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Grief is a Journey

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"Grief Is a Journey is the book I recommend to people living with loss. Dr. Doka distills insights from a wealth of scientific evidence and years of his own experience into practical, plainspoken guidance." —IRA BYOCK, MD, author of *The Four Things That Matter Most*

GRIEF IS A JOURNEY

FINDING YOUR PATH THROUGH LOSS

Dr. Kenneth J. Doka

PART 1

The Journey of Grief

Whatever you love—whether a person, a pet, or even an object—you may one day lose, for loss is a universal occurrence. And when you lose what you love, whether by separation or death, you grieve that loss; so grief, too, is a universal experience.

Yet, while the experience of loss is universal, the reactions to that loss are as distinct and individual as you are. Everyone grieves each individual loss in a unique way.

That fact is paradoxically both troubling and comforting. Troubling, since you want certainty: *What can I expect in grief? When will these feelings and reactions end? What is normal?* But comforting, too, because it accounts for the wide range of reactions you may be experiencing, and it reminds you that, just as each relationship is unique, so is each loss. Your own reactions have no less worth or validity than those of others around you.

Yet you still wish for a guide, and *Grief Is a Journey* offers that guide. Its opening chapters explore the many myths that trouble you as you grieve, and other chapters explore the varied reactions you may experience, as well as the factors that influence the particular manner of your grief.

This book affirms that as you go forward, you are going to retain a part of the one you have loved. It affirms that grief *is* truly a journey—as lifelong as your love—and it shows that you need not journey alone, or without hope.

CHAPTER 1

The Myths and Realities of Grief

It has been eight months since Vicky's husband died, and Vicky is very confused by her own grief. In the first two months she seemed to be coping so well, but in the past six months she feels worse—not better. She cries often and is short-tempered at work and at home. She is angry—angry at her husband for not taking care of himself; at friends who are not attentive; and even at her children, who are pressuring her, as she says, “to suddenly get better.”

Brian is grieving the loss of his son. He thinks of Shay often and lovingly plans an annual carnival in his young son's memory. But his wife, Marla, worries that Brian has not dealt with his grief because he has never cried or talked about his feelings.

Steve is mourning the death of his lover. He misses him terribly. They spoke daily—sharing events and offering advice. Though it has been over a month, Steve still picks up the phone and begins to dial Henry and expects to hear Henry's voice when the phone rings. He wonders if he is going crazy.

So does Carla, who is mourning her brother. She and her brother both were married and had kids, and they often socialized together, even vacationing as families. It seems so unfair that her brother died so young, only in his forties. But Carla resents everyone who asks how John's wife and children are doing. “What about my grief?” she says.

Though their losses and reactions are different, all of these people share a common experience—an experience that each one of us will encounter during our lifetime. They are grieving. Grief is the price we pay for love.

Loss is universal, but our reactions to it are not. Our responses are individual. Psychologists and clinicians have known this for years, but when people are suffering—the

elderly woman left in an empty home without her husband, the adolescent son of a newly divorced couple, or the mother of a child struck with a debilitating illness—grief feels like an uncontrollable burden they must bear alone. Psychologists have learned so much useful information about grief, and how it unfolds, that can help people with their pain. But this information hasn't been given out widely to the public, or even made known to other therapists and clergy. At the same time, there are several myths about grieving that persist and that are damaging people's health and well-being.

Misconceptions about grief lead more than one million people each year to seek out chemical solutions to their pain, either through alcohol, recreational drugs, or prescription medication. Almost all report that they feel abandoned by family and friends who think that they have failed to “get over it” in time. Millions experience their grief alone, and they ask themselves, *Am I going crazy?*

This is why I felt compelled to write this book. I want to help people better understand their grief and to cope with it. I also want to help other counselors who may not know about recent important discoveries about how grief works.

Although grief is a universal, critical life experience, we often journey through it privately, isolated, afraid to share our feelings—worried that our responses may be misunderstood or dismissed. And there is limited public understanding or conversation about the ways we cope with loss. For years, as I have lectured publicly about grief, I am inevitably asked variations of the question raised above. *Am I going crazy? What's wrong with me that I am crying all the time? Or, What's wrong with me that I am not crying all the time? What's wrong with me that my grief ebbs and flows? Why do I seem to be getting worse, sadder, rather than better?*

I want to reassure you that whatever your response is to grief, it is natural and normal for you. You may cry or not cry; you may feel much sadder at some times than others. For some people, grieving takes a long time; for others it takes less time. But it takes you the time that it takes. There are no rules that make one person's response normal and another's abnormal.

The journey through loss and grief does not have an effective road map that helps us to understand our experiences and pain, although I hope that in this book I will help you create your own route through your grief.

When we are grieving, we have a variety of perfectly normal, natural reactions that we may feel are “wrong” for one reason or another—they're strong or inconvenient or unexpected or condemned by our culture or family. We become fearful of sharing these reactions with others, who may not know how to offer support. They may even compound our problem by suggesting, when our reactions are truly natural and normal, that we need professional help. We may lose confidence in our ability to cope at a critical time when we need to adapt in order to survive. Our fears can become reality.

So I want to try to reassure you that you can cope. You may need some guidance in dealing with your pain, but you can create your own map for navigating your grief. First of all, your feelings are your feelings. You feel what you feel. You may feel sad, angry, or anxious; or a number of other emotions; or a jumble of emotions all at once.

In my teaching and lecturing, my counseling, and the hundreds of letters I receive as editor of *Journeys: A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement*, I have learned that most people have two models of how grief works. The first model is that *each day, it will get a little easier*. That model usually fails because many people get surges of pain that arise from time to time, especially around holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries. Another model of grief is that it proceeds

in *stages*, which is based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages. These bereaved persons expect, or are expected by others, to go through phases of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression—before they reach acceptance. But the fact is that Kübler-Ross originally saw these stages as reflecting how people cope with illness and dying, not as reflections of how people grieve. Actual experiences of grief are far more individual, often chaotic, and much less predictable.

Grief is not a single process that everyone experiences the same way. This is critical for you to try to remember. Since we do not experience grief in a predictable set of stages, there is no “one size fits all” way to cope with loss.

There is also no closure to grief. Grief is not about letting go of past relationships or closing yourself off from them. Even in bereavement, you continue your bond—albeit in a different way.

Grief is not an illness you get over. It is a journey.

Here are some major principles to keep in mind about this new understanding of grief:

- You have personal, individual pathways in grieving
- Grief is not only an emotion. It includes physical, behavioral, cognitive, social, and spiritual reactions. Your own responses are influenced by your religion or sense of spirituality, culture, class, gender, and life experiences.
- Grief is not at all a relinquishing of ties to the deceased. It is understanding the complex ways that you retain a continuing bond to the person you loved.
- You experience many related losses as a consequence of a single loss or death. These secondary losses will also influence your life, and you will want to name and grieve them, too.

- You do not simply cope with your loss. There are possibilities for growth inherent in your grief, even though you may not see them for some time.

People feel grief for many kinds of losses. We grieve the deaths of family members, friends, lovers, and coworkers; sometimes even people we once loved, such as ex-spouses. We mourn the end of a valued friendship whether through death, relocation, or conflict. We grieve transitions and changes in our life. We become attached to dreams, to ideals, to our pets, to possessions, and to people we admire, whether politicians or celebrities, and grieve these losses, as well.

Twenty-six years ago, Donna angrily divorced her husband Nolan after she became aware of his multiple infidelities. She is stunned by her own grief reactions to hearing of his death. After all, she reasoned, it had been so long and the divorce had been so bitter. Married again now for near twenty years, she finds it difficult to sort out her feelings. Her friends do not understand why she would grieve “the creep.” She feels awkward to share it with Austin, her present husband. She thinks he would just not understand—in fact, it took years for her to trust Austin after her past experience. How can he be expected to understand her grief?

We grieve other types of losses, too, as we journey through the different stages of life. A mother will feel pain after her preadolescent son objects to a public hug for the first time. Elderly people grieve their loss of independence when they have to give up their driver’s license.

Losses like this are often disenfranchised—they are unrecognized and unsupported by other members of society. Sometimes we even discount or dismiss our own pain. We feel *disenfranchised grief* over losses that are not openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned, or publicly shared. We experience these losses, but we come to believe we do not have the right to

grieve them. Frequently, other people in society prohibit our right to grieve losses like these. As a result, we often suffer in silence, not knowing the true cause of our reactions, having no context in which to understand this, and receiving little support and recognition. While the concept of disenfranchised grief has been recognized by researchers and professionals for the past twenty years, this concept has rarely moved beyond specialists in the field.

Grief Is a Journey starts with this groundbreaking yet basic idea from the latest findings on grief: *We each have to find our own personal pathway as we deal with loss.* Grief is as individual as fingerprints or snowflakes. After all, each of us has our own set of experiences and distinct ways of coping. Every loss is different. Its consequences emerge from our unique relationships and arise from our own singular circumstances. Once you truly accept that basic but liberating concept—and once you identify your personal pathway—you are empowered to cope. You will find the right way to deal with your pain and memories, you will identify sources of meaningful support, and you will find the right resources to help you cope with your grief.

Once you identify the ways that grief manifests itself in your own life—and in the lives of those you care about and love—you can better help yourself, and you will see more clearly how to reach out effectively to support your family and friends who are grieving. This new understanding of grief allows you to answer three critical questions: *How can I understand my own pathway? How can I use this knowledge to help me deal with my grief? How can I support those I care about in their grief?*

I'd like to dispel some prevalent myths about how we grieve before we move forward. These myths have been perpetuated for years by laypeople as well as psychologists and counselors, but they have caused pain to millions of people who would otherwise experience

their grief in a more natural, healthful way. These myths are pervasive but unsupported by scientific research. Identifying them can keep you from creating unrealistic expectations and allow you to explore a more individualistic and personalized truth—your own truth about your loss and your grief.

OFFERING CONDOLENCES

- Nothing you say can ease the pain of the loss. You can show support and empathy by your presence.
- Culturally appropriate actions such as bringing food, sending flowers, or making memorial donations are ways that show caring and support
- Do not invalidate or minimize the loss. Comments like *You are young, You can get married again, Think of the children you still have, She had a very long life, and At least he did not suffer* may attempt to comfort, but they do not acknowledge the loss and grief the person is experiencing.
- Do not offer platitudes such as *He is in a better place* or *God must have wanted her*. Grieving individuals may eventually find comfort from their beliefs, but right now they want the person with them—alive.
- Do simply say you are sorry for the loss
- Do share any special memories of the deceased, as well as the lessons you learned from the deceased or the impact they had on your life. While you may share them at the funeral, send them as well in a letter or card. They will be cherished.
- If you wish to help, be specific in what you can do. “Can I help get people to and from the airport?” or “Would you like me to pick up Cody after practice?” are far better than “Let me know if I can help.”