so much unhelpful "help" before it ever reached your ears. But we don't have that. We have words, and descriptions, and endless attempts to be understood and to understand.

The excessive, unrelenting need to describe your grief to someone, or correct their assumptions, just so they can support you better is one of those added cruelties inside grief.

TO SHARE OR NOT TO SHARE: HOW DO YOU TELL PEOPLE YOUR STORY?

In the early days after Matt died, I told everyone what happened. I couldn't help it. I cried easily, and often. People asked, and I told them. After a while, it felt weird and wrong, and too exposed, to give people this information. I got tired of the probing questions, the pitying looks, the hand placed softly on my forearm as a stranger leaned in to hear the details of my life.

And to be completely honest—not everyone deserved to have this most intimate information.

Do you have people in your life who don't deserve to know about your grief or who you've lost?

I'm talking about those people who don't handle the information with the skill and reverence and grace it deserves. I'm talking about the people who respond to this delicate information with the skill of a raging elephant—stomping around, asking questions, or worse, brushing it off like it was no big thing.

There are also just times when you want to keep your head down, get your groceries, walk the dog, and not feel you have to dive into your grief with every random person who stops you on the street to ask, "How are you *really*?"

Some people feel that they have to respond to every question about how they're doing, regardless of the actual relationship they have with the person asking.

Lots of people feel horrible if they don't mention the one they've lost, as if by not saying something, they're erasing the person, denying their central place in their lives. A lot of people feel awful when they sidestep and evade questions they'd rather not answer.

As with all other times in life, you do not have to do anything that goes against your own safety—whether that is physical or emotional.

If you choose to not reveal your inner life, your broken heart, or even the cold hard facts to other people, you are not betraying the one you've lost. Though it feels bizarre to talk around the gaping hole in your life, to answer, "I'm fine, thanks" to a routine question when you are not in any way fine really is a kindness to yourself. It *can* be a kindness to yourself.

Not everyone deserves to hear your grief. Not everyone is *capable* of hearing it. Just because someone is thoughtful enough to ask doesn't mean you are obliged to answer.

Part of living with grief is learning to discern who is safe and who is not, who is worthy and who is not. Part of living with grief is also learning to discern, for yourself, your own right timing in sharing this with others.

It's OK to be cautious about what you share and when. Your grief is not an open book, and it doesn't have to be. When, where, and with whom you share will shift and change over time, and sometimes even within the same day, but you always get to choose.

Those who support your shifting needs are the ones to keep in your life. The others? They can be set free.

> "The baby died."
>
> "Oh my god, I'm so sorry," she breathes. She is full of apologies, and I believe they are sincere. Yet she doesn't leave right away. "How did the baby die?" she asks.
>
> A and I look at each other again. Is this woman for real? She expects us to relive the past forty-eight hours to satisfy her curiosity?
>
> We answer her because we believe we must. Because we believe everything the hospital tells us. We endure all that happens to and around us, because we don't know any better. Because we are in shock. Because who comes prepared to deal with a dead baby?

> It is not in our nature to be so rude as to say, "None of your goddamn fucking business." So we tell her. Cord accident. Short, clipped answers. Hoping she will stop. Hoping she will go away.
>
> **BURNING EYE, in her essay, "Milk," on Glow in the Woods**

GRIEF REARRANGES YOUR ADDRESS BOOK

It's kind of a dorky statement, but it is true that grief rearranges your address book. It's amazing how many people drop out of your life in the wake of catastrophic loss. People who have been with you through thick and thin suddenly disappear, or turn dismissive, shaming, strange. Random strangers become your biggest, deepest source of comfort, if even only for a few moments.

It's one of the hardest aspects of grief—seeing who cannot be with you inside this. Some people fade out and disappear. Others are so clueless, so cruel (intentionally or not), you choose to fade out on them.

I dropped a lot of people in my life after Matt died. I simply could not tolerate them anymore: sudden, accidental death and its aftermath really highlights even the smallest relational mismatch. I gained a lot of people in my life—people whose skill and love surprised me, supported me, helped me survive. And a small handful of my dearest friends stayed beside me the entire time, through those brutal early days and beyond.

Grief can be incredibly lonely. Even when people show up and love you as best they can, they aren't really with you in this. They can't be. It so very much sucks that, in large part, you *are* in this alone. And also, you can't do this alone.

You may find that people come in and out of your life during this time. There are people who were instrumental in helping me survive those first few weeks who eventually moved back into their own lives, their own needs. They came into my life for a time, and then we let each other go. It hurt, that they had their own intact lives to get back to, but for a time, I was everything for them, and I knew it. Good people will show up as they can, for as long as they can. That they leave is not a failure, even though it hurts.

If there are people in your life you love, who love you, but this whole grief thing is making things a little clunky, it's OK. Grief is difficult on

everything; relationships are not immune. There will be people who can handle the choppy relationship bits and make it through with you. Hopefully the love and trust you've built together is resilient, giving you a net to fall into.

But not everyone will make it through this with you. Not everyone *should*.

It's true in all of life, but even more so inside grief: there is no time for relationships that make you feel small, shamed, or unsupported. This is your grief. Your loss. Your life. Honestly, this isn't really the time for relationship repair, or excessive social graces. It doesn't matter if some people *think* they're helping: if their form of support feels dismissive, judgmental, or just plain wrong, you do not have to keep them as friends.

If there are people in your life causing more harm than good, it's OK to cut them out. Your life is very different now, and some people simply do not fit.

For those who cannot make the transition with you into this new, unasked-for life, it's OK to bow to them, bow to the friendship you've shared, and let them go. It's not their fault. It's not yours. It's part of grief. Sometimes the best form of love is to let people go.

> Traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships: with families, loved ones, AA meetings, veterans' organizations, religious communities, or professional therapists. The role of those relationships is to provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what has happened.
>
> **BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma***

STEP AWAY FROM THE MADNESS: HOW TO STOP ARGUING ABOUT GRIEF

It really is a kindness to remove certain people from your life when you're in this much pain. But what about those people you can't cut out of your life, those permanent fixtures who are not supportive of you in

any way? Those people who insist on cheering you up, or checking to see if you're over this yet? You can't always walk away from family members, or people you see consistently inside your chosen communities.

A newsletter reader sent me this question: "How can I deal with people who expect me to be 'over this' already? My fiancée died almost two years ago. How can I convince them it's all right that I'm not 'over it'?"

Though this question was sent by one reader, lots of people struggle with this issue. So many people expect you to be over it, if not already, then certainly in the very near future. They can't possibly understand what it's like to be you, to live inside grief like this. They want the "old" you back, not understanding that that old you can't come back. That self is gone.

It's so tempting, so easy, to be drawn into arguments, or to defend your right to your grief.

The thing is, no matter how much you say, no matter how much you try to educate them, they *can't* understand. As tempting as it is to give them that verbal smackdown (even nicely), your words aren't ever going to get through.

So what can you do?

Sometimes it just makes it easier on you, easier on your heart and mind, if you simply stop trying to explain.

▪ ▪ ▪

Refusing to explain or defend your grief doesn't mean you let other people go on and on about it, continually telling you how you should live. I'm talking about stepping out of the argument altogether by simply refusing to engage in debates about whether or not your continued grief is *valid*.

Defending yourself against someone who cannot possibly understand is a waste of your time and your heart.

The important thing to remember is that your grief, like your love, belongs to you. No one has the right to dictate, judge, or dismiss what is yours to live.

That they don't have the right to judge doesn't stop them from doing it, however.

What that means is: If you want to stop *hearing* their judgment, you'll need to clarify your boundaries. You'll need to make it clear that your grief is not up for debate.

STEP AWAY

While it's certainly easier said than done, there are steps you can take to remove yourself from the debate:

1. Clearly and calmly address their concern.
2. Clarify your boundaries.
3. Redirect the conversation.

These three steps, when used consistently, can significantly reduce the amount of judgment that makes it to your ears. Here's how this might look in actual practice:

First, acknowledge their concern while presuming friendly intent: "I appreciate your interest in my life."

Second, clarify your boundaries: "I am going to live this the way that feels right to me, and I'm not interested in discussing it."

Steps one and two—addressing their concerns and clarifying your boundaries—often get combined in one statement: "I appreciate your interest in my life. I'm going to live this the way that feels right to me, and I'm not interested in discussing it."

This can be especially effective when you follow your statement with step number three, redirecting the conversation, aka changing the subject: "I'm happy to talk about something else, but this is not open for discussion."

It sounds wooden and strange, I know. But the message here—including the formal wording—is that you have a clear boundary, and you will not allow it to be breached in any way.

If there are people in your life who won't take such a clear boundary without further argument, you can stick to a stock phrase, "That isn't a topic I'll discuss," and then move the conversation on to something else.

If they can't do that, you can end the conversation completely—walk away, or say good-bye and hang up.

The important thing is to not allow yourself to be drawn into battle. Your grief is not an argument. It doesn't need to be defended.

It's awkward at first, but clarifying your boundaries and redirecting the conversation will become a lot easier the more you practice it.

Eventually, the people in your life will either get the message—not that you don't have to be over it, but that *you aren't willing to discuss it*—or they will leave. Even those people who seem immoveable and permanent will fall away if they have to.

The thing is, grief will absolutely rearrange your relationships. Some people will make it through, and some will fall away. Some people you thought would always be by your side will disappear entirely. People who were at the periphery of your life might step up and support you in ways you didn't see coming.

If the people in your life can handle, even appreciate, you staying true to your own heart, then they'll make it through with you. If they can't, let them go: gracefully, *clearly*, and with love.

14

RALLYING YOUR SUPPORT TEAM

Helping Them Help You

Our friends, our families, our therapists, our books, our cultural responses—they're all most useful, most loving and kind, when they help those in grief to carry their pain, and least helpful when they try to fix what isn't broken.

Most people want to help; they just don't know how.

There's such a huge gap between what people want for us, and what they actually provide with their support. It's no one's fault, really. The only way to close that gap is to let people know what works, what doesn't, and how we can all improve our skills in caring for each other.

Just because your grief can't be fixed doesn't mean there's nothing for your support teams to *do*. There are tangible, concrete ways to support people in grief. It just takes practice, and a willingness to love each other in new and different ways.

By shifting the focus away from fixing your grief onto actually supporting you *inside* it, friends and family can get that much closer to showing you the love they intend. They can make this better, even when they can't make it right.

I want you to be able to hand this book off to friends and family members who want to help you. I want you to direct them to the guidelines and suggestions in this chapter, so that you do not expend any of your energy in explaining your needs. The tools here will help them learn how to love you in this, how to come up alongside you, right inside your pain, without trying to cheer you up.

This chapter, more than any other, speaks to your support team rather than directly to you.

> When my friend Chris's young son died, I told her about how my therapist used to ask our group to "be like the elephants" and gather around the wounded member. I knew I couldn't really help her process the grief, but I could be there, at first just a body sitting close to her, later a voice on the phone. She told her friends about the elephants, and people started giving her little gifts or cards with elephants, just saying "I'm here." Gather your elephants, love. We are here.
>
> **GLORIA FLYNN, friend of the author, in a personal message**

SHIFTING FROM GRIEF AS A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED TO AN EXPERIENCE NEEDING SUPPORT

If you're feeling frustrated and helpless in the face of someone's grief—you're normal. It's not your fault that you don't know what to do when you're faced with great pain in yourself or someone you love. Our models are broken.

We've got a medical model in Western culture that says that death is failure. We've got a psychological model that says anything other than a stable baseline of "happy" is an aberration. Illness, sadness, pain, death, grief—they're all seen as problems in need of solutions. How can you possibly be expected to handle grief with any skill when all of our models show the wrong approach?

Grief is not a problem. It doesn't need solutions.

Seeing grief as an experience that needs support, rather than solutions, changes everything.

It may seem like a small shift, just the change of a few words. Think of the space shuttle: two degrees difference on the ground translates into thousands of miles through space. The foundation you stand on as you approach grief influences everything—you will either get where you most truly wish to go (to love and support the people in your life), or you will fly wildly off course.

Let me give you an example. If you feel that grief is a problem, you will offer solutions: *You should get rid of her clothes. He's in a better*

place now, so try to be happy. You can't just sit around and be sad all the time; they wouldn't want that for you. Maybe you should get out more.

You will encourage your grieving friend or loved one to do what you suggest because you're trying to relieve their pain—they have a problem, and you're doing your best to solve it. You get frustrated because your friend seems defensive. They don't want to take your advice.

The more you try to help—aka fix it—the more obstinate they become. Clearly, they don't want to get better.

The griever, on the other hand, knows that their grief is not something that can be fixed. They know there is nothing wrong with them. They don't have a "problem." The more people try to fix their grief, the more frustrated (and defensive) they feel. The griever is frustrated because they don't need solutions. They need support. Support to live what is happening. Support to carry what they are required to carry.

Grieving people expend a lot of energy defending their grief instead of feeling supported in their experience of it. Support people feel unwanted, unappreciated, and utterly helpless. This isn't working.

Even when you mean well, trying to fix grief is always going to turn out badly. This may be hard to hear, but if you truly want to be helpful and supportive, you need to stop thinking that grief is a problem to be solved.

When you shift to thinking of grief as an experience to be supported, loved, and witnessed, then we can *really* talk about what helps. When we stand on the same ground together, our words and actions can be truly supportive and useful.

The good news is that there are skills here. Just because there aren't *many* models of how to support someone doesn't mean there aren't *any*. There are things you can do—not to make your friend's grief go away, but to help them feel companioned and loved inside it.

NEW MODELS AND GOOD EXAMPLES

We cover a lot of territory in this chapter. First, I want to thank you for showing up, for wanting to help. Being with someone while they're grieving is incredibly hard work. None of this is easy. It can be uncomfortable to hear what doesn't help, especially when your heart

really *is* in the right place. Throughout everything we say here, please remember that simply by wanting to be supportive, wanting to do the big, deep, heavy, hard work of loving someone inside their pain, you are doing good things.

I spend a lot of time talking about all the ways we fail to support grieving people. But it's not enough to simply state what's gone wrong. In order to move forward together, we need a new image of what grief support really is, or what it could be: an image for us to live into.

When a bone is broken, it needs a supportive cast around it to help it heal. It needs external support so it can go about the intricate, complex, difficult process of growing itself back together. Your task is to be part of that cast for your broken friend. Not to do the actual mending. Not to offer pep talks to the broken places about how they're going to be great again. Not to offer suggestions about how the bone might go about becoming whole. Your task is to simply—be there. Wrap yourself around what is broken.

Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to bear witness to something beautiful and terrible—and to resist the very human urge to fix it or make it right.

And that's hard.

LEARNING TO BEAR WITNESS

Even knowing what I know, even with what I personally experienced, even with what my students have told me again and again, I still find myself tempted to greet someone's pain with words of comfort. Those worn-out platitudes and empty condolences like "At least you gave him a good life" or "This, too, shall pass" still jump into my mind.

With everything I know about the reality of grief, what helps and what does not, I *still* want to make it better.

We all have that impulse to help. We see suffering, and we want it to stop. We see pain, and we want to intervene. We want so badly for things to be OK. That impulse to love and to soothe is human. It's part of why we're here.

We don't like to see those we love in pain.

When I ask you to respond differently, I'm not telling you to suppress that impulse to remove someone's pain. That would be impossible. What

I *am* asking is that you notice your impulse to make things better, and then—don't act on it. Pause before you offer support or guidance or encouragement.

In that pause, you get to decide what the best course of action truly is. Acknowledgment of the reality of pain is usually a far better response than trying to fix it. Bearing witness is what is most called for. Does your friend need to be heard? Do they need to have the reality of the pure, utter suckage of this validated and mirrored back to them?

It seems counterintuitive, but the way to truly be helpful to someone in pain is to *let them have their pain*. Let them share the reality of how much this hurts, how hard this is, without jumping in to clean it up, make it smaller, or make it go away. That pause between the impulse to help and taking action lets you come to pain with skill, and with love. That pause lets you remember that your role is that of witness, not problem solver.

IT'S OK TO BE WEIRD ABOUT IT

It's so much harder to say, "This sucks, and there's nothing I can do. But I'm here, and I love you," rather than offer those standard words of comfort. It's so much harder, and so much more useful, loving, and kind. You can't heal someone's pain by trying to take it away from them. Acknowledgment of pain is a relief. How much softer this all becomes when we are allowed to tell the truth.

In his essay "The Gift of Presence, the Perils of Advice," author and educator Parker Palmer writes, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul's healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through."[1]

We are all, as the mystics sometimes say, part of the cloud of witnesses. In the face of pain that can't be fixed—in ourselves, in each other, in the world—we are called to bear witness. To acknowledge the reality of how much it hurts to be here, sometimes. How much life asks of us.

The role of the support team is to acknowledge and companion those in pain, not try to make it better. These are high-level skills. They aren't always easy to practice. But they *are* simple: Show up. Listen. Don't fix.

Sometimes we're clunky as we learn these new skills. That's OK.

▪ ▪ ▪

Grieving people would much rather have you stumble through your acts of bearing witness than have you confidently assert that things are not as bad as they seem.

You can't always change pain, but you can change how you *hear* pain, how you *respond* to pain. When pain exists, let it exist. Bear witness. Make it safe for the other to say "This hurts," without rushing in to clean it up. Make space for each other.

As a support person, companionship inside what hurts is what is asked of you. By not offering solutions for what cannot be fixed, you can make things better, even when you can't make them right.

HOW DO WE BECOME PEOPLE WHO "GET IT"?

It's really hard to love someone in pain. I know.

It would be cool to have a code word, or a badge or something, that warns people of the delicate, often no-win predicament of supporting someone in pain. When Matt first died, I wanted a button that said, "Please excuse my behavior. My partner just died, and I am not myself."

It would be great if people came with care instructions: *When I feel sad, please do this. You'll know to back off when you see me do or say these things.* Unfortunately (or fortunately), we aren't mind readers. We can get better at hearing what others need by practicing attention and open communication throughout all of our lives, across all of our relationships.

Like any other skill, bearing witness to pain will get easier the more you practice it. Knowing how to respond will become more intuitive. What feels clunky and exposed will eventually become—not easy, but much, much easier.

These are skills you're always going to need. You will experience and witness pain often in your life. From smaller stressors to catastrophic

losses, grief is everywhere.

The call to bear witness to pain is something we all need to learn. If you're already good at it in other areas of your life, draw on that inside your friend's grief. The more intense the pain you are called to witness, the more tempting it is to try and remove that pain. Stay still. It's OK to flinch when you see the pain we're in; just please, don't turn away from it. And don't ask us to.

ENOUGH WITH THE POETRY, WHAT ARE THE SKILLS?

It's important to talk about the deeper, larger sweep of what it means to companion someone in their grief. At the same time, we do need tangible, concrete things to *do* in the face of someone's pain. You're not meant to just—I don't know—hang out and beam love. (I mean, do that. But there are other things, too.)

Show Up, Say Something

There's a complicated dance that happens between grieving people and their support teams: most people want to be supportive, but they don't want to intrude. Or they're terrified of making things worse, so they say nothing. They pull away rather than risk an imperfect connection.

In an article for *The Guardian*, writer Giles Fraser calls this "a double loneliness"—on top of the loss of someone they love, the griever loses the connection and alliance of the people around them.[2] For fear of making things worse, people disappear and go silent just when we need them most.

I used to tell my friends that there was no way they could win. If they called me to check in too often, they were crowding me. If they didn't call often enough, they were dropping the ball, ignoring me. If I ran into someone at the grocery store and they said nothing, I felt invisible. If they wanted to talk about how I was feeling, right there in the produce section, I felt invaded.

Caring for each other is hard. It's all such a mess, at times.

The important thing to remember is that we don't need you to be perfect. It's OK—more than OK—to lead a conversation with, "I have

no idea what to say, and I know I can't make this right." Or, "I want to give you space and privacy, but I'm also worried about you, and I want to check in." Claiming your discomfort allows you to show up and be present. Trying to hide your discomfort just makes things worse. From the griever's perspective, it's a huge relief to be around those who are willing to be uncomfortable and show up anyway.

If you aren't sure you should say something—ask. Err on the side of being present. Your effort really is noticed and appreciated.

Do This, Not That: A Handy Checklist

Often, when I talk about bearing witness and being with what is, people respond with, "Yeah, yeah, I can do that. But what are the things I should absolutely avoid doing?"

I understand that you want a road map. We all like concrete action steps, especially when faced with the amorphous, daunting task of supporting someone in their grief. There's an essay in the appendix that summarizes how to truly be helpful inside someone's grief, so check that out. And here are a few more points that can be made:

Don't compare griefs. Every person has experienced loss in their life, but no one else has experienced *this grief*. It's tempting to offer your own experience of grief to let the grieving person know you understand. But you don't understand. You can't. Even if your loss is empirically very similar, resist the urge to use your own experience as a point of connection.

Do: Ask questions about their experience. You can connect with someone by showing curiosity about what this is like for them. If you *have* had a similar experience, it's OK to let them know you're familiar with how bizarre and overwhelming grief can be. Just stick to indications that you know the general territory, not that you know their specific road.

Don't fact-check, and don't correct. Especially in early grief, a person's timeline and internal data sources are rather confused and wonky. They may get dates wrong, or remember things differently

than they actually happened. You may have a different opinion about their relationships, or what happened when and with whom. Resist the urge to challenge or correct them.

Do: Let them own their own experience. It's not important who's "more" correct.

Don't minimize. You might think your friend's grief is out of proportion to the situation. It's tempting to correct their point of view to something you feel is more "realistic."

Do: Remember that grief belongs to the griever. Your opinions about their grief are irrelevant. They get to decide how bad things feel, just as you get to make such decisions in your own life.

Don't give compliments. When someone you love is in pain, they don't need to be reminded that they're smart, beautiful, resourceful, or a fantastically good person. Don't tell them that they're strong or brave. Grief isn't typically a failure of confidence.

Do: Remember that all those things you love about the person, all those things you admire, will help them as they move through this experience. Remind them that you're there, and that they can always lean on you when the load of grief gets too heavy to carry alone. Let them be a right awful mess, without feeling they need to show you a brave, courageous face.

Don't be a cheerleader. When things are dark, it's OK to be dark. Not every corner needs the bright light of encouragement. In a similar vein, don't encourage someone to have gratitude for the good things that still exist. Good things and horrible things occupy the same space; they don't cancel each other out.

Do: Mirror their reality back to them. When they say, "This entirely sucks," say, "Yes, it does." It's amazing how much that helps.

Don't talk about "later." When someone you love is in pain, it's tempting to talk about how great things are going to be for them in the future. Right now, in this present moment, that future is irrelevant.

Do: Stay in the present moment, or, if the person is talking about the past, join them there. Allow them to choose.

Don't evangelize (part one). "You should go out dancing; that's what helped me." "Have you tried essential oils to cheer you up?" "Melatonin always helps me sleep. You should try it." When you've found something that works for you, it's tempting to globalize that experience for everyone else. Unfortunately, unless the person specifically asked for a suggestion or information, your enthusiastic plugs are going to feel offensive and—honestly—patronizing.

Do: Trust that the person has intelligence and experience in their own self-care. If they aren't sleeping well, they've probably talked to a trusted provider, or done a simple Google search themselves. If you see them struggling, it's OK to *ask* if they'd like to hear what's helped you in the past.

Don't charge ahead with solutions (evangelizing, part two). In all things, not just in grief, it's important to get consent before giving advice or offering strategies. In most cases, the person simply needs to be heard and validated inside their pain or their challenges.

Do: Get consent. Before you offer solutions or strategies, you might borrow my friend and colleague Kate McCombs's question: "Are you wanting empathy or a strategy right now?" Respect their answer.

There are probably a million more points to make about what to do or not to do, but this list is a good starting place. It's not that all of these "don't" approaches are bad; it's simply that they aren't effective. When your goal is to support your friend, choose things that are more likely to help you achieve that goal.

HOW COME THIS ISN'T HELPING? I'M DOING ALL THE RIGHT THINGS

There's something important you need to know: sometimes, you can do everything right, and your friend will still refuse to answer your texts, show up to your party, or otherwise show that your careful attention is helping them at all.

Remember that evidence of "helping" is not in the reduction of pain; it's in knowing the grieving person feels supported and acknowledged inside their pain. But even if your intention is to support them, it still might not feel so awesome for your friend.

Your intention is important, but it's how things feel *to the grieving person* that defines how well this goes.

A long time ago, I was a sexual violence awareness educator; I spoke often about what defines sexual harassment. Some years after Matt died, I was talking to an editor friend. We'd been wondering how to describe the mismatch between what someone intends and what the grieving person experiences. I brought up the similarities between sexual harassment and grief support. My friend freaked at that comparison: "You can't tell someone who's trying to help that they're just like someone who sexually harasses!" Of course not! Sexual harassment is a completely different thing. But what I'm saying is that there are correlations there—in that the reality of the situation is defined by the *receiver* of the attention, not by the intentions of the person giving the attention. How it lands is everything. You don't have to agree with how the grieving person feels about what you've said or offered, but you do have to respect it.

Just because you mean well doesn't mean your friend receives it that way. It's always important to check. Checking in to see how things are going is an act of kindness that goes a long way in making all this better.

Remember, your goal is to truly be of service and support. That means being willing to let go of what you *think* will help and being genuinely curious—and responsive—to what your friend needs.

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY (DON'T OVERWHELM WITH YOUR LOVE AND ATTENTION!)

Honestly, when it comes to grief support, I find it easier to educate the truly ignorant than I do the earnest. When someone not in my life slapped a platitude or a dismissive comment on my grief, I had no problem correcting them. But the people in my life who loved me, who so very badly wanted to help and show up and be there—they were almost too much to bear. I didn't have it in me to correct their assumptions or advice. Their attention was sometimes exhausting. In early grief, the person you love has such a low reserve of energy, they simply cannot show up for your friendship—or even for themselves—in the ways you might be used to. As I keep saying, grief is impossible. No one can win.

I've just said that you should ask your friend questions, be curious about what this is like for them, be sure to check how your actions are landing and reassess as needed. And sometimes, the more proactive you are in showing your support, in asking them for their feedback so you can be more useful, the more they seem to shut down.

Let me give you an example because this is really delicate territory: I had wonderful friends in my life before Matt died. Emotionally skilled, responsive, beautiful friends. At times, our interactions in my early grief were incredibly draining precisely *because* they wanted to know what they could do to help. They asked. And they asked. And they asked. How best to acknowledge. How best to attend. How best to ask questions, how best to give space. That pressure to tell them how to care for me was too much. It made me shy away. I simply did not have the energy to articulate my needs. Being asked, repeatedly, to offer feedback and suggestions exhausted me. At times, it made me avoid the best people in my life.

Think of it like this: your grieving person spoke a language that only one other person in the world spoke, and that person died. It's tempting to ask the grieving person to teach you that language so that you can speak it to them. No matter how much you want to speak to them, to give them back what they've lost, they can't teach you the language. Coming out of their pain to teach you syntax and grammar and vocabulary so that they can then return to their mute state is simply impossible. They cannot do it. They cannot access that part of their mind that forms lessons and offers feedback.

In a way, I'm asking you for two contradictory things: lean in and hang back. Respond to your friend, be curious and responsive to their

needs. At the same time, don't ask the grieving person to do more work. Observe how things are landing for them, but in those early days, please don't expect—or demand—that they show up with their normal emotional-relational skills. They do not have them. Asking the grieving person to educate you on how best to help is simply not something they can do.

It *is* on the griever to speak up when something doesn't help. It's just unlikely that they'll do so. It's the griever's responsibility to ask for what they need. It's just unlikely that they'll do so. Draw on what you know of them, from the time before grief ripped into their lives. Use it as a compass to guide you.

Don't give up.

Here is what grieving people want you to know: We love you. We still love you, even if our lives have gone completely dark, and you can't seem to reach us. Please stay.

It's an immense relief to spend time with people who can be with the reality of grief without saying much. It's a relief to be with people who can roll with whatever comes up—from laughing maniacally to sobbing uncontrollably in the space of a few minutes. Your evenness, your steadiness of presence, is the absolutely best thing you can give.

You can't do this perfectly, and we don't expect you to. You can only aim toward more love.

For all you've done, for all you've tried to do, we appreciate your effort. Thank you.

For more information on how to support people in their grief, please refer to "How to Help a Grieving Friend" in the appendix.

PART IV

THE WAY FORWARD

15

THE TRIBE OF AFTER

Companionship, True Hope, and the Way Forward

Companionship, reflection, and connection are vital parts of surviving grief. As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, attachment is survival. We need each other.

Grief is already a lonely experience. It rearranges your address book: people you thought would stay beside you through anything have either disappeared or they've behaved so badly, you cut them out yourself. Even those who truly love you, who want more than anything to stay beside you, fall short of joining you here. It can feel like you lost the entire world right along with the person who died. Many grieving people feel like they're on another planet, or wish they could go to one. Somewhere there are others like them. People who understand.

We all need a place where we can tell the truth about how hard this is. We all need a place where we can share what's really going on, without feeling corrected or talked out of anything. While some friends and family can do this well, I've found that it's the community of fellow grievers that understands this best.

I've known my friend Elea for years now. We originally met online, and we didn't meet in person until long after we'd become friends. She was biking through Oregon one summer, so we decided to meet up in Seaside. When I got to Seaside, there were hundreds and hundreds of people milling around, and I had this moment of real social anxiety: "How am I going to recognize her with all these people? I've only ever seen her picture. It's not like you can just walk up to somebody and say, 'Excuse me, do you know me?'" But then I thought, *Well, she's going to*

have her son, Vasu, with her, so I'll just look for him. I mean, I would know that kid anywhere. I'll just look for Vasu.

It took several seconds before I remembered: Vasu is dead. He died the same year as Matt. We never met. The only reason I know my friend Elea is because her son is dead. In fact, the only reason I know a lot of people in my life is because someone is dead.

These people are the reason I survived.

Much of what is beautiful in my life now comes from the community of other grievers: it's one of the few true gifts of loss. Every one of us would trade the community we found for the life we'd lost, and we can say so without remorse. And every one of us will fiercely love, guard, protect, and honor the others we have met here, in this life we didn't want.

> "My heart is shattered, still. It is healing, slowly, in the ways that it can mend. It will always have holes in it, and maybe some other evidence of deep, painful loss, and it will never be the same as it was Before. It is both stronger and more fragile. More open, and still, closed off.
>
> Our losses are different, but I recognize yours. I hear your words and feel pain because it all traces down to the same roots. I recognize your pain because I've felt my own. Our stories aren't the same, and the name for our loss or the relationship we grieve may be different, but I want you to know I recognize your loss as true and real.
>
> Above all else, I'd want you to feel your loss is validated. Accepted.
>
> I hear you.
>
> I bow to you.
>
> **GRACE, Writing Your Grief student, on the tribe found in the wake of her brother's death**

ALONE, TOGETHER

I write and speak about grief pretty much all day, every day. My written words, my workshops, my courses—everything I do is meant to give some measure of comfort to those in pain. Sharing stories of grief from

my own life and from my students' lives lets me tell you that you are not alone.

But that's where language gets tricky, especially in new grief. If an intense loss has erupted in your life, one thing you'll hear often is "You're not alone." And that isn't really true.

No matter how many times people tell you they're here for you, no matter how well they *are* here for you, no one can "do" grief with you. No one can enter into your true mind and heart and be there with you. It's not just semantics.

You are alone in your grief. You alone carry the knowledge of how your grief lives in you. You alone know all the details, the subtlety and nuance of what's happened and what's been lost. You alone know how deeply your life has been changed. You alone have to face this, inside your own heart. No one can do this with you.

That's true even if someone has had a loss similar to yours.

There's a story that makes rounds through the grief world—it's called "The Bedouin's Gazelle"; you can find one version in the book *Arab Folktales*, published by Pantheon Books. In the story, a man finds his young son dead. To soften the news for his wife, he wraps his son in a cloak and tells his wife that he has brought her a gazelle from the hunt. In order to cook it, she has to borrow a pot from a home that has never known sorrow. She goes door-to-door in her community, asking for a pot. Everyone shares a story of loss that has come to their family.

The wife returns home empty-handed, saying, "There are no pots that have not cooked a meal of sorrow." The man opens his cloak, revealing his son, and says, "It is our turn to cook meals of sorrow, for this is my gazelle."

One interpretation of this story is that everyone grieves. Whether it's this version of the folktale, or the version with the guru and the mustard seed, or any of the other versions you might find, that's the common takeaway: everyone grieves.

Not one household, not one life, is without pain.

What I hate about that interpretation is the implied second half of a statement like that: everyone grieves; therefore, your grief is not special. In other words: buck up. You don't get to be cared for in your pain because everyone is in pain. That you're not alone in experiencing loss means you have no right to such deep grief. You're asked to downgrade your pain simply because others have felt it, too.

But there's another way to look at this.

As the woman walked from house to house, not yet knowing the grief awaiting her at home, she learned the pains of others. She learned, in advance, which families had suffered the loss she was about to face. Without knowing it, she laid the groundwork for finding her own tribe within a tribe.

That journey from door to door prepared her in advance for what was to come, whispering in her ears: Meet them. Know them. You will be alone in grief—intensely alone—and *these* are the others who will know exactly what that means.

That other people have experienced pain, even pain that looks a lot like yours, is not meant as a solution to grief. It's meant to point the way to those who understand. It's meant to introduce you to your tribe.

It's meant to tell you who can hear your pain, who can stand beside you, listening, bearing witness.

That day in Seaside I expected to see Elea's son because, as part of my chosen tribe, her son is real to me. He's real because I've heard Elea's stories. Because her stories of grief sit inside her stories of love, and I know him through both things. Vasu is real, not just because I can see a picture of him happy and alive; he is real because I get to witness the story behind the story of each photograph his mother shares. I get to see the sleepless nights in my friend's face. I get to see Vasu become, as Elea wrote, "more tumor than boy." I get to see the days death came and went, and the day death came and stayed. I get to see how grief carves itself into her, shadowing each step. I get to see the love that's twinned with despair, and she gets to see mine, too. We hear each other. It hurts. And we're as comfortable with each other's pain as we are with each other's love. All of it is welcome.

And that's the thing. Everything is welcome in a community of loss. We know we're alone, and we're not alone in that. We hear each other. It doesn't fix anything, but somehow it makes it different.

> Sadness is treated with human connection.
>
> **DR. PAULINE BOSS**[1]

KINSHIP AND RECOGNITION

Finding others who have shared a similar depth of pain shows you those people who understand just how alone you are. Finding others lets you know that everything you're experiencing is normal, even if seemingly bizarre. Finding others who live inside this territory of grief validates the nightmare of what you already know: there are things that can never "get better."

That may seem like the opposite of helping, but for those experiencing such deep loss, having others recognize the depths of your pain is lifesaving. When someone can look at you and truly see, really recognize, the devastation at the core of your life, it changes something. It helps. It may be the only thing that does.

Companionship inside loss is one of the best indicators, not of "recovery," but of survival. Survival can be forged on your own, certainly, but it's so much easier when you travel with a wider tribe of grieving hearts.

> "Death creates a family.
> I step forward into the circle
> Of mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, partners
> With tears forever in their eyes.
> Wanting to run all the way back,
> Wanting to run.
> But not running.
> I join hands with the holy mourners.
> We cannot outrun our pain so we wade into it.
> We hold each other in love and light
> And we stumble and catch each other
> And we walk without knowing why
> Or where.
> The meteors stream in the moonlight
> And we walk a little while together.
>
> **KATHI THOMAS ROSEN, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Seth**

THE TRIBE OF AFTER

People in your outer world might worry that you're spending too much time on grief blogs, reading grief books, or talking with people who have lived a similar loss. That's ridiculous. We *all* look for similarity in our relationships. We naturally gravitate toward those with whom we share important things: interests, hobbies, backgrounds. Our lives are built around what we have in common. Of course you go looking for your own kind in grief. As one therapist wrote, after a loss of this magnitude, the world is split between those who know and those who do not. There is a vast divide between you and the outer world. While that divide may not always be so clear, it is now. And now is when you need your tribe.

I used to bristle at the word *tribe*. It's Internet New Age speak, and I always hate that stuff. But having lived this myself, having found my own people, and having created places for people to find each other, I can't argue with the word. We are a tribe. The Tribe of After. After death, after loss, after everyone else has moved along, the fellowship of other grievers remains.

It's easier now to find that fellowship, easier than it was when I was first widowed. Back then, there was very nearly nothing. Most online resources for grief support presumed, since I was widowed, that I was well over seventy. The few sites I found that dealt with the accidental death of a partner at a young age were heavily religious, or they tried to pour rainbows and happy endings on top of what could never be healed. Platitudes and simplistic, reductionist renderings didn't work for me before Matt died, and they were intolerable after. As an artistic, self-reflective, extra-smart, completely dorky person in what amounted to a small town, I'd often felt I didn't fit the larger world. But once Matt died? I didn't belong anywhere.

Back then, I spent endless hours on the Internet, looking for someone, anyone who sounded like me. Piece by piece, through a tangled chain of side comments and scraps of information, jumping from one (then) obscure blog to the next, I found my people.

Reading their stories, listening to the truth of their own stark, brutal pain helped me in ways nothing else could. Those people I found, the ones who stood beside me, the ones who were willing to stand beside the gaping hole that erupted in my life (and their own) and not look away or make it pretty—*they* are the reason that I survived. Their stories were the trail of bread crumbs I followed when I got lost, and I got lost a lot. That old adage, "We stand on the shoulders of giants," cannot be more true for

me. I survived what was unsurvivable because of their giant hearts. Because of what we created, together. Because of the stories we told.

We reflected the broken world back to one another.

My fellow widowed people, my fellow grievers, the other broken hearts—together we knit a story of survival inside pain that can't be fixed. And we did it, simply, by telling the truth. We accepted the immoveable reality of loss. We stayed by each other inside it. We acknowledged each other's truth.

That's the power of acknowledgment: it comes up beside pain as a companion, not a solution. That's how we get through this, side by side with other devastated, broken-hearted people. Not trying to fix it. Not trying to pretty it up. But by telling the truth, and by having that truth witnessed, acknowledged, heard.

WE NEED EACH OTHER

Look, here's the deal. I never wanted to be a grief therapist. If Matt hadn't died, I would likely have left the therapy field altogether. In the days before Matt died, I told him I was tired of being in the pain business. After he died, I closed my practice; I never saw my clients again.

But grief made me lonely in ways I had never known, and I had known lonely. That loneliness drew me to search for those people who would become my tribe. That needle-in-an-invisible-haystack search, with all its dead ends and wrong turns and disappointments, is why I do the work I do now. I couldn't stand the thought of new people being thrown into the world of grief and finding nothing, hearing nothing that sounded like them.

I came back to this field because I saw how powerful connection can be. As I said earlier, writing has always been my medium. When I started this work, I wrote to give others what I myself most needed: Companionship. Acknowledgment. Survival. I wrote because my words helped. I wrote to make connection inside grief easier to find. I created things—books, blog posts, courses, workshops—because if I could do anything to make this load lighter and less lonely for anyone, one person or a thousand—I had to. What else could I possibly do?

There are a lot of words in this book taken from my Writing Your Grief courses. Over the past several years, I've had the privilege to read —and to witness—so many beautiful, horrible stories. The students who have come through these courses amaze me, over and over, with their capacity to love, their capacity to witness, their capacity to come to each other with kindness and acceptance. From their first careful days online through what is now years of support, these writers have become family for each other. They welcome each new person, each new story, with love and validation. What we've done, what we've all done, is to make space for the devastation that brings us together.

What helped me survive is what helps them survive, and is what will help you survive. It's companionship inside pain. It's the power of presence, and of bearing witness. It's not magic; it's love. Love that doesn't turn away.

You might find it through writing in the company of others. You might find it in some other forum. You might find it in real life or online. What's important is that you find a place where your loss is valued and honored and heard. When the center has been torn from your life, you need the company of others who can stand there beside the hole and not turn away.

> "What a gang of grief-stricken beautiful people we are. I will miss all your voices, even the silent ones. I always noticed when a quiet voice liked a post. I wish for each of us, myself included, that we continue to reach out to those who understand loss and pain, that we find bits of comfort and ease in all our days, other groups who will listen and hear what we say, and share their own voices of loss. What a chorus we created in this group, what music we shared. I have heard paeans to life, dirges of despair, chorales of love, operas of loss. Please keep writing, each of you. I hope I listen to all your voices again, in some other group, on your blogs, or some random Internet spot. I hope the synchronicity of the universe brings our voices together again, mingled with other voices of loss from other groups here.
>
> I hope each of us finds moments to share with someone who understands what loss really is, who helps us set a place

at the table for those who are not here, who understands the pain. Salut, my friends. I bow to you all.

CHRIS GLOIN, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Bill

A CULTURE OF KINDNESS

Being with other people who understand the depth of your pain doesn't fix anything. As I've said a million times, some things cannot be fixed; they can only be carried. Grief like yours, love like yours, can only be carried.

Survival in grief, even eventually building a new life alongside grief, comes with the willingness to bear witness, both to yourself and to the others who find themselves inside this life they didn't see coming. Together, we create real hope for ourselves, and for one another. We need each other to survive.

I wish this for you: to find the people you belong with, the ones who will see your pain, companion you, hold you close, even as the heavy lifting of grief is yours alone. As hard as they may seem to find at times, your community is out there. Look for them. Collect them. Knit them into a vast flotilla of light that can hold you.

One of my students described our writing community as *a culture of kindness*. That is what I want for you. The good news is, there are more places to find those cultures, more opportunity to *create* those cultures, than there was even just a few short years ago. In a life you didn't ask for, in a life you didn't see coming, these small islands of true community make all the difference.

It takes work to find these places, I know. They're easier to find, but not yet easy. Read everything your heart and mind can tolerate. Read the comments (ignore the ignorant and cruel); follow the links you find there. Leave comments. Track your people through the wilderness of grief until you find their campsite, or make one of your own. I can talk in poetry about this forever, but it's the only thing I know: we find each other by becoming findable. The voices of my original tribe were a rarity back in my early days. I found them because they were willing to be found. Write, comment, connect. The more ways you find to speak your truth, the more ways your people can find you, the more ways your

words can find them. Light your lantern. Raise it up. Keep looking. Keep finding.

I know it's exhausting. All of this is exhausting. And finding your tribe is the one thing I can guarantee will make this easier on you. Companionship and kinship are your survival. Even if you think it is impossible, please at least be willing to consider being found. Be fierce about it. You may be rare, but you are not the only one living a nightmare. We *are* here, and we're listening.

No one can enter the deepest heart of grief. We here, even the ones who know this magnitude of pain—we are not there with you inside your deepest grief. That intimacy is yours alone.

But together, we recognize each other and bow to the pain we see. Our hearts have held great, great sorrow. Through that pain, we can be there for each other. As our words knock on the doors of each other's hearts, we become way stations for each other.

The truth is, also: you are not alone.

"**Blessing**

May those who weep knows
we weep with you.
We share our different griefs together.
The fact of loss
which tears us from community
is the very thing
bringing us together into this tribe.
We, who witness,
humanizing each the experience of another
by simple listening.
In the darkness a tiny light.
In the solitude a small voice.
In the silence, a little love.
An ear to hear,
Another heart to share,
in a still small way,
the brokenness.

RICHARD EDGAR, Writing Your Grief student, on the loss of marriage, identity, and belonging

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LOVE IS THE ONLY THING THAT LASTS

How do we end a book on loss if we don't lean back on the expected happy ending? If we don't search for a tacked-on transformation, or a promise that everything will work out in the end?

I end this book with love because love is all we've got. It's neither up-note nor doom. It simply is.

We grieve because we love. Grief is part of love.

There was love in this world before your loss, there is love surrounding you now, and love will remain beside you, through all the life that is yet to come. The forms will change, but love itself will never leave. It's not enough. And it's everything.

One of my teachers spoke of the main spiritual exercise of his life as crossing back and forth over the bridge between what was before and what is now. Living in grief is continually crossing and recrossing that bridge. Survival in grief lies in finding the connection between the life that was and the life that has been thrust upon you.

In truth, we can hold on to nothing: not the physical world, not feeling states, not even our own thoughts. But love, love we can carry with us. It shifts and changes like a natural force because it is a natural force, yet somehow remains foundation, bedrock, home base. It connects what is now, to what was, to what is to come. It allows us to travel between worlds.

> “Because I am held in love, this is the blessing I wish for myself: for the grace to look what has happened in the eye and accept the way it was, the way it is, the way we were, and the way we are; the grace to live with the way things are now; the courage to get up in the morning; the capacity to look at a bullfinch on the bird table or the full moon or the slant of the sun on St. Catherine’s playing field behind our house and to know that there is both goodness and pain in the world, and that I am part of both.
>
> Because I am held in love, this is my blessing for myself: to be in this space of light, however small it is, however filled with pain, each day, and to hold at bay the ravening maelstrom of chaos and darkness and disintegration of self that lurks and grabs outside this space of love. Little by little, to integrate the pain and rage and loss with love, and to overcome the darkness with light. Soft slanting sunlight, not the harsh glare of electricity, but gentle light that reveals, and also beautifies, both the whole and the broken.
>
> Because I am held in love—in your love, Richard, and in god’s love—this is my blessing for myself: to accept myself as I am, to love myself, forgive myself and allow myself to grow. To find a way of being in this world without you, sustained by love.
>
> **I. H., Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her husband, Richard**

IT’S OK THAT YOU’RE NOT OK; YOU’RE NOT MEANT TO BE OK

I think we often believe that leaning on love will fix things, like it’s some mythical medicine that removes all pain, negates all hardship. That has never been love’s role. Love, companionship, acknowledgment—these things come up beside you, and beneath you, to support you in your pain, not to take it away. They aren’t replacements for what you’ve lost, and they don’t make being broken any easier.

Love is brutal at times. It asks more of you than you can give. A lot of everything here, a lot of this work-of-grief, is about being strong enough to bear the weight of what love asks of you. It’s about finding

ways to companion yourself, to stay present to both the pain and the love that exist, side by side.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes, "Love means you breathe in two countries."[1] Bridging that impossibility between the life that was and the life that is means breathing, somehow, in two countries: love exists in both, connects both.

This is going to hurt, maybe for a very long time. Broken hearts just do. The love you knew, the love you dreamed of, the love you grew and created together, that is what will get you through. It's a vast, wide raft that can't be broken or depleted. You might forget it's there sometimes, but you can always come back to it.

The entire universe can crumble (and it does), and love itself will never leave. Love is with you here, even and especially in this. Love is what sustains us. When there is nothing else to hold on to, hold on to love. Let it carry you forward.

> I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love.
>
> **WENDELL BERRY,** ***The Art of the Commonplace***

THE MIDDLE GROUND OF GRIEF

We have this idea that there are only two options in grief: to be sad forever and never leave the house, or to put all this sadness behind you and go on to live a fabulous life. But the reality is far broader: you are neither doomed to eternal sadness nor forced into a model of recovery that can never fit you.

There is a vast middle ground between those two extremes.

That middle ground of grief can be made only by you—you, living as best you can in alignment with what you know to be true, for yourself, with love as your guide and companion. You make that middle ground by offering yourself kindness. By refusing to give in to the dominant emotional paradigm that says your grief is a problem to be solved. By giving yourself all the time and space you need to be as broken as you are.

None of us on this grief path will return to the life, or the self, that was. Going back is simply not possible. What we can do is bow to the damaged parts, the holes blown in our lives. We can come to what remains with kindness, and with love. We can wonder what parts of ourselves survived the blast.

In a Facebook post, Anne Lamott called this "friendship with our own hearts," and that's exactly what I'm talking about. Finding your middle way inside grief is about finding friendship with your own heart, making a home inside your own heart. It's in learning to bear witness to your own pain, in treating yourself like someone you love. It's about claiming your right to be in pain, without cleaning it up or making it pretty for someone else's comfort. It's about finding those who can share this path with you, who are not afraid to see your heart in all its pain and all its grace.

Your own middle ground gets created as you experiment with grief, finding ways to stitch this experience into your life. It will change you, yes. Who you become, how you carry this loss—these things continue to unfold. The middle ground is always a work in progress. It's one that neither asks you to deny your pain, nor be forever engulfed by it. It's one that simply lets you find a home inside the reality of love, with all its beautiful and horrible parts. Held by love, inside an experience of love—it's the only place we're "safe."

> It's your life. The one you must make in the obliterated place that's now your world, where everything you used to be is simultaneously erased and omnipresent . . . The obliterated place is equal parts destruction and creation. The obliterated place is pitch black and bright light. It is water and parched earth. It is mud and it is manna. The real work of deep grief is making a home there.
>
> **CHERYL STRAYED, *Tiny Beautiful Things***

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

There isn't a lot left to say in this chapter. I know it isn't enough, this book, these words. Nothing can actually make this OK for you. My hope

is that you've found companionship here, and that the exercises and practices in this book help you live the life that has been asked of you.

As best I can, I've tried to tell you the truth about grief as I know it. To give you an image to live into, a road map inside the dark. It's a story I wish I didn't have to tell, and it's the story I have.

Our hearts get broken in ways that can't be fixed. This has always been true. We must find ways to say this old truth in new ways, so that we never stop hearing it. We must speak so that others listen, so they begin to hear again. As James Baldwin writes, there isn't any other tale to tell:

> Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For while the tale of how we suffer, how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.
>
> **JAMES BALDWIN, "Sonny's Blues"**[2]

In telling the truth about our own hearts, we let others around us begin to find their own truth. We begin to shift the dominant paradigm that says that your grief is a problem to be solved. We get better at bearing witness to what hurts. We learn how to survive all the parts of love, even the difficult ones.

By simply stating the truth, we open conversations about grief, which are really conversations about love. We start to love one another better. We begin to overhaul the falsely redemptive storyline that has us, as a culture and as individuals, insist that there's a happy ending everywhere if only we look hard enough. We stop blaming each other for our pain, and instead, work together to change what can be changed, and withstand what can't be fixed. We get more comfortable with hearing the truth, even when the truth breaks our hearts.

In telling the truth, and in hearing the truth, we make things better, even when we can't make them right. We companion each other inside what hurts. We bear witness to each other. That's the path of love. That's

what we're made for. That's the new story of bravery, the new story we need to tell.

I know you didn't ask to be part of this story. I wish that you weren't here. That you are, well—you are, and there is nothing to be done but welcome you. You're part of the change happening, both in your own heart, and in the hearts and minds of others. Simply by being here. By showing up, by staying present, by choosing to show yourself love and kindness inside what hurts.

Acknowledgment is everything, and so I end this love letter to you where we began: I'm so sorry you have need of this place, and I'm so glad you're here.

It's OK that you're not OK.

Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

May this book help you carry what is yours.

APPENDIX

How to Help a Grieving Friend

My essay on how to help a grieving friend is among the top three most shared posts I've ever written. A lot of what I've mentioned in part 3 is summarized in this essay, so I've reprinted it here. To give it to friends and family who want to help, you'll find a printable copy at refugeingrief.com/help-grieving-friend.

I've been a therapist for more than ten years. I worked in social services for the decade before that. I knew grief. I knew how to handle it in myself and how to attend to it in others. When my partner drowned on a sunny day in 2009, I learned there was a lot more to grief than I'd known.

Many people truly want to help a friend or family member who is experiencing a severe loss. Words often fail us at times like these, leaving us stammering for the right thing to say. Some people are so afraid to say or do the wrong thing, they choose to do nothing at all. Doing nothing at all is certainly an option, but it's not often a good one.

While there is no one perfect way to respond or to support someone you care about, here are some good ground rules.

1. Grief belongs to the griever.

You have a supporting role, not the central role, in your friend's grief. This may seem like a strange thing to say. So much of the advice, suggestions, and "help" given to grieving people tells them they should be doing this differently or feeling differently than they do. Grief is a very personal experience and belongs entirely to the person experiencing

it. You may believe you would do things differently if it had happened to you. We hope you do not get the chance to find out. This grief belongs to your friend: follow their lead.

2. Stay present and state the truth.

It's tempting to make statements about the past or the future when your friend's present life holds so much pain. You cannot know what the future will be, for yourself or your friend—it may or may not be better "later." That your friend's life was good in the past is not a fair trade for the pain of now. Stay present with your friend, even when the present is full of pain.

It's also tempting to make generalized statements about the situation in an attempt to soothe your friend. You cannot know that your friend's loved one "finished their work here," or that they are in a "better place." These future-based, omniscient, generalized platitudes aren't helpful. Stick with the truth: This hurts. I love you. I'm here.

3. Do not try to fix the unfixable.

Your friend's loss cannot be fixed or repaired or solved. The pain itself cannot be made better. Please see #2. Do not say anything that tries to fix the unfixable, and you will do just fine. It is an unfathomable relief to have a friend who does not try to take the pain away.

4. Be willing to witness searing, unbearable pain.

To do #4 while also practicing #3 is very, very hard.

5. This is not about you.

Being with someone in pain is not easy. You will have things come up—stresses, questions, anger, fear, guilt. Your feelings will likely be hurt. You may feel ignored and unappreciated. Your friend cannot show up for their part of the relationship very well. Please don't take it personally, and please don't take it out on them. Please find your own people to lean on at this time—it's important that you be supported while you support your friend. When in doubt, refer to #1.

6. Anticipate, don't ask.

Do not say, "Call me if you need anything," because your friend will not call. Not because they do not need, but because identifying a need, figuring out who might fill that need, and then making a phone call to ask is light years beyond their energy levels, capacity or interest. Instead, make concrete offers: "I will be there at 4:00 p.m. on Thursday to bring your recycling to the curb," or "I will stop by each morning on my way to work and give the dog a quick walk." Be reliable.

7. Do the recurring things.

The actual, heavy, real work of grieving is not something you can do (see #1), but you can lessen the burden of "normal" life requirements for your friend. Are there recurring tasks or chores that you might do? Things like walking the dog, refilling prescriptions, shoveling snow, and bringing in the mail are all good choices. Support your friend in small, ordinary ways—these things are tangible evidence of love.

Please try not to do anything that is irreversible—like doing laundry or cleaning up the house—unless you check with your friend first. That empty soda bottle beside the couch may look like trash, but may have been left there by their husband just the other day. The dirty laundry may be the last thing that smells like her. Do you see where I'm going here? Tiny little normal things become precious. Ask first.

8. Tackle projects together.

Depending on the circumstance, there may be difficult tasks that need tending—things like casket shopping, mortuary visits, the packing and sorting of rooms or houses. Offer your assistance and follow through with your offers. Follow your friend's lead in these tasks. Your presence alongside them is powerful and important; words are often unnecessary. Remember #4: bear witness and be there.

9. Run interference.

To the new griever, the influx of people who want to show their support can be seriously overwhelming. What is an intensely personal and private time can begin to feel like living in a fish bowl. There might be

ways you can shield and shelter your friend by setting yourself up as the designated point person—the one who relays information to the outside world, or organizes well-wishers. Gatekeepers are really helpful.

10. Educate and advocate.

You may find that other friends, family members, and casual acquaintances ask for information about your friend. You can, in this capacity, be a great educator, albeit subtly. You can normalize grief with responses like, “She has better moments and worse moments and will for quite some time. An intense loss changes every detail of your life.” If someone asks you about your friend a little further down the road, you might say things like, “Grief never really stops. It is something you carry with you in different ways.”

11. Love.

Above all, show your love. Show up. Say something. Do something. Be willing to stand beside the gaping hole that has opened in your friend’s life, without flinching or turning away. Be willing to not have any answers. Listen. Be there. Be present. Be a friend. Be love. Love is the thing that lasts.

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Chapter 15: The Tribe of After: Companionship, True Hope, and the Way Forward

1. Pauline Boss, “The Myth of Closure,” interview with Krista Tippett, On Being, June 23, 2016, onbeing.org/programs/Pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/.

Chapter 16: Love Is the Only Thing That Lasts

1. Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1994).
2. James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man: Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

RESOURCES

It's still tough to find good resources when you're grieving. The support landscape is getting better, but it's not yet awesome. The organizations listed below are among my few favorites.

For dealing with grief in families with children, there's no better place than the Dougy Center. They're international experts in children's grief, and some of the only professionals invited in after large-scale natural or human-made disasters. Find them at dougy.org.

The MISS Foundation offers support and resources for people grieving the death of a child at any age. See missfoundation.org.

Soaring Spirits International hosts a blog written by several different writers, each living with the loss of a spouse or partner. The foundation also holds several weekend conferences for widowed people, with a large percentage of attendees widowed under age fifty. Look for Camp Widow on the website soaringspirits.org. From their resources page, you can find links to lots of other services for widowed individuals and grieving families.

Modern Loss is a great site, especially for younger and midlife adults. They cover a variety of losses via guest posts and essays. If you're a writer, you might also consider submitting your own work. Find them at modernloss.com.

Glow in the Woods is a site for babylost families. They're an amazing resource both for companionship inside loss and for information on coping with the physical and emotional realities of neonatal and postpartum death. Visit glowinthewoods.com.

The Liz Logelin Foundation awards funds to families when a parent dies. Information on grants and resources for grieving families can be found at thelizlogelinfoundation.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Devine is a writer, speaker, and grief advocate. She travels the world encouraging people to speak the truth about their pain, and learn to really listen without jumping in to fix each other's broken hearts. She lives with an ever-changing band of beasts on a tiny plot of land near the highway in Oregon.

ABOUT SOUNDS TRUE

Sounds True is a multimedia publisher whose mission is to inspire and support personal transformation and spiritual awakening. Founded in 1985 and located in Boulder, Colorado, we work with many of the leading spiritual teachers, thinkers, healers, and visionary artists of our time. We strive with every title to preserve the essential "living wisdom" of the author or artist. It is our goal to create products that not only provide information to a reader or listener, but that also embody the quality of a wisdom transmission.

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This book is not intended as a substitute for the medical recommendations of physicians, mental health professionals, or other health care providers. Rather, it is intended to offer information to help the reader cooperate with physicians, mental health professionals, and health providers in a mutual request for optimum well-being. We advise readers to carefully review and understand the ideas presented and to seek the advice of a qualified professional before attempting to use them.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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PRAISE FOR *IT'S OK THAT YOU'RE NOT OK*

"*It's OK That You're Not OK* is a permission slip to feel what you feel, do what you do, and say what you say, when life finds you in a place of profound loss and the world seems hell-bent on telling you the right way to get back to being the person you'll never again be."

JONATHAN FIELDS
author of *How to Live a Good Life*, founder of Good Life Project

"Megan Devine has captured the grief experience: grief is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be honored. She understands the pain that grieving people carry *on top* of their actual grief, including the pain of being judged, dismissed, and misunderstood. *It's OK That You're Not OK* is the book I've been waiting for for 30 years—the one I can recommend to any newly bereaved parent, widow, widower, or adult grieving a death."

DONNA SCHUURMAN
senior director of advocacy and training at the Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families

"In this beautifully written offering for our broken hearts, Megan Devine antidotes the culture's messed-up messages about bearing the unbearable. We don't have to apologize for being sad! Grief is not a disease from which we must be cured as soon as possible! Rather, the landscape of loss is one of the holiest spaces we can enter. Megan serves as our fearless, feisty, and profoundly compassionate guide."

MIRABAI STARR
translator of *Dark Night of the Soul: John of the Cross* and author of *Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation*

"This book is POWERFUL. Too many grief books focus on 'getting over it,' but this book says: 'Look grief in the eye. Sit with it.' *It's OK That You're Not OK* comes at grief with no flinching. It's intelligent and honest. It's a message that everyone who has ever dealt with loss needs to read."

THERESA REED
author of *The Tarot Coloring Book*

"Our current cultural norms surrounding death render us incapable of dealing with grief authentically and result in unknowingly causing more hurt and suffering to not only ourselves, but the people we care about most. *It's OK That You're Not OK* is the perfect how-to manual to help heal and support ourselves, each other, and our death-avoidant society."
SARAH CHAVEZ
executive director of the Order of the Good Death

"Megan Devine knows grief intimately: she's a therapist and a widow. In this wonderfully honest and deeply generous book, Devine confronts the reality of grieving and reminds us that 'love is the thing that lasts.'"
JESSICA HANDLER
author of *Invisible Sisters: A Memoir* and *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss*

"*It's OK That You're Not OK* is a wise and necessary book. Megan Devine offers a loving, holistic, and honest vision of what it means to 'companion each other inside what hurts.'"
STEVE EDWARDS
author of *Breaking into the Backcountry*

"In a culture that leaves us all woefully unprepared to navigate grief, Megan Devine's book is a beacon for a better way of relating. *It's OK That You're Not OK* shows us the path to be companions, rather than saviors, to loved ones who are experiencing deep pain. This book should be required reading for being human."
KATE MCCOMBS
relationship educator and creator of *Tea & Empathy* events

"Megan Devine tells the truth about loss, and in doing so, she normalizes an experience that has been censored and stigmatized. *It's OK That You're Not OK* is enormously comforting and validating. Through her lifework—and now this important book—Megan leads us to a place that's rare in our culture: a place where our loss is valued and honored and heard."

TRÉ MILLER RODRÍGUEZ
author of *Splitting the Difference: A Heart-Shaped Memoir*

"One of the hardest things about going through hard times is trying to get and give support. In *It's OK That You're Not OK* Megan Devine guides us through tough times with grace. With loving acceptance and compassion, Megan is the new, warm perspective you need."

VANESSA VAN EDWARDS
author of *Captivate* and behavioral investigator at ScienceofPeople.com

"Megan Devine shows us that rather than treat grief as an illness to recover from, we can approach it with warmth and understanding. This is an invaluable book."

RENE DENFELD
bestselling author of *The Enchanted* and *The Child Finder*

"This book is the radical take on grief we all need. Megan Devine breaks apart stereotypes and societal expectations that layer additional suffering on top of the intense heartbreak of loss. For those in grief, these words will bring comfort and a deep sense of recognition. With precise language, insightful reflections, and easy-to-implement suggestions, this book is a flashlight for finding a way in the darkest times. For anyone looking to support others in their grief, this is required reading!"

JANA DECRISTOFARO
coordinator of Children's Grief Services, the Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families

"Megan Devine's hard-won wisdom has the power to normalize and validate the experience of grief. If you're tired of being asked, 'Are you better now?' read this book for a fresh perspective."

CHRIS GUILLEBEAU
New York Times bestselling author of *The Happiness of Pursuit*

"Grief support and understanding that is heartfelt, straightforward, and wise."

JACK KORNFIELD
author of *A Path with Heart*