

a revolutionary approach
to understanding and healing
the impact of loss

ANXIETY

the missing
stage of
grief

Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC

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LIFE
LONG

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Da Capo Press

Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
www.dacapopress.com
@DaCapoPress

First Edition: September 2018

Published by Da Capo Press, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Da Capo Press name and logo is a trademark of Hachette Book Group.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Claire Bidwell, author.

Title: Anxiety, the missing stage of grief : a revolutionary approach to understanding and healing the impact of loss / by Claire Bidwell Smith.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Da Capo Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018010553 | ISBN 9780738234779 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780738234762 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Grief. | Anxiety. | Loss (Psychology)

Classification: LCC BF575.G7 S5826 2018 | DDC 155.9/3--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018010553>

ISBNs: 978-0-7382-3477-9 (hardcover), 978-0-7382-3476-2 (ebook)

E3-20180824-JV-PC

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*To everyone who has ever lost a loved one...
and lost themselves a little in the process. You
are not alone.*

Introduction

IF YOU ARE READING THIS BOOK RIGHT NOW, IT'S PROBABLY SAFE to say that you or someone you love is struggling with anxiety. Not only that, but maybe you are just now connecting the dots to see that this anxiety may stem from a loss you've experienced in your life.

That loss can be recent or decades old. Your anxiety could be severe... or just enough to make your life uncomfortable. Anxiety is a tricky emotion, and I'm guessing that you're more than ready to figure out how to get a grip on it and learn how to feel good again. That's exactly what this book is designed to help you do.

Anxiety that stems from loss is more common than most people realize. When someone we love dies, our world turns upside down on multiple levels. The shock of everything that comes with losing someone significant is a powerful catalyst for all the feelings of fear and dread that constitute anxiety. So I want to start by acknowledging that you are not alone in experiencing anxiety after loss.

Your loss could have happened just months ago, or you could still be grappling with the effects of a loss that occurred years earlier. Losing someone we love is an experience that stays with us all our lives, and the broader implications of a significant loss can manifest in all manner of life changes and behavioral and emotional triggers. This book is designed to speak to those who are in the first stages of processing their grief and also to those may no longer be actively grieving but are experiencing the long-term effects of that initial grief, specifically anxiety.

I've written this book to help you understand how to diminish and

release that anxiety, while at the same time processing the loss that brought it on in the first place. I understand that simply acknowledging your anxiety can make you feel anxious, so I promise we're going to do this in a safe, comfortable, and compassionate way.

In this book I'm going to lead you step by step on a path to healing. It's the same path I took when I worked through my own anxiety following the deaths of my parents, and it's the same path down which I have led hundreds of clients in my work as a grief therapist. Know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that by reading these pages, you are taking the first steps toward healing your anxious heart.



In my work as a grief therapist, I openly share my past with my clients. Because grief and anxiety are such particular experiences, I know it helps others feel more comfortable when they know that I have truly walked in their shoes. While I am going to share many stories of how my clients overcame their own grief-related anxiety in later chapters, I want to begin by telling you a little of my story.

I was eighteen years old when I had my first panic attack. I was on a road trip with my high school boyfriend, Jordan. We had just graduated, and it was the summer between our senior year of high school and our freshman year of college. We were headed to separate schools in New England that fall and had decided to take a trip to visit each other's colleges, hoping to remain connected even after the summer.

The trip had gone well—we saw each other's campuses, held hands as we walked across commons, and whispered vows of faithfulness in the face of distance. As we drove the two-day drive home to Georgia, we talked endlessly about all that was ahead of us. I stared out at the highway rushing before us, the future looming large, my sneakers propped on the dashboard, and my hair blowing in the breeze from the open window. The future seemed exciting, but also a little scary.

As I gazed out at the road, my heart suddenly did a little flip-flop. And then a bigger flip-flop. I yanked my feet off the dashboard and sat forward,

breathing in deeply. My heart was racing and I felt dizzy. “What’s wrong?” Jordan asked. But I couldn’t answer him—I was too panicked to speak. Was I having a heart attack? The thought made me even dizzy. I felt as though there were a giant weight on my chest, and I couldn’t breathe.

I shook my head at him, wide-eyed. “Something’s wrong,” I finally managed to say. Not knowing what else to do, Jordan followed highway signs to the nearest hospital emergency room and walked me through the double doors.

Several hours and multiple tests later, the doctor concluded that I’d had a series of heart palpitations but that I was otherwise young and healthy, and he sent us on our way.

From that day on, I lived in fear of having another episode like the one in the car. And in fact, I began to have them quite frequently. Chest pounding, heart racing and palpitating, severe dizziness. It was an awful problem, one that I quickly began to feel imprisoned by.

Looking back on that initial visit to the emergency room, I so wish that the doctor had probed more into my psychology. If he had asked even just a few personal questions, he would have learned that I was in an extremely anxiety-provoking phase of life: I was about to move away from home for the first time, and both of my parents were battling cancer.

Unfortunately, I was too young to correlate such events, and the attacks continued to plague me. The deceiving thing about anxiety is that it can manifest in such real physical symptoms that most people do not realize that anxiety is the source of their problem.

In fact, it would take me many years to learn this for myself, but when I finally did I was able to begin climbing out of this anxious phase of my life. I now help countless other people do the same, but it is the road on which I got here that taught me everything I know today about the affliction that is anxiety—and how unresolved grief is inextricably woven into it.



I was fourteen when both of my parents got cancer at the same time. I was an only child, and the prospect of losing my family was something that

loomed over me constantly throughout my adolescence. While my father's prostate cancer was treated easily and he quickly went into remission, my mother's late-stage colon cancer took our small family on a roller coaster of hospitals and doctors and seemingly endless treatments.

My parents were wonderful people. They'd met and married late in life, both of them each other's third marriage. My father was an engineer and a World War II prisoner of war. My mother was a glamorous artist living in Manhattan. She was forty and he was fifty-seven when I was born, and even though my father had three grown children from his first marriage, my mother had always wanted one of her own. I was born in 1978 in Atlanta, and for a long time our lives were good.

But by the time I headed off to college, my father was in his seventies and my mother's cancer had begun to win the five-year battle she'd been fighting. She died midway through my freshman year at a small liberal arts school in Vermont. I didn't make it in time to be by her side during her final moments.

My mother's death rocked me. I was absolutely floored by it. Nothing could have prepared me for it. Not the five years we'd spent helping her combat her illness, not the talks my father had with me about her potential demise, not the school guidance counselor's sessions. The truth was I never believed she would actually die, because *Mothers don't die. Bad things don't actually happen.*



I now understand that the dismantling of those beliefs became the catalyst for my anxiety. When my mother's death disproved those two beliefs I'd so fervently held on to, the whole floor dropped out. If my mother could die, anything, absolutely *anything*, could happen.

I took a hiatus from school and went back home to Georgia to help my father pack up and move out of our house. I got a job as a waitress, and I struggled to relate to my old friends from high school who came around to check on me. No one I knew had experienced so significant a loss. Everyone was sympathetic, but nonetheless I felt very alone in my grief.

The anxiety attacks continued to surface and even worsen. I lived in fear of having them, and I navigated a constant undercurrent of panic. I worried that my father was going to die at any moment. I worried that *I* would die. And less concrete than those fears, I simply felt a yawning dizziness at the idea that life was completely out of my control.

I turned to alcohol to quell the anxiety, and I attached myself to a young man who had also recently lost a family member and was deep in the throes of his own grief. Together we made our way to New York City, and it was there, in a college psychology class, where I realized for the first time what had happened all those years ago on the road trip with my high school boyfriend: I'd had a panic attack.



Understanding this was the first step in my healing process. Recognizing that I had anxiety as a result of my mother's death actually helped me to better face the loss and enter into my grief. Losing someone we love is so deeply painful that we often turn away from the feelings rather than letting them course through us. But when we choose to push away difficult emotions, they don't just disappear; they simply fester beneath the surface, causing anger, frustration, and... anxiety.

But just because I finally understood what was happening didn't simply make it go away. The anxiety lingered, and the panic attacks continued to surface now and then. When I brought up the idea of seeing a therapist, both my father and my boyfriend encouraged me to just push through and not to indulge further my feelings—which is what they thought would happen were I to enter into therapy. I now understand that the opposite would have been true. Grappling with anxiety is like driving a car on an icy road. When the car begins to skid, you need to turn with it in order to gain control rather than trying to veer away.

But at age twenty, that's exactly what I was doing, veering away, pushing myself deeper into my studies and also into my relationship with alcohol. The anxiety continued to simmer. When I watched the Twin Towers fall from the roof of my East Village apartment building in 2001,

my anxiety reached an all-time high. It was no longer just my little microcosm that was at the mercy of mortality, but the world at large.



I moved to Los Angeles after I graduated college in New York, intent on being a writer. My father was living in Southern California by then, and I got a job as an assistant at a glossy magazine and spent my free time driving my elderly father to doctor appointments. His cancer had returned, this time in his bones.

He eventually grew so ill that I quit my job and moved in to care for him during his final days. I was twenty-five years old. His passing was much more peaceful than my mother's had been. He spent considerable effort facing and accepting his death, which enabled me to do so as well.

But then he was gone, and I was very much alone in the world. I moved to an apartment by the beach and contemplated what to do with the rest of my life. Following the loss of my father, I felt an aching loneliness and an existential doubt about the purpose of life. While most of my peers were in the throes of their postgrad jobs, concentrating on their careers and partying on the weekends, I was hurtling into a deep depression.

At the urging of a friend, I finally entered therapy, and it was there, in the therapist's office, with the whole last decade of my life splayed out before the both of us, that I was finally able to see that I'd had a hard run of it. I began to understand that I had been forced to confront mortality and loss much earlier than most. And because we live in a society that is fearful of death, I'd been encouraged to push away my grief rather than process it.

Therapy proved an invaluable experience. Reviewing and understanding my losses greatly served to calm my anxiety, and I learned coping strategies for facing my pain and fear and also gathered tools for further self-evaluation and exploration. In fact, therapy left such a positive impression on me that three years after my father's death, I decided to get a master's degree in clinical psychology and become a therapist myself.



When I graduated from my master's program, there was no question what field I wanted to work in: death and dying. I had already seen how few of my fellow clinicians were comfortable with death, most of them citing it as the one issue they would not want to work with. But if there was one subject I was up for exploring, it was death.

I chose to work as a grief counselor in hospice because of the hospice team who cared for my father. One of the reasons his death was so peaceful was that his hospice team had created an environment that made it possible.

The nurses, chaplain, home health aides, social workers, and bereavement counselor on my father's team were some of the most caring and compassionate people I had ever met. At a time in my life when I felt overwhelmed and scared, they showed me great compassion and patience and support. I will be forever grateful for that experience, for it set me on the path I am on today.

I moved to Chicago after I finished graduate school, and that was where I worked as a hospice bereavement counselor for four snowy years. I spent my days driving around the Illinois suburbs, holding the hands of patients in nursing homes, sitting at kitchen counters with people who were caring for their dying family members, and facilitating grief groups for a wide range of people who had lost their loved ones through our hospice.



Everything I thought I knew about grief changed during those hospice years. Loss went from being a very singular personal experience to a much more three-dimensional one. I truly did know grief before I began that job as a bereavement counselor at age thirty, but when I walked into a room to meet with a grieving family, they would take in my youthfulness and scoff. Who was I to help them through the loss of a close family member?

The funny thing was that as soon as I disclosed that even just one of my parents had died, I would see their shoulders drop, their countenance soften.

Grief is a very isolating experience. Until you've actually lost someone close to you, there is no way to comprehend the enormity of the experience. So by my telling them about my parents, they immediately knew that I understood something about them in a way that most others did not.

During those four years, my personal experience with grief was eclipsed by a much greater understanding. I saw every kind of loss—spouses, children, siblings, best friends. Some of them lost to long-drawn-out illnesses, some of them quite sudden or even violent. And then because there was a shortage of grief resources in the area, I opened up my groups to people outside our hospice and began to encounter people who had lost loved ones to events other than illness—murder, suicide, tragic accidents. What I thought I knew about grief before this experience was completely turned on its head.



During those early years, I was also a young wife and gave birth to my first child. It was a peculiar experience to be working in the realm of the dead while bringing life into the world. I drove my big pregnant belly around to nursing homes and hushed suburban houses inhabited by dying patients, and as my belly grew larger and I began to prepare for my daughter's arrival, I couldn't help but notice how much emphasis is placed on bringing people into this world when we make such little effort to ferry people out.

Simply put, our culture has no idea how to face death. Even now, children are shielded from it, given vague explanations, kept home from funerals and memorial services. Our current workplaces give us maybe a week off after a significant family member dies, and we are expected to move on and “get back to normal” very quickly.

So it's no wonder, given those messages throughout our lives, that when it comes time to actually face death—to die ourselves or to help someone else enter that phase—we have no idea how to do it. Even our own physicians in the medical community shrink from death. I can't tell you how many hospice patients we had that came on with only a day or two to

live—the doctors and the family members working up until the last minute to try to keep them alive by any measure. What would have been more healing for all involved, including the patient, would have been an approach that acknowledged the death and sought to create a peaceful setting for all those facing it.

For this reason, the theme I encountered most commonly in the bereaved clients I counseled in hospice was regret. *If only I'd known that she had just a week left... I didn't know he was going to die so soon... Now when I look back, I can see how sick she really was, but no one told me...*

Hearing these tales of regret broke my heart. Today I spend countless hours walking clients through those last days, helping them to see that it was the fault of the culture at large, not themselves individually, for their inability to face the loss.

It has become my life's work to help change the culture of death and dying. The truth is we will all die. Every single one of us. If we could better lean into that fact, and support each other as we face it together, we could live less anxious, more peaceful, and more vibrant lives.



I have now been a therapist specializing in grief for more than a decade. I currently have a busy private practice in Los Angeles, I offer online grief support, and I regularly lead grief retreats around the country. I have counseled hundreds of people experiencing the loss of a loved one.

A few years ago I had an epiphany. I realized that the predominant symptom I was seeing in my clients—even more than depression or anger—was anxiety. Month after month, my office had become filled with clients who told me stories that mirrored my own. They described panic attacks, hypochondria, and a constant underlying feeling of dread—all since experiencing a significant loss.

To this day, my clients seek me out, desperate for a way to grapple with their anxiety, but they also come because they are not sure how to process their grief. They arrive in my office filled with confusion about Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famed five stages. They are worried that they have gone

about the grieving process all wrong, that they haven't followed the formula correctly, or that they've skipped a stage or dwelled too long in another.

I take time to remind them that the five stages were originally written for people who were *dying*, not people who were grieving, and because of this the stages don't organically fit the emotions that a person experiences following a loss. And in fact, there are elements of grief that are still being explored, anxiety being a significant one.

I do believe that there is a very real process to grief, but I think that it looks different for every individual. I think that each person must sift through their own waves of sadness and anger, anxiety and regret. And most of all, I believe that the part of the grieving process that can bring the most healing is when we can find ways to stay connected to our loved ones rather than feeling like we have to let go of them.



The idea for this book came from the countless hours I have spent counseling people. I felt called to write this book when I realized how many people were struggling with anxiety during their grief and that there was nowhere to turn for more information about this very real symptom.

You are reading this book because you are experiencing anxiety. You are trying to figure out how to get a handle on it, and you are trying to understand where it came from. Like my clients, you've probably had panic attacks or other common symptoms of anxiety—and, like them, you may not have realized the source of that anxiety. This book will help you understand how loss can create anxiety and how to move through those difficult emotions.

You are reading this book because you have lost someone you deeply cared about. Perhaps the loss was recent and it feels as though your world has fallen apart. You are not sure where to turn, how to make the pain stop, how to quell your fear, or how to calm your thoughts. You feel alone among your peers, in the workplace, and perhaps even among family members who have experienced the same loss. Above all, you are sitting with the realization that life is not what you thought it was.

For others, you may have experienced a loss years ago, or maybe even during childhood, and you are just now connecting the dots that losing your person was the catalyst for the anxiety you have been struggling with for decades. No matter how long it's been since your loss, it's not too late to work through it and restore a sense of peace to your life.

Within these pages you will find stories of real-life people who have walked the same path you are walking now. You will read about their struggles with anxiety and grief and about how they overcame these difficult symptoms. While working on this book, I interviewed more than a dozen former clients, tracking how and why their losses prompted anxiety and what that looked like for each of them individually. Then I dissected their healing processes to better understand what works and doesn't work to alleviate these symptoms. To maintain the complete confidentiality of my clients, the names and identifying characteristics have been changed.

In addition, I called upon the vast network of resources I have worked with over the years: renowned physicians, death doulas, hospice nurses, and advanced-planning experts. I interviewed them about their own experiences of grief and anxiety, both with their patients and within themselves, and I asked them all the questions I would have loved to ask when I was grappling with this at the beginning of my journey. They gave me detailed information that will help you better understand things like the physiology of anxiety, that is, how our bodies react to fear and sadness, and they also provided many practical solutions and coping strategies, all of which you will find within these chapters.

My wish for you as you turn these pages is that you pause now and then to take a deep breath and to understand that you are not alone. As I walk you through a broader understanding of how grief and anxiety are intertwined, my intention is that you close the cover of this book with a newfound strength to overcome the symptoms you are experiencing, tools to relinquish your anxiety, and a greater sense of peace about your loss.

Although you can skip around and choose to read various chapters that stand out to you, know that I have written this as a sort of guidebook and that each chapter builds on the next. I ask that you read the book slowly. Underline or highlight passages that resonate with you. Keep a journal as you read, or speak with a therapist about the insights you are gaining. Reread sections if necessary, and take time to engage with the exercises

provided. Note when you read something that you feel especially resistant to; if you're not ready to tackle it, then make a note to return to it later. Doing all of this will deepen the healing process this book provides.



It makes sense that loss causes anxiety. Losing someone we love is one of the most difficult things we will ever experience during our lifetime. The impact of loss permeates all areas of our life and can often bring us to a standstill. Death reminds us that our lives are nothing if not precarious and that everything can change at a moment's notice. It is an experience unlike anything else. And it is one that we cannot prepare for, no matter how hard we try.

In grief, we must walk a path of fire and pain, of deep sadness and crippling anxiety, in order to get to the other side, to a place where we can experience the beauty life has to offer and to find a renewed appreciation for our time here. It is by understanding this journey, and stopping to take stock of what it means to live and die in this world, that we can emerge more peacefully on the other side, having been transformed into a person with greater compassion and empathy, not just for the world at large but for ourselves as well.

We will never get over the death of someone we love, but we can learn to live with it. We can learn to connect with our lost loved ones in new ways, we can free ourselves of anxiety, and we can open ourselves up to the world again.

You have picked up this book because you are ready to heal.

1 | What Is Anxiety?

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

—C. S. LEWIS

WHAT IS ANXIETY? WHERE DOES IT COME FROM, AND HOW CAN you gain control over it? And why is it so frequently spurred by the loss of a loved one? These are often the first questions I address when meeting with a new client, because understanding anxiety is the first step in learning how to overcome it. But understanding how it is tied to the loss of a loved one is even more important.

I have been a grief counselor for more than a decade. I've worked in both hospice and private practice. I've held the hands of many people in their final moments of life, including my own father. And I've worked with countless people who have struggled to cope in the wake of grief after losing someone they love.

Yet while I've written and spoken and worked with death in so many capacities, it is this one issue that I have encountered more than any other: anxiety following a loss.

It is understandable that death makes us anxious. We experience anxiety after a loss because losing someone we love thrusts us into a vulnerable place. Loss changes our day-to-day lives. It forces us to confront our mortality. And facing these fundamental human truths about life's unpredictability can cause fear and anxiety to surface in profound and unexpected ways.

In this book we will explore all of these feelings and more. But before

we can get into the deeper work, first we must cover the basics, and that means helping you feel better fast. I've chosen to structure this book in the same way I work with my clients, moving through the same process and work we do together in person. The first session always begins with a basic lesson about anxiety—what it is, how it works, and, more important, how to get some quick relief. So that's exactly what we're going to do here.

To help give you this foundational understanding, this chapter will provide some questions that will assist you in determining your anxiety level, give you practical information and advice from a renowned medical doctor, offer quick tips for coping with an anxiety attack, and cover a real-life case whose story will help illustrate the process of alleviating anxiety.

[The first thing to know](#) is that anxiety is more common than you may even realize. Recent studies show that 18 percent of the population of the United States, roughly forty million people, have suffered from anxiety in the past year. Not only that, but it also seems to be on the uptick. Anxiety is leading far ahead of depression as the [most common health issue on college campuses](#). And even higher than the national average, [data from the National Institute of Mental Health](#) shows that 38 percent of teenage girls and 26 percent of teenage boys have an anxiety disorder.

Just in the past five years, Google Trends reports that Internet searches involving the term *anxiety* have nearly doubled. These statistics may seem surprising, but anxiety is often kept hidden by most of the people afflicted. In fact, it can actually be quite easy for you to mask your symptoms and go about your regular life while experiencing this very real struggle. On the other hand, anxiety can also be debilitating, causing you to withdraw from career and social obligations and preventing you from living a normal life.

The good news is that anxiety is also highly treatable.

THE BASICS OF ANXIETY

So what exactly *is* anxiety? At its core, anxiety is fear of something, real or imagined. Specifically, anxiety comes from fear-based thoughts about things that are not necessarily occurring in the present moment or that may never occur. Anxiety is intrinsically linked to our physiology. You may have a physical pain or sensation that then generates a fear-based thought or memory. Or you may have a fear-based thought that generates a physical

sensation.

Anxiety is a feeling of dread or foreboding. Anxiety can be as simple as a general sense of uneasiness, a feeling that all is not right, or it can be as specific as worrying that you have cancer or that the plane you are flying in will crash. Anxiety comes from the Latin word *anxius*, which means a state of agitation and distress. This distress is often felt on a deep level, in both the mind and the body. It is the sense of danger but not always a specific one that you can identify.

Anxiety is also a practical and useful emotion. We actually *need* anxiety in certain situations. Anxiety helps us prepare for an exam or think about all the things we might need to pack for a trip. Anxiety helps us stay alert and present to our well-being. But when anxiety goes beyond these practicalities and we begin to worry all the time, it can become problematic. Worry is the mind's expression of anxiety. When we find ourselves worrying incessantly about things beyond our control, that is when we need to take steps to calm the mind.

When feelings of fear become very intense or come on suddenly and feel overwhelming, without any specific cause, this is called panic. Your fear reaction, at both low levels of anxiety and high levels of panic, is experienced in the body by very real physical sensations. Muscles tighten and constrict, your heart pounds, breathing becomes strained, and you may feel dizzy or faint. In terms of anxiety, these sensations arise in reaction to a *thought* you are having rather than an actual physical threat, like an intruder entering your house.

Anxiety also begets anxiety. So even reading this passage may cause you to feel anxious. If that is the case, take a deep breath and know that your body is having a reaction to your thoughts about anxiety. What's helpful to know is that your body and mind can be gently trained to not react as strongly as they are now to fearful thoughts.

Your body is designed to react to fear. And this is a useful tool with which all humans are wired. We all have a built-in fight-or-flight response to threats. If someone is coming at you with a baseball bat or if you face a wild animal, your body goes into an automatic fight-or-flight response, and with this response come the same feelings that you may feel when anxious—racing heart, coiled muscles, dizziness. You are familiar with these feelings because we have all experienced them at one time or another.

Our fear-response system involves several brain and body systems that send messages that are transmitted over nerve pathways throughout our entire body, using a vast assortment of hormones, proteins, and other neuroendocrine substances. When you encounter a situation that stimulates the fear response, your entire body sends an alarm that prepares you to face the danger or choose to flee.

We do not even have to be actively thinking about these fears on a conscious level for them to impact our level of anxiety. Even when we push away anxious thoughts, the subconscious continues to register them, exploring them in ways of which we are not necessarily aware. In fact, suppressing fear and panic often leads to even more pronounced anxiety. It is when we are able to turn into the fear, like a car turning into a skid on an icy road, that we are better able to gain control of the situation and adequately process it.

After the death of a loved one, many of the fears that run through your mind can be perceived as more of a threat than before the loss. You have witnessed someone die, and now that inevitability is more real than ever before in your life. So when you have a fear-based thought about that person's death, or about your own mortality, or a worry about losing someone else, your body and mind are reacting stronger than before you experienced loss.

The intense amount of emotions that come with grief can also heighten your sense of fear and danger. Most people have never felt such strong emotions as they do when they lose someone they love. It can be very frightening to find yourself overwhelmed with sadness or anger, and this can lead to even more anxiety, even years after the loss.

Anxiety can also perpetuate itself. I can't tell you how many clients confess that what they are most anxious about is experiencing *more* anxiety. Once they have had one panic attack or one truly anxious spell, they often find themselves worrying that they will have another. They worry that they will be at an event, at work, or on a plane and that they will suddenly get hit with a bout of anxiety and be unable to cope with it. Thus, the fear-based thoughts become simply about having more of them. It's a tricky cycle, one that can last far beyond the actual loss, but it is one that can be brought under control.

One of the things I find most fascinating about anxiety is that it can

become addictive. Worrying about something can make a person feel as though they are doing something proactive about their specific fear, when really they are just perpetuating a heightened state of alert that keeps them in an anxious state. Choosing to remain in a hypervigilant state rather than adopting a relaxed state can make you feel like you won't be prepared for the thing you are most afraid of, but that is not true. Allowing yourself to remain in an indefinite state of alert is exhausting and can have a severe impact on your health.

I know that reading or thinking about anxiety can sometimes be difficult, but knowing what anxiety is and how it works is the first step to overcoming it, so keep reading!

WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE?

Anxiety comes in many shapes and sizes. While it can look different for different people, it also has a lot of common symptoms, many I'm sure you'll recognize. Above all, the most complicated aspect of anxiety is that it can manifest in very real physical symptoms. These symptoms, ranging from heart palpitations to nausea, can deceive you into thinking there is something physically wrong with you, when really there is a deeper, underlying, psychological issue that must be addressed in order to alleviate the physical symptoms.

===== SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS =====

- Irregular heartbeat
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Shortness of breath
- Choking sensations and nausea
- Shaking and sweating
- Fatigue and weakness
- Chest pain and heartburn
- Muscle spasms
- Hot flashes or sudden chills

Tingling sensations in your extremities
A fear that you're going crazy
A fear that you might die or be seriously ill



A colleague of mine, Dr. Philip Pierce, who specializes in cognitive behavioral treatment of anxiety, laughed when I asked him how many of his patients go to the hospital when having a panic attack. “My idea for cutting medical costs is to have a special person at the ER just to deal with panic attacks and save the money spent on doctors and the tests,” Dr. Pierce told me. “I’d say 30 to 40 percent of my patients are calling 911 or going to the ER the first time they have a panic attack.” Dr. Pierce explained:

People have the idea that panic attacks come out of nowhere, but they don’t. Although some people actually wake up with a panic attack, what’s usually happened is that the mind is not completely sleeping when you are. It could have been a dream; it could have been a muscle tightening while you’re sleeping, and the mind notices. The body gets the message that something is wrong, and it builds up to a panic attack.

There’s usually something going on. Usually that day there is some precipitating incident. The most important thing is normalizing it. There’s nothing wrong. You can function during a panic attack. Someone will have a panic attack—they’ll be at dinner and they’ll get up, wind their way through the dining room. They’re fully functioning. So I would say, it’s a good, healthy reaction.

Dr. Pierce reassured me that it is possible to eliminate panic attacks, and we’ll explore more of his cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) methods in [Chapter 8](#) of this book. “I would say in five to ten CBT visits, 70 percent of panic attacks cease. But rather than panic attacks being seen as something terrifying and scary, I like to normalize them and say, ‘So what if you get an occasional panic attack? It’s not doing you any harm. Your body is testing itself.’ Oftentimes, the same sensations of something like dizziness are misinterpreted. People pay to go on theme park rides so they can feel dizzy. It’s just the unexpected nature of it when you’re having a panic attack.”

After we go through a major loss in life, we tend to become hypervigilant to bodily sensations such as these. Whereas before the loss we may not have noticed these same bodily sensations, now that we have experienced the death of a loved one, we are preoccupied with the thought that something similar could happen to us, so when we feel the sensations of worry in our body, our fear response increases.

At its most basic, anxiety is the sense of fear. These fears can be real or imagined. Your fears can be about something in the past, the present, or the future.

In grief we experience fear for many reasons. We can feel afraid of how the future has changed now that an important person in our lives is gone. We can feel afraid of more loss, worrying that we might lose more loved ones. We can worry about our health, concerned that we may get sick or die soon, too. Some people also have residual feelings of trauma as a result of witnessing or hearing details of the death itself.

While many people experience anxiety for a variety of reasons—divorce, moving, illness, a genetic predisposition—the kind of anxiety that is brought on as result of losing someone close to you is its own breed. While grief anxiety maintains many of the same characteristics as generalized anxiety, there is an underlying situational cause. So when we can allow ourselves to grieve and truly explore the impact of the loss, we are better able to ease and manage the anxiety that accompanies it.

The following questions will help determine whether you are suffering from generalized anxiety or anxiety brought on by grief.

===== ASSESSING YOUR GRIEF-RELATED ANXIETY =====

A. ARE YOU TROUBLED BY THE FOLLOWING?

Repeated, unexpected attacks during which you are suddenly overcome by intense feelings of panic or fear for no apparent reason or the fear of having another panic attack **YES NO**

Persistent, inappropriate thoughts, impulses, or images that you can't get out of your mind (such as a preoccupation with death, illness, or safety) **YES NO**

Fear and anxiety surrounding social situations **YES NO**

Excessive worrying about upcoming events or activities **YES NO**

Shortness of breath or a racing heart for no apparent reason **YES NO**

Persistent and irrational fear of a situation such as flying, heights, driving cars, and so forth **YES NO**

Inability to travel alone **YES NO**

Replaying a traumatic experience such as receiving bad news or witnessing someone die or become ill **YES NO**

B. MORE DAYS THAN NOT DO YOU EXPERIENCE THE FOLLOWING?

Feeling restless and jittery **YES NO**

Feeling exhausted and drained of energy **YES NO**

Feeling easily distracted **YES NO**

Feeling irritable or angry for no reason **YES NO**

Feeling tenseness in the limbs **YES NO**

A pounding heart **YES NO**

A dry mouth and throat **YES NO**

Shortness of breath **YES NO**

Nausea **YES NO**

Problems sleeping **YES NO**

C. HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THE FOLLOWING SINCE LOSING A LOVED ONE?

An increase in worry **YES NO**

A preoccupation with death and dying **YES NO**

Fear of your own health or the health of other loved ones **YES NO**

Panic attacks **YES NO**

An increase in depression or sadness **YES NO**

An increase in anger **YES NO**

A preoccupation with feelings of guilt or regret **YES NO**

A SSESSING

The more times you answered yes on the “Grief-Related Anxiety” quiz, the more likely it is you may suffer from an anxiety disorder.

Sections A and B of the quiz are designed to indicate symptoms of an anxiety disorder, while Section C screens for grief being the complicating or inciting factor of the disorder.

While anxiety disorders are incredibly common, working to determine what the contributing factors of your anxiety are is key to understanding and diminishing the symptoms.

If you answered mostly yes in Section C, you are likely experiencing grief anxiety. This means that the anxiety you are experiencing is directly related to your loss, even if your loss was years ago. This book is designed to help you understand, treat, and overcome these symptoms.

If you answered mostly no in Section C, you may have a preexisting anxiety disorder that has been amplified by the loss of a loved one. This book will be helpful in processing your grief and alleviating the accompanying anxiety, but you may have additional work to do beyond that in order to fully heal from your disorder.



NORMALIZING ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

The first thing I tell my clients is also the first thing you should know: the anxiety you are experiencing is normal. As we’ve learned, our bodies have a physiological response to thoughts and emotions. Think about how when you feel sad tears come out of your eyes. I mean, really think about that for a moment. You think of a sad memory or a person you miss, and your

whole body reacts to that thought, to the point of releasing liquid from your eyes.

Now ask yourself, why shouldn't your body also react when you are feeling scared? Losing someone we love is incredibly scary. We spend much of our lives acting as though we are going to live until old age. We plan for the future, make present-day sacrifices for later investments, spend inordinate amounts of money and time trying to retain our youthfulness, and then suddenly lose someone we love and are reminded, quite starkly, that life can and does end.

This can be a frightening realization, making us feel vulnerable and worried. We suddenly see our lives with new eyes. We are reminded of not only how precious our time is but also how little control we have over that time. It's only natural that these realizations can make us feel anxious and fearful.

In addition to this, we are often alone in dealing with these new thoughts and feelings. When we lose someone we love, we are thrust into our own world of pain and grief, while the rest of the world carries on around us as though nothing has happened, when in fact, for us, our whole lives have been turned upside down. It can be a very isolating experience.

There is an enormous amount of processing that the brain must do following a loss. First, there are all the emotions that come with it—sadness, anger, regret—but then there is also a certain amount of logistical adjustment that must come. We are forced to rearrange our lives to accommodate for the absence of this person. Sometimes that means a change of home or job or a family role—all stress-provoking adjustments. It's never any wonder that clients often come to me with their newfound anxiety during the six- to eighteen-month period following a loss.

It is during this time that they have begun to fully comprehend the enormity of the loss. In the very beginning, people most often are simply coping with the shock that their loved one is really gone. Even those who have lost a loved one to a long-drawn-out illness—in essence, those who were expecting the death—still experience a certain amount of shock that the person is actually gone.

After the shock wears off, then come waves of sadness, rushes of memories that sometimes bring on guilt or regret, and also all the logistical life changes. The stressful buildup of all of these components is so much

more than most people anticipate when they think about what grief will be like. In fact, so many people put pressure on themselves to move quickly through the grief that they end up suppressing most of the major emotions described here.

It is this suppressing of emotions and stress that can make it feel like the panic and anxiety have seemingly come out of nowhere. Like the story I told you about my first panic attack in the introduction, I was simply riding in a car, staring out the window, when I was hit with an anxiety attack. It felt as though it came out of nowhere. It was only many years later that I was able to see that the stress leading up to that attack had been building for quite some time, but I had been trying to ignore it or push it away.

This is a common occurrence. The majority of my clients claim that their anxiety came on without warning, but upon further probing it always becomes obvious that there was a significant event (the loss), followed by the buildup of emotion.

The tricky thing about anxiety, though, is that it disguises itself within such very real symptoms that the majority of people experiencing a panic attack for the first time mistakenly think they are having an actual heart attack, as happened with me and also with many of my clients. I find it very useful to understand the physiology of a panic attack. Knowing how your body reacts to stress will help you to cope with, and eventually overcome, these attacks.

When I first began to learn about anxiety, I found it helpful to speak with medical doctors. I found it comforting to have them explain to me how the body works and to assure me that I was not going to die from the symptoms I was experiencing. In order for you to feel that same comfort, I interviewed CNN's chief medical correspondent, Dr. Sanjay Gupta.

I first met Dr. Gupta working on an end-of-life project in 2016 and have enjoyed many insightful conversations with him about death and dying. He is a kind and compassionate physician who genuinely seeks to make people feel more comfortable grappling with issues of mortality. He shared with me several key pieces of information that will help you make sense of your anxiety.

DR. SANJAY GUPTA ON THE PHYSIOLOGY OF ANXIETY

When I spoke with Dr. Gupta, the first thing I sought was his advice on what to do when a panic attack comes on. “First,” he told me, “realize that panic attacks are not as uncommon as people think they are. Know that before you can gain control over the panic, you have to believe you *can* gain control. There’s an initial feeling of helplessness. But you have to realize that the attack is not out of the blue. You have to realize that there’s something that triggered it.”

This goes back to what I explained earlier about there being potentially unconscious or suppressed thoughts that can trigger a bodily reaction. When we experience a feeling of panic that seems to come out of nowhere, it can be very frightening.

Dr. Gupta urges us to step outside of that initial response and remind ourselves of what is actually happening. “You need to understand that you’re not dying. If the mind interprets the body as unsafe, the anxiety will increase. The trick is to not perceive it as an unsafe episode. Your body is not great at knowing the difference between the present and past, so if you start to mentally go to a place of fear, then your body responds. If you mentally go to the past, your body may respond as if the event is taking place right now. So the key is to get grounded and remind yourself of the here and now.”

Some easy ways to get grounded are to stop what you are doing and take a walk around. Or if you were already moving, find a quiet place to sit still and take some calming breaths. It also helps to voice your feelings to someone by phone or in person. Getting out of your head and grounded in the moment will send a clear message to the body that there is no threat at hand. I even have one acquaintance who sings loudly, citing that it’s a surefire way to lessen her panic attacks.

Dr. Gupta likened this process to giving bad news in medical school. “If the person receiving the news visualizes that they cannot cope, then they will respond as if they cannot cope. But by empowering them with a plan of how they are going to cope, and giving them hope, it changes the way they respond.”

This means that when you are having a panic attack, it’s important not to feed into the fear. In essence, if you tell yourself you can get through it, your body will respond in kind.

Dr. Gupta reminds us that changing our images, thoughts, predictions,

and plans creates a physiological response. “During a panic attack, people start to hyperventilate. They’re blowing off carbon dioxide. It becomes uncomfortable, and it can make the symptoms worse. So focusing on calm breathing really helps. It physiologically makes sense: you can change your dioxide levels. You can develop a clearer mind in terms of what’s happening.”

Most people feel that panic attacks come out of nowhere, and sometimes it can be difficult to understand what triggered the attack. But Dr. Gupta reminds us that “if we break down the physiology of a panic attack, it becomes clear why our bodies are having such very real physical symptoms. In some ways, the body and brain are in constant survival mode. The brain is constantly releasing *sympathetic* signals that fire up bodily systems and then *parasympathetic* signals that tone those same systems down. Because of this, we have the ability to react quickly to any given situation. The body is always accelerating and always slowing down.”

Before you were intimately familiar with grief-related anxiety, you probably never even registered this kind of constant accelerating and slowing down occurring in your body. In fact, most people take for granted all the ways their bodies are constantly adjusting themselves. But when you develop anxiety, you can often become hyperattuned to all the little changes your body goes through on an hourly basis.

Dr. Gupta explains, “The physiology of a panic attack always begins with the sympathetic discharge in response to something. But what’s really interesting is that you can have that sympathetic discharge far earlier than you’re consciously aware of. Your body can actually start to change in anticipation, in ways you are not consciously aware of and in ways you may not become aware of for hours.”

This means that a person could have a thought or emotion in the morning that could then lead to a panic attack in the afternoon. And this is exactly how people end up overlooking their grief and thinking there is something physically wrong with them instead.

“For the person experiencing the attack, it will seem highly unexpected,” explains Dr. Gupta. “But if you had the person all hooked up to monitors hours earlier, you could basically say that based on things like their breathing patterns, blood sugar, and stress hormone levels, they were likely to have a panic attack.”

I asked Dr. Gupta about the difference between the bodily response to an actual threat (like an intruder in your house) and a threat like experiencing the death of someone we love, and I was amazed by how similar the responses are.

When a human being experiences a crisis, there is a fight-or-flight response. This can also be true in cases of emotional crises, such as grief. There is a physiological response. Pupils dilate. Blood-sugar levels increase. Cortisol and stress hormones release sugar because we need energy. There is increased tension in arms and legs, so movements become quick and precise. You get jittery because you're too revved up. There is increased blood supply to the brain and the heart.

In the case of a panic attack, all of these are magnified. A person can have an irregular heart rate, become lightheaded and nauseous, experience shortness of breath, and feel choking or a lump in their throat. They can feel like they're having a heart attack.

The mind is a very powerful tool. I want you to take a moment and really let it soak in that your anxiety, your very real physical symptoms, is coming from the thoughts and feelings you are having in reaction to the death of your loved one. Even if your loss was years ago, you may have become accustomed to experiencing these physical symptoms on a regular basis as a result of the grief you felt.

What sets grief-related anxiety apart from generalized anxiety is that there is a very specific trigger for the fear-based thoughts. They are stemming directly from the experience of loss.

Dr. Gupta concludes, "The most interesting thing from a physiological standpoint is that all of this can be very predictive. We think it's coming out of the blue, but it's not. What's important to understand is that something triggered it."

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The second step to grappling with anxiety is recognizing what Dr. Gupta concluded—that we must understand that something triggered it. We have to peer beneath the surface of the anxiety in order to see what the root of our worries and fears are. We have to reckon with all the feelings that accompany deep grief.

You may feel compelled to try to move quickly through the grief process. It's a very common instinct; most bereaved people strive to get back to normal as quickly as possible. Some even try to go back to their regular lives as though nothing has changed. And even for those who do let themselves steep a little longer in the grief, there is usually more work to be done. This is almost always the case with people experiencing grief anxiety. Even when they think they have grieved, there is almost always more to process.

In my ten years of doing this work, I've paused often to ponder how it is that we experience so much pain and must do so much work when we lose someone we love. Sometimes I am literally stopped in my tracks thinking about it. How can loss be this big of an experience, this painful, this lengthy, this far-reaching, when it happens to all of us all the time?

The only answer I'm ever able to come to is that grief is a reflection of our relationships. The deeper and more complex the grief, the deeper and more intense the relationship was, good or bad. And it is the exploring of that relationship, that love or that complexity, that helps us understand more about where the anxiety is coming from. Every person's grief is completely unique because so are their relationships. You can have two sisters who lose the same father but who have two completely different reactions to his death, based on the different relationships they had with him.

If we do not do the work to explore the issues left behind in the wake of loss, they do not simply go away. For instance, if you lose a loved one without getting to say good-bye, those feelings of regret and guilt and sadness do not simply disappear on their own. Those feelings must be reckoned with. They must be processed, and sometimes work must even be done to find a new way to say good-bye.

I'll never forget the case of a man who came to one of my grief groups in Chicago. His wife had been gone for almost ten years when he joined our group. But because she died in childbirth and he was forced to immediately begin caring for their newborn, he shoved his grief aside for many years. In joining our group, it was like he was taking a lid off a jar that had been put in the cupboard. All the contents were still right there inside; all his sadness and shock and anger were right there waiting for him a decade later.

So this is the beginning of the work: first, understanding what anxiety is and beginning to alleviate the physical symptoms and, then, digging deeper

to understand and process the feelings that are causing the anxiety. To get a better understanding of the whole picture, I'd like to share with you the story of my client Joanne. It's a story that is similar to mine, but I want to include it here because not only is it a classic example of grief-related anxiety, but all of the techniques I used with Joanne to overcome it will also be covered in this book.

JOANNE'S STORY

Joanne first came to see me a week after she'd had her first panic attack, one that was so severe it landed her in the emergency room. At age twenty-three, Joanne lost her father to a rare form of cancer, and now a little more than a year later, she found herself struggling in several areas of her life.

Joanne was sweet and put-together, with a clothing style surprisingly classic for someone so young. She spoke in a strong and confident voice, smiled at me brightly, and was quite pleasant to be around. In short, she was someone you would never guess was suffering from anxiety.

In our first session Joanne described her panic attack. She had been driving home from her job as a teacher's aide in an elementary school. As she sat in traffic, headed to her apartment, she suddenly experienced a severe bout of dizziness, followed by a racing heart and shortness of breath. These physical symptoms immediately filled her with fear. She wondered if she might be having a heart attack or a brain aneurysm.

Joanne pulled over to the side of the road and called her mother, who came to get her and drove her to the emergency room. After being thoroughly checked out by a physician, it was concluded that Joanne was completely healthy and had likely experienced a panic attack.

This knowledge did nothing to alleviate Joanne's anxiety, and in fact, over the course of the next week, she lived in a state of near constant fear of having another attack. She had not even been able to drive to my office, instead enlisting her younger brother to chauffeur her.

I began to ask her a series of questions to better understand her particular experience.

Had she had another attack since the one in the car or just the fear of having one? Just the fear, she told me.

Was she experiencing trouble sleeping? Yes, but only since the panic

attack, she reported. Prior to the attack she had been a good sleeper.

I asked her to repeat how long it had been since her father died. Just over a year, she said.

And was this the first time she'd experienced anxiety, or was this something she'd grappled with throughout her life? It had only been since her father's death that she had begun to feel anxious on a variety of levels, and this was the first time in her life she'd ever had a panic attack.

She answered my questions readily. Joanne was desperate for help. Ever since the panic attack, she had been calling in sick to work, afraid she would have another attack while in the classroom. She wanted to know if I thought that maybe any of this could be related to the death of her father. In response, I asked her to tell me about her life before he died.

Joanne had been raised in an idyllic suburb by two loving and wonderful parents. She had a younger brother with whom she was close. While she was growing up, her parents had been a constant supportive presence, and they enjoyed family trips and regularly held warm holiday gatherings in their home for their extended circle of friends and family.

Joanne had sometimes struggled with feelings of insecurity among peers, and later in romantic relationships, but overall she had led a life relatively unscathed by misfortune or psychological struggles. When her father, Steven, grew ill during her senior year of college, the whole family was taken by surprise. Although Steven sought excellent medical care, the doctors were unable to cure his cancer, and Joanne accepted her college diploma with her father absent from the audience.

Joanne and her mother and brother were rocked by Steven's death. A vibrant entrepreneur, Steven had been close with all three of them. Always proud of Joanne, he loved talking with her about business ideas and her future career plans. He and Joanne's younger brother, Sam, shared a love of sports and camping, and Steven also maintained a loving relationship with his wife, Joanne's mother. Steven's death instantly shattered the future all three of them had envisioned for their lives.

In the year since his death, Joanne had gone on to graduate college and began working as a teacher's aide in an elementary school that she loved. Her brother was now in his junior year of college and in a serious relationship. Joanne's mother continued to maintain the family home, despite experiencing a lot of depression and sadness following the loss of

her husband.

I asked Joanne if anything had changed even more recently. She admitted that in the last month, she had moved out of her mother's house into her own apartment and that she had also broken up with her boyfriend. I pointed out that it sounded as though she were truly on her own in the world for the first time since her father died, and I asked her how that felt.

Joanne pulled her arms around herself and nodded her head, her eyes brimming with tears. She described feeling vulnerable and more alone than she'd ever felt and admitted that she could see how this might have precipitated the anxiety attack. She suddenly sat up straighter and looked at me.

She recounted how all that day she had been dreading going home to her quiet apartment. All she could think about was how much her life had changed and how none of it looked like she thought it would anymore. She'd always thought that everything would just go as planned—that she'd graduate college and get the perfect job and eventually get married and have kids, but ever since her father died, it just seems like she didn't know anything about life, and she felt that terrible things could happen again at any time.

I nodded at her, sympathizing and remembering how similarly I felt after my mother died. Before Joanne left my office that afternoon, I worked briefly to normalize her anxiety, explaining how common it is to feel this way after a significant loss and also how anxiety is often a sign that we have deeper grieving to do. To help her get through the next week, I reminded her that the doctor gave her a clean bill of health and that even if she began to feel a panic attack coming on to remember that this is just her body responding to thoughts and feelings. I also gave her a list of quick tips she could use if she felt that she might be having another attack (see inset [here](#)).

Joanne and I spent the next few sessions exploring her father's death on a deeper level. We processed the feelings of fear and sadness she experienced seeing him decline physically, and we talked at length about their final conversations—exploring any regrets or things left unsaid. We discussed the pressure Joanne felt to emotionally support her mother and her younger brother, and we talked about the various ways she felt unprotected and unsafe in life following her father's death.

Each week, in addition to talking about her life, I gave Joanne assignments such as writing, meditation, and exercise; exploring her spirituality and beliefs about the afterlife; and initiating conversations with her mother and brother about things that needed to be addressed. And each week I worked on continuing to normalize Joanne's anxiety. Every time we met, I could see that her anxiety level had decreased a little more. She had two more panic attacks during our time together, but neither of them were as significant as the first, and during each one she was able to calm herself and make it through the attack quickly.

After about eight months of meeting regularly, Joanne walked into my office and told me she felt ready to end our time together. She told me that she felt like a completely different person than when she had first come to see me and that she had finally processed her father's death in a way that she had not yet done when we first met. She understood now that her anxiety had stemmed from her unaddressed grief. She acknowledged that she still maintained a low level of anxiety but that she no longer felt afraid of it or hindered by it.

I watched her walk out of my office knowing that although her life would never look the way she once thought it would, she had done the kind of work that would allow her to walk a full, meaningful path through this world. When I wrote to her two years later to interview her for this book, she replied immediately: "So crazy to hear from you today because it is actually the 4-year anniversary of my dad's death. But I am doing really well, and I definitely have you to thank for that. I am still using all the skills I learned from you, meditating, journaling and yoga."

Joanne is just one example of how grief can bring on sudden and intense anxiety, but she is also an example of how you can overcome it.

10 QUICK TIPS FOR ALLEVIATING A PANIC ATTACK

1. Recognize and accept that you are having a panic attack.
2. Remind yourself that you are healthy and there is nothing physically wrong with you.
3. Begin breathing calmly to regulate your blood pressure and dioxide levels.
4. Get grounded in the present moment. Do something that engages your

senses: eat a piece of chocolate, pet an animal, take a shower. Doing these things will help return you to the present moment.

5. Call someone who knows you well and tell them you are feeling anxious. Just saying it out loud can often help lessen the enormity of the thoughts in your head.
6. Change your environment. If you are outside, go inside and find a comfortable place to rest. If you are inside, go outside and breathe some fresh air.
7. Visualize something calming to stop the cycle of anxious thoughts.
8. Allow for all the emotions you are feeling—try to view them with curiosity rather than fear.
9. Externalize the panic attack—give your anxiety a name. Recognize that it is not who you are.
10. Tell yourself that this attack will end, that you are not stuck in the attack, and that you are not alone.



THE PATH TO HEALING BEGINS

Now that you have a foundational understanding for how anxiety works, it's time to go beneath the surface. In the coming chapters we'll be exploring your grief on a deeper level and examining the story of loss you are carrying.

In my work as a therapist, I've come to realize how valuable storytelling is in our day-to-day lives. We tell ourselves stories about our experiences in order to make meaning of them. Unfortunately, our society doesn't always do a very good job of providing places for people to share their stories of loss, so in the next chapter I'll provide ways for you to tell your story.

As you move forward in this book and continue to do the work presented here, I'd like to ask that you also continue to monitor your anxiety level. I'm going to provide anxiety-level check-ins within each chapter, but also feel free to return to this first chapter as often as you need in order to reread or revisit some aspect here that helps you normalize the symptoms you are experiencing.

Remember: Anxiety is simply an expression of scary or painful thoughts and feelings. Anxiety is normal. Anxiety is not who you are. Treat it as though you would an annoying sibling. When anxiety shows up, recognize that it is here, say hi, and tell yourself that you don't need to succumb to it. Remind yourself that you are embarking on a journey to alleviate the root cause of the anxiety. And remember that you are not alone.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In [Chapter 1](#), we learned about the basics of anxiety—what it looks like and how it manifests. Did reading about it help normalize some of the feelings you're having?

One of the first steps to managing anxiety is understanding what it is and learning how to separate yourself from it. In this chapter, we're going to learn how your grief plays a role.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

Chapter by chapter, we're going to work on learning more about how to alleviate and manage these symptoms, but feel free to return to [here](#) in [Chapter 1](#) and review the quick tips on how to alleviate a panic attack.

2 | What Is Grief?

The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not “get over” the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.

—D R. E LISABETH K ÜBLER-R OSS

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE'RE GOING TO TAKE A BRIEF LOOK AT THE overall grief process, because one of the reasons we experience anxiety following a loss is either because we are not facing our grief or because we are not coping with it adequately. So, take a deep breath, and let yourself open up to the idea that perhaps you have not fully grieved yet. And let's EXPLORE what grief really looks like.

One of the initial things my clients want to discuss when they find their way to my office and get comfortable on my couch is whether they are grieving *properly*. They often can't believe how much bigger, more intense, and more pervasive grief is than they ever imagined.

Before we lose someone, it is simply impossible to understand the true depths of grief. And often, when we find ourselves plummeting to those depths following a loss, the journey is much more harrowing than we thought it would be.

Grief can make you feel like you're going crazy. Grief can have physical symptoms. Grief can leave you confused and forgetful, anxious and angry. Grief can leave you in a heap on the dining room floor in the middle of the day, and it can keep you up in the darkest hours of the night.

It is precisely because of all these varied reactions and symptoms that grief is so often misunderstood. I can't tell you how many clients have expressed to me the worry that they are "not doing it right." I tell them exactly what I'll tell you—there is no right way to grieve. I've said this in every book I've written and in every lecture I've given. And unfortunately, as much as we want there to be a perfect formula—a quick and easy way out of this torturous state—there simply isn't one.

My colleague Dr. B.J. Miller, former director of the Zen Hospice Project and a hospice and palliative care specialist at the University of California–San Francisco Medical Center, has many thoughts on why we grieve the way we do, and you'll hear them throughout this book. As a sophomore in college, Miller was in an accident that left him a triple amputee. He used his experience as the motivation for becoming a doctor and helping others to heal. He says:

I think a lot of our culture's stunted grief has to do with emotional fidelity. I meet a lot of folks who are angry, for example. They are angry at themselves, or they feel guilty. But once you open it up, they're really just in grief. And this is because as a society, we are bad at grief. We don't honor it, and we don't give it space.

I think this is a mark of our society being a very young one. Every older culture does this a lot better. I mean, in other places you have six or twelve months of a grieving period where the world doesn't expect much of you, where you even wear different clothes so people know the zone you're in. To me that seems so enlightened. This idea that you're supposed to bounce back in two weeks seems not just impossible, but also disrespectful.

Grief is this sweet little window where you're really tender and where you're setting up this relationship with the loved one who gets to live within you going forward. In our society we largely shut all that down, which is just sad, and a mark of our own immaturity.

When we choose not to shut down the grief process, there are many paths to healing our grief. Like Kübler-Ross says, you will never *get over* the loss of your loved one, but you *can* learn to live in the world without them, and you can even find ways to thrive. But getting there means understanding how the grief process works.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITIONAL FIVE STAGES

In 1969 a Swiss doctor introduced a five-stage model of grief, and today this is still the model that most people think of when they experience a loss. While there have been many other theories about grief introduced in the decades since, the five stages that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross coined—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—continue to pervade our culture.

THE KÜBLER-ROSS FIVE-STAGE GRIEF MODEL

Denial —This first stage of loss is the one that helps us survive the initial emotional impact. The feelings of numbness, shock, and denial help us cope with the day-to-day survival in the first weeks and months after a loss. It is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed and like life feels meaningless. A range of emotions will return eventually.

Anger —Anger is a powerful emotion that gives us strength and represents real feelings and an underlying pain. It is not uncommon to find yourself irrationally angry at family members, people who did not attend the funeral, or medical personnel who attended to your lost loved one. Try to be careful how you express this anger outwardly, but do find healthy ways to release it. This is a necessary stage of grief.

Bargaining —In this stage, grievers may find themselves bargaining with their higher power or with themselves, trying to find any way to alleviate the pain they are feeling over their loss. “What if” questions may preoccupy you throughout this stage, or you may find yourself wishing yourself back to the past. This stage is often short-lived or one that filters in and out through your grief process.

Depression —Following the previous stages, grievers find themselves truly facing the loss in a way they had not yet. Often, doing so brings on a heavy sense of sadness and feelings of emptiness. You may find yourself feeling hopeless about the future or about how you will ever live without your person. These feelings are normal and natural. Some people need additional support and work to move through this stage and return to a place of better functioning, while others move into and out of this stage naturally.

Acceptance —In this final stage, people reach a level of acceptance

about the loss. You may not ever feel that it is “okay” that your loved one died, but in this stage you come to accept that will have to live your life without them and hopefully embrace your “new normal.” You may never feel over the loss, but you can learn to live without your person.



ANXIETY: THE MISSING STAGE

Since the inception of the five stages, many other theories about grief have surfaced in the clinical world. Notably, those by Thomas Attig and J. William Worden have made great strides in looking beyond the traditional five stages, and their ideas have been incorporated into this book. But I cannot overlook our culture’s insistence upon holding on to the Kübler-Ross model, and that is why I have chosen to talk about anxiety as a “missing” stage.

What is interesting to me about the five stages is that Kübler-Ross originally intended them to be applied to patients who were *dying*, not patients who were *grieving*. When she wrote the stages, she was working as a physician in a hospital in Chicago, and her focus was to bring more awareness to the experience of dying patients. By working closely with, and interviewing, dozens of them, she observed a process that many patients went through upon learning they had a terminal diagnosis.

First, the patients were in denial. Then they became angry. After that they began to bargain—with themselves, with their higher power, even with the medical staff. When that still didn’t change their diagnosis, they became depressed. Following that stage, most patients reached a level of acceptance.

This makes sense, right? I’ve always thought so, especially after working in hospice and seeing so many dying patients go through this particular five-stage process. However, after the popularity of these *dying* stages caught on, they were then applied to the *grieving* process, and that’s where things went awry. And it is precisely this dilemma—the average individual who comes to me expresses distress and confusion about how they are moving through the grief process.

The famed five stages simply don’t work as smoothly when applied to a

person who is grieving. To be fair, Kübler-Ross later went on to note that she regretted writing the stages in a way that was misunderstood, and she explained that the stages were not meant to be a linear and predictable progression. But it was too late—the model had already been swept away and adopted by Western culture at large. Even today, you can find the five stages everywhere you look, from jokes on late-night television about newly elected political candidates to social media posts about housewives trying to give up wine.

So in addressing this “missing stage,” I feel that I am amending the mold rather than breaking it. The majority of my clients come to my office using the stages as a reference point, so I want to work with a model with which all of you are already familiar.

WHERE DOES ANXIETY FIT INTO GRIEF?

Grief is one of the most painful experiences we will face as humans. It is not something easily quantified or defined. At its core, grief is the series of emotions we feel when we lose someone we love. Intense sadness, anger and frustration, disbelief, and, yes, anxiety are among the predominant feelings.

It is only natural that we experience some level of anxiety following a major loss. We spend most of our lives walking around thinking that we will wake up tomorrow as planned. And while grief itself has not changed much over the years, our relationship with death has. Life expectancy over the past century has increased dramatically due to medicine and science and technology. We are living longer than ever before, with the basic assumption that most of us will make it into our eighties and nineties. It has also become much less common to lose children during childbirth or in childhood to various diseases.

These advances are wonderful, but as a result we have grown less accustomed to facing death during our lives, and, thus, we are less adept at moving through grief. Death has also become very medicalized, the majority of people now dying in hospitals and care centers rather than at home. And while we seem to know more than ever about the psychology of grief, we nonetheless continue to live in a society that shies away from death, creating a systemic problem of feeling isolated as we experience the

loss of a loved one.

Because grief is so painful, we tend to be more private about it, seeking consultation with therapists and reading books about it. In general, we are not privy to the grief processes of the people around us, so when it happens to us, we can often feel as though we have no role models for how to grieve, no framework with which to go about the process.

In *On Grief and Grieving*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross writes about depression, “See it as a visitor, perhaps an unwelcome one, but one who is visiting whether you like it or not. Make a place for your guest. Invite your depression to pull up a chair with you in front of the fire, and sit with it, without looking for a way to escape.” I’ve always thought that this quote applies to grief as a whole. I’ve never met a person who was able to lose a loved one and skip the grief process. Even those who try, who attempt to suppress it or just move quickly past it, will find that it simply isn’t going anywhere until it’s had its way with you.

Most people push themselves to get through their grief as quickly as possible and return to their lives. Grief-related anxiety is most often a result of trying to suppress or avoid the strong emotions that come with loss. As painful as they are, we must let them course through us. They’re not going anywhere until they do. Grief has its own time line and its own plan for you. The more you try to wriggle free of its grasp, the tighter it gets.

And this is precisely how anxiety develops. I believe the anxiety comes from three places. One of them is due to this attempt to push away or suppress the grief process, which leads to unresolved grief and inner-lying tensions that bubble up in the form of anxiety. Another is this stark reminder that loss brings of the uncertainty of life and the existential dizziness that comes as a result. And yet a third reason we may experience anxiety following a loss is due to the nature of the death itself—in certain cases, it can be quite traumatic to watch or hear about how a loved one died.

As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, I don’t think Kübler-Ross’s five stages work as an exact formula to which to adhere. The stages can certainly be used as guideposts and as a potential framework, but they are much more fluid and dynamic than the way in which they were originally structured. However, for our purposes and to help further contextualize, here is where I see anxiety sitting within the five-stage model.

Denial
Anger |
Bargaining |— → ANXIETY
Depression |
Acceptance



Anxiety comes after anger but before, or alongside, depression. Bargaining, which currently sits between the two, is the stage that I believe applies least to the grieving process. The only way I can make sense of it is to liken it to magical thinking. We rarely see grieving individuals bargaining with themselves or higher powers to bring back the deceased, but we do see a kind of wishful thinking, a magical thinking either that somehow life will go back to normal or that we will be able to move through the grief process unscathed.

But magical thinking is only a thin sliver of the grief process. Following the anger stage, anxiety is much more prevalent than bargaining. Therefore, if I were to insert anxiety, it would come after denial and anger but before depression and acceptance.

It makes sense that we experience shock and denial following the loss of a loved one. Even with the death of someone who has had a long illness, it can still be startling to experience their actual absence, and there is often a certain period of denial before the reality of the loss truly sets in.

The following stages—anger, anxiety, and depression—are all so fluid that it is hard to put them in a linear order. Some people never experience anger, but if they do, it is often a way of masking deeper pain and sadness, so sometimes it does come before depression. Anger is a quick way to push away sadness. It's always easier to be mad than it is to feel pain.

Some of us experience intense bouts of anger: anger with ourselves, anger with medical professionals, even anger with the deceased. I often see more anger in my male clients, as it is culturally more acceptable for men to

exhibit anger than it is for them to exhibit more vulnerable emotions of fear or sadness. Regardless, anger is almost always a mask for pain.

Throughout this book, you will hear many stories of people who were overcome with bouts of anger throughout their grief process, much of it inextricably linked to their anxiety levels. Anger is a way of expressing frustration, and there is nothing quite so frustrating as feeling out of control.

When anger subsides or when it is worked through to uncover what lies beneath, we are left facing the truth of what is at hand. We have lost someone very dear to us, and our world has been forever altered. This is where anxiety comes into play. We are finally facing the loss head-on, and it is agonizing. We are horrified that our person is really gone. We are scared of the pain we are experiencing. We are fearful that more bad things could happen. And as a result, we are set adrift in a sea of uncertainty and anxiety.

But along with that anxiety can also come depression. They go hand in hand. This has been well documented for centuries. By facing the rawness of life in this way comes an ocean of depression across which we must swim. Yet even after the depression sets in, you may also continue to feel anxiety, the two of them interwoven, coming in waves.

But all of these emotions are just that—emotions. They don't last forever. We move in and out of them, release them, return to some, rest in one for a while, find meaning in another. Acceptance is the phase of embracing your new normal. This does not mean you are “over” the loss. As Kübler-Ross states, we will never get *over* the loss of someone dear to us. But we can learn to live with the loss, as we would learn to live with a missing limb. It is possible to return to our lives and remember how to make meaning and purpose without that person by our side. That is what acceptance means.

For some people, even after they achieve a level of acceptance, they may continue to experience bouts of depression or anxiety related to the loss long into their lives, and this is normal. It's not always about ridding ourselves of these emotions altogether but rather learning how to manage them and learning how not to let them control our lives.

OTHER MODELS OF GRIEF

In his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, Dr. J. William Worden proposed that there are four tasks of grieving (notice *tasks* instead of *stages*). He suggests that they do not need to be followed in a linear fashion, but they do need to be addressed in order to fully move through the grief process.

J. WILLIAM WORDEN'S FOUR TASKS OF GRIEVING

Task 1. Accept the Reality of the Loss

The foundation for healing begins with acceptance of the loss. This does not mean to suggest that you feel okay about your loved one's death but that you work to face it early. Rituals like funerals and memorial services, or tending to a loved one's grave, are important ways to work toward acceptance.

Task 2. Process Your Grief and Pain

Everyone has unique ways of processing grief; the emotions vary for each individual. It is important to use action to process your grief—setting up a scholarship in your loved one's name, investing in hobbies, or joining a grief group. Using action is a way for us to move through our pain rather than avoiding it.

Task 3. Adjust to the World Without Your Loved One

This third task urges us to get used to our new and altered world. Everyone manages this in different ways. For some, it means cleaning out your person's belongings from your home or making other plans on Saturdays when you used to go to the movies with your loved one. Bigger adjustments, such as financial plans or child rearing, are also part of facing this new reality. Working on task three is an important way to become accustomed to your new world.

Task 4. Find a Way to Maintain a Connection to Your Loved One

In his original model, Worden urged grievers to withdraw emotional energy from their loved one and reinvest it elsewhere. But later he became convinced that the opposite needed to occur—grieving individuals experienced the most healing and peace when they were able

to find ways to stay connected to their loved one. This means incorporating our loved one's memories into our daily lives and current families by continuing traditions, telling stories, and honoring values that our loved one held dear.



Alternatively, Dr. Thomas Attig invites us to look at grief through a slightly different process than both Kübler-Ross and Worden, but still uses many of the same suggestions. In his book *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, he outlines several phases of the process that are helpful to consider.

===== THOMAS ATTIG'S GRIEF PROCESS =====

1. Changes in the Physical World

In this phase, we must address the changes that have occurred in our physical world. This means looking at how the loss has impacted us in realms such as living space and work, financial, and physical health.

2. Changes in Relationships with Others Still Living

In phase two, we must understand how our relationships with the people around us have changed now that a loved one is gone—for instance, how your relationship with your mother might change after your father dies or how your marriage is affected in the wake of losing a child. Coming to terms with these changes and working to negotiate new roles is integral to healing.

3. Changes in Perspective on Time

Attig encourages us to examine our perspective on time (a sense of the past, present, and future): What does our life look like now that this loss has occurred? Losing someone significant has a profound impact on the way we view the time line of our life and our future going forward.

4. Changes in Spiritual Grounding

Evaluating or perhaps simply considering our spiritual grounding in the

world is an important part of the grief process. It is only natural that we explore our beliefs and sense of purpose following a loved one's death.

5. Changes in Relationship with the Deceased

Explore our relationship with our lost loved one, not only our relationship with them when they were alive—all that it brought to us and how it affected our sense of self—but also working to establish a new sense of connection now that they are gone.

6. Changes in Identity

It is impossible for a person to go through the loss of a loved one and not experience a shift in identity as a result. Working to examine these identity changes and embrace them is an important part of the grief process that will lead to healing and acceptance.



All of these various models contain important elements of the process. While they suggest different areas of work, and place importance on particular ways of moving through these areas, they all overlap in meaningful ways. I have incorporated all of their suggestions into the work I do with my clients and the work that I urge you to do in this book.

WHAT DOES GRIEF LOOK LIKE?

All this talk about how to grieve is important, but what does it really look like? Your grief process is as individual as you are, so I can't tell you what *your* actual grief looks like. But I can tell you what the commonly experienced components of grief are.

Numbness. In the beginning, you may feel nothing at all or have a heavy sense of numbness. It can feel as though you're watching life unfold from behind a glass window or like you're in an impenetrable bubble. I've had many clients come to me in the early months following a loss and report not being able to feel anything. This is normal. The emotions will come eventually. Sometimes it takes our brains time to catch up to reality.

Many people report not crying at funerals or memorial services and thinking there is something wrong with them as a result. But this is actually a very common experience.

Forgetfulness. I've had so many clients tell me about feeling like they are in a fog. This is different from feeling numb, but it can accompany other emotions. Clients report that they have grown forgetful in the face of the loss. They can't remember what they did yesterday, where they put the car keys, or who called on the phone ten minutes ago. This, too, is very normal. Grief occupies such a large part of our brains that, for a while, it becomes hard to think about regular life as we once did.

Crying. There may be intense bouts of crying, the kind that come out of nowhere and leave you doubled over on the kitchen floor. This is normal. Let it out. Crying is a terrific stress reliever and a healing way for your body to process all the intense emotions you're carrying around.

Don't be afraid of crying. I can't tell you how many clients have told me that they often try to stop themselves from crying because they are afraid if they start, they will never stop. I promise them that they will stop. The tidal wave of emotion that comes when you do let yourself begin to cry can often feel overwhelming, but I can assure you that it will subside and that when you are done crying, you may feel drained but also lighter.

Feelings of Going Crazy. You may have moments of literally feeling like you're going crazy and of not feeling like your usual self. You may also feel a sense of being unmoored, of the world feeling vast around you and the unexpected lurking at every turn. This is also normal. Take time to do things that feel grounding in these moments. Go for a walk, take a bath, or call a friend.

Frustration, Anger, and Short Fuses. These are all very common reactions to grief. You are carrying so many emotions around just under the surface that the simplest things can set you off. I've had many clients tell me stories about unexpectedly snapping at the grocery clerk or the postman. While I don't want to excuse any kind of lashing out, a short fuse can be expected. If you find yourself heating up, take some deep breaths and remind yourself

that you are grieving and that everything is heightened right now.

Anxiety. This comes in all kinds of forms. Panic attacks, general anxiety, social phobias, and concerns about your body and health or the well-being of the people around you. Again, this is a normal part of the response to a significant loss, and we'll continue to discuss it in the rest of the book.

Lethargy, Hopelessness, and Depression. It's completely normal to feel a sudden lack of energy both physically and mentally. You may find even the simplest tasks like going to the grocery store to be completely exhausting or overwhelming. You may find yourself wanting to sleep in the middle of the day or staying in the house more than usual. This is normal.

You may also find yourself not feeling as social as you once did. You could even go through a period of not wanting to see your usual friends and social circle. Going through a loss can make you feel like no one around you understands you anymore, and this can cause you to withdraw and also to feel lonely. Seeking out support groups or spending time with people who are also grieving your loss is recommended. You may even consider taking time to explain to your friends that you are not feeling yourself but that you look forward to seeing them when you have a better handle on the grief process.

Also, while it's normal to have moments of hopelessness in these waves of depression, there is a fine line to watch for. If you find yourself feeling bleak, or having suicidal thoughts, it's time to seek professional help. There are myriad grief counselors and therapists readily available practically anywhere you look.

===== **SIGNS OF SERIOUS DEPRESSION** =====

- › Sleeplessness or sleeping too much
- › Hopelessness
- › Suicidal thoughts
- › Alcohol or drug abuse
- › Loss of appetite

- › Withdrawing from social activities
- › Intense feelings of hopelessness

While some of these signs may mimic aspects you might experience during your grief process, if any of them are severe, particularly suicidal thoughts, I urge you to seek professional help. Please visit the back of this book for a list of [resources](#).



These are just a list of some of the most common facets of grief. I want to remind you again that your grief process is completely individual. You may go through all of these or only a couple. You may go through some and then revisit others. You may experience some of them at the same time. All of these ways of grieving are normal, and you are not alone in your experience. Taking time to sit with the emotions, however they appear, will be the key to moving through them.

HOW THE DEATH ITSELF AFFECTS YOUR GRIEF

How we lose someone has a vast impact on the grief process. From sudden deaths to long, protracted illnesses, how the person leaves our world can have many different impacts on our psyches.

Most of the time, death is not easy—not for the person at the end of their life or for their loved ones—but some deaths are more peaceful than others. Not being able to say good-bye to someone we love before they die can be very difficult to grapple with. Also, sudden or violent deaths can take a long time for our brains and hearts to process. Both of these experiences greatly affect the grief process.

Losing both of my parents to cancer, and working in hospice, I have seen many people through the loss of a loved one due to illness. This loss has its own particular process as well, with people often having spent months, even years, caring for their loved one.

In some ways, their death was expected, and perhaps we have had time to say good-bye, but that is not always the case. Sometimes even when it is clear someone is going to die, we can be in denial. They can be too.

My parents had vastly different deaths because they both chose to approach them differently. My mother was in denial that she was dying up until the very end, which meant that I was too. So even after she had been sick for several years, I was still shocked when she actually died. My grief process was lengthened and deepened by the guilt and remorse I carried for not having been able to be there more for her at the end.

However, my father's death was a much more healing experience because he was able to face the end and helped me to do so as well. We were able to say all the things we wished to say to one another before his death, and after he was gone I felt a much greater sense of closure and of peace than I did following my mother's death.

Experiencing a peaceful death and having this healing ending with my father was what led me to work in hospice. Working to support a philosophy that encourages helping patients and families experience peaceful deaths has been one of the most meaningful parts of my career.

However, some of us don't have the opportunity for a peaceful death. We lose a loved one to something sudden or violent, or we simply aren't able to face the death in time. The work I do with so many of my clients involves helping them work through guilt and remorse following a loss, and I'll cover that much more in [Chapter 4](#).

The truth is that most of us do not have the ending we wish to have with our loved ones. I've had a great many clients who have lost someone to suicide or to an accident, and these deaths leave a deep mark on the psyche of the person who is grieving. There is so much that is unresolved in these cases, and the questions, guilt, anger, and confusion surrounding the death play heavily into the grief process.

When we do not feel that we had the chance to say good-bye, or simply feel that there are unresolved issues with our lost loved one, the grief can sometimes last longer and contribute to a greater sense of unease. There are many ways to work through these lingering effects, but they sometimes require a more intensive journey that can take time to sort through. Doing the work of anger and regret processing, finding forgiveness, and also forging a newfound sense of connection with your lost loved one will be part of this work and will be discussed in later chapters.

DR. B.J. MILLER ON “GOOD DEATHS”

I believe in a good death. It's interesting—I've heard some people in palliative care say “well, there is no such thing as a good death.” But there has to be death, so why *shouldn't* it be good?

Sometimes I call it a *better* death, just to imply the relativism of it. Of course there are good deaths. Some people are ready to die and actually *want* to die. This idea that we're all always terrified of death, and it's all always bad, and it's always something that we've never wanted, isn't real.

I do believe that a death can be good or bad. For me the difference is that I've stopped looking for some objective criteria, and the only thing I can come back to that seems to hold water long enough, is the idea that a death that is somehow consonant with a person, that it's somehow in keeping with that person as they see themselves. It's the idea that their persona plays itself all the way out.

Sure, transcendence and transformation are possible at the end of life—it does happen, but you can't bank on it. Very often things like family dynamics stir things up. Death often seems like it throws gasoline on what would otherwise be smoldering fires, in terms of relationship dynamics. And so you can't count on this perfect kumbaya-type reconciliation and closure, but you can *create* it. You can *invent* it. So I ask these questions: Is the death consonant with the person? Is their death in keeping with how they saw themselves in the world? Did that persona get to play itself all the way out?

The hard part is when this doesn't happen. And this is exactly why it's hard to talk about a *good* death, or what dying could be, because I feel that by looking for the opportunities in all this, if we're not careful, we'll set people up to fail, to feel like they've *failed* at dying. If someone feels they had a hard life and screwed this thing up or that thing up, now they feel they've even screwed up around death. That feeling as a caregiver, or as a loved one, that “I failed this person because I didn't help them get a good death,” is detrimental to healing.



HOW LONG DOES GRIEF LAST?

This is one of the most frequent questions I get. And there is no simple answer. Some of us move through grief in a neat and tidy way, plucking away at the various stages and moving through the intense emotions within a year. For some of us, it can last a lifetime.

There are a multitude of factors that come into play when trying to determine how long grief will last. It is different for every single individual, and I never like to compare losses—it doesn't do any good to try to figure out if one loss is harder than another (for example, loss of spouse or loss of a parent), but I do think that the kind of loss does factor into the length of the grief process.

Our personalities also come into play. Some of us are introspective, deep-feeling individuals who naturally veer toward stronger emotional states—something that may impact the length of grief. Others of us are energetic go-getters who power through life and also through our emotional processes.

And sometimes grief returns even after you thought were finished with it, thus lengthening the experience in unexpected ways. A secondary loss or a big life change can bring the original loss roaring back on all sorts of levels. One of my clients who lost a child felt that her grief was completely reopened when she and her husband divorced seven years later. This is also a common occurrence when you lose multiple family members, such as another client who lost his elderly father but then also his brother a year later.

Our culture at large would have us believe that grief should last only a few weeks or months. Current workplace bereavement leaves, or even just the urging from friends and family members to be *over* the grieving process after six months, don't usually line up with the actual experience of the griever.

In the clinical world, this is deemed “complicated grief” and is diagnosed when a person continues to experience symptoms of recurrent sadness or preoccupation with the deceased for one to six months after the death. In my world as a counselor who works daily with people who are grieving, they almost *all* fit this category, making me feel that any grief is complicated grief.

I think it is completely normal to continue to experience sadness and recurrent thoughts of our loved ones for months and even years after the death. When those thoughts and emotions impair the grieving person's functioning, then intervention may be required, but otherwise I believe it is perfectly acceptable for someone to grieve for much longer than the clinical world might have you believe.

I will say this again—I've never met anyone who was able to escape the powerful experience of grief following a loss. Even those who push it away and think they have mastered it or tamped it down and are moving on in their lives will often be surprised to have the grief show itself down the road, still asking to be dealt with.

So when someone asks me how long their grief will last, I usually think about the ways in which they are embracing it, in order to get an inkling of the duration that particular individual might experience. If someone is really allowing themselves to sit with the immense pain of it all—and that means crying about it, talking about it, acknowledging it—then I know that they will move through the hardest parts more quickly.

All this is to say, there is no specific time line for your grief process. It is as individual as you are and as unique as the relationship you had with the person you lost.

By the very act of you reading this book, you are already doing the work to face your grief and move through the powerful emotions with which you are grappling. And by facing your grief, you are also tackling your anxiety.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR GRIEF PROCESS

Before you move deeper into this book and the work at hand, I want you to ask yourself a few simple questions about where you are in the grief process. Journal the answers or discuss them with a therapist or trusted friend.

1. Do you feel you have properly grieved? If not, take a moment and target the specific areas offered in this chapter, in which you feel you need to work on.
2. Do you feel you have experienced one grief emotion more than

another? For example, have you felt predominantly angry, or have you been mostly steeped in depression? Opening up to other emotions may be the key to moving *through* the process rather than dwelling *in* it.

3. Is there something blocking you from moving through your grief? Perhaps a stigma around experiencing emotions? Or a sense of guilt about something involving your loved one?
4. Do you feel you need additional support in order to continue moving through your grief? If so, consider finding a local grief group or therapist who can help you.

Before we move to the next chapter, I want to reiterate that the way to alleviate your anxiety is by honoring your grief process, as painful as it might be. Letting yourself move through all the emotions, all the stages, and all the phases and seeking to create a nurturing environment for yourself while you do so will serve you in this process.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

So far you've learned about the basics of what anxiety is along with the basics of what grief looks like; you are gaining an understanding of how the two go hand in hand.

Anxiety doesn't disappear right away, but with time and diligent work, you will find that it will begin to decrease significantly. Answer the following questions before the start of the next chapter and learn to keep track of your decreasing anxiety.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

☐ **Panic attacks**

☐ **Insomnia**

- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

In the next chapter, we're going to open up the idea that exploring and sharing your story of loss can help alleviate some of the weight and the isolation you are carrying with you. You're also going to learn to deconstruct your story and think about which parts of it are causing harm and which are promoting healing. Doing this work will help ease some of the pressure that grief builds inside of us. And remember, when we push away grief, the result is often a mounting sense of anxiety.

3 | Understanding Your Story of Loss

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—J OAN D IDION

WHAT IS YOUR STORY OF LOSS? IF YOU'RE ANYTHING LIKE MY clients, you are carrying around the story of how your loved one died, and it's heavier than any suitcase you've ever pulled through an airport. Yet nonetheless, this story comes with you every place you go. This story is one of the most significant of your life, and it has shaped who you are today.

Some of us keep our stories buried deep within us, and others of us feel compelled to share our stories with anyone who will listen. Whichever the case, these stories live inside of us, and they demand to be heard.

In my initial meetings with new clients, I give them all the time they need to tell me their story, because so often they have never really had the opportunity to do so. This story has been burning within them since it began, and most people find great relief in being able to spill out all the details. Being able to tell our story has an enormous impact on our healing process and almost always serves to decrease anxiety.

In my work, I've come to understand that one of the significant reasons anxiety manifests after the death of a loved one is from not allowing ourselves to fully examine the story of our loss. Some people suppress their stories simply out of not having a natural outlet, and others do so from a fear of feeling more pain. In the clinical world, this is called grief

avoidance, and it can be quite common and normal to want to avoid confronting the loss so directly.

But several things happen when we stifle our stories of loss. Namely, we lose the opportunity to really explore that story, to unpack it, to deeply understand it, and to give it a home outside of our bodies. When we find ways to externalize the story, we gain the opportunity to see the different ways that the story we are carrying serves us or harms us.

Today I run a series of grief retreats focused around mother loss with my professional partner, Hope Edelman, author of the best-selling *Motherless Daughters*. These four-day retreats always begin with a morning of story witnessing, in which each participant gets the chance to tell the story of losing her mother to our entire group of twenty-five women. To say this is a powerful experience is an understatement. Some of these women have never shared their stories. Many of them have never even met another motherless daughter.

So for them to tell their story in a room of two dozen women who deeply understand their experience is very healing. Hope and I consider this a vital part of the retreat. We feel that once the women have shared their stories and felt seen in this way, then they are better able to open up to the work at hand of deeply processing their mother loss.

I asked Hope some questions about the power of storytelling for this book, and you'll see many of her insights throughout this chapter. Hope lost her mother to breast cancer at age seventeen, an experience that caused her undue amounts of sadness and anxiety throughout most of her adult life. In her late twenties she penned *Motherless Daughters* about the powerful effects of mother loss on women, a book that was incredibly meaningful to my healing process when I discovered it at age twenty.

Throughout this chapter, I want to help you externalize and explore your story of loss. I think of these stories as living, breathing entities inside ourselves. The essential truth is that even if you are not sharing your story, you are still carrying it around inside of you. It is vital to find ways to let it out; to look at it in the bright light of day, and to share it, helps it breathe a little. It helps us breathe, too.

WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

As a species, storytelling is one of our most ancient forms of communication. It is the way in which we have passed down lineage and preserved history. Telling stories is one of the most essential ways we learn about ourselves and our world.

Even if you do not consider yourself a natural storyteller, you must recognize your innate ability to be one anyway. Think of the story you tell about how you met your significant other, or how you came to adopt your dog, or the first car you ever bought. There is always a story. And now there is the story of how you lost one of the most important people in your life.

In the beginning, a grieving individual will often recount the story of the death, perhaps beginning with the initial illness or the preceding events that led to an accident or suicide. I can't tell you how much of my work has been spent simply creating a compassionate and safe place for someone to tell me the minute details of the last few months of their loved one's life.

The further you are from the loss, the broader the brush strokes become, but when I see clients who are in the first year or two of a loss, they are still holding on quite closely to the small details that led up to the actual death. They tell me about the date their mom first discovered a tumor, the name of the first doctor she went to and the second and third doctors, the medications, the surgeries, and a complete blow-by-blow account of the complicated aftermath that ensued. Each of the last painful days is described in detail, often concluding with a shake of the head, expressing disbelief that any of it even happened at all.

Every small moment is important to tell in the beginning. These moments help us understand this horrific thing that has happened. Many clients I see turn these details over and over in their heads, trying to make sense of them, working to make it all line up, and in doing so it is sometimes with the hope that if they can figure out a missing puzzle piece, maybe they can still change the outcome. (This is the kind of magical thinking that comes with the bargaining stage.)

Even though we can never really change the outcome, it helps to tell these stories anyway as a way of understanding and accepting them. It is so hard to walk around in our daily lives, bottled up with these painful memories. But unfortunately, there aren't a lot of obvious outlets for them. As much as we might want to, we cannot unspool the details in a Facebook post. Nor are they dinner-conversation fodder when you meet an old friend

to catch up. Nonetheless, the impulse is there, so we must find healthy and appropriate places to share our tales of loss. When we don't share them, anxiety festers.

Hope Edelman says, "What happened to me, unfortunately, was that after my mother died, the curtain of silence came down. The messages I got about grieving were: *This is something we don't talk about. This is something we try to get over as quickly as possible. This is something that makes other people upset, so we don't talk about it.* I think it was that that led to the anxiety. Those messages were the lid that got put on top of the boiling pot."

Figuring out how to talk about our experiences of loss is vital. When we look at them as stories, we can see that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of a story paints a scene and brings the listener into the world being described. The middle of a story is usually composed of the most action and conflict—the characters come up against challenges and attempt to overcome them. Sometimes they fail and sometimes they succeed. And the end of the story contains some kind of resolution.

Our stories of loss typically contain these very elements as well. I'll use my own as an example. The beginning starts when both of my parents got cancer at the same time. In telling my story, I would describe how old we all were, where we were living, and what our lives were like when the diagnoses happened. The middle of the story would cover all the ups and downs of my parents' cancer treatments; the fear, sadness, and confusion we experienced; and the emotional reactions and decisions we made as a result, peaking with both of their deaths. The end of the story would be what my world looked like after they were gone and how I found ways to begin to move forward.

This structure should feel familiar to you. It is typical of most books and films and also of the stories you tell about yourself. We create stories around the most meaningful moments of our lives, the experiences that shape our identities. Taking a look at the way we are telling these stories is very important, though.

I've been both a writer and a therapist for most of my adult life, and I've always been fascinated by the way the two realms intersect. As a therapist, my main focus is to help clients explore the stories they tell themselves about their lives, and as such it's been invaluable to me to have training and

experience in exploring the art of narrative.

My initial sessions with clients usually consist of listening to them tell their story, not just their story of loss, but the story of who they are and the life they have lived up until now. These tales are constantly growing and changing. And as we mature into life, we understand ourselves and our pasts on deeper levels all the time. One experience lends a different light to a past experience, and this past experience enriches the new ones we move into.

“This is also how we externalize the story,” Hope shares. “It gets it out of your head, and it puts it out in the world. It’s a way of starting to make meaning of it, because when you tell the story to someone else, you have to give it some kind of structure and coherence so that other people can understand it. Memory comes to us in a big hodgepodge of images and memories and feelings. But when we try to harness all that into a narrative that we can share with somebody else, we are starting to create a sense of meaning out of it. And that’s at the crux of grief work. Making meaning of the loss.”

But sometimes we tell the stories in ways that don’t always serve us, stories about our lives, our relationships, and ourselves that are no longer true or perhaps slanted a bit in the wrong direction. Maybe they served us at one time—for instance, to see ourselves as a victim or to see ourselves as somehow wronged—and those narratives can get stuck. But often, upon closer inspection, we realize that they don’t fit anymore. As a therapist, I work to help clients examine these long-held narratives and begin to rewrite them.

That’s what I want to help you do in this chapter. I want to ask you to unearth your story of loss, to take it out in the broad daylight, learn how to share it in a healing way, and learn how to examine and truly understand it. This isn’t always an easy process, but it is one of the key ways to alleviate your anxiety.

One of the metaphors I like to use in my practice when meeting with a new client, particularly one who has never been in therapy before, is that of a suitcase. I explain that each of us carries around a metaphorical suitcase, stuffed full of all the things that have ever happened to us, all the choices we’ve ever made (both good and bad), and all the relationships of which we’ve been a part.

When a new client comes to see me, it's as though they drag this bulging suitcase into the room and open it up in front of me. Boom, right there on the floor between us is a giant pile of all the things that make up this person's existence. There are childhood traumas, romantic partnerships, family relationships, career choices, health issues, bad habits, mistakes, grievances, regret and anger and sadness. It can be overwhelming for them at first, to see it all laid bare like that.

I came up with this suitcase analogy after I had gone through my own therapeutic process. My first experience in therapy was at age twenty-five, after both of my parents were already gone. When I opened up my metaphorical suitcase in that little room all those years ago, I was horrified and overwhelmed by what was inside. There were my complicated teenage years watching both of my parents battle their illnesses, the pain and unrelenting sadness I had over their deaths, and also all the terrible behaviors I had indulged in as a result—drinking and bad relationships. It was a lot to take in all at once.

But with the help of my therapist, I was able to really take a look at it all for the first time. I realized there was so much about these parts of the story that I had never truly explored. For instance, I had spent years thinking I was a terrible person for not having been with my mother the night she died. In reexamining that story, I opened up to the idea that perhaps I was a scared young teenager who was in denial because everyone else around me was too. In this way, I began to change my story of loss to one that was less excruciating and much more healing.

When I work with clients now, I explain how together we are going to carefully examine the contents of their suitcase. I tell them that we're going to pull things out one by one and take a hard look at each, processing any pain or grief and working through any regret and anger. After we've examined all the contents, then the fun part begins. We will begin to repack the suitcase, but in an entirely new way. We will decide what needs to stay or go, what needs to be put back but in a different place. And maybe we will even find some new tools to add to the suitcase that weren't there before.

This is precisely what I want you to do with your story of loss. When we carry these stories around deep inside of us, without truly examining them or letting them out into world, we are doing ourselves a disservice. I believe

that on some unconscious level, our stories are begging to be heard. Silencing them only serves to let them languish inside of us, causing a persistent knocking on our soul's door that often takes the form of anxiety.

There may be many aspects of your loss that you have not wanted to look at, parts of it that are so painful, you'd rather skip over them. But trust me, doing this work is what will ultimately set you free from that pain and also ease the tensions that lead to anxiety. And I think you'll be surprised to find that the pain often isn't as intense as you think it will be or, at the very least, that it's more bearable than you anticipated.

I want you to imagine me holding your hand as we go through this chapter. Everyone has a story. And everyone has parts of their story that they feel ashamed of or sad about. There is no one who has lived a life unscathed. Your story is part of who you are, and owning it is how you will move forward.

HOW CAN YOU TELL YOUR STORY?

Now that you understand a bit more about how exploring a story on a deeper level can quite literally change it and change your feelings about the loss, I want to offer you some ways you can do this yourself.

Hope suggests that “people can explore their stories by talking to other people. Support groups. Friend groups. Social groups that come together. The Dinner Table, for example—an organization which invites people to come have potluck dinners and talk about loss. They can explore by writing, certainly, either in journals or in classes where you're encouraged to write. You can write it; you can perform it. You can externalize it by making a work of art, through painting, through ceramics, through collages, through scrapbooking. These are all ways of telling your story—they don't have to all be in the spoken word.”

Storytelling Outlets

- **Joining a grief group.** There are grief groups in almost every part of the country. These groups are often offered through bereavement centers or hospices. Most groups are divided by age or type of loss (for example, loss of a spouse, loss of a child, loss of a parent). These groups are open to anyone who would like to join, although some

may require that you are a certain number of months out from your loss. Meeting regularly with a group of people who have experienced a loss similar to yours can have profound healing effects. Hearing their stories and sharing yours can help normalize your experience and provide you with a safe place to share your story among people who understand. See the back section of resources in this book for how to find grief groups in your area.

- **Writing about your loss.** I'm going to explore this tool at length in [Chapter 7](#) because it is one of the most valuable tools available for processing grief.
- **Anniversary or holiday gatherings.** Invite friends and family to bring stories of your loved one to gatherings and prepare your own stories to share.
- **Online grief forums.** There are many online outlets for people who are grieving. Similar to joining a grief group, you will have the opportunity to share your story with people who can relate and hear other stories of loss that will help to normalize your own. See the resources at the end of the book for a list of online support.
- **Finding a safe friend or family member who is willing to listen.** Choose one or more people in your life who are willing to listen to your story. Let them know that you need to share for a while and ask them to withhold judgment or advice.
- **Finding a therapist.** Meeting one-on-one with a therapist to explore your story can be invaluable to your process. A therapist is trained to create a nurturing and safe environment in which you can share even the hardest parts of your story that perhaps friends and family are not capable of doing. See resources in the back of the book for tips on finding the right therapist for you.

LETTING THE STORY CHANGE

As I've emphasized above, one of the most important parts of this work comes when we allow our story to change, when we can dig deep enough to recognize that we are not always telling the story that best serves our healing process. To illustrate this idea, take a look at how Hope's story

changed when she was ready to really look at it.

HOPE EDELMAN'S STORY SHIFT

About ten years after my mother's death, I began by researching her life. And in doing so, in talking with her friends, in getting her medical records, in reliving some parts—even the hardest parts of her illness and death, even the aftermath—I was able to make a different meaning of it, and that was really important to me.

I carried the narrative, the story, for a good ten years or more, that my mother was never told how sick she was. That the oncologist and my father knew the test results, and the oncologist would give them to my father, and my father, either on his own or with a doctor's input, would tell my mother what the test results were. That she never got them directly from the doctor herself.

So when she told us kids—there were three of us—that she was getting better or that she was in remission because nothing was showing up—she believed that to be true. That was my story. And in my story, my father and the doctor had conspired against my mother—two men against one woman—so that she never got to make decisions for herself or say good-bye to her children. And I was pretty mad about that. For a long time.

But in the beginning, that was my story, and I was sticking to it. Another part of my story also was that the doctor didn't do enough to save my mother or that there was more that could have been done. Although I knew that her cancer was diagnosed very late in the game.

So in doing the research, I got my mother's medical records. And I saw in them that the social worker, in the hospital after the surgery, tried to tell her how bad it was, and she didn't want to hear it. I also interviewed her oncologist, who was actually a really nice guy who'd been sort of, like, the evil physician in my mind. He turned out to be such a nice man. He said to me, "Hope, there was never any hope of saving your mother's life when she came to me. The best I could do was buy her as much time to be with her children, and that was my goal. I knew from the start I wasn't

going to be able to save her life. It was too advanced. It had spread too far.”

When I heard this, I was just like, wow. And initially, I had to sort of retreat into my little cave and process this new information. But then I think the most significant moment came after that. I went down to Florida to interview my mother’s best friend from childhood who I’d stayed in touch with all those years. When she heard my version of events, she said, “Hope, I don’t think you’re giving your parents enough credit. I knew your mother really well. I’ve known her since she was thirteen years old. And I’ve known your father since they were dating.” She said to me, “I don’t think your mother *wanted* to know. I think your parents had an either spoken or unspoken agreement that your dad would give her the news and that he knew what she could handle and what she couldn’t.” She said, “I think if your mother had known the truth, she would have died much quicker. I think it actually gave her more time to not know.”

Well, finding all this out was so powerful. Because now I had to change my story! This story of mine had been a very self-righteous one, a story of self-victimization that had given me a lot of power, and now I had to change it. I’m so glad I did because it helped me understand the whole situation from a much more mature, adult perspective. But it was disorienting and a little disabling for a while. I needed to sort of make meaning out of that. I needed to sort of fold it into the previous narrative and let it change.

I could have said, “No, I’m not going to accept that.” I could have been really stubborn about it, and some people are. But in doing the research, I had to be sort of ready to accommodate whatever that new story meant. That old story was my buffer against sadness. I had to be ready to let that sadness happen. So this isn’t really a story about anxiety, but about sadness.



As you can see in Hope’s story, it’s easy to make our stories suit our emotional needs. This is not a bad thing; it’s a coping mechanism.

Oftentimes, we are in such deep emotional pain following a loss that we are capable of doing only the best we can. And sometimes the best we can do is tell ourselves a story that helps us get through the day, the month, that first year.

The problem comes when a decade later we realize that we are clinging to a story that is not entirely true and that is, perhaps, harming us on a deeper level, causing anxiety or anger. As Hope said above, her story was less about anxiety and more about sadness, but for so long she was afraid to steep in the sadness, so she pushed it away, letting anxiety take control.

It can be daunting to do this work on your own, so I do suggest utilizing the help of a therapist or trusted friend who can help you look at all the components of your story. I'm also going to provide some questions below that will help you take a look.

In thinking about when to do this work, Hope suggests, "I think everyone is ready at a different time. Some people are going to be ready to do that search very quickly. And for some people it's going to take a lot of years. Everyone is on their own path. That information will be there when they're ready. Not forever—some of the people or materials may be harder to dig up, but whenever you're ready is the time to do it. But I couldn't put a time stamp on it. The one thing I've learned in twenty-five years is that there's no one-size-fits-all for grieving."

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR STORY

Below are a few questions to ask yourself when thinking about your story. Do this work on your own in a journal or use these questions to bring to your therapist or confidant.

1. What is the beginning of your story?

There are many different beginnings to our stories. Consider that there are various ways to think about the beginning of *your* story. Is it when you were born and your life began? Is it when you heard a loved one's diagnosis? Is it the moment a loved one died? Is the beginning of your story the beginning of when you accepted the loss? Let yourself consider each of these as a beginning, and ask how that changes how it plays out.

2. Are there parts of the story you leave out when you tell it?

Owning the *whole* story is an important part of this process. If there are painful moments or if something happened that you wish you could change, don't leave them out. Instead, examine them and see what work you need to do around owning and accepting those parts. Again, finding a safe person or environment in which to delve into these aspects is important.

3. Are there parts of the story you are telling that are perhaps not true in the way you once believed them to be?

Remember that our stories are always changing. Different life experiences as well as maturity lend themselves to seeing our lives and experiences in new lights. Recall how Hope Edelman thought her mother was deprived of medical information, and when Hope learned the truth, the story changed. Are there ways you can open up to the idea that maybe there are parts of the story that you are ready to reconsider or explore in a new way?

4. If the story you are holding on to is centered around the person's death, can you expand it to be more about their life?

In the beginning, we often cling to stories about the death—the events or illness leading up to it, the final days or moments, the immediate aftermath. Imagine using a camera lens to zoom out so that you can begin to look at the entire life of your loved one, not just their final weeks or months.

5. Is there a version of this story of loss that depicts a positive experience?

Sometimes we need to turn our story inside out, or we need to squint our eyes and look at it like one of those negative-image paintings, focusing on the parts we are not always seeing. View your story through all the positive things that have occurred as a result.

In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross and coauthor David Kessler acknowledge the need we have to share our stories with family and friends. "When someone is telling you their story over and over, they are trying to figure something out. There has to be a missing piece or they too would be bored. Rather than rolling our eyes and saying 'there she goes again,' ask questions about parts that don't connect."

That's exactly what we are trying to do when we tell these stories—

connect the missing pieces and make sense of what has occurred. Please do not deny this natural impulse. This is an intrinsic piece of the puzzle and how you will navigate your way through the grief process to a more healing place in life. Recognize that you have an important story to share, and strive to find safe outlets in which to do so. Letting this story out, and fully understanding it, will ease all that you are bottling up, helping you release tension and anxiety that have built up as a result.

OTHER PEOPLE'S STORIES OF LOSS

In the initial phase of grief, you may not feel ready to hear other people's stories of loss, but eventually they can become greatly comforting and very healing. By reading or hearing other stories of loss, you will realize that you are not alone. You are not alone in going through this major life event, nor are you alone in all the feelings that come with it.

Reading about how other people navigated through their grief process can help you find your way. Additionally, realizing that other people faltered along the way, or felt guilt and remorse in regards to their loved one, can help you begin to forgive yourself for your own shortcomings.

However, do not feel as though you have to listen to or read any stories that do not feel good to you. Feel free to put down a book or put off attending a bereavement group until it feels like it will be helpful.

HEALING MEMOIRS ABOUT LOSS

- › *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed (mother loss)
- › *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion (spousal loss)
- › *Her* by Christa Parravani (sibling loss)
- › *Invisible Sisters* by Jessica Handler (sibling loss)
- › *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis (spousal loss)
- › *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett (loss of a friend)
- › *The Long Goodbye* by Meghan O'Rourke (mother loss)
- › *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala (loss of spouse, children, parents)
- › *The Light of the World* by Elizabeth Alexander (spousal loss)

- › *The Angel in My Pocket* by Sukey Forbes (loss of child)
- › *H Is for Hawk* by Helen MacDonald (father loss)
- › *The Guardians: Elegy for a Friend* by Sarah Manguso (loss of a friend)
- › *Heaven's Coast* by Mark Doty (spousal loss)
- › *The Still Point of the Turning World* by Emily Rapp Black (loss of child)



GET IT OUT

Sharing and exploring these stories are ways of coming to terms with the loss. Going over the details of a loved one's death helps you face the reality of it and begin to accept the loss. Again, this doesn't mean that you are letting go of your loved one or that you are "over" their death, but instead you are working to face the loss.

According to Kübler-Ross, "You must get it out. Grief must be witnessed to be healed. Grief shared is grief abated. Tell your tale, because it reinforces that your loss mattered."

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In the last chapter, we learned about storytelling and how it affects both our grief process and our anxiety levels. When we can find an appropriate outlet for everything we are carrying around after a loss, we can also ease the pressure that builds.

Finding ways to acknowledge your story and release the burden of holding on to it will be an important part of decreasing your anxiety.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

☐ Panic attacks

- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

If you are experiencing regular panic attacks or obsessive worry, skip to [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) to begin learning how to calm your anxious thoughts. Otherwise, continue to the next chapter, where we are going to learn about how to work through any guilt you may be feeling following your loss.

4 | Making Amends

“No regrets” doesn’t mean living with courage, it means living without reflection. To live without regret is to believe you have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with your life.

—B RENÉ B ROWN

AMONG THE MOST COMMON EXPERIENCES FOLLOWING A LOSS IS that of guilt and regret. I have yet to meet a grieving person who does not harbor some feeling of remorse over something left undone or unsaid in the wake of losing someone they love. It is only natural that this happens, yet it is also one of the underlying causes of anxiety.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross states, “Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death.” And it’s true that these feelings of guilt can be all-consuming and often debilitating. When death comes to someone we love, it feels as though a door has been forever shut. Words and actions left undone may play out in your mind for months, or even years, following the loss. But there are ways to work through these painful regrets. There are still ways to make amends.

Often we attempt to push away everything that is left unspoken between us and our loved one because we feel that there is no way to make amends now that they are gone. But when we resist the impulse to find closure, it festers inside of us and gives us a feeling of unease. Not consciously realizing where that uneasiness comes from creates a feedback loop of anxiety. Truly processing all the guilt and regret is vital to diminishing anxiety.

I know that this work might feel scary. The things you regret or feel guilty about are probably the ones you push away the most. Or they're the ones that arise most frequently, causing you undue amounts of anxiety. I know this because I grappled with my own guilt for so many years, and I also know this because I see it in every single one of my clients.

I have been the recipient of so many confessions of guilt that it is impossible to count them all. These confessions most often occur deeper into the therapy work. It is rare that they emerge in the initial sessions, and that is because these feelings are the hardest ones to talk about. Only once a client has become extremely comfortable do they finally begin to open up about the guilt and regret they are carrying.

It's always remarkable to me, though, how healing it can be to simply voice your regrets out loud. Usually, when we think of something we wish we could have done differently, we immediately shove it away, telling ourselves that we can't change it and thinking that it will make us feel worse to think about it. But I believe the opposite is true. We need to acknowledge our regrets and guilt and then find ways to process them, make amends, and forgive ourselves.

So let's begin by openly diving into it all. Let's open the windows in your heart and shine some light on these dark feelings. First of all, I want you to understand that you are not alone in any feelings of regret, remorse, guilt, or shame. Everyone who experiences loss feels regret of some kind, whether it is warranted or not.

Guilt is an interesting concept. There is a version of it that is therapeutic and useful. In this version, we recognize that we have done something wrong and understand that we must learn from our mistakes and become a more fully evolved person. But when someone is gone and it feels as though there is no way to make amends, this dilemma becomes more complicated.

When we experience guilt within grief, we feel forced to carry the burden of our wrongdoings with us rather than being able to apologize and make things right with that person, feeling that we are no longer able to do so. However, holding on to guilt is counterproductive to our healing process and serves to cause undue amounts of anguish and anxiety.

Working through your guilt, no matter how scary that might sound initially, will be one of the keys to alleviating your anxiety.



There are so many ways that guilt comes to us. Mostly, it is for things we did not say or do during our time with that person. Sometimes it is for things we simply wish we could have done differently.

===== REASONS FOR COMMONLY FELT GUILT =====

- › Not being there at time of death
- › Not saying good-bye properly
- › Unrecognized anger (at the person or ourselves)
- › Survivor guilt
- › Not apologizing for something
- › Not doing something that could have prevented the death or suffering
- › Behaving poorly toward the end
- › Having negative thoughts about the person
- › Feeling relieved about the death (usually after a long illness, mental or physical)
- › Not spending more quality time together when given the chance
- › Taking the person for granted



PROCESSING SUDDEN LOSS

When we lose someone suddenly or unexpectedly, it is almost impossible to escape feelings of guilt or regret. There is often much left unsaid between you and your loved one, not to mention many feelings of regret over actions taken and not taken on both parts. Anger often plays a huge role in the processing of sudden losses. You may find yourself angry with your loved one, with others who you believe could have prevented the death, and also with yourself.

When we dig deeper beneath the anger, guilt usually surfaces. We may find ourselves feeling guilty for being angry at our person or feeling guilty about something we did not do to change the outcome. Admitting these feelings and letting yourself process them openly will help to soften them. Pushing them away will do the opposite and create that feeling of unease that leads to anxiety.

It is very common to have recurrent thoughts of how we could have changed or prevented the death. In most cases, these thoughts naturally recede after a period of weeks or months, but sometimes we need to enlist the help of trusted friends or professionals to help us resolve them. Our brains often take time to adjust to the new reality of this person being gone, and for a period of time it not unusual to find yourself trying to think of ways that things could have played out differently so that you do not have to face this new reality.

Many people try to stop themselves from playing out these alternative scenarios, but really it's just the mind working its way to a level of acceptance. If you feel that you are obsessing on alternative scenarios in a way that feels unhealthy, please do seek the consult of a therapist who can help you.

A client of mine named George lost both of his parents in a sudden car accident. When he came to see me, he had recently had two panic attacks that seemed to come out of nowhere. He told me that during the first one, he had been on a camping trip with his wife and small children and that the second one had come at work while he was sitting at his desk.

George considered himself a very strong person and was angry that he was experiencing this kind of anxiety. He was reluctant to admit that it was connected to his grief, but at the urging of his wife, he had reached out to me.

As we dug into his story of loss, he confessed that he'd had an argument with his father about financial matters shortly before the accident, but they had never resolved it. George was consumed with guilt that he had not been able to apologize before his father died. He felt as though he could not even let himself grieve because he was so angry with himself. He spent his days pushing all of these thoughts and feelings away each time they arose.

I was able to help George see that the panic attacks were a result of not processing both the guilt and the grief. After we worked through some

initial coping tools to help him if another panic attack came on, we eventually went on to do the deeper work of first forgiving himself for the argument and then allowing himself to grieve.

George was resistant to writing an apology letter to his father, so instead we recounted several other arguments George had had with his father throughout their lifetimes and looked at how each one had eventually been resolved and his father had forgiven him. After George allowed himself to realize that his father would have forgiven him this time too, only then was he able to truly let himself feel all the sadness of losing his parents. While George continued to grieve for a normal period of time, he never had another panic attack.

It is inevitable that we will experience guilt when we lose someone suddenly, but if you have lost someone to suicide, the anxiety that can come from carrying so many layers of guilt and anger can be debilitating. As you do the work to move through the anger and make the amends you need to, you will see a discernible decrease in anxiety. There are many wonderful resources and books to help cope with suicide survivor's guilt, and I've listed some in my [resources](#) section.

PROCESSING LOSS TO ILLNESS

Losing someone to an illness comes with its own particular variations of guilt and anger. There are countless people to blame for steps along the way that led to the death, and there are countless moments and decisions to second-guess. Having recurrent thoughts about things that could have been done differently is normal and natural. This is your brain's way of eventually working its way to a place of accepting the reality that your person is no longer here.

Having counseled so many people through hospice, I have met a great many individuals who feel angry or guilty that they did not do a better job as a caregiver or as a health advocate for their loved one. Over and over, I have listened to clients lament not trying different medications or procedures or getting second opinions for their ill loved one.

Sometimes we are even angry with our loved one. We feel that they could have tried harder to get better or made different health care decisions. This is a more common feeling than you might imagine, and I've had many

clients confess feelings of guilt for thinking these thoughts.

Last, many people express guilt about not having understood that their person was really dying, lamenting that if they had better understood, they would have made different decisions. The first step to moving through this involves coming to terms with not understanding that death was approaching and then realizing that you can still make amends and say good-bye.

===== WHY WE DO NOT SEE DEATH COMING EVEN WHEN THE PERSON IS SICK =====

- › We are not properly informed by the medical team.
- › We are in denial.
- › We are attempting to be optimistic.
- › The death truly was unexpected, even by physicians.
- › The loved one themselves did not wish us to know.



For many years, I was consumed with guilt over the fact that I did not make it to my mother's bedside when my father told me she was dying. At age eighteen, driving by myself from college to her hospital in another state, I stopped to see a friend and decided to stay the night and go on to my mother in the morning. My father called in the middle of the night to tell me that she was gone.

I was instantly sick with regret for not having gone straight to her side. For years, I beat myself up over this decision and felt that I was a terrible person and an unloving daughter for having made the choice to be with my friend that night.

It was only years later, through the help of therapy, and also maturity, that I was able to understand that at age eighteen, I was too young not to fall prey to my feelings of denial. I finally understood that an unconscious part of myself could not bear to see my mother die, and that is why I did not go to her. There was yet another part of me that did not even believe that she

would actually die.

While working in hospice ten years later and encountering so many other grieving individuals who had similar experiences, I finally began to forgive myself and to see my choice as one typical of a teenager facing extreme stress.

Dr. B.J. Miller, whom I introduced in [Chapter 2](#), has helpful insight into the ways in which people sometimes end up feeling that they failed their loved one during the final days or months. “I have a couple of thoughts on this,” says Dr. Miller.

The first is to just call this out—death is really hard. And closure is beautiful, but it’s an invention. It’s not that you or anyone else *fails* to reach closure or reconciliation—those things are not to be expected. Closure is a made-up thing. Nature didn’t create that. So if we’re failing, we’re failing at something that nature never designed us to succeed at.

The second piece is that if I had to exercise one muscle in all this, it would be forgiveness. Let’s say your loved one had a spectacular death—you’re still going to come up with things that you didn’t get to, that you should’ve gotten to, and whatever else. So, I think that really, we just need to get much better at forgiving ourselves and forgiving each other.

This is our problem as humans. We have incredible imaginations, so we can always imagine something better than what we have, and we have to watch that and we have to get better at forgiving ourselves.

I myself have since heard countless stories of remorse for the way someone behaved around the time of death. There are people who didn’t answer the phone that last opportunity. And others who had recently shared harsh words that had yet to be resolved before someone died. And still others who simply wished they had been more present to their loved one when they had the chance.

In a 2017 HBO documentary titled *Diana, Our Mother: Her Life and Legacy*, Princes Harry and William both speak candidly about the guilt they felt surrounding the last phone call they had with their mother.

“If I’d known what would happen, I wouldn’t have been so blasé about it. But that phone call sticks in my mind quite heavily,” William said. When asked about his last words with his mother, he said he would never forget them, but he did not elaborate on what those last words were.

Harry, who has admitted to continuing to grapple with grief over his mother's death for the past twenty years, said that he will have regrets "for the rest of my life, how short the phone call was. And if I'd known that was the last time I'd speak to my mother, the things I would have said to her. ... Looking back on it now it is incredibly hard."

When we carry this kind of regret and shame around inside us, it manifests in other symptoms—anger, depression, self-hatred, and, of course, anxiety. Finding ways to release the guilt and forgive ourselves is vital.

RECOGNIZE TO LET GO

So how do we go about releasing the guilt? First, we must recognize that it is fueled by our personal beliefs about ourselves and about the situation. The first step to reckoning with it requires an honest examination of the beliefs we are holding on to.

For some, even just this step may take some work. I have found that sometimes grievors hold on to guilt as a way of holding on to the person they have lost. Some part of them feels that if they were to release themselves from guilt, then they might also be letting go of the person they lost, that if they let themselves feel free and happy again, they are not honoring the person who died. Dr. Miller suggests:

When situations like this come up, I urge people to ask themselves, if your person were here right now, what would they tell you to do? And almost every time the person says, "Oh, well, he wouldn't want me to suffer." Of course. Because if you're really trying to love and honor that person, what would that person tell you to do right now?

In my experience as a physician, I do believe that we as a society could do death better. But when I really think about the person who is actually doing the dying, most of the time they're doing all right. Even if there is pain involved, even if there's lots of pain. We just don't know what those shoes feel like. Most of the time the hard part is for those of us who have to keep on living.

What we as onlookers are witnessing of the dying process—the death rattle and these other things—that person is not actually feeling at all. That's *our* pain. The hazard of projection is a huge one. But alternatively, let's say your loved one *did* suffer. He's not suffering now. You did what you could at the time. Suffering isn't always bad. It teaches us

things. Perhaps someone suffered and then was able to feel the relief that his death presented him. I do think so much of the anguish is in the family members who have to live on and witness these things.

If you have found yourself in a similar situation, ruminating on a circumstance that perhaps does not call for as much guilt as you are feeling, ask yourself some questions. Ask if you might be holding on to guilt because you are afraid that letting go of it means also letting go of your loved one. If the answer is yes, then examine this idea. I know that in my case, this was partially true. I was afraid that letting go of my guilt and reengaging with my life again meant that I would be moving on from my mother's death and, in turn, letting go of her.

Dr. Miller shared a recent experience that also illuminates this point.

Just recently, I was at a conference, and this guy came up to me and told me his mom had died a year and a half earlier. He was the one chosen to make the call to pull the plug. He explained that his mother had been very clear with him that she did not want to live on a ventilator, and she'd made it perfectly clear what he should do on her behalf. So he did that on her behalf, but he presented as feeling guilty and horrible about what he had done. So we talked about it, and the bottom line was that he did exactly what his mom had asked him to do. He did what she had educated him to do, precisely. He got no flak from doctors or nurses for making that decision, but still, it was like he was honoring his mother by blaming himself for the way she died.

The truth is that we never truly let go of the people we love. Releasing negative emotions around the death, and finding meaning in our lives again, does not mean that we have forgotten our loved one or that we no longer miss them. Once you are feeling ready to release your guilt and forgive yourself, the next step is to examine the guilty thoughts.

===== QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR GUILT =====

- › What did you expect of yourself that you were not able to do?
- › Were those expectations realistic?

- › What could you have done differently?
- › Were you hindered by emotional stress?
- › Would your loved one forgive you now, given the opportunity?
- › What would you tell a friend who made the same mistake you made?
- › What have you learned from this mistake that you can apply to your current life?



If after answering these questions you feel that your mistake was legitimate and that you truly failed in your expectations of yourself, then can you own your failure and take responsibility for it? This is called healthy guilt. This is the kind we learn from and grow from.

If after answering these questions you realize that you are being hard on yourself and have been holding on to unrealistic expectations, then it is time to begin to release the guilt. Further into this chapter, we will explore various exercises that will help you in the letting-go process.

Either way, remember that holding on to guilt—either the healthy kind or the negative kind—does not serve you and will hold you back from overcoming your grief and your anxiety. Doing this work now, even if it seems scary and hard at first, will be the very work that will set you free from these lingering feelings.

RUTH'S STORY

I began to see Ruth three years after the death of her husband. Ruth was in her early eighties and suffering from a medical condition that did not allow her to drive. Since she lived not far from my office, I agreed to pay house visits.

In our first session, Ruth told me about the death of her husband, Bernard, three years earlier. Ruth wrung her hands as she spoke, anxiety crackling through her like electricity. “Everyone thinks I’m such a nice person,” she told me. “But really I’m awful.”

She paused, her voice trembling. “I wasn’t there,” she explained. “The night he died, I wasn’t there.” Her eyes filled with tears, which spilled over,

dripping onto her blouse.

As she began to tell me more of the story, I sneaked glances around her home. Old photographs of Ruth and Bernard lined the shelves, and trinkets from their travels together dotted the tables. Ruth told me how they had met later in life, each becoming the other's second marriage. Together for thirty years, they shared a happy, comfortable life together. "Thirty years, just like that," Ruth said, snapping her fingers.

A little more than three years ago, in his nineties by then, Bernard grew ill with several various afflictions. He sought opinions from different doctors, and Ruth struggled to sort out the different diagnoses and conflicting medical opinions regarding treatment. Bernard continued to grow sicker until it was apparent that he was truly declining. Finally, he ended up in the hospital, unable to feel comfortable at home. After several days, the doctors finally told Ruth that Bernard was not going to make it.

"And here's where I made the mistake of my life," Ruth told me through her tears. She took a deep breath, shaking her head and wringing her hands some more. "I went home, Claire," she finally said. "I left him there." I nodded at her sympathetically, waiting for her to say more. "What kind of person does that?" she begged me to tell her, but I said nothing, wanting her to continue with the story.

"I left him there, and I went home, and the doctor called in the middle of the night, and he was gone." Ruth began to cry again, and I gently passed her a tissue, but she refused it, her tone suddenly growing stronger and angrier. "He died all alone in the hospital, and I was here doing nothing! For thirty years he took care of me, and I couldn't be there for him at the end?! What kind of person does that to someone they love? A horrible person, that's who."

Finally, all the energy drained out of her, she leaned back against the couch cushions, letting out a mournful sob. I waited for her to recover, and then I sympathized with how hard it must have been to lose him and what a wonderful relationship it sounded like they had.

"It was all perfect," she said. "Every minute of it. But I took it all for granted. And then I destroyed everything with this one awful act," Ruth continued.

I thanked her for being so honest about that night and how she felt about herself, and I asked her if we could take a closer look at what happened.

She nodded tearfully, and we commenced a pattern that would become familiar to our future sessions—one in which Ruth recounted the actions that led to her guilt over not being there for Bernard's death, followed by my attempts to deconstruct her beliefs around her decision that night.

I began by asking her how she felt the night that she left Bernard in the hospital. She told me she felt scared and confessed that Bernard had always made most of the decisions around important matters. She felt overwhelmed by all the medical information and did not know how to sort through it. She also admitted that she felt very tired that night, that it had been a long few days of Bernard going through ups and downs.

I reiterated how challenging it is to be a caregiver and how sometimes we don't always make the most sound decisions when we are stressed and tired. "It doesn't matter. I should have been there. I was being selfish, and he died alone," she insisted.

"Ruth," I asked carefully, "did you know he was going to die that night?"

"No," she replied quietly.

"Did the doctors say that he would die that night?" I pressed on.

"No," she said.

"If someone had told you that he was going to die that night, would you have left the hospital?" I finally asked.

"Of course not," Ruth answered quickly, snapping her head up. "But it doesn't matter," she insisted. "I should have been there. But I wasn't because I am a selfish, horrible person."

Over the course of the next few weeks, our regular sessions followed a similar pattern. No matter how many times I was able to poke holes in her belief system, Ruth would return to the story that she had failed Bernard because she was a miserable person.

As we got deeper into the therapeutic process, I learned that Ruth had lost her father at age ten. He was a fisherman, and one day his boat was caught in a storm in the ocean off the coast of Washington and he drowned. What I also came to find out was that the morning he died, he called her, but she was too busy to talk to him. After his death, she was consumed with guilt for not taking his call. Her ten-year-old mind told her that she was a selfish person, and she never did the kind of grief work that would have helped release this negative thought.

Almost seventy years later, at the end of her life, grappling with Bernard's death brought this very old, very ingrained belief rushing up to the surface. Upon examining the parallels between these two losses and seeing how her old belief system had come into play, Ruth was finally able to begin to release her guilt around Bernard's death.

Yet still, there was some work to be done. Along the way, I had come to realize that, in addition to carrying around this old belief about herself, Ruth was also simply afraid to stop feeling guilty because she felt that in doing so, she would be letting go of Bernard. Thinking about him all day and fretting over her fateful decision had helped Ruth continue to feel connected to him. If she wasn't puzzling over this piece of guilt, then would she still remember to think about him? Would she still be connected to him?

I assured her that she would, and together we worked on finding new ways to stay connected to him that didn't involve remorse. I encouraged her to write letters to Bernard, which she began to do regularly and found much relief in. I also spent more sessions encouraging her to tell me more stories about their life together. We looked at photos and other old memories to revisit the loving man Bernard had been.

From time to time, Ruth would circle back to her old belief about how horrible she was for not being there the night Bernard died, and again we would do a little work to disprove this belief. Sometimes she just needed to tell me the story one more time, as a way of getting it out of her system.

Ruth, too, learned to forgive herself. In our sessions she recounted what a kind and patient man he had always been with her, and she finally understood that she was the only one reinforcing the negative thoughts. I also shared with Ruth how common it is for people to feel guilt after they lose someone and how many clients I had worked with who had also not been able to be there at the time of death or who had made decisions they regretted because they were feeling overwhelmed or scared. Knowing that she wasn't alone in her experience helped soften her stance on herself, and she finally began to move forward.

Now that you can see that there are many different ways to begin to understand how the things you may feel guilty about were beyond your control all along, it's time to really do the work to release it altogether. There are several steps to releasing this kind of postgrief guilt and to being able to move forward, but I'm hoping you are starting to see how helpful it can be to do this work.

===== STEPS TO RELEASE GUILT =====

- › Recognize that feeling guilty after losing someone is a common experience.
- › Understand that releasing your guilt does not mean letting go of your loved one.
- › Examine the beliefs around your guilt and break them apart to see which are justified and which are not real.
- › Use creative exercises to say the good-bye or apology you didn't get to say.
- › Find ways to stay positively connected to your loved one.



Over the years, working with so many clients who have all needed to find various ways to make amends, I've come up with some creative ways to repair the things you may feel remorseful about. Here are some of my favorite exercises that I think you will find really helpful.

Write a Letter to Your Loved One

As I've mentioned, for years I wrote letters to my dead mother, telling her how sorry I was that I wasn't there the night she died. Even though I wasn't sure if she could somehow read these letters, it still felt good to write them and to have the opportunity to say, "I'm sorry." This was also one of the primary ways that Ruth used to make amends to her late husband and to forgive herself.

You can write your letters by hand or on your computer. Choose a day in which you have some privacy and a time that is not followed by any demanding activities, as you may feel a little raw or drained after writing

the letter. Sit down and begin with their name, and then write whatever comes. You may want to apologize for something, or you may want to say good-bye in a way you weren't able to. Take as long as you need to write the letter. Anticipate that you may feel quite emotional as you do this exercise.

Write a Letter to Yourself Forgiving Yourself

Imagine stepping outside of yourself just a bit, and sit down to write a letter to the person you were when you made the mistake. Forgive yourself. Be kind and reassuring to yourself, and try to feel real compassion for yourself, even though you may be disappointed in the actions of your past.

Visualize Saying Good-bye or Being There If You Weren't

This is one of the most powerful exercises I recommend. Find a quiet place where you can lay down uninterrupted. Close your eyes. Take some deep breaths, and let yourself fully relax. Now visualize your loved one before you. Take a moment to really feel their presence. Next take as much time as you need to say all the things in your mind that you need and wish to say to them. Say good-bye if you didn't get to say good-bye. Apologize if you need to apologize. Tell them you love them, if that feels good. You can return to this exercise as often as needed.

Do Something in Honor of Your Loved One

I think one of the most beautiful ways of making amends is to do something in honor or in service of your loved one. Perhaps they were passionate about a particular cause that you can contribute to in some way. Or you could simply support an organization that they would have felt good about (for example, if they were an animal lover, donate to a local shelter or wildlife conservancy). You will find that doing any kind of good deed in their honor will feel good and give you a sense of reparation.

Visualize Your Loved One Forgiving You

Similar to the exercise above in which you visualize speaking to your loved one, this time you will focus on hearing from them. Find a comfortable place to do this where you will be uninterrupted. Lay down, close your eyes, and begin to relax. When you are ready, invite your loved one into

your mind's eye and be open to the idea of receiving a message from them. Perhaps they have a message of forgiveness, or advice, or simply love. Receive your message, and feel it throughout your heart.

Each Time You Find Yourself Having a Negative Guilt Thought, Replace It with a Positive Memory

Sometimes when we've focused on a negative thought too many times, it can be difficult to make that thought stop popping up, even when you've done the work to actively release the belief behind it. Retraining your brain to stop the thought from occurring takes a little work in the beginning but then quickly becomes easy. In this case, each time you have a negative thought like, "I should have been there," stop yourself from going further with the emotions of that thought and replace it with a positive memory of you and your loved one. We'll cover this kind of work on a much deeper level in [Chapter 8](#).

Find Someone You Can Talk to About Your Feelings of Guilt

Talking about your feelings of guilt to a therapist or a bereavement group who understands can greatly alleviate the heaviness of carrying those feelings around. Finding these outlets can provide a healing place for you to process these feelings and help you normalize your experience.

THE RELEASE

I want you to close your eyes right now and take a deep breath. Then I want you to allow any feelings of guilt or remorse or regret rise to the surface. Next I want you to recognize that having these thoughts is a normal part of the grieving process. You are not alone in feeling them. You are not a bad person. If there are mistakes that you made, they are simply those—mistakes. You can and will learn from these mistakes, and you will live a more meaningful life as a result of growing from this experience.

But I want you to take one more breath and ask yourself if holding on to your feelings of guilt is truly serving you. If letting go of them feels scary, remember that releasing guilt does not mean you are letting go of your loved one. Releasing regret does not mean you are dishonoring your person. There are many more beautiful and healthy ways to remain connected to

and honor the person you lost. You also need to honor yourself. And by letting go of these feelings, by *forgiving* yourself, you will also release yourself from anxiety and sadness.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In the last chapter, we learned about feelings of guilt and regret and how these can affect both our grief processes and our anxiety levels. Are you holding on to guilt as a way of holding on to grief? If so, remember that there are ways to stay connected with your loved one while still releasing some of the more difficult emotions that come with grief.

When we take time to really face our fears and disappointments, we are able to grieve in a healthy way that helps decrease anxiety.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

If you are experiencing regular panic attacks or obsessive worry, skip to [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) to begin learning how to calm your anxious thoughts. Otherwise, let's go on to the next chapter and learn about how taking charge of our lives after a loss can eliminate stress and anxiety.

5 | Taking Charge

Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible in us be found.

—P E M A C H O D R O N

WHEN WE LOSE SOMEONE SIGNIFICANT, OUR LIVES SEEMINGLY fall apart. It can feel as though a tsunami has hit, taking everything in its wake and leaving you standing in the midst of great destruction. Where do you even begin to pick up the pieces? Pondering this enormous task never fails to bring on incredible amounts of stress and anxiety. Finding ways to tackle the issues at hand will alleviate that pressure.

So much of the grief literature focuses on the emotional changes that come with a loss, but there are many other shifts that occur when we lose a loved one. Our finances may change, living situations can become unstable, and childcare can be affected. In particular, the death of a partner usually has a severe impact on finances, especially for women. According to Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Facing Joy*, widows of all backgrounds are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as married women. In addition, children who lose a parent also suffer from a change in financial and physical support more than others.

These changes can impact not just the big picture but the long-term picture as well. You may have lost someone significant ten years ago and are still struggling in your life as a result. The good news is that it's never too late to start picking up the pieces and making vital changes that can impact your well-being, both physically and mentally.

In this chapter, we're going to explore the resilient grieving model and help you find ways to get on your feet again, while still honoring your grief process. Doing this work will bring a level of peace back into your days that will greatly help reduce your anxiety.

WHAT IS RESILIENT GRIEVING?

Resilient grieving is the idea that we can take active measures and steps to find strength and learn coping tools in the face of loss, even when the pain seems unbearable.

An evolving field of research has recently acknowledged our capacity for *resilience*, the natural human ability to face trauma and loss by finding ways to thrive, become more in tune with our lives, and create new ways to make meaning out of our experiences.

DR. MILLER ON RESILIENT GRIEVING

Some people would presume that grieving and resilience don't go together. For instance, if you're grieving, then you're a sad sack; you're wallowing. Which sounds like the opposite of resilience.

The problem is that we can love our suffering; we can use it as a cross to bear. I think there are hazards in both directions. But the way through is to see how related grieving and resilience are. When I think of my own regrets, I know I have a shared big regret around my own injuries, and also my sister's death, in that I didn't really honor the grieving period. I didn't grieve. I took the bait that the strong, admirable thing to do was pull myself up from the boot straps and get back on the horse as soon as possible. That was the sort of heroic tradition I thought was a template.

I now feel embarrassed to have bought into that absurd kind of cinematic idea. Yes, we can always grieve, we can always return to a relationship with the person who has died, one way or another, but I do think there's a temporal period after the loss where you are just viscerally, hormonally, in a different place. You're just in a different zone. And that window seems to be a period when you are tender and open. I feel like by

short-changing my grief period in both instances, I literally damaged a relationship. I didn't listen to my own grieving. I didn't honor it.

So where is the right balance between grieving and resilience? From my way forward, it feels like the highest way to honor anything I've lost, the highest way for me to honor what still exists, is to keep coming back to loving life. That's the highest way to honor it all. So if I check myself, or if I check with my patients, and their way of grieving is by clinging to it or loving the grief a little too much, as if it's honorific and therefore cutting themselves off from other relationships with living beings, and not being present, then to me, that's the muster.

Ask yourself, is the state you're in, over time, serving life? Is it helping you be present while you're still here? If it satisfies those criteria, then I'm all for it. But if you ask those questions of people who are either numb to their grief or overloving it, that question can be an organizing force to pull you through it.



As someone who has seen hundreds of clients move through the grief process, I know that resilient grieving isn't for everyone. I believe there are certain personalities and circumstances that more readily lend themselves to this philosophy. But I also believe that there are tools and ideas within resilient grieving that all of us can use. More important, many of these techniques serve to reduce anxiety.

Resilient grieving is about being proactive in your grief process. It's about letting yourself cry and mourn but also taking a look at your coping methods and earnestly beginning to reshape your life. It's about not letting your world fall irrevocably apart as a result of this loss. For some people, this may feel out of tune with your natural grief process—some people feel that dusting themselves off and getting on with their lives means letting go of their loved one, but that's not what resilience is about.

There are ways to stay connected to your loved one *and* also live a meaningful life without them, as painful as that may sound. I really do believe there is a way to balance the mourning process with resilience and

that building resilience will serve to reduce your anxiety and leave you feeling less overwhelmed. Again, this kind of rebuilding can begin to happen in the first year of loss or even years out.

This work is particularly important as it relates to anxiety, because it is precisely when we do not do this work, when we let our emotions go unchecked and smothered with false distractions, that anxiety begins to surface.

In this chapter and the next, I'm going to introduce you to two women I know, Susan Hannifin-MacNab and Tembi Locke, and use their stories to illustrate the practices of resilient grieving and also the importance of taking inventory of your life after a loss. Both Susan and Tembi lost their spouses when they were young mothers, and they each went through their own experiences with grief and anxiety.

Susan's husband, and the father to her then five-year-old, died in a car accident. He'd gone out for a Sunday drive in the local mountains and never returned home. Susan filed a missing person's report, hired a private investigator, and searched for him for days. Weeks later, a local nature photographer spotted his car at the bottom of a ravine, near a beautiful lake. Police and highway patrol recovered his body on Susan's wedding anniversary. The next day was her birthday.

I met her two years later at a grief retreat I held in Ojai, California, and I was struck by her strength and calm confidence. But I could also tell how much deep sadness she carried with her. Most of all, Susan seemed frustrated and angry. She was angry that her life and that of her son had taken such a traumatic turn, and she seemed intent on finding a way to not let it destroy both of them.

While at the retreat, I worked with Susan on stepping aside from her anger so that she could begin to face the grief and sadness that ran beneath it. Allowing herself to be sad was difficult for Susan and not something she felt she could readily do when she had a small child to care for. But that weekend she was able to allow herself to tap into her grief and work through some of her anguish.

Susan went on to write her own book, called *A to Z Healing Toolbox: A Practical Guide for Navigating Grief and Trauma with Intention*. Susan had always struck me as someone who was naturally inclined to use resilient-grieving methods. Susan explained to me that she thinks "resilient people

will reach out and get help to understand and tame their anxiety. Resilient people will not judge or berate themselves for being anxious—they instead will find resources and tools (people, classes, groups, experts, techniques) to help themselves cope.” She also believes:

Just as sadness and depression are a normal part of the grief process, they are also part of human resiliency. We have to let ourselves *feel* what we are feeling first. That’s the initial step. Sadness and depression are usually in direct proportion to how much we love/loved our person. So, when we love hard, we grieve hard. I loved my husband fiercely, so I have grieved him fiercely. Personally, I don’t think someone can reach the resiliency stage or posttraumatic growth stage until they have done the initial work of being sad, angry, and/or lonely. I have a sign on my wall that says, “Don’t forget that you’re human. It’s okay to have a meltdown. Just don’t unpack and live there. Cry it out and then refocus on where you are headed.” This reminds me that it’s okay to feel it, cry it, scream it, yell at it—and then move it forward.

This is where I see my clients get stuck all the time. They find themselves caught between a place of trying to be brave and soldier through the loss instead of letting themselves feel all the deep emotions that naturally come with grief. And when we ignore those feelings and don’t do the work of feeling sad, angry, and lonely, we create great discord within ourselves that manifests in anxiety.

In [Chapter 2](#), I mentioned the work of Dr. Thomas Attig. Dr. Attig’s ideas that differ from the traditional five stages suggest that loss causes a *grief reaction*, composed of all the components we usually think about, including sadness, despair, anger, and confusion, but what we do with this experience is our *grief response*. The grieving response is how we learn to adapt and cope with our now transformed world.

“When we are ready to break away from whatever may be holding us in grief reaction, grieving continues as we actively engage with the realities of what has happened to us and we begin addressing challenges of relearning the world of our experience,” he writes.

“We work through and express emotion,” he explains. “We change motivations, habits, and behavior patterns. We modify relationships. We return home to familiar meanings in life. We reach for inevitable new meanings. And we change ourselves in the process. Death, bereavement,

and our grief *reactions* are not matters of choice. But grieving in the quite contrasting second sense of the term as an active *response* to them is pervaded with choice. When ready, we must choose our own path in transforming the course of our lives following bereavement.”

Tembi Locke, actress, speaker, and author of the memoir *From Scratch*, lost her husband, Saro, after a decadelong battle with a rare form of cancer, leaving her widowed with a seven-year-old daughter, an experience that taught her both deep grief and also resilience.

Tembi told me, “In many ways, I came to widowhood and deep grief already exhausted. I had spent my entire thirties as a cancer caregiver for my husband. That means that for years, I had lived with a gnawing anticipatory grief for which, at the time, I had no name. The anticipation of losing my partner, lover, best friend, and father of my child created incredible anxiety.” She went on to expound on her experience:

A decade of living with a life-threatening illness had left my nervous system hijacked by the near-constant anxiety. The unpredictability of his care and treatment had me in a perpetual state of “fight or flight.” Plus, I had been experiencing anticipatory grief for years. That came with its own anxiety. To survive it all, I had to learn how to stay in the moment and escort myself back to my present. It took a lot of work and a lot of emotional energy, but it was how I survived.

After Saro died, to some degree my anxiety was masked in the first year. It was so interwoven with acute grief that it was hard to discern one from the other. It was all a ball of awful. By the second and third years, it was more obvious. I had free-floating anxiety that could land anywhere, at any time. Hearing a distant siren could set me off; it triggered trauma. Sometimes it still can. Perhaps it will always be my nervous system’s auto response to certain circumstances and fears. In some ways, it is the legacy of long-term trauma. But I know the signs now, I can feel it coming on. I have tools to redirect the fear. I have a personal mantra to calm the parts of me that are afraid. My anxiety is manageable because I acknowledge it.

When I asked her about the kinds of resilient behavior she used like the ones mentioned by Thomas Attig above, Tembi had this to say:

The short answer is everything and the kitchen sink. I really have tried so many different things to respond to grief and honor it in my life. I think that, in and of itself, is a kind of

resilience. It is a willingness to keep trying in the face of pain and loss. Resilience is rooted in willingness.

On a practical level, I make sure I am around people who can support me and be with me exactly where I am. I know I need that in order to feel safe and supported. So, I am very selective about who I choose to be intimate with in my grief. I don't feel people can be resilient if they are not starting from a place of being somewhat supported.

I write a lot. I mean a lot. I have written so many letters that never got sent. These letters help me to see what is hurting me, what I want to change, where I hope to go.

She went on to tell me that, "Some techniques came naturally—taking downtime and being with positive, supportive people. Other techniques came to me by way of other people's suggestions and reading books. Grief counseling helps. I am a naturally curious person. I'm not afraid of my own emotional landscape. So this helps me to stay open to what might inspire me or move me. I suppose I am naturally inclined to move toward what I don't always understand. I get curious about it. And if I stumble on something (a piece of advice, a place, an idea) that feels right for me, I will not hesitate to incorporate it into making my life a little better."

After witnessing so many different clients go through the grief process, some of them more resilient than ever, I think that what Tembi hits on about curiosity is important. We must be curious about the process, and we must be willing to engage with our emotional realm in way that we have perhaps never before done. Grief is unlike anything we go through during our lifetimes. It is overwhelming and sometimes frightening. Being willing to engage with it and to explore all the ways it shapes us is vital to moving through it.

In a book called *Resilient Grieving*, author Dr. Lucy Hone writes, "Throwing yourselves into recovery doesn't mean hiding from grief, pain, misery, aching. It just means you go with the present experience—when these emotions come, you open up to them and let them in—but you choose to get up in the morning and get out in the knowledge that, if you want to win this fight for survival, you've got to step up and take control."

So how do we go about doing this? Here are some basic ideas about resilient grieving that you can begin to employ no matter where you are in the grief process.

Establish Routines

Creating a regular schedule and routine, despite the changes that you have incurred, works to soothe the brain and let our unconscious know that we are safe. This has a calming effect on the body and central nervous system, leading us away from some of those bodily responses that can easily trigger a panic attack.

When my mother died, I took a yearlong hiatus from college. I had no sense of routine—I stayed up late, traveled on a whim, did nothing predictable. At the time, this felt like what I wanted—my mother was gone; nothing *should* be the same. But in retrospect, I think it would have perhaps been more beneficial for me to remain in school and continue as planned, while still grieving. Being unmoored like that, out in the world, increased my anxiety and my sense that there was nothing to rely on.

Tembi explained that she believes she “made it through the first year on fumes and single-minded determination to keep as much of my world around me as intact as possible. Because my daughter was seven at the time, I wanted to keep the constancy of place and routine. Plus, the time and energy that I had given over to caregiving for nearly a decade suddenly had no outlet. I think I transferred that need ‘to do’ over to making sure things were orderly. I was almost obsessive, but it kept me sane, if not exhausted.”

Examine What Is Working

Dr. Hone encourages grievors to ask themselves if their behavior is “helping or harming.” This means paying attention to the thoughts you are focusing on. Are you obsessing on feelings of guilt, continually running through a list of “what ifs,” or replaying traumatic images?

These are all normal responses to loss. It’s as though our mind wants to turn the experience over in our heads like a Rubik’s cube, trying to make sense of it, trying to line up the events in order to reach a different outcome. Again, this is normal and expected, but after a certain period of time we must begin to release these thoughts and move away from them.

If you find yourself continually replaying certain thoughts, stop and ask yourself if they are actually helping in some way. If they are not, then it is time to let go of these thoughts. We’ll cover more strategies for “retraining” your brain in [Chapter 8](#).

Ask for Help

This one may seem obvious, but I can't tell you how many people I've encountered who shrink from this in the face of grief. Either they assume that no one around them will be able to truly help, or they are afraid to ask for help. Letting the people around you know what you need—whether that's household help, financial planning assistance, or simply someone to listen—can ease the burden you are carrying. I think you'll be surprised how ready your community is to help you once they have an understanding of how.

Asking for help does not always come easily. In cases of loss where our lives and our emotional capacities change dramatically, sometimes we must force ourselves to step outside of our usual comfort zone and maybe even that of our society. Susan told me:

My entire world flipped upside down when my husband died. Where there were once two parents to take on the tasks of child rearing, now there was one. Where there were once two professionals to take on the tasks of providing a family income, now there was one. Where there were once two adults to run a household—cooking, cleaning, paying the bills, doing the taxes, shuffling children, grocery shopping—now there was one. It was impossible to do everything myself. So, I asked for help. I delegated responsibilities. I gathered a posse of people to assist me with everything. And people came (and stayed) because they wanted to help. It seems that culturally, most Western countries believe that adults should be independent at all costs. But I completely threw that notion out the window when grief came barreling into my life. I remembered my years of living in Hawaii with my husband—families, friends, coworkers modeling *interdependence*. I have since integrated that notion into my life, and it's made all the difference.

Nurture Your Physical Body

Caring for our physical body is often the first thing to go out the window. When we are grieving, it is common to experience a lack of appetite, lethargy, sleeplessness. Being proactive about your health during this time is vital. Healthy foods, exercise, and rest will greatly reduce your stress and anxiety levels.

“Exercise was a major healing component for me,” Susan told me. “I exercised six to seven times a week while grieving. I walked, hiked, swam, biked, Rollerbladed, kayaked, paddled... all while crying. Since I had

always exercised, it was the *only* thing that still felt ‘normal.’ Plus, I knew I needed the endorphins to combat anxiety and depression symptoms.”

Seek Positives

When we are grieving, there is the tendency to look at the whole world through gloom-colored glasses. In the initial grieving process, or if you have let things stagnate for too long, we can become mired in seeing negativity everywhere.

For years, I could look at my life only through the lens of having lost my parents. I saw only what I didn’t have and all the ways in which my life was ruined as a result of their deaths. Finally, I began to actively work to acknowledge the positive aspects of my life, and doing this turned everything around for me.

This isn’t always an easy process—it requires diligence and focus. Sitting down and making gratitude lists, reminding yourself to bask in positive moments and experiences, and remembering that embracing life again doesn’t mean letting go of your loved one.

Distractions

The habit of dwelling on negative thoughts, or what psychologists call rumination, can become exactly that—a habit. Actively working to break this cycle by distracting yourself with positive activities can help break this pattern. Go to the movies, take up gardening or some other hobby, or begin to socialize with people who make you feel comfortable, all of which can have a profound effect on reducing negative cycles of thoughts that cause anxiety.

Tembi claims that she didn’t use a lot of distraction.

I felt strongly that I had to allow for my grief to live openly in its many forms. I had to be willing to get intimate with it, to get to know it. I recognized its magnitude and saw it as a part of my life that wasn’t going anywhere. So, I needed to understand the grieving Me—what I liked, didn’t like, what I needed. So, I also felt that if I distracted myself from this huge event in my life that I would be shutting off a part of emotional life. I would be lost to myself. That doesn’t work as a creative individual. Now, that is not to say that I didn’t have moments of distraction. I took trips; I went to museums, lots of movies; I engaged in things that lifted my spirits. I changed my bedroom. I bought a new wardrobe. I watched a lot of

TV. Doing those things distracted me momentarily just enough to offer respite or make feel engaged with life. It was distraction that pulled me toward optimism or the possibility of future joy.

There is a fine line between healthy distractions and negative ones. Take a moment to ask yourself if you think you are using distraction as a way of trying to avoid the grief process or if the activities you are choosing are healthy ones.

Create Rituals

Find ways that feel good to you to bring your loved one into your life. Our inner selves crave connection with our loved ones. Don't deny this impulse. Create your own ways to continue that bond. Make their favorite meals, light a candle every night, tell stories about them, start a project in their honor, or find a way to be of service for a cause that they cared about.

Connect with Others

Sometimes being around people can be difficult after a major loss. Finding the *right* people to share company with can make all the difference. Take a look at the people in your life and put distance between yourself and anyone who makes you uncomfortable right now.

Also, seek out people who understand what you're going through. Join a support group, or reach out to a friend who is also familiar with loss. Finding ways to feel a little less alone in your grief will be incredibly soothing.

Make Meaning

Finding ways to make meaning of the loss is invaluable to your sense of peace. This doesn't mean making sense of why that person died now but rather finding ways to make their loss and your grief meaningful.

Did your loved one have a cause they were passionate about? Continue the work in their honor. Has your pain made you more compassionate? Find ways to use that in ways to help others.

Accept the Loss

A lot of resilience work involves truly accepting the loss. For many of us, this means simply facing our grief, opening ourselves up to the changes in our world, and working to genuinely step into the pain as a way of moving through it. This can feel incredibly frightening, but doing this work is never as scary as we think it's going to be.

Also, remember that this acceptance has a long arc. You will come to many different points of acceptance throughout your grief experience. It is not something you need to feel daunted by, as some of it does come naturally and in time.

===== **DESIGNING YOUR OWN RESILIENCE PLAN** =====

- › Begin by making a complete list of everything you need help with, including little things.
- › Share your list with a friend or family member and ask them for support.
- › Pinpoint any areas that you feel particular pain or fear around, and then examine why and find ways to work through these areas.
- › Share your list with your therapist or grief group and ask for support.
- › Take a look at the truth of your financial situation and see a financial adviser or ask advice from a family member or friend.
- › Make a list of things in your life that are taking up unnecessary energy or time and begin to make changes to decrease these stressors.
- › Take up new hobbies or activities that bring you pleasure and joy.
- › Maintain or increase your physical activity.
- › Actively seek out people who bolster your life in positive ways.
- › Continue to check in on this list as you make new changes in your life, checking things off and adding new ones as they arise.
- › Consult with others before making big changes like moving or changing jobs. These impulses often come up in the wake of loss, but be sure you are ready.



CHOOSING RESILIENCE

It is only natural that your life changes dramatically after the loss of a loved one. As many different theories about grief advise, accepting these changes and beginning to create a new life are part of the grieving process. Please go easy on yourself as you do this work. Remember that it takes time and does not have to be done all at once.

I also want to caution you not to use these techniques as a way of avoiding your intense grief emotions. You *can* and *should* do both at once. Allow space for sadness and anger, while at the same time making efforts to rebuild.

Remember that feeling overwhelmed by these big changes in your life is completely normal, but if you do not work to accept them and rebuild your foundation, you can experience more stress and anxiety as a result. Recognize that it is difficult to face these changes alone. Seek out support, and create a new network of supportive people who can help assist you in moving forward. Your life may never look the way it did before you lost your loved one, but it can become stable again.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In the last chapter, we learned about all the different ways your life can seemingly fall apart after a major loss but also about how there are very real ways you can get things back to normal and under control. Finding ways to be resilient during the grief process is an important part of reducing anxiety.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness

- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

If you are experiencing regular panic attacks or obsessive worry, skip to [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) to begin learning how to calm your anxious thoughts. Otherwise, let's move on to the next chapter in which we're going to begin thinking about positive changes we can implement in our lives as a result of loss.

6 | Taking Inventory

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

—S HERYL S ANDBERG

WHILE CHAPTER 5 WAS ABOUT EMPLOYING A RESILIENT-GRIEF approach to picking up the pieces of your life after a loved one dies, I want to take it one step further in this next section. In this chapter, we are going to look at the ways in which anxiety manifests when we ignore the call to reevaluate our lives after losing someone significant.

Grief never fails to serve as a reminder that our time here is short and that we truly must make the most of it. But grief can also come with a dizzying sort of freedom. It can help you realize what is important and help you focus on living your best life, but, even so, sometimes those things are hard to do, and the anxiety comes from knowing you're *not* doing them.

Finding a balance between embracing life to its fullest potential, and also being responsible and planning for the future, is an important part of this journey. Don't be surprised if you have found yourself in this predicament—suddenly wanting to make major changes to your life because you now realize what is truly important to you. Or—sometimes harder—you know you need to make major changes but feel paralyzed. In this chapter, I'm going to check in with several different clients and authorities about how they approach this issue.

Dr. B.J. Miller, who drives a motorcycle despite being a triple amputee and who displays very little anxious traits, had this to say when I asked him if he experiences anxiety. “I was going to say no, right off the bat, but I do.

I experience anxiety when I ask myself if I'm making the best use of my time. Am I loving life as much as I could or should or would? Am I doing things that I believe in? In a way, the fear of death is really the fear of not living the life I want to, while I have it to live. If those are one and the same, then yes I do have anxiety about death."

Evaluating these epiphanies about the potential to live your best life is vital to moving forward and rebuilding your identity without your loved one and to overcoming all the anxiety that comes with doing so. There are many approaches that will allow you to tackle this in a positive and meaningful way. I'd like to begin with the story of my client Ethan, because his journey to fulfillment is one I aim to achieve for all of my clients—and for you.

ETHAN'S STORY

Ethan booked his first appointment with me following an acute panic attack at work. After puzzling over what could have brought it on, his only guess was the recent loss of a friend. The loss of this friend had resurfaced an even older loss—that of his father when he was a teenager, and now Ethan was in his thirties and felt he was finally assimilating the devastating impact of losing a father in a way he never had before.

At the time he came to see me, Ethan had suddenly found himself aware of the ways in which his father's premature death had affected his self-esteem and his ability to be emotionally intimate with his girlfriend. But it was the death of Ethan's friend that acted as a catalyst, helping him see that now was the time to finally make some changes.

Losing a friend so close to his own age had served to remind Ethan of just how short life can be, and this set off a wake-up call, resulting in a series of debilitating panic attacks. Ethan realized that he wasn't living the life he wanted to be living, but because of buried grief over his father and the dissatisfaction of his career and relationship, Ethan suddenly felt panicked and paralyzed about what to do about it.

Over the course of several months, Ethan and I worked closely together to untangle all the threads of grief. Pulling these apart was necessary in order to really understand the results that had come from these losses. While it was Ethan's friend's death who had served as the wake-up call, it was really the grief over Ethan's father that we needed to work through.

Largely because he had been a teenager at the time of the loss, incapable of grappling with the complex emotions of grief, and also because he'd had to step in as the male figure in the household, Ethan had never truly allowed time or space to process his grief. Thus, it manifested in a variety of ways that directly affected his ability to be emotionally intimate. Additionally, Ethan carried a lot of anger and rage that would sometimes burst forth in unexpected situations.

Although it was easy for me, as the therapist, to see that we needed to backtrack through his father's loss in order to tackle his underlying anxiety, each week Ethan came in feeling frustrated with his day-to-day life and wanting to focus on that. He was miserable in his job as an attorney—a career he'd felt he should pursue but had never been passionate about. He was also deeply unhappy with his long-term live-in girlfriend and did not feel that they were compatible. While she was pushing to get married, he longed to find the strength to break up with her, but the truth was he was afraid to be alone.

Ethan's panic attacks grew stronger before they got better. He experienced them frequently at work, and sometimes in the morning upon waking up. He told me that at first he would be feeling fine and going about normal tasks, and then suddenly he would feel swept away by a wave of dizziness that would serve to trigger his entire adrenaline system, sending him into a spiral of shallow breathing and lightheadedness. Each time this occurred, he felt certain that he was going to die, and his whole life—and in his mind a life yet truly lived—flashed before his eyes. Several doctor visits and multiple tests all reported him as in perfect health. By the time Ethan came to see me, he had developed anxiety simply about having more attacks.

I urged Ethan to work with me on several levels. The first was normalizing his anxiety, by giving words and context to it. The emotions of regret, fear, and anger were so bottled up within him that the only outlet they could find was these attacks. His thoughts were creating emotions that sent his body into a series of fight-or-flight responses.

Many of my sessions with Ethan began by discussing his current life circumstances and the changes he was intent on making, followed by concentrating on opening up his old grief about his father's death and all the ways that loss had impacted his life. None of this was easy for Ethan. He

had spent nearly two decades trying to pretend like everything was fine. Acknowledging that perhaps the opposite was true was very painful for him initially.

I reviewed the suitcase analogy that I've spoken about earlier in this book, explaining to him that it can be difficult to open up his metaphorical suitcase and take a look at all the long-buried contents but that together we would sift through it and begin to rearrange, discard, and add better coping tools. We worked on checklists of things to do in the midst of a panic attack. I taught Ethan about meditation, even walking him through it during our sessions, and helped him incorporate a daily practice in his life. (Meditation will be covered extensively in [Chapter 9](#).)

While Ethan worked on his own time to adopt these new coping methods of meditation and mindfulness for his anxiety, and also began to have a series of painful yet necessary talks with his girlfriend, we began to spend more time in the office processing the grief over his father's death.

In one session I helped him walk through the painful memories of his father's actual death—a sudden heart attack that Ethan had witnessed, the memories of which he had long since buried. Digging these up and letting him feel the pain and sadness was difficult but rewarding. He was able to express and verbalize his fear, sadness, and trauma around this event and take it out into the light of day to let it breathe a little. We carry these memories around in us, whether we are even aware of it or not, so taking time to reflect on them and process them in a safe place helps ease some of the weight we carry with them.

We also worked to examine all the impacts this loss had on his development. He'd developed an avoidant attachment style as a result of this traumatic separation from his father, and it contributed to his lack of ability to be emotionally intimate with his partner. When we experience major losses early in life, it often affects our way to attach to other primary figures in our lives. Instead of being able to hold secure attachments, we can develop anxious or avoidant styles that limit our capacity to form healthy relationships.

Over the course of a few months, Ethan's anxiety began to dissipate considerably. Learning new tools and also processing his grief had softened him, allowing him to open up his full range of emotions rather than bottling them up. As he began to find himself on more solid footing, Ethan turned to

the next task at hand: taking charge of his life.

Ethan's biggest fear was that he would also die young like his father did and not have lived the life he meant to live. So, in addition to beginning to make changes, we talked a lot about his thoughts about death and about what happens when we die.

Ethan realized he had never really let himself explore these ideas. He didn't really know what he thought about death or about the afterlife. We had many a spirited conversation about these topics, and Ethan began to explore various religions and aspects of spirituality that began to bring him comfort and peace. (For more on this process, see [Chapter 10](#).)

Ethan's panic attacks ceased two months into therapy. While he began to feel better emotionally, spiritually, and physically, more than anything he now felt driven to take charge of his life and make the big changes he had been afraid to make. He worked to open up to his girlfriend and discovered that he didn't want to break up with her but wanted to explore a deeper emotional connection—one that he had previously been incapable of.

Ethan also made drastic changes to his career. He quit the law firm where he had been so miserable, and he started his own firm, helping immigrants in need of low-fee counsel. He also began playing the guitar again, something he had abandoned in adolescence, planned a trip to an exotic location that he'd always wanted to visit, and enrolled in an art class as a way to tap into a creative side of himself that he felt deserved attention.

By the time our sessions came to an end, Ethan was in a completely new place in life. He had a new career path and was saving money to buy an engagement ring for his girlfriend. He was much more emotionally stable, and his panic and anxiety had diminished to almost zero.



Taking inventory of your life after losing someone you love is an important part of the grieving process, but it's also a very significant way to reduce anxiety. As you saw in Ethan's story, a loss can serve as a wake-up call, reminding us of our priorities and sometimes alerting us to ways we've been living that aren't optimal.

There is often a fear, though, that moving forward means letting go of your loved one, and I want to continue to reiterate that this is not the case. You can move forward and live a meaningful life while continuing to honor and cherish your person. Two things can be true at once: you can miss your person and wish they were still here and also build a new life without them.

This forward movement has a different time line for everyone, so I urge you to find the right time for yourself to do this work. Sometimes we push ourselves to move on too quickly as a way of trying to escape the sadness. And sometimes we steep too long in the sadness before finally finding a way to move forward. Check in with yourself, and even check with friends and family to see where they think you are with this.

===== TEMBI LOCKE'S TIME LINE =====

I remember getting to the first anniversary of Saro's death and feeling like I had been duped. Somewhere in my psyche I thought that if I could just get through the first year, just be as present as I could, then I would start to feel better. But I arrived at the end of that first year, more exhausted by the idea that I had more years of grieving him to come. I didn't feel better, I felt more lost than ever. And I was managing my own grief and our daughter's grief alone. Parenting a grieving child can put one's own grief on a whole other trajectory. It was a heart-wrenching time.

That second year was just about waking up and allowing myself to be in the world as it was. It was prayer each night, meditation in the morning. Put one foot in front the other. Sit down when needed. Then try again. I remember being disillusioned that year, which I think was my form of anger. And I was also terribly anxious that year. I had many, many, doctor visits. I was sure that there was another diagnosis waiting in the wings. My grief had become physicalized. I felt sick all the time. And my daughter's anxiety about losing me fed into my anxiety. It was a terrible loop that took me months, maybe a year to get out of it.

It was perhaps at the end of the third year when I began to see the evidence of a new life that I was building. By then, I had enough experience with my own grief to know all the events and triggers that

would cause me a deep sense of loss. But I also knew how to handle them a bit. I had developed some support system and “tools” for self-care. And by self-care, I mean just knowing when to bow out, take a personal day, go easy. I had learned to take my hand off the wheel when I knew I was skidding on the black ice of grief. I had to release and surrender in order to allow the moment to pass and get back on safe ground. That year is when I began to want to find an instrument for grief, a way to turn my loss into something beautiful and meaningful.

In the fourth year, I began to get curious about my life, the bigger things that I wanted and desired. I wanted to reclaim parts of me that had not only been lost in grief, but that had been lost in years of caregiving. I had desire again, professionally and personally. I became curious about dating, I started a professional endeavor that opened doors for me. Life felt scary but also filled with potential. My own potential. I had done enough hard grieving that my energy source was refilling again. My anxiety abated somewhat.

And now, in the fifth year since his death, I feel his loss in a different place. It comes to me daily, but in a different way. Not less acute, his absence can still leave me overcome with sadness. But now, I am more familiar with the way the grief rolls in and rolls out again. I have had time to develop a relationship in death and with my own heart-felt loss. But that has taken five years.

I would suggest that it's actually a process. And for me that process moved (and still moves) at varying paces. My resilience is actually my willingness to show up in the face of the unknown, without promise. When people look at me and see resilience, they are really looking at someone who struggles to stay open and curious to life. And certainly, I do feel that seeing women (and men) who have suffered the loss of a spouse or a child or a sibling and seeing that they have managed to carve out a life from loss inspires me to find my own way. I always ask people how they do it, what has worked for them. Other people's bravery is the fuel and inspiration for my own resilience.



As you read through the following list of questions, try not to feel overwhelmed. You may have strong reactions to all of them or maybe just a few. Either way, facing all the parts of our lives that we need to change can feel daunting. But remember that recognizing what those changes need to be is the first healing step. Once you've targeted the areas for growth, then you can begin to work on them in bits and pieces rather than all at once.

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What are some things in your life that you would like to change? Job? Family? Finance? Are there steps you could be taking to begin to make changes in those areas? Is this the right time to make these changes? Consult with friends, family, or a therapist to evaluate the answer to this question.
2. Do you have any bad habits you need to quit? Overeating? Smoking? Alcohol? Many people use short-term behaviors like drinking, drugs, redecorating, rebuilding, sex, eating, and social media as temporary distractions from the pain of grief. Finding ways to work on reducing or eliminating these habits can be a great reliever of anxiety and guilt. There are many support groups and specialized therapists that can help you eliminate these behaviors.
3. Are you involved in relationships that either need to end or need to change? Review the people you surround yourself with and ask yourself if they are contributing to your life in meaningful and healthy ways. If they are not, seek ways to shift those relationships.
4. Do you need to make amends with someone? Is that weighing on you? Revisit [Chapter 4](#) and open yourself up to healing any broken ties.
5. Do you have major life goals (writing a book, running a marathon, learning a new language) that you have been putting off? Perhaps now is the time to consider embracing and working toward these goals.
6. Ask yourself Sheryl Sandberg's question: What would you do if you

weren't afraid?

7. Are you contributing to the world at large? Take stock of any ways in which you feel you are doing so (volunteering for a nonprofit, donating to causes, helping people in need), and think about ways you can increase or incorporate these activities into your life.

Finding ways to feel like you are living a meaningful life is a great way to reduce anxiety about your place in the world.

8. What are the positive things that you can do *because* your loved one is gone? Make a list and work to embrace them.

WHY DO WE GET INTO UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AFTER A LOSS?

This is one of the most common themes I encounter with my clients. It is not at all unusual for people to either commence or perpetuate unhealthy relationships following a loss, but these relationships can also become one of the largest sources of angst and anxiety.

Unhealthy relationships can sometimes begin immediately after a loss, or they can become a pattern that plays out for years, so whether you are new to your grief or you are processing an older loss, taking a look at how it plays out in your current relationships will be a key component to creating a healthier lifestyle free of anxiety.

When we lose someone significant, there is a gaping hole left. All the ways they supported our lives, emotionally, physically, and even financially, have a big impact on us after they are gone. It is only natural that we react to this loss either by seeking to quickly fill that hole with someone else or by feeling (sometimes unconscious) anger or frustration with other loved ones who cannot adequately fill it.

I have seen people who lose a spouse attempt to quickly enter into new romantic relationships, only to cause more disruption within their lives as a result of choosing someone hastily and not doing the work to sit with the uncomfortable feelings of loss after their partner died.

Others who have lost parents or siblings also attempt to replicate those relationships or fulfill those roles within romantic relationships, generally finding the same amount of discord as those who hastily chose new spouses.

First of all, this is normal human behavior. We are social creatures. We enjoy being loved, nurtured, and attended to as well as providing those same qualities for another person. There is nothing wrong with desiring close, intimate relationships, and when we are feeling sad and vulnerable in the grief process the urge to seek solace in another human is understandable. And on the flip side, sometimes we desire intimacy but are so fearful of more loss that we do not allow ourselves to be close with others.

But it is when we do not do the grief work, when we do not process all the feelings of loneliness and anger and abandonment that come with losing someone, before jumping into another relationship, that we find ourselves in these situations.

Our unhealthy relationships can be with friends, coworkers, supervisors, our children, and, most often, our romantic partners. We see our loss play out within our romantic relationships because our partners become our closest attachment.

We also may find ourselves experiencing a great deal of anger at our closest loved ones when we feel that they do not truly understand our experience of loss. I recently had a male client who lost his brother, and over the course of that first year my client found himself increasingly angry at his wife for not recognizing or acknowledging his grief process.

And on a long-term loss level, I often see a lot of attachment and codependency issues play out within all kinds of relationships. We may develop an anxious attachment style after loss, finding ourselves having difficulty in relationships with friends and lovers because we are constantly preoccupied about the safety of the relationship. Will they leave us as we were once left by someone else (in death)? Will I face more loss and get hurt again if I open myself up to love or connection with someone?

These fears are normal and understandable following a loss, recent or years out. They can serve either to paralyze us or to propel us into unhealthy codependent bonds with others. Doing the work to examine how our loss is playing out in our day-to-day relationships is essential to decreasing our anxiety and living a healthier emotional life. Find a therapist to talk through your relationships with, and free yourself of the anxiety that comes from knowing you are in an unhealthy dynamic.

Susan Hannifin-MacNab, whose husband died in a car accident,

explained that she now “only spends time with people I want to spend time with; I no longer feel the need to appease, placate or compromise in social situations. I have cleared my time, space and heart for nurturing deep, lasting friendships and relationships. I don’t feel anxious anymore in certain social situations because I don’t accept those invitations; nor do I feel guilty about my decision not to socialize with certain circles.”

Hers is an example of some of the positive effects of grief and how it can help us to see what is important in our lives and how to make changes that benefit us in a healthy way.

WHY DO WE RESIST CHANGE?

I know I keep talking about how doing all this work is vital to making your way to the other side of grief and anxiety, but I also recognize that it’s not easy work. There are many points along the way where you may find yourself resisting making the changes suggested here.

The main reasons we resist change, even when it is for our benefit, is because it’s hard. Change requires facing truths that are often uncomfortable—truths about unhealthy relationships or maladaptive behavior—but also truths about how much pain we are carrying. It can feel incredibly difficult to face the pain that lies behind the door of change.

But according to someone like Susan, “Resilient people will reach out and get help to understand and tame the anxiety. Resilient people will not judge or berate themselves for being anxious—they instead will find resources and tools (people, classes, groups, experts, techniques) to help themselves cope.”

I want to reassure you that the initial intensity of facing painful truths lessens with time. Do this work in increments, in baby steps, and reach out for support along the way. Do not expect to do it all at once or to succeed with each avenue you try. Be gentle with yourself, and find reassurance and encouragement in all of those who have walked this path before you.

LEANING INTO CHANGE

I believe that some of the most challenging work we do in the grief process comes with simply accepting that our life will never be the same now that our loved one is gone. This realization is something many of us resist

initially. We do not *want* our lives to change, and we try to find ways to fight the changes. But leaning into them and truly accepting that we must live a new life now is part of the healing process.

When we resist the changes or the impulses that arise to make even bigger changes, we end up feeling stuck and anxious, because deep down we know that in order to heal we must become someone new. It's difficult, but one of the things to remember about working with anxiety is that anxiety is not always a negative emotion and that, in fact, it can serve as a motivating force. There are times and ways in which you can use anxiety to propel yourself forward. If something is waking you up in the middle of the night, or stopping you in your tracks in the middle of the day, don't push it away. Pay attention to it. Stop and listen. Make the changes your soul is asking of you. Open yourself up to the idea that there are positive aspects to be found in this metamorphosis and that perhaps the person you will become as a result will be even better than who you were before.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In this most recent chapter, we've discussed how grief and loss can often serve as a wake-up call, reminding us of all the ways we'd like to be living our lives but perhaps haven't yet begun.

Remember that one of the reasons we fear death so much is out of a feeling of not having lived the life we meant to. Taking steps to change this and embrace our lives and our goals can greatly reduce the fear of death and the anxiety that come as a result.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ **Panic attacks**
- ☐ **Insomnia**
- ☐ **Nausea**

- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

Hopefully by now, you've gained a lot of knowledge about your grief process and various ways to face it. If you are continuing to experience regular panic attacks or obsessive worry, skip to [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) to begin learning how to calm your anxious thoughts. The next chapter is a powerful one, all about how writing through your grief process is instrumental to both processing the intense emotions and also creating a way to stay connected to your loved one.

7 | The Power of Writing

I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.

—A NAÏS N IN

I FEEL STRONGLY FEEL THAT GRIEF IS A LIVING, BREATHING THING inside of us. As mentioned earlier, we must find ways to let it out in order to alleviate our suffering and anxiety. Writing out your grief can be a powerful tool.

I understand that the idea of writing terrifies many people. You may feel that it's hard or that you won't be any good at it. For the purposes of relieving anxiety using the tool of writing, you need not be Hemingway, nor do you need to worry about it being hard.

Writing through our grief is instrumental to clearing out all the weight we carry with us in the aftermath of a significant loss, six months or even sixteen years later. Putting pen to paper or fingers to keys is a direct way to relieve tension and stress and find a way to reconnect to your loved one. You are anxious because you don't have an outlet for all that you're holding within you, and in this chapter I'm going to show you how to release it.

I use writing tools and exercises with each and every one of my clients at some point or another during our work together. The writing assignments I give them vary from person to person, always tailored to a specific need directly related to their process.

For some of them, writing letters to their loved ones is a significant part of the healing process. For others, it is daily journaling to release tension. And for some, it becomes a therapeutic part of the process to simply write about their memories of their loved one. And for my clients who respond

strongly to writing, they often do all of these and more.

At some point or another, I always recommend that each and every one of my clients write their loved one a letter. Thinking about doing this usually brings tears to their eyes, just as it may be doing for you right now reading this. That's because writing this letter gives you the opportunity to reconnect with your loved one in a way you probably haven't felt since they died.

Sometimes my clients need to write a letter resolving something. Perhaps they weren't there when their loved one died, or they didn't get the chance to say good-bye in the way they wanted. Or perhaps there was unresolved anger or they weren't on good terms or some other issue for which resolution was not reached before the death. Either way, giving yourself the opportunity to sit down and say these things to your loved one in a letter can be incredibly cathartic and can lift a heavy burden that is weighing you down and causing you anxiety.

Others simply miss their loved one so much that the last months or years of not speaking to them have felt like a form of suffocation. Allowing themselves to talk to their loved one through a letter, to tell them about their life or just tell them they love them, can feel like opening a window to let a breeze into a stagnant room. Just because your person is gone does not mean that your relationship is over.

One of my clients, James, who you'll hear more from in [Chapter 9](#), found that writing letters to his dad was a huge part of working through his grief and anxiety.

When I interviewed him for this book about our experience working together six years ago, he told me, "Letter writing helped with the grief, which helped with the anxiety. I spoke to my dad every day, so having that gone after he died was such a loss. Writing to him helped restore that connection a great deal. It just helped with that impulse and that old desire to communicate."

When I asked James if he felt he needed to believe in anything in particular in order to write the letters, he told me, "I don't think I had to believe in an afterlife. But I definitely dabbled with it more than ever. I found myself slightly more agnostic than on an average day. Writing to my dad felt like sending a message in a bottle. I put it out there, and it felt so good to write it, such a relief to write it."

This is an important distinction to keep in mind when opening yourself up to the idea of writing letters to your loved one. In this book you've learned that anxiety is the fear of a thought, not of an actual physical threat in front of you. When you have that fear in your mind about something, your body and emotions respond to it. The same is true for letter writing—when you allow your mind to connect to your loved one again in this way, to talk to them, your body and emotions feel soothed by the action, whether you are “actually” talking to them or not.

I want to add that the act of physically writing the letters (either by hand or on your computer) is important. Writing is different from talking to your loved one in your head or even out loud. There is a deeper intention behind it that has a direct impact on your brain and your experience of connection. Even if it seems like it might be scary or emotional, I want to ask you to try it anyway. Cry while you write the letter if you have to, and take your time. If you need to stretch out the writing of the letter over the course of several days or weeks—if you need to take breaks and come back to it—that's just fine. Be kind and compassionate with yourself as you go through this process.

WHY IS WRITING SO EFFECTIVE?

As we learned in [Chapter 3](#), it is important to honor the stories we carry within us and to find ways to let them out. Writing is an excellent way to do this. I believe anyone can be a writer. And I believe that writing through grief is an innate reflex.

I've been a writer since a very young age. It was a medium I was drawn to as a way of expressing myself and understanding the world around me. Early on I found that I was often unaware of how I felt about something until I had taken time to write about it, surprising myself with some of the thoughts and feelings that would emerge and always grateful for the relief it provided.

Because my writing inclination was already developed by the time I was a teenager when my parents both got sick, writing became a natural outlet for all of my fear, sadness, and anger. I wrote poems about my mother's cancer and about my feelings of loneliness. And later, after she was gone, I felt compelled to write her many letters expressing all the guilt I had over

not being able to say good-bye. Doing so was instrumental to my ability to finally forgive myself. To this day I still write letters to my parents on certain anniversaries or around big life events or even if I'm just missing them a lot.

When my father got sick in my twenties, I started a blog, and I wrote about being a young caregiver. I was awestruck by the response and the community I found as a result. Every time I wrote about my grief, I felt a little less alone. That's another beautiful thing about writing—you can share it, and often it can become a way of really helping others understand your experience, especially when it is the isolating experience of grieving.

Writing about grief has been popular for a long time. From C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, about the death of his wife, in the 1960s to the proliferation of grief memoirs in the twenty-first century, both writers and readers alike have been drawn to stories of loss. It's not just that the writers of these stories feel catharsis in sharing their stories but that we as the readers feel the same in reading them.

At age eighteen I didn't know anyone who had lost a mother, and I didn't even really have anyone around me who'd been through a major life hardship. I felt incredibly isolated in my experience, and so I did what I'd always done—I turned to books. I read every memoir I could get my hands on. Some were about horrible accidents, or illness, or alcoholism, or betrayal, but no matter the subject, I found it comforting to read a tale in which someone was thrust into a difficult experience and came out the other side.

In this chapter, we're going to explore a lot of different ways that you can utilize writing in order to alleviate your grief anxiety, from journaling and letter writing to more specific storytelling and simple reading. Please try to set aside any insecurities or resistance, and remember that this kind of writing isn't for the purposes of publishing (even if that does become something you want to consider later) but instead for the purpose of healing.

Before we get into actual exercises you can begin to do, I want to share with you some thoughts and advice from another author. For a really in-depth look at what it's like to write about loss, I reached out to Cheryl Strayed, author of the 2012 best-selling memoir *Wild*. This book, about the loss of Cheryl's mother, was an Oprah 2.0 Book Club pick, translated into

dozens of languages around the world, and made into a film starring Reese Witherspoon. But before all of this fame and glory, Cheryl had always been a writer at heart, and, as such, she felt called to write this book about her experience of loss.

===== **CHERYL STRAYED: MY GRIEF IS THE LENS THROUGH WHICH I
VIEW THE WORLD** =====

I didn't make a conscious choice to write about my mother's death or my grief. I simply *had* to write about it. There was nothing else to say. My sorrow is the story I had to tell. I had to bring my mother back to life on the page. I had to use writing to make sense of that tremendous, life-altering loss. My grief is the lens through which I've viewed the world since I was twenty-two, and it's everywhere in my writing. It seeps into every story I've written, even those that aren't directly about grief or my mom.

I think that writing has been the most healing thing in my life. I used to deny that because I was afraid that by admitting that writing was cathartic for me meant that I was less of an artist. I've come to realize the opposite is true: that I find writing so healing speaks to how deeply I'm called to write. My writing is the very heart of me, and so of course it's the conduit through which I'll process my life—and yes my grief. Writing is the way I come to most deeply understand both beauty and pain. There are whole swaths of things I didn't know—and never would have known—had I not written about them.

In my first book, a novel called *Torch*, I wrote about a family over the course of a year during which the mother of the family dies young of cancer. It's fiction—it truly is—and yet it's very much at root about the experience my family went through when my mom died at forty-five. I had to write it because when I lost my mom, I also lost my family. My stepfather couldn't—and didn't—continue to be a father to me and my siblings. My siblings and I also drifted apart. Our family dissolved and not just temporarily. It was over. It never came back.

That loss was so painful to me, but I know it's a common one. Lots of

families fall apart after the mother dies. I've learned that by talking to so many people who've had that experience. In *Torch*, I told the story of that hard year through the perspectives of four characters, and it was enormously healing for me to do that because I was forced to have compassion for other perspectives. I was made to understand why a stepfather who said he loved his wife's kids like his own stopped loving them that way after she died. It didn't solve all my sorrows, but it helped me grow and it also helped me grieve.

When I wrote my memoir *Wild*, it was my own grief I explored, and that too was a huge growth experience. Every time I reengage with my grief or my mother's life and death, I learn something new about it. The experience is in some ways unchanging, but in other ways it shifts over time. I see it in a new light with every passing year. In *Wild*, I went all in. It was nonfiction. I didn't cast that experience onto imagined characters who had a lot in common with me, but rather said, This is what happened. This is how I felt. I did that in my essays too. My first essays are directly about my grief—"Heroin/e" and "The Love of My Life."

Writing is always a journey. I'm always writing into what I think I know but don't really. Writing helps me see, but you can't know what you're going to see until you're upon it. This is even true—and maybe even *most* true—when writing memoir. I teach memoir writing sometimes, and I always tell my students that though they think they know the plot to their life, they are mistaken. It's a strange contradiction, but it's true. Things happen to us, and we go right past it. When we write, we turn back and look. We reinhabit the person we were through the consciousness of the person we've become. It's enlightening. It's shocking. It's beautiful.

I couldn't believe how many people there were who said they knew exactly what I meant, who said I'd written their truth. This didn't begin with my books. It began with my essays. Then with *Torch* it grew, and with *Wild* and *Tiny Beautiful Things* it exploded. Thousands upon thousands of people who told me my work made them feel for the first time that they were not alone. But you know what? Their response was the first thing that made me feel that way. I remember so vividly how alone I felt after my mom died. I didn't know one person with a dead mother! How can that be? And yet it was true. I found my tribe by telling my truth. I wrote to

them and they wrote back.

I think most people benefit from writing. You don't have to be a serious writer to do it. No one has to read what you write (and most of the time no one would want to read what most of us write). Stories are the way we make sense of ourselves and others; they are the way we understand love, loss, fear, rage, revenge, jealousy, beauty, friendship, and well, everything. There is a story about everything. There is a story that will make you feel every emotion—from laughter to sorrow. I'm a huge advocate of using writing as a healing tool. It can be as non-structured as saying I'm going to write X number of times a week in my journal to get some thoughts on paper or as directed as taking a class or being part of a group that requires you to write about specific things. Writing is like walking to me: it never fails to clear the mind. There are so many ways to do it right.



Writing through grief is an actual impulse that bubbles up for many of us. We are stopped short when we do not consider ourselves writers, so I want to ask you to set aside that restriction and allow yourself to become a writer, if only for the sake of your own healing.

Jessica Handler, author of *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss*, gives some great advice about this type of writing, something she learned to do for herself after the death of both of her sisters. “Don’t expect beautiful prose yet, to undo the terrible thing that has happened to bring you here, or even a million-dollar book deal. Simply tell your story, and you will begin to build a bridge that connects who you were then with who you have become.”

Jessica goes on to say, “No story of loss is a simple one. The feelings that come with grief can be hard to pin down with a pen or put in order with a keyboard. As you write, you encounter strong emotions, memories, often

a wealth of family stories, differing opinions, and facts. This is why writing about grief in steps helps you build that bridge.”

As Jessica explains in *Braving the Fire*, writing about grief helps build an understanding of you were before the loss and who you will go on to become. This is essential to the healing process. Accepting that you have begun a new life and working to understand who you are now without your loved one are how you will find peace moving forward.

Now let's get you writing.

JUST GETTING THE WORDS OUT

If you're worried about putting your grief on the page, try some of these prompts from Cheryl, who says,

Prompts allow us to begin—which is half the battle in writing. A couple of years ago I was asked by a college English professor if I could give her a list of suggested prompts she might share with her students who'd just read *Wild*. I came up with this list off the top of my head, and I think it'd be useful to share them with you too. They aren't all about loss and grief directly, but loss and grief isn't ever *only* about loss and grief. More often it's about love, about what remembering what we once had and letting that be enough:

Write about a time when you realized you were mistaken.

Write about a lesson you learned the hard way.

Write about a time you were inappropriately dressed for the occasion.

Write about something you lost that you'll never get back.

Write about a time when you knew you'd done the right thing.

Write about something you don't remember.

Write about your darkest teacher.

Write about a memory of a physical injury.

Write about when you knew it was over.

Write about being loved.

Write about what you were really thinking.

Write about how you found your way back.

Write about the kindness of strangers.

Write about why you could not do it.

Write about why you did.

WRITING EXERCISES FOR MOVING THROUGH GRIEF

I'm going to share with you the writing assignments that have proved most effective for my clients. Read through them all, and decide which ones resonate with you. If you have a strong emotional response to one—for instance, if you tear up at the thought of writing a letter to your loved one—this is often a strong indication that you need to do this, even if it seems that it might be a very emotional experience.

Also, if you try one but do not find it to be a good fit, if the feelings or sentences are not flowing, try another one. Ideally, I would love for you to try them all.

DAILY JOURNALING

To ease you into your own writing, I want you to pause for a moment and get out a piece of paper and write anything. Just write down the first thing that comes into your mind about how you're feeling right now, in this moment.

To give you an example of how free you can get with this, I'll tell you that for a year after my mother died, I couldn't write anything—not a school essay or a poem or a grocery list—without first writing the sentence, “I am an ugly, hateful person.” The first time this happened, the first time I wrote those words, I was taken aback. I had no idea that I had been carrying that belief around with me so strongly every day.

I felt that way about myself after not having been there for my mother in her final moments. But I found that each time I wrote that sentence down, I was able to release that belief a little more. And finally, one day, I didn't have to write it anymore at all.

This is an example of the kinds of things we can carry around within us following a loss. And I now know that carrying these thoughts and beliefs in our hearts and minds has a profound effect on the central nervous system. These repeated thoughts, even when they are unconscious, are what have a

direct effect on your level of anxiety. Even when you are not conscious of it, these thoughts create emotions to well up inside you, and those emotions in turn cause your body to react, creating anxiety and fear and sadness.

Aside from a good therapist, there aren't a lot of good outlets for exploring these thoughts and beliefs, and that's where writing comes in as a source of support.

So I want you to begin by writing down anything you might be carrying around in your heart. It could be something like, *I'm lonely*. Or *I'm scared*. Or simply *I'm sad*. Then write another sentence. And keep writing for ten minutes. Write whatever comes. Cry if you need to, but keep writing. Letting it out is the key to finding peace.

One of the best practices you can cultivate during your grief process is to do this kind of free writing every day. This comes in the form of daily journaling. Go to the bookstore or an art store and buy a beautiful journal. Then pick a good spot in your home and decide on a consistent time each morning to devote to this practice. I know that this can be difficult for some people who have hectic lives, so if it's not the same exact time or place every day, or if you need to write in the evenings or afternoons instead, that's okay, too. The main goal is to be writing every day.

Allison, who lost her father suddenly when she was thirty-two years old, found herself experiencing a lot of difficulty in the workplace during the initial months after he was gone. Throughout the day, her attention would often turn to her father, and her emotions would begin to rise up. Because she needed to maintain a professional decorum at her job, she was really struggling to manage these feelings that came in the middle of the day. I suggested she buy a journal and that during her lunch break she find a quiet place to sit and channel out all of her emotions into a journal. She began to do just that and found that after ten minutes of letting herself write about all the things she was feeling, she was able to return to her tasks at work with better concentration and the sense that she had released some of the emotions she had been holding in.

Remember that no one has to read this journal—you yourself don't even need to reread it. (Sometimes looking back through these journals, though, can be a great way of seeing just how much you've changed and grown throughout your grief process.) This kind of daily writing is simply an outlet. It's like a receptacle for all the pain and fear you are carrying inside

of you when you are grieving. Dump it out into words on the page, and I think you will find that you are better able to move through your days and your interactions with others.

LETTER WRITING

As I talked about in the beginning of this chapter, another invaluable tool is to write letters to your loved one. When we lose someone significant in our lives, we lose a person with whom we are used to communicating on a regular basis. It can be so difficult to suddenly not have that person to talk to as you used to.

When it's been years since you've lost your person, the impulse to reach out to them may have faded, but you may still have many things you wish to share with them. It might be big life events, memories that you'd like revisit with only them, and all the ways you've changed and grown since they died.

For those of you whose loss is recent, you are probably finding that the impulse to reach out is still there. You may find yourself picking up the phone to call them or wanting to tell them about something that just occurred. When this impulse happens after a loss, we immediately feel a strong sense of frustration and sadness that we cannot reach out as we once used to. And often this is where we stop. We put down the phone in our hand, feeling an even greater sense of loss and emptiness. Yet just because that person is no longer physically here does not mean that we need to cut off communication.

In fact, I think it does a great disservice to our psyche to do so. You are sending a message to your brain that you cannot communicate with that person anymore, and for many of us, after a lifetime or a deep relationship with that person, it can feel very wrong to deny ourselves the impulse to communicate with them. So don't deny it. Get out a pen and a piece of paper and *communicate*. While emotional, it will also feel incredibly soothing.

Annie, who lost her brother in a sudden accident, was bereft to find that she could no longer call him every evening on her way home from work, as she had been accustomed to doing. Annie and her brother had been very close, and they'd had a standing daily phone date in which they both

downloaded their days to one another. No longer having this outlet was making Annie feel as though she were suffocating. She would go home and try to talk to her husband or her kids about her day, but it just wasn't the same as it had been with her brother.

At my urging, Annie began to write notes to her brother every evening. In fact, she found a park that was on her route home from work, and she would pull over each evening on the way home, take out her journal, and tell her brother through a letter all about her day. Sometimes when she was done, she would even close her eyes and imagine that he was talking back to her, telling her all about his day, wherever he is now.

Annie found this process very healing and more so that it alleviated much of the stress and tension she had built up in the months of not talking to him. To this day, Annie still pulls over occasionally to write to her brother and hear his messages back.

Again, don't be afraid of any of this seeming weird. You don't need to tell anyone about your process or share your writing with them. This is something you are doing for you.

In addition to restoring a sense of connection with your loved one, writing these letters can also be an important way of working out any unfinished business you may have, such as guilt, anger, or any other unresolved tensions.

I've also had a great many clients who have struggled with anger in the wake of a loved one's death. Some clients have lost a friend or family member to suicide, and they find themselves left with myriad questions, guilt, anger, and sadness. Or maybe you simply had a complex relationship with your person, and now you feel angry that you will never get the chance to resolve it or to say your piece to them. Writing them a letter (or multiple letters) is your opportunity to do so.

Last, I want to share a sweet personal memory with you. When I was twenty-three years old, I received a letter in the mail from my dad. It began with a disclosure that I need to suspend any resistance to the manner in which this letter was written and to just read it. So I did.

The letter was one my father had written to my dead mother. He told me later that he was missing her so much that he felt compelled to sit down and write to her one evening. In the letter he began by telling her about his life now without her and how much he longed for her to still be a part of it. He

told her about what it had been like to get to know me better in the wake of her death, but how he often worried that he just didn't compare as a parent to her.

But then suddenly, the letter shifted, and my mother took over! My father told me that as he continued to write to her, he couldn't stop imagining her responses to things he wrote, so he finally let her take over and write the letter herself. In turn, she told him how much she had loved him and how grateful she was for their relationship, and she even gave him parenting tips for supporting me and a long message of love specifically for him to share with me. Her voice rang through these passages in a way that was distinctly different from his.

I wept when I read this letter, and to this day it is one of my most cherished possessions.

Again, write the letters *you* need to write. Say whatever it is you need to say. Let whatever comes out flow naturally. Be gentle and compassionate with yourself as you do so. And allow space for any emotions to arise. These feelings are coming up because they need to. Let them out. Put that pen to paper.

Letter-Writing Prompts

- Write a letter to your loved one, filling them in on all that's happened in your life since they died.
- Write a letter to your loved one about something you feel guilty or sorry about that you wish you could apologize for.
- Write a letter of thanks to your loved one for all the ways they made you feel loved and supported during their life.
- Write a letter to your loved one about one of your favorite memories together.
- Write a letter to *yourself* from your loved one. Allow yourself to imagine what they might say to you if they could give you comfort during this time.
- Write a letter to *yourself* forgiving yourself for anything you feel that you could have done better during your loved one's life or death.
- Write a letter to *yourself* ten years from now. Tell yourself all the

ways in which you hope to heal and move forward and whom you hope to become.

REMEMBRANCE AND MEMORY WRITING

Another great writing technique during the grief process is to devote time to writing down all your memories about your loved one. This can feel cathartic and also extremely comforting, especially for those who feel anxious at the thought of potentially forgetting anything about this important person.

You can choose to write about your loved one informally using some of the prompts below, or you could even go so far as to take a memoir or biography class at a local writing center. Either way, you should find this a healing experience.

My client Sarah began writing down memories of her late husband about a year after his death. She was so afraid that in time, she would forget bits and pieces about all the wonderful adventures they had shared in their lifetime together. At first, she found herself simply jotting down memories as they came, but in time she began to write lengthier pieces, depicting one adventure after another. Several years later, she compiled all the writing into a book that she gave to her children and grandchildren so that they, too, would always have the memories of this important family member.

You may not find yourself writing a whole book, like Sarah, and you may never do anything in particular with these writings, but putting them down on paper will alleviate the fear that you will forget, and you may find yourself truly enjoying getting to immerse yourself in these old memories and moments.

Memory-Writing Prompts

- I remember when...
- I loved it when you...
- It always made me laugh when you...
- The first time we met was...
- You were so good at...

- You were most you when you were doing...
- You taught me...
- You were happiest when you...
- The funniest thing that ever happened to you was...
- You always wanted to...
- Your favorite song was...
- Your favorite food was...
- Your favorite hobby was...
- Your favorite clothes were...
- Your favorite place was...
- Your favorite movie was...
- Your favorite book was...
- Your favorite holidays were...
- You got through hard times by doing...
- You were admired for being...



As you move through these three different kinds of exercises, take time to really get to know yourself as a writer. You may find it difficult to let the words flow in the beginning, but as with anything, practice helps. Do not feel that you have to be a great writer or write the perfect sentences every time you sit down. This writing is just for you.

This work will be emotional, but that is part of it. So do your best to create a safe space and time in which to do the writing. And strive to find compassion for yourself as you move along. Revisiting old memories or writing through anger or regret can cause powerful emotions to surface, but writing through it is what will help to release and soothe those emotions.

Know that there is no perfect time to begin this work. You may find yourself, as in some of the examples above, writing through your grief very

early on in the process. Many of my clients who are in the initial weeks or months of their loss utilize all of these exercises. But I also have clients who are decades out from a loss, working to process old grief and how it's impacted their life, who find these exercises equally cathartic and healing.

Wherever you are in your grief, I urge you to take out a pen and begin to let the thoughts and emotions flow onto the page.

Please visit the resource section in the back of this book for more ideas and platforms where you can share writing or get further instruction.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In the last chapter, you learned about all the various ways that using the power of writing can not only help you to process and release your emotions but also help you restore a level of connection to your loved one.

Remember that much of the anxiety that comes after a loss is directly related to no longer feeling that you can communicate with your loved one and that reinstating that connection through writing can be incredibly soothing.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ **Panic attacks**
- ☐ **Insomnia**
- ☐ **Nausea**
- ☐ **Dizziness**
- ☐ **Heart racing/palpitating**
- ☐ **Obsessive worry**
- ☐ **Hypochondria**

If you are continuing to experience a fair amount of anxiety, rest assured that the next two chapters are going to provide many useful tools

for calming your mind and giving you much greater control over your anxious thoughts. Read these chapters carefully, and do your best to give each exercise a try.

8 | Retraining Your Brain

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

—ALBERT E INSTEIN

THIS CHAPTER IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT IN THE BOOK. I 'VE purposely placed it deeper into these pages because I really believe that until you've thoroughly confronted your grief in all the ways the previous chapters suggest, you're not ready to do the work that comes in this chapter and the next. Learning how to harness your anxious thoughts is the most valuable tool you can acquire in the process of gaining control of, and relinquishing, your anxiety.

Once you begin to see this for yourself, the work at hand becomes surprisingly simple, and the positive reinforcement you'll quickly gain from paying attention to your thoughts will spur you on to keep working the problem.

This process has been revelatory for my clients when they begin their own work in this arena. Understanding how thoughts work, and learning how to take a step back from them and not let the thoughts control them, changes their anxiety levels in significant ways. In this chapter, we're going to focus on different ways of looking at our thoughts and beliefs. Take your time reading, and be patient as you let the information sink in. If you are able to really open up and try some of the exercises presented here, you will be rewarded.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

One of the most effective and widely used treatments for anxiety is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). While this kind of work does not directly address the grief process, it very much works to alleviate and eliminate anxious thoughts that come on as a result of loss. Aaron T. Beck’s *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook* is a wonderful resource; I source Dr. Beck’s work below.

CBT is a short-term, goal-oriented treatment that uses a practical approach to change thought patterns and behavior that impact a person’s emotional well-being. It is one of the predominant treatment methods for anxiety.

Essentially, the term *cognitive* refers to the way that we know or recognize our experiences, and CBT is a treatment that helps people understand how to change thoughts and beliefs that directly impact negative emotional states such as anxiety. The core of CBT addresses the idea that the way we *think* directly affects how we *feel*, so *changing* the way we think can help change how we feel.

In grief, many new thoughts come into our minds—thoughts about mortality, about uncertainty, about painful memories, and worrisome visions of the future. Many of the thoughts that occur after a significant loss are new ones, but even if they are not new (for example, death is an inevitability), the thoughts feel more real than ever before following a loss. And because a lot of these grief-based thoughts are scary, our bodies have an automatic fear response that, in turn, elicits anxiety.



Triggering Event	Thought	Feeling
Loss of a loved one	Life is uncertain	Fear, anxiety



In this chapter, I’m going to cover various ways that you can apply techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy to lessen your grief-related

anxiety. A few things to know going into it: It helps to approach this technique with an openness to trying it and to really learning new ways to understand your thoughts. You also need to be willing to work on the role you could be playing in making your anxiety worse. Last, this technique will take time and practice, so be patient with yourself.

As we've been learning in this book, fear and anxiety are completely normal emotions that enhance our survival skills. But the emotions of fear and anxiety become problematic when they are persistent and unrealistic in our everyday lives. Learning how to manage your thoughts will directly serve you in easing your anxiety. In CBT people learn how to manage their thoughts by recording and writing them down, and we're going to do just that in this chapter.

Let's begin by breaking down your anxiety. The first thing we must do is discover the underlying fear behind your anxiety.

Anxiety State: List various things that make you anxious, such as events, situations, and specific times.

Underlying Fear: Name the specific fear, threats, or catastrophe behind each anxiety on the left.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Anxiety is a complicated creature. We already know that it affects you on many levels, and in [Chapter 1](#) we went over the most commonly experienced *physical* symptoms.

- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath

- Chest pressure
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Weakness
- Tense muscles

But now let's take a look at some of the *cognitive* symptoms. These include:

- Fear of death or physical impairment
- Fear of being unable to cope
- Fear of going crazy
- Painful memories and images
- Perceptions of unreality
- Confusion, lack of concentration
- Trouble reasoning
- Hypervigilance for threat

The *behavioral* symptoms that follow the *cognitive* symptoms include the following:

- Avoidance of situations
- Escape plans
- Feeling the need for safety and reassurance
- Agitation
- A feeling of paralysis
- Trouble speaking

Finally, the emotional symptoms that arise as a result of both the

cognitive and the behavioral symptoms are as follows:

- Feeling scared, even terrified
- Feeling nervous and tense
- Feeling on edge or jumpy
- Feeling impatient and frustrated

Based on these lists, I want you to make your own personal list correlating all of the symptoms and behavior. Becoming aware of the link between them is the key to overcoming them.

1.

Anxious Thought: *Thinking I might have cancer.*

Physical Symptoms: *Tight chest, light headedness, rapid heart rate.*

Cognitive Symptoms: *What if I die just like my mother did and I leave my daughters behind?*

Behavioral Symptoms: *Sad, scared, nervous.*

2.

Anxious Thought:

Physical Symptoms:

Cognitive Symptoms:

Behavioral Symptoms:

3.

Anxious Thought:

Physical Symptoms:

Cognitive Symptoms:

Behavioral Symptoms:

4.

Anxious Thought:

Physical Symptoms:

Cognitive Symptoms:

Behavioral Symptoms:

5.

Anxious Thought:

Physical Symptoms:

Cognitive Symptoms:

Behavioral Symptoms:

6.

Anxious Thought:

Physical Symptoms:

Cognitive Symptoms:

Behavioral Symptoms:

Becoming aware of the patterns you have associated with your anxious thoughts is the key to this work, so complete these worksheets carefully and really study them to understand how your brain is influencing your sense of well-being.

CATASTROPHIC THINKING

When we are suffering from anxiety, we have a tendency to exaggerate and catastrophize the possibility of bad outcomes. This can range from finding a strange mole on your arm and immediately thinking you have cancer to a family member being late to arrive home and thinking that something terrible must have happened.

You're not alone in these catastrophic responses, and I think they are particularly strong when you are grieving. This is because the very worst thing has, in fact, happened. Someone you love has died. You now have proof that terrible things can happen, so it's only natural that you begin to worry that *more* terrible things might happen.

In [Chapter 1](#) I talked about how highly anxious people sometimes have a

tendency to remain in a state of hypervigilance rather than feel unprepared for something terrible happening, and this way of being feeds directly into the cycle of catastrophic thinking. But cognitive therapy teaches us how to detect, and actually override, these exaggerated thoughts of worst-case scenarios.

Studies have shown that anxious thinking happens in less than half a second. It happens so quickly that most of us do not even realize our brains are processing a threat. It's like a computer that has an operating system set to perceive and respond to threats in the environment. We must learn how to override this operating system or create a new one altogether. Again, the key to this is learning how to recognize your anxious and catastrophic thoughts.

At the core of catastrophic thinking lies a belief that you will be unable to cope in the face of another tragedy or disaster. Perhaps you read a news story in which someone has died suddenly. In your anxious-grief response, this article causes you to imagine what it might be like to lose another important person. Often, the very next thought is that you will not be able to cope. You already know how painful grief can be, and you cannot bear the idea of experiencing it again. But changing your belief about your ability to cope can calm your anxiety.

Study your responses to this worksheet and note the differences in how you *think* you'll cope as opposed to how you would *actually* like to cope. When you find yourself experiencing catastrophic thinking, return to your desired coping methods as a way of diminishing the catastrophe.

Anxious Worry: Describe what has actually made you anxious.

Helpless Thinking: How do you imagine coping in this situation?

Desired Coping Response: How would you like to cope?

1.

Anxious Worry: *Fear about mammogram results.*

Helpless Thinking: *I'll receive bad news, and I won't be able to handle it.*

Desired Coping Response: *I would like to stay calm and know that I can and will cope with bad news.*

2.

Anxious Worry:

Helpless Thinking:

Desired Coping Response:

3.

Anxious Worry:

Helpless Thinking:

Desired Coping Response:

4.

Anxious Worry:

Helpless Thinking:

Desired Coping Response:

5.

Anxious Worry:

Helpless Thinking:

Desired Coping Response:

6.

Anxious Worry:

Helpless Thinking:

Desired Coping Response:

FEAR OF ANXIETY

By the time my clients come to see me, many of them have developed a fear of the anxiety itself. They are so overwhelmed by the periods of anxiety they have been experiencing that they are terrified of having more. Many people can even overcatastrophize their own anxiety, maintaining a belief that they cannot cope with it. Taking time to look at this belief and recognize that you *can* cope with it will help alleviate your concern about it.

When Joanne from [Chapter 1](#) came to me after her panic attack in the car following her father's death, she was deeply afraid of having more panic attacks. She had become so attuned to the physical sensations of anxiety that every time she experienced heart palpitations or breathlessness, her anxiety would spike even higher, out of fear that another panic attack was coming on.

In several sessions I worked with Joanne to point out how she had, in fact, coped appropriately and successfully with her first panic attack. She had pulled over to the side of the road, called her mother, received help, not actually had a heart attack, and eventually returned to a state of calm. In an effort to reduce her fear of more attacks, we reviewed various scenarios in which she feared having another attack and discussed ways she would be able to cope in response.

Joanne had an upcoming trip in which she would need to take a plane ride. She was very worried about having a panic attack on the plane and felt that she would not be able to cope if she did. Together we walked through what it would be like if she did have a panic attack during her flight. We talked through all the coping mechanisms she had been learning and reviewed how these same tools would work just as well on a plane as anywhere else.

Once Joanne was able to see that even if she did have another attack it would be okay, she stopped responding so fearfully to the bodily sensations of anxiety. Instead, each time she experienced a heart palpitation or dizziness, she would pause what she was doing and acknowledge to herself that she was having an anxious response to a thought, pinpoint the thought, and then remind herself that she was capable of coping. This process was instrumental to Joanne learning to manage, and lessen, her anxiety.

For many people, their gut response to anxiety is to avoid it or run from it. But research has repeatedly shown that avoiding the anxiety does very little to eliminate it. When we respond to an anxious thought with fear, and then run from it or shut it down, we are in essence giving it more power. Letting the thought in, examining it, questioning the validity of it, and noting your responses to it take away its power.

Furthermore, much of anxiety has to do with feeling a need for control. When we lose someone we love, we feel helpless. But seeking to control future outcomes gives us a false sense of security and sets us up for failure.

Getting comfortable with the reality of how uncertain our lives are can help us cope with anxious thoughts.

Now that you've begun to understand a little more of how anxious thoughts work, let's talk about how to return to *normalized* thinking.

Here's where the shift needs to happen. It's quite simple.

Anxious Thoughts: Focusing on worst possible outcomes

Normal Thoughts: Focusing on realistic outcomes

Anxious Thoughts: Focusing on inability to cope

Normal Thoughts: Focusing on ability to cope

Here are a few steps you can begin to take in order to return to a normalized way of thinking.

1. Normal Anxiety

As we've discussed, it's natural and healthy to feel a little anxiety during certain situations. Anxiety helps us prepare for things like job interviews, travel, presentations, quizzes, and tests. Think of several things you have experienced recently about which you had *normal* anxiety. Jot them down, along with your reactions to this anxiety. Doing this helps you to generate a realistic idea of what anxiety can, and should, look like. Then ask yourself how you can think more normally about your overly anxious concerns.

2. Catch Your Anxious Thoughts

Fearful thoughts can occur automatically, spinning us out into an anxious state before we have even realized it has happened. Learning how to catch these thoughts takes some work, but often once you begin, it gets easier. Start by recording each exaggerated anxious thought that occurs. Jot it down and then list the likelihood of its actually happening.

An example here would be when you have a thought that maybe that pain in your side is a cancerous tumor. Instead of following the thought down the rabbit hole and playing out the scenario in which you are diagnosed with cancer, try to catch it and recognize that you are having an anxious thought. Then move on to the next step.

3. Gather Evidence

Become a detective of your own thoughts. Each time you have an exaggerated anxious thought, look for evidence that it is true. Write down the evidence you collect and rate the likelihood of the outcome. Doing this serves two purposes. It serves to help you see that often the catastrophe you are imagining is often unlikely, and it also helps distance you from the thoughts, making you a powerful observer of them.

4. Create a Cost-Benefit Analysis

Many of us who have been living with anxiety have grown used to it. However, we forget how exhausting and unfulfilling it can be to live in such a state of hypervigilance. Looking at the costs and benefits of this way of being can be a powerful way to change your thinking about how you've been living. Write down all the costs and benefits of your anxiety. Return to this list when you are anxious to remind yourself of the unhealthy costs.

5. Embrace the Catastrophe

Most of us run from our catastrophic thoughts. We have them, then have an intense physical and emotional reaction, and generally shut down from there. However, allowing yourself to really embrace the catastrophe helps to diminish it. Really allow yourself to play the scenario all the way through and generate coping methods that you would use along the way.

6. Correct Your Thinking

Now that you've started to identify your problem thoughts, it's time to correct them each time you become aware of them. Note the exaggerated thought, and then write down any errors associated with that thought. You can watch for these errors every time you have an anxious thought.

In cognitive therapy, the real shifts occur when we become aware of our exaggerated anxious thoughts and take steps to change them into normal thoughts. Doing the above work will help you to make this powerful shift.

However, if you are feeling resistance to this work, I want you to keep a couple of things in mind. One, it's important to remember that this kind of work takes time and practice and patience. If you feel overwhelmed but

think these techniques could be useful to you, then enlisting the help of a therapist trained in CBT can be beneficial. Second, it's important to recall many of the messages in this book about how letting go of anxious thoughts does not mean you are letting go of your loved one. You can still grieve your loved one but do so in a less anxious state.

THE DOCTOR WEIGHS IN

For more advice on CBT methods, I turned to Dr. Philip Pierce, whom you'll recall from [Chapter 1](#). A University of California lecturer and psychologist in private practice in Los Angeles, Dr. Pierce, PhD, specializes in treating anxious patients using CBT methods.

"People think of worry as a protective mechanism," Dr. Pierce told me. "This can be one of the precipitating things for panic attacks. I don't think this is such a conscious thing. I think it's an unconscious mechanism. But I think quality of life is significantly decreased because people are making negative predictions most of the time about things that rarely, or probably, won't happen."

This is that state of hypervigilance I spoke about earlier in this chapter. When we choose to maintain that state, it can feel like we are doing so because it will help us be prepared in case something terrible happens, but, really, it is just causing more stress and lending itself to more panic attacks.

"To work with someone, I would start by making them aware of their worry. They're thinking of it as a protective mechanism. They think their worry is helping. *What if something happens and I hadn't thought of it? If I hadn't prepared, then I could never forgive myself.* But this behavior actually decreases quality of life."

For the kind of grief-related anxiety this book focuses on, Dr. Pierce also reinforces the usefulness of the tools covered in this chapter and also suggests breathing techniques.

I would have patients do thought records to help them identify the thoughts that are triggering the anxiety. I would give them tools like, "Let's go to the worst possible thing that could happen and explore how emotionally likely it is, how realistically likely it is." And the most important part is, "How would you cope with that?" People usually stop once they get to the worst possible case scenario, telling themselves, "Oh my god, that would be terrible."

And they stop there, and they're frozen in that spot, as opposed to "How likely it is, and how would you cope with it?" I would also give them relaxation exercises, like diaphragmatic breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, to decrease their anxiety level in general.

Diaphragmatic breathing is breathing that is done by contracting the diaphragm, rather than focusing on the lungs. Air enters the lungs and the chest rises, but the diaphragm, the muscle located horizontally between the ribs and abdomen, contracts and expands.

Dr. Pierce explains, "When you start getting anxious the tendency is to take short fast breaths from your upper chest to get as much oxygen as possible into your bloodstream. What you're doing with diaphragmatic breathing is sort of the opposite. You're resisting the fast breathing, so it has a calming effect. You're also sending a message to the brain that things are cool and there's no emergency here."

===== DEEP BREATHING AND RELAXATION =====

1. Sit comfortably, or lie down on your back in a relaxed state, with one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain still.
3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale.

Practice this technique for five to twenty minutes until you feel your body begins to relax.

Progressive muscle relaxation is when you relax your muscles through a two-step process. You begin by systematically tensing particular muscle groups in your body, such as your neck and shoulders. Then you release the tension and notice how your muscles feel when they are relaxed.

1. Lie down in a comfortable position on your back.
2. Begin by focusing on a target muscle group—your legs, for instance. Take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about five seconds. It's important to really feel the tension.
3. Next, quickly relax the tensed muscles. After a few seconds, you should

feel all the tension flow out of your muscles, and they will become loose and limp.

4. Deliberately focus on the difference between the tension and the relaxation. This is the most important aspect of this exercise.
5. Remain in this state for fifteen to thirty seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group and repeat steps 2 and 3. Systematically move through every muscle group of your body.

Any time you feel anxious, try this exercise as a way to relax and ease tension that comes with anxious thoughts. This sends a message to the brain that all is well.



BYRON KATIE'S METHOD OF SELF-INQUIRY

Another fascinating authority in this field is Byron Katie. The author of multiple books, Byron Katie is known for her method of *self-inquiry*, a system that teaches people how to look at their thoughts and beliefs and shift them to attain better outcomes.

In the Motherless Daughters retreats I lead with Hope Edelman, we always employ Byron Katie's work, as many of the women we are working with have developed belief systems following the loss of their mothers that do not serve them in their day-to-day lives.

Byron Katie's work is quite simple, and it is based around four essential questions:

===== BYRON KATIE'S FOUR QUESTIONS =====

1. Is it true? (Yes or no. If no, move to number 3.)
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true? (Yes or no.)
3. How do you react? What happens when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought?



Okay, so let's break these down. I'm going to give you an example using one of the beliefs I developed after my mother's death. Hope and I have discovered that it's a belief that many motherless daughters carry. And I suspect that many people who have lost a significant loved one are subject to it as well.

The belief that I carried with me for a long time after my mother died was *I am alone*.

Let's apply Byron Katie's questions to this belief.

1. *Is it true?*

When I first started to work with this belief, I answered yes to this question. At the deepest level, I felt incredibly alone after my mother's death. Her absence left me feeling wholly on my own in the world. So initially I would have answered yes to this first question.

2. *Can you absolutely know that it's true?*

Okay, so when I had to answer *this* question, I had to admit to myself that no, it was not *really* true. Even when I was married, I felt alone. But that wasn't really true, was it? I was not alone. Not at all. In fact, I was surrounded by people who loved me and cared for me.

3. *How do you react? What happens when you believe that thought?*

I had to admit that my reaction to that thought caused immediate sadness and anxiety. There was never a time when I had the thought and did not respond with negative emotions. These emotions created more self-limiting thoughts and a lot of fear.

4. *Who would you be without that thought?*

Wow. This final question always served to stop me in my tracks. Who would I be without that thought? I had never considered it. I had never even considered letting go of the thought because I believed it so deeply. Yet I couldn't deny that the idea of being a person who didn't have this thought was very appealing.

This is where the transformation took place. I suddenly realized that I could have that thought but that I didn't have to *believe* it. And as soon as I had this realization, I quickly began to notice each time I had that thought,

and then I began to make a choice about whether to *believe* it. In the beginning, I had been so used to believing this thought that I sometimes still went with it, spiraling out into anxiety and sadness, but now there was this new and very persistent voice that made me question if doing that was really serving me.

Still to this day, I sometimes have that thought. *I am alone*. Something difficult will arise in my life, and my initial reaction will be this thought, this belief. But I almost always catch it now. “Hi, old thought,” I’ll say to it. And then I will remind myself that I am not actually alone, and I will move through the difficult event with a healthier attitude, knowing I can cope with whatever hard thing is at hand.

In fact, Byron Katie’s work became useful in all areas of my life. I began to understand how many false reactions I had to life stressors or perceptions about relationships and people, and once I was able to see this clearly, it became easy to change the thoughts. I’d like you to try it for yourself now.

Think of any of your big current fear-based beliefs. They can be anything from “I will always be sad” to “I cannot cope with my grief and anxiety.” Answer truthfully, and take your time to really think about your answers.

YOUR SELF-INQUIRY
Is it true? (Yes or no. If no, move to number 3.)
1. Can you absolutely know that it's true? (Yes or no.)
2. How do you react? What happens when you believe that thought?
3. Who would you be without that thought?

Much like cognitive behavioral therapy, Byron Katie’s work asks us to

become aware of our thoughts and beliefs and to then deconstruct them, allowing ourselves freedom from anxiety, worry, and negativity. Byron Katie's work is a simpler approach to many of the CBT angles presented earlier, but it is also a quick and easy place to start.

AWARENESS, AWARENESS, AWARENESS

Learning how to become aware of your thoughts is the most effective way to treat anxiety. When we lose someone we love, our worst possible fears have come true. This causes us to become more hypervigilant in our lives and to overcatastrophize uncertainty. Using techniques of thought awareness and reinforcing your innate ability to cope with difficult life events will help you gain control over your anxiety.

Throughout all of this work, be patient with yourself. It really does take some getting used to, but if you are able to make a solid commitment to working on your thoughts in this fashion, you will begin to experience palpable relief from your anxiety and worry.

A NXIETY **C** HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. Hopefully, this last chapter was an illuminating one, helping you understand where anxious thoughts come from, how they can perpetuate themselves, and also how you can stop the cycle of worry and panic.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ **Panic attacks**
- ☐ **Insomnia**
- ☐ **Nausea**
- ☐ **Dizziness**
- ☐ **Heart racing/palpitating**

- ☐ Obsessive worry

- ☐ Hypochondria

Learning how our brains work and where anxious thoughts come from and how we can learn to control how much we feed into those thoughts is an integral part of knowing ways to reduce and eliminate anxiety. In the next chapter we're going to focus on mindfulness and meditation, techniques that build on everything we've learned here. Go slowly and be patient with yourself as you digest everything you're learning.

9 | Being Present

We must be willing to encounter darkness and despair when they come up and face them, over and over again if need be, without running away or numbing ourselves in the thousands of ways we conjure up to avoid the unavoidable.

—J ON K ABAT-Z INN

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION HAVE CONSISTENTLY BEEN THE most powerful antidotes to healing the anxiety of the majority of my clients and also my own. Please don't stop reading if you think that meditation isn't for you. This chapter is about much more than meditating, and it builds on everything we learned in the last chapter. Mindfulness and meditation are about becoming aware of our thoughts and using that awareness to break free from anxiety.

If you're like me, you wake up in the morning, and the moment you open your eyes, a ticker tape of thoughts begins rapidly flowing through your brain like the headline banner on the bottom screen of a news channel. Sometimes the thoughts are just daily maintenance ones—you have to give that presentation at work today, your kid has a math exam, you've got a dentist appointment in the afternoon, and you *have* to remember to get lightbulbs on the way home.

Mixed in with these thoughts are larger ones—how am I going to cover the car repair expenses, could that persistent ache in my shoulder be something serious, or does my boyfriend really love me? And often when we are in the throes of grief, our thoughts are colored by the loss. You wake up, and the first thing you think about is how it's another day without the

person you love. Then a bigger thought is wondering if every day is going to feel this hard. Will you always be sad? You may flash to an image of that person—maybe one from their dying days that continues to haunt you or even a fond memory that then causes you pain.

There is seemingly little order to any of these thoughts, either the small ones about running errands or the bigger ones about your future. They just flow through your mind, and eventually you push yourself out of bed and begin to go through your morning routine, yet all the while the thoughts keep streaming through your mind. The thing to note is that every single one of these thoughts creates an emotional response. Each one may bring something different—anger, fear, frustration, sadness, or even despair. And those emotional responses, in turn, create a physical response in your body.

What I’m going to teach you in this chapter is how to become aware of these thoughts, how to have compassion for yourself when you have them, and ultimately how to stop them from causing you anxiety.

Teaching my clients this tool and helping them understand the foundation of mindfulness is one of my favorite aspects of the work we do together. And that’s because I’ve never failed to see them achieve rapid results if they truly give this practice a try.

I also lead meditation workshops at each grief retreat I hold. Learning how to get quiet and hold space for ourselves is vital, but also learning how not to let thought patterns and negative beliefs dominate our days and send us on a roller coaster of emotions is important.

I was first introduced to mindfulness and meditation in my late twenties. I had newly discovered yoga, and even though I’d spent a large part of my life largely shrinking from any kind of serious physical activity due to a fear of connecting with my body after watching my parents die from illness, I was immediately comfortable with yoga. I was surprised by how good it felt to stretch my body and to finally begin to pay attention to it. I was also happy to find that I didn’t need to be “good” at yoga in order to enjoy the benefits.

Not long after I had developed a regular yoga practice, I made a friend in one of my classes who suggested I also try meditation. I balked at first. It sounded too hippie and spiritual for me. But I went anyway. During this time in my life, I was emerging from an intense few years of grief, and I had a great desire to turn my life around and find ways to feel peaceful and

happy again. I decided it couldn't hurt to try meditation.

Now when I tell this story to my clients or at the grief retreats I lead, I always chuckle to myself, thinking back on that twenty-eight-year-old version of myself. That version of myself never could have imagined that one day I'd not only actually be meditating regularly but even teaching others how to do it.

At my friend's suggestion, I began taking private instruction from a meditation teacher. Her name was Juliette, and every week I would go to her tiny apartment and we would sit on little round pillows opposite each other, and she would guide me through the beginning practice of learning to quiet my mind. It was incredibly difficult at first. I couldn't believe what she was asking of me. The more I tried to stop thinking, the more the thoughts came. Grocery lists and bills I needed to pay, thoughts about how the little pillow was uncomfortable, and worries that Juliette was judging me. The more I tried to get quiet, the more I struggled.

After five minutes she would ring a little bell, and I would open my eyes and she would ask me to tell her how it went. I was honest with her and told her how I struggled and how I couldn't stop the thoughts. She smiled and explained to me that she didn't want me to *stop* them. Instead, she wanted me to notice them. She asked me to observe my thoughts and feel compassion for myself, not scorn, for whatever the thoughts were. I would shift in my seat and close my eyes, and we would go again.

After a little while, I began to understand what she was talking about. Whereas my thoughts had always felt like just who I was, suddenly I realized there was a part of me that was separate from them, a part of me that was able to act as an observer of my thoughts. I was struck with the sudden realization that the thoughts were just that—thoughts. They weren't the whole of who I was. I remember popping open my eyes in the middle of the meditation when I realized this.

Juliette smiled when I told her about my revelation. From that moment on, I began to grow stronger in my practice, and as soon as I learned to let go of controlling or worrying about the thoughts and just observing them instead, they began to lose their power. This experience changed everything about who I am and how I live my life today. It was the beginning of my transformation.

Not long into my practice, I also began to notice a difference in my days.

Each time I became aware that I was having an anxious or a sad thought, I was able to pause and observe it rather than grab on to it as I always had, following it down a rabbit hole of emotional and physical responses. And once I became more of an observer of these thoughts rather than a slave to them, their power began to diminish and I became discernibly more peaceful, less anxious and sad, and much happier as a result. It was a truly remarkable shift in my life.

This is why I love to share this tool with you. The results are often so immediate and almost always long-lasting.

My client James is another great example. James was in his late thirties when he came to see me after the loss of his father. He was deep in grief, overwhelmed by all the changes about what he thought his future looked like, and he was also experiencing debilitating periods of anxiety and panic attacks.

After a number of weeks of working with James to normalize his anxiety and deeply process his grief over this loss, I knew he was ready to move on to mindfulness. Like the place I'd been in when I found it, James was willing to try anything that might alleviate his anxious thoughts. Although he was skeptical about meditation, he began to give it a try, and the results were remarkable. James was soon able to feel much more control over his anxiety and also find a deeper level of peace in his life.

Three years after our time together in grief therapy ended, I invited James back to my office to talk with him for this book. I was thrilled to hear about the long-lasting impact our work had on him and am excited to share his thoughts with you. For anyone who is still feeling skeptical about the practices I'm introducing you to in this chapter, know that James was too, but today he lives a life remarkably different from when we first met.

JAMES'S STORY

Anxiety was the primary thing that brought me into therapy. It was so overwhelming. I think that it began about a month to six weeks after my father died. I'd remained at my family's home for a little while after he died, and then I came back home and started work almost immediately. It was the normal everyday work stresses that amplified it.

The primary thing that would happen to me usually had to do with work

—like a normal, everyday stress that hadn't bothered me before, a deadline or something of that nature, would come up—and instead of being able to act in that moment, it was like I couldn't breathe. That was the most common thing. I would have to run outside or try to get outside as fast as I could. The environment felt claustrophobic. I would end up just outside trying to catch my breath.

I have a job that can be stressful at times. It's production related. So there are moments when it's stressful, but never like that. And the other thing that would happen was an explosion of emotion sometimes. Like, I didn't see it coming, and all of a sudden I would get so angry with someone, like in a way that I wouldn't have otherwise.

I knew it was a panic attack. But I had an idea of how to get out of it, too. You know just by consciously working on the breathing, but I didn't have control of when they would hit. They would just hit sometimes while crying about my dad late at night. I remember a couple of times just in my bedroom late at night—just that shortness of breath. I would stand up and walk a little bit, force the breathing, and calm myself down.

The panic had to do with the absolute nature of death. It had to do with the fact that I felt that I wasn't going to talk to my father again. Or at least prior to the recommendation that I write letters to him—that changed everything—it really did. It was just this sense that I couldn't talk to my friend anymore.

I kept finding myself getting really emotional in situations that didn't call for it. When I learned about meditation, I thought it was sort of mumbo jumbo. And then I started trying it slowly. It took some time. I'm cautious with new things. But the meditation was the first and probably primary means of getting some relief and a little bit of control back in my life. Prior to that, things were just happening to me. It felt different from any other part of my life.

I began to achieve a place where I could just kind of scratch the surface of getting control of my mind and then move a little bit more forward with that. And knowing that I wasn't going to have these herniations of emotions and explosions, that was a great relief, just being able to get a little back to normalcy and control.

A large reason I was experiencing so many panic attacks and anxiety was because I had just reached a point of not knowing what to do with my

grief. But talking about it certainly just relieved a weight.

In many ways, I'm kind of glad I went through it all. I was given the gift of learning meditation. And I never wanted to lose my dad, but its inevitability was always there. He was quite sick for a number of years, so it was no surprise. I learned a lot about myself.

There are certain parts about that segment of my life that are lucid clear. Losing my shit sometimes—I almost got in a street fight once because of it. I was threatening to beat up a guy over a parking spot once! And I don't do that sort of thing. I was really someone else.

Now my anxiety is back to the base level that it was prior. I don't snap much at all. I would say it's at a relatively healthy level. My grief is kind of different since the birth of my son last year. It returned for a while, in a much smaller way. I miss my father so much. He is my son... it's crazy. His energy and his strength are just so reminiscent of my dad. So the grief comes and goes. I think the thing is with grief, when I didn't know how to deal with it, it was terrifying and overpowering, and it caused me anxiety. Now that it doesn't cause me to feel that way, I can deal with it. I'm able to cry about it and miss him. I still write him a letter every once in a while.

My advice to someone who is experiencing grief anxiety is to, first and foremost, try to be open to meditation. Consider it as a means to kind of get control of your thoughts again, to maybe even find peace in your thought processes. The anxiety in particular, if it makes itself present in the form of a panic attack, I don't think there's anything better than meditation in that case. Because you will be able to know what you're dealing with.



James's experience with meditation is similar to that of many of my clients. He began with a healthy dose of skepticism, and that's understandable. When you're experiencing anxiety, you just want to get a handle on it. Something like meditation can sound so ethereal. But once you really start to apply these methods, the relief and the new sense of control you'll feel over your thoughts will be palpable.

And if you have anger issues like James, and feel yourself getting

emotional in situations that don't call for it or lashing out in unexpected ways, meditation can really help. James thought of it as mumbo jumbo but then started to try it and found great relief.

People have been using techniques of mindfulness and meditation for thousands of years, but it is only since the 1960s that this approach to wellness and healing has expanded into Western culture. Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979, where he and his colleagues used these tools to help many people cope with stress and anxiety.

Kabat-Zinn's studies have shown that meditation causes significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety and panic in patients with generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Kabat-Zinn has gone on to publish many books about mindfulness, but his first book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, is one I consistently recommend my clients read.

So what is mindfulness, exactly? While often used in conjunction with meditation, it's a bit different. Mindfulness is the concept of compassionate, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. It is a gentle way of paying closer attention to yourself and your life and an invitation to develop a deeper relationship with your own experience. This includes your experience of anxiety, fear, and sadness. Cultivating this awareness takes time and practice, but the benefits are enormous.

As you now know, anxiety and panic arise from fear-based *thoughts* rather than an actual physical threat. Anxiety is the feeling that something is wrong rather than there actually being something in the room with you that is physical distressing. It's the fear of getting cancer, or of experiencing more loss, instead of something that is actually happening in the moment, such as a home intruder. This is why learning how to observe our *thoughts*, rather than reacting to them, is the key to gaining control of your anxiety.

Fearful thoughts send a message to our body to create a response. If we choose to let these thoughts dominate our brains, then the amygdala, the section of the brain responsible for detecting fear and preparing for emergency events, becomes stimulated, increasing our heart rate, breathing, and adrenaline. Catching ourselves in the moment and working to simply be aware of the thoughts, rather than believing them, we are able to send a message to our brains that will begin to calm the central nervous system

instead of continuing to activate it.

So how do we do this? The first step is in learning simple meditation techniques. Learning how to sit still and become aware of our thoughts as they arise is the initial work. Take a deep breath. Look around the room or environment you are currently in. Take note of the air temperature and how your body feels. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Hot? Cold? Bring yourself as fully into the present moment as you can. Remind yourself that this is the only moment that exists. The future scenarios you are feeling anxious about are not real, and they may never be. You are right here, right now, and you are alive and safe.

Even if the anxiety continues to pulse through your body, that is okay. Use the sensation of your breathing to help you stay present. Do not feel discouraged if anxious thoughts continue to come. In mindfulness it is not a mistake to feel upset. Instead, this is an opportunity to use this practice of present-moment awareness to change how you relate to the experience of these feelings. Observe them rather than believe them.

Mindfulness breaks the cycle of anxious thoughts that are fueling your central nervous system. It also gives your body a chance to support the natural capacity of the cortical centers to interpret the situation in a safer context. You may not be able to stop the thoughts, but you can learn not to identify with them or believe them. In this way, even though you have not stopped your thoughts, they begin to lose the power to control you.

While all of these are good things to think about in the face of feeling anxiety and panic, working to practice mindfulness and meditation during times when you are not anxious will give you greater control when you are.

HOW TO MEDITATE

Meditation is not as difficult as you may believe. You do not need a special environment, and you do not need any tools you do not already innately possess. Meditation is not about reaching some nirvana-like state that seems attainable only by Buddhist monks. Mindfulness is simply about bringing compassionate awareness to your present moment. But when we are grieving, this is often the opposite of what we are naturally drawn to doing.

When we are grieving, our thoughts are all over the place. We are reviewing the past—how we lost our loved one, the things we did and

didn't do at the end, old memories, and images of our loved one. We are also consumed with thoughts of the future and how our life looks different now without that person. We are revising future dates and events—processing what it will be like to move through life without that person going forward. But neither of those thought patterns is about the present moment. So again, learning to gently bring your awareness back to the present will serve you.

You may feel afraid that dwelling so much in the present moment will mean you are letting go of memories of your person or that you will not be spending enough time thinking and planning for the future, but mindfulness is not asking that of you. Trust me, you will still think plenty about the past and the future. Mindfulness is simply asking you to add in more time to devote to the present moment, especially when you are anxious.

A great way to begin to explore meditation is by taking a class or workshop. It can be helpful to have in-person guidance and the motivation of having other people around you doing the same as a way to concentrate on this practice. But that is something you can try when you are ready. For now, I want to walk you through some simple ways you can explore and begin to practice at home.

GUIDED MEDITATION

First, find a quiet space where you can be uninterrupted for a period of time. Within that space, find a comfortable position. I don't recommend lying down because sometimes you may fall asleep in this position (although this comes in handy in the middle of the night when you can't sleep!) . So find a comfortable seated position in a chair or just on a pillow on the floor. Try to get yourself into a position where you won't be inclined to move much for at least five minutes. I like to sit in a chair with a back and have both of my feet on the floor, legs uncrossed, with my hands resting gently in my lap. I'll ask you to time your meditation, so set a timer for five minutes (you can also rely on your own timing, although choosing to rely on your own internal clock may cause you to *think* more about time while you're trying to meditate).

Now close your eyes, and first just take some breaths and orient yourself to this space. Begin to note any tension in your body. Notice where you are

holding the tension, and take a moment to release it. Relax your shoulders, unclench your jaw, and let your tongue be soft in your mouth and your eyelids be heavy and closed. Now just begin to breathe normally through your nostrils.

As you breathe, focus your awareness on the feeling of air entering your nostrils. Keep your awareness right there, and use the actual feeling of the air coming and going to keep your attention focused there. If you hear an outside noise or your foot suddenly feels itchy, just note those things and return your attention to your breath. You will notice that thoughts will begin to come and go. You may think of your grocery list or the plans you have for this evening. You may have a sad thought about your loved one or an anxious thought about the future.

Notice those thoughts as they arise. Do not judge them; try not to feel annoyed or disappointed with yourself for having them. Just observe them. Let them come and go. You don't need to grab on to them and follow them, going from one grocery item to another—just let it go. You can always think about your grocery list when you come out of meditation. Observe each thought as it arises, and do your best to view this process with compassion.

Becoming an observer of your thoughts is what is key here. The goal is not to silence your thoughts altogether, although that is something that may begin to occur as you develop a deeper and more regular process. For now, all you are working to do is observe your thoughts rather than react to them. Choose to return to your breath over and over again. And watch the thoughts come.

After five minutes, slowly blink open your eyes and bring your awareness back to the room. Take a deep breath, and move your body around a little, shaking out any tension. You can now choose to end your practice, or you can close your eyes and do another five or ten minutes. In the beginning of developing a practice, it can be helpful to practice a couple of times back-to-back like this.

But whether you continue for another round or not, take a moment and note the experience you just had. What was easy about it? What was hard? Were you able to observe your thoughts rather than following them? How did it feel to do that? Did you notice a difference in control? Feel free to keep a journal in the beginning phases of building a practice, and write

down your observations after each session.

WHERE AND WHEN TO MEDITATE

What I remember most about my initial experiences with mindfulness is that my early meditation practice filtered so quickly into my overall life experience. While I did not feel that I had mastered meditation yet, I very quickly began to be able to notice my thoughts in a way that I never had before. The relief was so huge for me. Whereas I had spent my days prior to meditation being controlled by my anxious thoughts, I no longer felt that I had to let them control me. I noticed them when they came, but I did not feed into them.

This positive experience reinforced my desire to continue meditating, and I began to cultivate a practice outside of my lessons with Juliette. I cleared a space in the corner of my bedroom near a window, and each morning before starting my day I would sit for ten minutes in meditation. It's helpful to make a designated spot for your practice, as it eliminates the need to figure out where to go each time.

Feel free to really devote a special space to your practice. Clear out a room in your home you haven't been using. Make it beautiful. Add candles, plants, a comfortable place to sit. Make it somewhere you enjoy being.

In the same way that it is helpful to create a space for your meditation, it's also helpful to designate a specific time. The goal is to establish a habit of meditation, and doing this will help train your brain to feel ready for it. Choose a time when you are not too tired or drained—first thing in the morning or midday or afternoon are all good times. Some people even like to open and close their days with meditating at two different times.

I personally love to meditate in the afternoon, as I've found that it acts as a reset button from all the day's hectic thoughts and experiences. Meditating in the morning is a wonderful way to open your day and set a calm tone, but if you have a demanding work or life schedule, it can also work wonders to take ten minutes out of the middle or afternoon of your hectic day to reset your thought processes.

Keep in mind that resistance to meditating is normal. There are days when it feels like the last thing I want to do or the last thing for which I have time. However, I'm always rewarded when I push through that resistance

and allow myself a few minutes of peace. For help with this, join a meditation center or download an app on your phone that offers guided meditations to help support your practice. And above all, be patient and compassionate with yourself while you embark on this journey.

LIVING MINDFULLY

As you continue to think about the concept of mindfulness and to explore building a practice, there are a few more things to keep in mind.

In *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn outlines seven attitudes that are essential for mindful living. They are nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, nonstriving, acceptance, and letting go. Applying these attitudes toward your practice, and your life, is essential for tackling anxiety and panic. Here is my adaptation of Kabat-Zinn's attitudes:

Nonjudging means taking a step back from your experiences and your thoughts and using that observer's perspective rather than rushing to categorize and judge everything going on in and around you.

Patience means recognizing impatience and the impulse to rush into reactions to our thoughts and experiences. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you learn to stay in the present moment rather than directing yourself according to your thoughts.

Maintaining a *Beginner's Mind* simply means becoming more open than ever to your experiences. Try to view your world as though seeing it for the first time. Relish the way the afternoon light comes in through the window. Meet each experience as though through the eyes of a child who has never seen it before.

Trust in yourself. As you deepen your practice, so too will you deepen a sense of trust in your surroundings and in your own innate wisdom.

Nonstriving means adopting an attitude of nondoing. This is essential to meditation. Learn how to just *be* rather than constantly *do*. This is where you will begin to feel a new sense of calm in your life.

Acceptance means being willing to accept the present moment for what it is rather than striving to change it or feeling disappointed that it's not different from what it is. Start living right where you are, with whatever you are feeling or experiencing, and accept this with compassion.

Letting Go is one of the biggest keys to alleviating your suffering. It is when we hold tightly to people, objects, and outcomes that we experience suffering. We can never truly hold on to anything or ever truly expect a perfect outcome. Learning to let go of these expectations is essential to mindfulness and to finding peace.

There's obviously much more to these seven attitudes, but it will be helpful for you to have this foundational understanding as you adopt a mindfulness practice.

ATTENTION AND AWARENESS BRING RELIEF

Meditating is one of the most useful tools I can recommend for help with your grief-related anxiety. I want to reiterate that when we are grieving, we spend an awful lot of time dwelling in the past and worrying about the future. Bringing attention and awareness to the present moment will bring you immediate relief. And developing a mindfulness practice will positively affect all areas of your life. You will find that you are more compassionate toward not only yourself but others as well. You will have more room in your heart for healing and less room in your mind for anxiety.

Take the first step toward this right now. Close your eyes and breathe...

A NXIETY **C** HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. In the last chapter, you were introduced to the techniques of mindfulness and meditation, my favorite tools for coping with and reducing anxiety.

The goal of this book, and the work you're doing as a result of reading it, is all about reducing anxiety by truly embracing your grief and loss.

Learning how to be truly present and compassionate with yourself as you go through this experience is one of the very best ways to attain a new level of peace in your life.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ **Panic attacks**
- ☐ **Insomnia**
- ☐ **Nausea**
- ☐ **Dizziness**
- ☐ **Heart racing/palpitating**
- ☐ **Obsessive worry**
- ☐ **Hypochondria**

Hopefully, by now you've been able to discern a noticeable difference in your panic and anxiety levels. If you feel that you are continuing to struggle, then read back over particular chapters that resonated with you or seek out the additional support of a therapist who can help you implement the tools you're learning here. In the next chapter, we're going to focus on opening yourself up to a deeper belief system, either religious or spiritual, with the goal of both restoring a sense of connection to your loved one and also giving you a greater sense of meaning in your life.

10 | Something to Believe In

Invisible threads are the strongest ties.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE? IS THERE AN AFTERLIFE? ARE WE still connected to our loved ones? Can they see us? Will we ever be reunited with them? Asking yourself these questions is a difficult yet intrinsic part of the grieving process. Not letting yourself ponder this mystery is a hindrance to your emotional growth and a surefire way to cause anxiety to bubble up following a significant loss.

In this chapter, I want you to initially set aside any current beliefs you are holding about the afterlife and our connections to our loved ones. Even if you have a strong belief about what happens next, or if you feel certain that there is nothing after this life, for just a short period of time I want you to hold your notions in a place of openness and let yourself explore them on a deeper level, in addition to letting yourself think about new ones.

In my work as a therapist, I have come to understand that those who are able to maintain a strong sense of connection to their loved one almost always have an easier time with the grief process. But what this connection looks like for each individual varies widely, and helping my clients explore this sense of connection is a big part of the work I do, particularly in alleviating anxiety.

Recall my client James, whom you heard from in earlier chapters. While he generally leans toward an existential way of thinking about the afterlife, as in not believing in one at all, he found great healing in letting himself

connect with his father through the act of writing him letters. James did not need to settle on a particular belief about what happens when we die to nonetheless let himself feel connected to his dad again. And doing so was a big part of his working through his debilitating anxiety.

As I wrote about in [Chapter 2](#), for a long time in the history of the psychology of grief, there has been an emphasis on helping griever's "let go" of their loved one. But over the past couple of decades, we have seen a shift in that approach. Now much of the literature and the practitioners themselves place a stronger emphasis on helping people maintain a sense of connection, and research has shown that this has a much greater impact on the healing process.

This makes sense. When we lose someone significant, it feels wholly unnatural to completely sever that connection. When we lose a person whom we talked to or saw on a regular basis, it is startling and often devastating to feel as though that relationship is over for good. How do we go from such closeness to nothing at all?

The answer is that we don't have to.

The truth is that after you lose someone, your relationship with that person does not end. Take a deep breath, and let that last sentence resound within you. Your relationship with your loved one is not over.

In fact, it will continue to evolve on many levels as you yourself change and grow through new life experiences. In time, you may find that your thoughts or feelings about the person you love change as well. I know that for me, in the twenty years since my mother has been gone, my relationship with her has continued to grow and change.

I went through many periods of time in which I felt angry with her or resentful of her. There were times when I felt very distant from her and other times when I've felt closer than ever. There have been times when I have wanted to be like her and times when I've actively attempted to differentiate from her. And along the way, many of my own life experiences, such as giving birth or reaching the age she was when she became a mother, gave me new insights into who she was, allowing me to develop new understandings of both herself and my relationship with her, past and present.

Along the way, I've also experienced a desire to reconnect with her on a deeper, more spiritual level, something that I was not open to in my early

years of grief. And doing so has strengthened not only my relationship to her but also that of my daughters, who never even had the chance to know her in this physical realm.

Doing this work and letting ourselves open up to the idea that our connection to our loved one is not gone altogether can bring great relief and healing. In this chapter, I'm going to provide you with a lot of thoughts to ponder, questions to ask yourself, and ways to create rituals around your honoring and connecting with your loved one.

This work can feel like a daunting task for some and easier for others. Some of you may not feel ready to open up to this work just yet, but I encourage you to read this chapter anyway and to keep these ideas in mind. When you are in the initial stages of grief, you may feel resistant or overwhelmed by the idea of exploring these more ethereal concepts, but with time know that doing so will be a way to bring your person back into your life.

Writer Cheryl Strayed says, "I'm still sad. I want my mom. That's all I want. Such a simple, impossible thing. But through my writing I have in some small way brought her back. I have done as we say writers do: I have made her alive on the page. It's not enough, but it's something. I have found tremendous solace in that."

I know that for me, after my mother died when I was eighteen, I wasn't ready to think about where she had gone. I was lost and scared and angry. I didn't want to think about her being somewhere else, and I didn't want to talk out loud to an empty room. I just wanted my mom back, right in front of me, to touch and hug and talk to.

But after years of feeling this way and trying to just move on and let go of her, I came to the conclusion that this approach wasn't working. My love for her, and her presence in my mind and heart, had not dissipated in the slightest since she'd died, and I realized that it was time to begin finding meaningful ways to embrace that closeness with her rather than continuing to try to "let go" of her.

This occurred to me around the time that my first daughter was born, and I was feeling a new sense of longing for her and a great sadness that my daughter would never know her. I felt a new determination to bring my mother not just into my life but into those of my children.

I also realized that I was yearning for a framework with which to

understand death and the afterlife, something I had never had before. I had also become a grief counselor in hospice by that time, and I recognized this same struggle in many of my clients. Those who did not have a religious or spiritual belief system in place with which to use a framework to understand their loss were flailing in a sea of uncertainty. Many of them were also struggling with depression and anxiety as a result of having lost their sense of connection to someone who had once had such a vital presence in their lives.

I became consumed with a desire to find some answers, not just for myself but for my clients as well. This desire for answers became the root of my last book, *After This: When Life Is Over, Where Do We Go?* For that book, I embarked on a journey that led me from conversations with priests and rabbis to shamanic rituals and psychic mediums. While I didn't discover the exact answer to what happens when we die, I did find a sense of relief in letting myself finally think about it all, and along the way I developed a much deeper sense of peace about my losses as well as a stronger feeling of connection to my parents.

Today I feel closer to both of my parents than I have in all the years they've been gone. And I have so infused the lives of my children with their essence that they bring them up and talk about them all on their own. I have taught them recipes that my mother taught to me, and I constantly tell them stories of my father's adventurous life. There are multiple photos hung around our house, and we always find ways to ritualize and memorialize them on holidays and anniversaries. Doing this work has brought me a wonderful feeling of peace and helped my children feel that they are not completely missing out on the experience of having maternal grandparents.

But almost more important, doing this work has quelled my anxiety to a discernible degree. Prior to restoring my sense of connection to my parents, I carried a constant gnawing emptiness around with me, and I now understand that it came from the feeling that my connection to them was completely severed. Reinstating that connection, in addition to developing a new spiritual framework, also gave me a sense of peace that if I die early (one of my deepest fears), my children will have known my parents to the best of their abilities. I also feel confident that they will know how to maintain their own sense of connection to me after I am gone.

A NOTE ON ANGER

If you have anger or unresolved issues with your loved one, the idea of reconnecting with them may feel impossible. How can you suddenly open up to the idea of a spiritual connection when you are angry with your person? The answer is that finding ways to express that anger is the start of reconnecting. If you have things left unsaid or anger you need to express, then start there. Write your person a letter and tell them how angry you are or anything else you need to express. Getting these emotions out of our system and, in essence, saying our piece allows us to eventually move into a softer place of connection.

When someone dies, we automatically think that our opportunity to resolve things like this are over, but that is not true. Once you work through any feelings of anger, resentment, or guilt, you will find that it will be easier to move on to a gentler sense of connection.

SO WHERE TO BEGIN?

Death is not something we talk openly about in our culture. In fact, you may not even know what some of your closest friends and family members believe about the afterlife. This realization struck me most profoundly when I was in a graduate school seminar about aging and dying. Our professor broke us into small groups and asked us to sit in a circle and share with each other what we think happens when someone dies.

It was a revelatory experience and one that I have thought back on many times throughout my career. That day in school, sitting around in my small circle of classmates, it felt as though we were doing something illicit, so profound was the experience of talking about something that is usually so hushed. I was also surprised to find how fascinating and also cathartic it was to hear so many different ideas from my peers.

Some of them believed nothing at all. Some had very strong beliefs. Others told stories about experiences they'd had with deceased loved ones that felt otherworldly. But there wasn't one of us who didn't have something we thought and believed. After that day, and even more so when I began to work on my last book, I started to ask everyone I knew what they think happens when someone dies.

This also became an intrinsic part of the work I do with my clients. As

we move past the initial grief process of working through the difficult emotions and beginning to explore the larger picture of our new life without our loved one, I always ask my clients a set of questions. And the work we do around their answers never fails to provide a deeper sense of meaning to their loss and to their lives.

To start opening up your belief system, I want you to ask yourself the same questions I ask my clients. Take your time with them. Reread them multiple times if you need to. Sit and stare off into space, and just think on them.

You may find that some fear arises when you initially begin to ponder what happens when we die. This unknowingness all of us have about what comes next is at the root of all anxiety. For as long as we have been on the planet, humans have feared the unknown. And death is nothing *but* the great unknown. But allowing yourself to face that fear is what will see you through it.

Go slowly. Allow any anxiety to surface and become a gentle observer of it, as we learned to do in the last chapter. The thoughts you have about what happens after this life are just thoughts. Opening up space to create new and reassuring thoughts about the afterlife will help diminish the anxiety.

Feel free to use a journal as you work through these questions. Or use them as a tool to bring to your therapist or spiritual or religious counselor in order to explore them on a deeper level.

1. What do you think happens when someone dies?

First note your immediate response to this question; take that initial response and think about it for a moment. Is your answer something you've been carrying around with you since you were a kid? Is it based on something your parents believed, or is it from the religion you were raised with or are currently embracing?

There is no right answer. Any of these reasons for having your initial response are just fine. But now that you have lost someone dear to you and what you believe about the afterlife matters more than ever, I want you to really look at this belief. Is it one that brings comfort? Does it fit with who you are and what you know your relationship and love for your person to be?

If your immediate response is that nothing happens when we die, think about that too. Do you *absolutely* believe that? If the answer is still yes, that's okay too. However, if there is a glimmer of doubt there, then I urge you to honor those fragments of curiosity. You can go back to believing that there is nothing, but first just let yourself open up to the idea that there might be something and see how that feels.

2. If you have a firm belief about what happens when we die (including that there is nothing after this life), do you currently have a spiritual, religious, or philosophical framework with which to explore it?

Many of us believe *something*, even if we can't pinpoint where it comes from. Start there, first by identifying what it is, and then I want you to think about whether you want to continue holding on to this belief.

If you're sure that this belief resonates the most with you and that you find it helpful and healing, then I want you to begin to do the work to strengthen it. Embracing your belief system will be a key way for you to work through your grief, which will in turn ease your anxiety. And embracing your belief will hopefully serve to allow you to open up to ways you can restore a sense of connection with your loved one.

Even if your belief is that there is nothing, return to James's story and know that you can still allow your brain and heart to connect with your loved one without believing that they can even hear you or connect with you from the other side.

If you aren't sure that your belief is one that you want to continue to hold on to, then there is a great opportunity here for you to do some exploration in this realm. Check in with yourself about any curiosity you've had about particular religions or philosophies. Go visit a church or a temple. Pick up different books that appeal to you, and read about various religions or views of the afterlife.

Do this until you find something that resonates and appeals to you and embrace it even more. Join a church and find a clergy person who is willing to engage with you and help you explore your beliefs. Begin to incorporate this religion's practices into your daily life.

Or find a center that offers workshops around different modalities of meditation and spirituality. Find ways to incorporate those teachings into your rituals, holidays, and anniversaries.

Think too about your loved one's spirituality or religion. Perhaps they held beliefs that would feel comforting for you to adopt. This could bring you an even greater sense of connection to them.

Above all, begin to engage in lengthy conversations with people about what happens when someone dies. Even when you are not sure yourself, it can be soothing and informative to hear someone else's take.

3. Ask yourself what do you most want to happen when we die?

About halfway through the journey of writing my last book, as I had grown accustomed to doing, I asked a writer friend of mine what he thinks happens when we die. He looked at me for a moment, and I waited for him to answer. I already knew he was an atheist, but I was still curious to hear his exact response. "Claire," he finally said, "what do you *want* to happen when we die?"

I found myself dumbstruck. I realized in an instant that I had never even asked myself that very question. I realized I had only ever considered ideas and beliefs that had been presented to me in various ways throughout my life.

I sat with the question for almost a year, turning it back and forth in my mind and allowing myself to entertain all kinds of answers. When I finally came to a conclusion of the scenario I would most wish for upon death, it allowed me to then seek a spiritual framework that supported this wish, and as a result, I was able to delve deeper into my belief system.

I urge you to do the same. Let yourself imagine what it is you would most want to happen when we die. Remove all restrictions from your answer. If the scenario could be anything, *anything* you want, what would it be? The answer might come to you instantly, or you may have to ponder it, as I did. Either way, use that answer as a means of digging even deeper to find an established religion or philosophy with which to strengthen your belief system around your conclusion.

JON'S STORY

When Jon came to see me, his wife, Liz, had been gone for three years. A young widower, Jon had been only in his early thirties when she died of cancer, leaving him and their two young children alone.

In our first session, Jon told me that for the first two years after Liz's death, he had not felt that he needed therapy. Looking back now, though, he realized it probably would have helped, for now he found himself grappling with several things that were causing him emotional distress and anxiety.

In the initial years following Liz's death, Jon felt that he'd had no choice but to just "put his head down and do the best to get through it." He was working a full-time job and trying to care for his two young daughters. Even though he had family around to help support him in many ways, he still felt overwhelmed as a single parent. Back then he worried that if he were to let his grief rise up, then it might swallow him whole and that he would be reduced to being an emotional mess, unable to care for his children.

But over the past several years, his grief had not disappeared, as he hoped it would. In fact, it sometimes threatened to come on even more strongly than in the beginning. With each milestone his daughters reached without their mom, Jon felt increasing anxiety and despair about living out the rest of his life without Liz.

He made the decision to come see me when he experienced several panic attacks, in addition to a few bursts of intense rage. Jon knew that it was his unresolved grief that was behind these outbursts and anxiety, but he was scared to face it.

Over the course of several months, I worked closely with Jon. There were some sessions in which Jon just cried, something that he had hardly ever allowed himself to do in the years since Liz's death. There were other sessions in which he told me long stories about his life with Liz and about the details of their relationship. And there were yet other sessions during which Jon carefully reviewed the time line of her illness and the experience of watching her die.

Jon begrudgingly began a daily journal and a meditation practice, both of which had positive results. By this time in our work, Jon's anxiety had dropped a discernible amount, but he was still having bouts of anger. Probing deeper is what finally led him to the work of exploring his spirituality.

Ever since Liz was first diagnosed with cancer, Jon had felt angry. He told me about what a good person Liz had been, that not only she had been kind and thoughtful, but she had devoted her life to working with

special-needs kids. Jon was furious that someone like Liz could be taken not just from him and his daughters but from the world. Jon felt that Liz didn't deserve to die and that his daughters didn't deserve to grow up without a mother.

I asked Jon about his spiritual and religious beliefs, asked him what he thinks happens when we die. Jon told me that he had been raised Catholic, but he no longer went to church, since there was a lot about the church with which he didn't resonate. I asked Jon if he had ever thought of considering adopting a different religion.

Jon admitted that he had pretty much written off all religions, feeling daunted at the idea of trying to explore something new. But he also admitted that he thought it might help him to feel that he had something to believe in.

Jon told me that Liz had grown up in the Unitarian Church but that she too had become less involved as she moved into the career part of her life. Before she got sick, she had begun to talk about joining a local church and taking their daughters. But then she had grown ill, and the effort had been put aside. I suggested to Jon that maybe he could both honor Liz's wishes and also explore his own faith in a new way by becoming active with the Unitarian Church. Jon began to go to Sunday services often with his daughters as well as spending time with the pastor talking about his transition from the Catholicism of his youth.

In time, Jon found great solace in this new church and in reestablishing a relationship with God. Jon began to attribute a new meaning to both his life and to Liz's death, and in doing so his anger finally began to dissipate.

I'm happy to report that Jon is still doing well and his daughters are continuing to thrive. Jon still goes to church services regularly and tells me that he feels closer to Liz than ever. He tells me that he has no idea how long he would have gone on stifling his grief and dealing with anxiety and anger had he not done the hard task of working through his grief.



Some people may feel that religion or spirituality can work as a scapegoat, giving people a false sense of hope or optimism about the fate of their loved ones. To that argument, I want to say that I think even a false sense of optimism and hope is better than debilitating anxiety and anger.

When I was researching the afterlife for my last book, in addition to religion and spirituality, I also saw more than a dozen psychic mediums. Many of my clients, past and present, have either gone to see a medium or been curious about it. I too was curious about it and also wanted to have a base of knowledge about the experience to discuss with my clients when the issue came up.

I went into the experiences with these mediums feeling very skeptical. I met with some who were clearly charlatans, and I had experiences with others that were so uncanny, they made me rethink some of my beliefs. But the one thing I could not deny was that for those people who had a positive experience with a medium, I was able to note a discernible difference in their sense of peace and their connection with their lost loved one.

That restored connection as well as the peace made me realize that it doesn't always matter if what you believe is "real." What matters is how it makes you feel. So again, let yourself feel open to exploring all possible avenues in this realm.

THE POWER OF RITUAL AND HONORING OUR LOVED ONES

A rabbi I spoke to once explained to me that in the Jewish religion, there is very little emphasis on the afterlife, that in Judaism the afterlife is what a person leaves behind here in this life. He went on to say that a person's afterlife is composed of the legacies and work they leave behind, the good deeds they did during their life, and the values they instilled in others. I found this idea comforting and useful.

The truth is that in order to maintain a sense of connection to your loved one, you needn't rely on any religion at all. There are myriad ways that you can honor your person and create meaningful rituals that bring them into your daily life.

My client Alice's mother had always had great compassion and concern for homeless people. Even though Alice's mother had been a stay-at-home mom, she had volunteered frequently for a local soup kitchen and donated

frequently to homeless shelters. As Alice became a teenager, she had begun to join her mother in these acts of service. Yet when she came to see me, her mom had been dead for several years and Alice was struggling to find meaning in her life, working a job she didn't care much about and involved with a man about whom she felt equally ambivalent.

When Alice told me the stories about volunteering with her mother, I could see her entire countenance brighten. She went on to tell me that doing this work with her mom had been some of her favorite memories. When I asked Alice if she had continued to volunteer with the homeless after her mother's passing, she seemed surprised to admit that she had not. It was truly one of those aha moments.

Alice quit her job and got a new one working at an organization that helps to support and integrate homeless people back into the workplace. After only a few months, her entire life had changed as a result. She was thrilled to go to work every day, feeling as though she was contributing to the world in a meaningful way, and not only that, but she felt so much closer to her mother doing this work.

There are thousands more ways, even simpler than Alice's, that you can start doing today to honor your loved one and connect with the memory of them. My mother was a chef, and I grew up loitering in the kitchen with her while she prepared meals. After she was gone, I missed that time together, but I also missed her food! In my early twenties I went on a mission to teach myself how to cook and was surprised how much I already knew, just having spent so much time watching my mother.

To this day I feel more connected to my mother when I'm cooking than at any other time. I've also made it a point to cook with my own daughters, and when I do I always make a point to share stories about my mother and invoke her presence.

When I ask my clients about ways they can honor their person or rituals they can instate that will make them feel closer to their loved ones, they can almost invariably think of several ways off the top of their heads. I'm sure you can, too. Nonetheless, below you will find a few more ideas. Remember that doing these things will make you feel closer to your person, and feeling closer to them will enable you to feel whole again and to experience less anxiety.

ANNIVERSARIES AND HOLIDAYS

Birthdays, death days, wedding anniversaries. ... These dates can be tough. Some people choose to shrink from them, while others feel better embracing them. But even those who try to ignore the date usually feel it anyway. Often, there is a lot of anticipation leading up to the day itself, and there is also some amount of relief after it has passed.

Not having your person there to celebrate with you can illuminate your grief around the loss. However, finding ways to incorporate them in your holiday rituals can give you a stronger sense of connection. Finding ways to face these dates and to do something meaningful during them will help ease your sadness and anxiety. Here are a few suggestions.

- Cook their favorite meal.
- Go to their favorite restaurant.
- Visit their gravesite.
- Donate to a charity in their name.
- Plant a flower or tree.
- Travel to their favorite place.
- Write them a letter.
- Go to a place of religious significance or worship.
- Watch your loved one's favorite movie.
- Visit a place he or she always wanted to visit.
- Wear an item of clothing or jewelry that belonged to your person.
- Watch home movies or look through photos.
- Hold a meal gathering and ask everyone to share stories.
- Ask everyone at the gathering to share a favorite memory of your loved one.
- Say a prayer or blessing in their honor.
- Set an extra plate, even though they're not there.
- Donate to a charity during the holiday season in their honor.
- Continue to uphold any traditions they particularly enjoyed.

- Place fresh photos of them around during gatherings.
- Light a candle in their honor.
- Hang a special ornament in their honor.
- Say a toast in their honor.
- Play your loved one's favorite music during a gathering.
- Have a moment of silence in honor of your loved one.

Those of us who work and write in the field of bereavement consistently see that the people who take time to ritualize, honor, and talk about their loved ones almost always fare better emotionally in the long run than those who don't.

One such expert in the field of bereavement is Allison Gilbert, author of numerous books, including *Parentless Parents* and *Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive*. Allison's mother died of cancer when she was twenty-five, and then she lost her father to cancer six years later, when she was thirty-one. She has since used her experiences to help many others understand their own arcs of grief and feels strongly that maintaining a healthy sense of connection to our lost loved ones heals grief and anxiety.

For Allison, this revelation came after seeing how her anxiety about more loss was manifesting in unhealthy emotional behavior that included feelings of irrational fear and catastrophic thinking around situations, such as her son missing his curfew by forty-five minutes. Allison said:

The morning after that happened I had a revelation about my behavior. I gathered my feelings and spoke calmly with my son, Jake, and my husband, Mark, about my outburst. Yes, I've been damaged by my losses. Yes, a cough can turn into cancer and kill you within months (my father). Things happen in an instant, and we often can't control them. Mark and I agreed, with Jake listening intently, that Mark doesn't share these concerns because he's never suffered a death in his close-knit family. And that makes our experiences and perspectives different. My losses have shaped the way I see the world, why I tend to invent worst-case scenarios.

She explained, "Behaviors that worked for me as a mom of small kids

worked well for a time—they were in line with anxious thinking. I was a good mom because I was hyperaware. I was a good mom because I investigated stroller safety reports and the best NHTSA-rated car seats. Now, as a mom of two teenagers (my daughter is fifteen) these same behaviors create inordinate stress.”

At that point, Allison turned to finding ways to stay connected to her lost loved ones as a way to ameliorate her anxiety about further loss. When we find ways to feel connected to the people we lose, then the catastrophe of death is softened so that we do not fear it as much in the rest of our lives, thus creating a balm for the anxious thoughts.

“It took me a while to appreciate that if I was going to keep my parents’ memory alive, the work was up to me,” Allison said. “I needed to be proactive. The urgency to keep my parents present in my children’s lives has only increased as they’ve gotten older. I want them to benefit from their maternal grandparents’ values, priorities, and experiences. I want my children to learn from their wisdom. But this was never going to happen by accident. I’ve had to make the decision to teach these lessons—not all at once, but a slow and steady drip of stories whenever the occasion cleanly presents itself.”

Rather than turning to religion or spirituality, Allison created threads of connection that made sense to her. “What I needed were concrete opportunities to keep my parents’ memory alive. I didn’t find joy in abstract concepts. True happiness for me stemmed from digitizing old photographs, making a quilt out of my father’s neckties, and baking my mother’s ‘famous’ fruit platter pie. Taking purposeful steps to celebrate loved ones—to ensure their ongoing presence in our lives—is one of the most essential aspects of healing and thriving after loss.”

===== ALLISON GILBERT’S SUGGESTIONS FOR KEEPING MEMORIES ALIVE =====

Plant Flowers

One of the most uplifting ways to celebrate a loved one’s memory is to plant daffodils, a fun and meaningful opportunity. The idea is to plant, if possible, one bulb for every year your loved one lived.

This is a great activity to involve friends, family, and neighbors. Not only will you benefit from the extra hands, but you'll be able to use the time to invite conversation and share stories about your loved one. Daffodils are the perfect flower for such a happiness-inducing project: as perennials, they'll come back spring after spring—and they're virtually indestructible. You don't have to remember alone. Remembering can be social and meaningful. It can be uplifting and fun.

Say Their Names Aloud

I make a point to say their names out loud. I also orient what I saw around my children's relationships, not mine. When I refer to my parents, I try never to say "my mom" or "my dad." I refer to my parents as "your grandma" and "your grandpa." Word choice is critical. Children absorb more and appreciate more when relationships involve, and revolve around, them.

Be Proactive

For many individuals, anxiety after loss stems from feeling unmoored. Death, even if we anticipate it, is ultimately out of our control. Being proactive about remembering loved ones is an essential antidote. Keeping a loved one's memory alive—enjoying reminiscent foods, listening to their favorite songs, sharing stories on social media—restores a critical sense of agency. We become empowered because we take back some of that control we've been missing.



A SENSE OF CONNECTION

I really believe that opening yourself up to the possibility of reestablishing or strengthening your relationship with your lost loved one will help you find greater peace and long-lasting healing. It doesn't matter if you just recently lost someone or if it was decades ago. It's never too late to give some thought to your spiritual side, ask yourself big questions, seek support, and deepen your connection. Doing this work will have an enormous impact on decreasing your level of anxiety.

Please reread this chapter as many times as you need to. Let the questions and thoughts here linger in your mind and in your heart. The love we have for the people in our lives does not disappear when they die, and neither does our connection with them.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. After reading the last chapter, I hope you've been able to give some thought to the framework that you use to understand your loss and your life. Finding ways to make meaning out of the death of a loved one, and the life you are subsequently living, is an important way of reducing anxiety.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

Hopefully, by now you are noticing a difference in your panic and anxiety levels. If you feel that you are continuing to struggle, then read back over particular chapters that resonated with you, or seek out the additional support of a therapist who can help you implement the tools you're learning here. In this next chapter, we're going to talk about facing your fears about death and in essence help you prepare for your own death. I know some of this can be scary, but tackling this important subject is a huge part of breaking down anxiety.

11 | Death Planning

For to fear death, my friends, is only to think ourselves wise without really being wise, for it is to think that we know what we do not know. For no one knows whether death may not be the greatest good that can happen to man.

—P LATO

THE ROOT OF ALL ANXIETY LIES IN UNCERTAINTY. AND WHAT presents more uncertainty than death itself? We fear death because we do not know when it will come or how it will happen. However, one of the best ways to overcome our anxiety about death is to face it.

Most people push off the idea of preparing for death, feeling that there is no reason to prepare for it when they are healthy or young. But for those of us experiencing anxiety around death, taking precautions and making preparations can be the very thing to set us at ease. It should come as no surprise that you are thinking of death more than ever following a loss. Losing someone we love is always a stark reminder of our own mortality. Realizing you are not prepared to die yourself, and feeling resistant to making those preparations, or pushing away the idea of doing so altogether, can be the direct cause of underlying anxiety.

In this final piece of the puzzle, we are going to learn about various ways you can begin to get your affairs in order as a way of alleviating your anxious feelings.

First things first. You are going to die. Pretending that you're not, or trying not to think about it, will not prevent it. Taking measures to be prepared will give you a greater sense of peace than you think.

Much of our anxiety in life stems from a fear of death in some form or another. We lose many things throughout our lives, from jobs and partnerships to pets and lifestyles. Choosing to face the fear of loss head-on, to bring it out into the light and really grapple with it, diminishes the fear. Diminishing the fear diminishes the anxiety.

I know it's scary. Believe me. All day long, I talk to people who have lost someone they love. I hear countless stories of death, tales of horrific illnesses or tragic deaths, lives taken too soon. It's sometimes difficult for me to listen to these stories and not imagine them happening to me. But I've found that facing the fear is far healthier than suppressing it.

When I used to work in hospice, we had a weekly team meeting that lasted several hours. All the members of our hospice would gather—the doctor, the chaplain, the nurses, the social worker, and myself. For several hours, we would go over the case of every patient we were currently treating. I often left these meetings depleted and anxious, with phrases like “metastasis to the brain and internal bleeding” ringing in my ears. I'd find myself obsessing about weird aches and pains, worrying I had cancer.

In order to overcome these thoughts, I did a lot of the work I talk about in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#)—retraining my brain and using techniques of mindfulness. But in addition to these tools, I also knew that part of the work to overcome my anxiety around this had to involve facing my fear and becoming comfortable with the idea of dying.

I forced myself to imagine my own death, and in doing so it helped me recognize some of the things I needed to change and also some things that I needed to get in place. Doing this work truly alleviated a portion of my anxiety. While I do not want to die early, I now know that if I do, there will be nothing left unfinished or taken care of.

I began with a few simple things and expanded from there. Each step I took reduced my anxiety in a discernible way.

-
-
-
1. Creating a living will
 2. Creating advance directives
 3. Getting life insurance

4. Making my funeral wishes known
5. Tasking friends with things I would like done after my death
6. Compiling a list of things I want my daughters to have
7. Creating a document that lists all my passwords and accounts
8. Writing letters to loved ones to read in my absence
9. Making a list of places I'd like my daughters to visit
10. Making a list of things I want my daughters to know about me and our family



In this chapter, we're going to explore all of this and more. Doing this work will not only help you feel more secure about what will happen when you die but also directly benefit your loved ones and the process they will go through upon your death.

Let me give you an example. Even before my father knew he was actively dying, he began to put things in place for after he was gone. I was in my early twenties during this time and living in New York City while he lived in Southern California. Each time I visited him, he would sit down with me and go over various things, telling me where his key for the safe-deposit box was and explaining that he wanted to be cremated. He also took me to the bank on several occasions and made me a cosigner on all of his accounts.

On one such trip, he sat me down at the kitchen table and handed me a piece of paper. "Sweetie," he said, "I want you to make a list of everything you have to do after I die."

I balked at him, shook my head, and told him he was being morbid. He pushed on, explaining that he was doing this for me. He went on to explain that when he was gone, there would be a great many things I would be responsible for, and he wanted to help me while he still could. I understand now that he was also doing this for himself. He was plagued with worry—his own anxiety—about what would happen to me after he was gone, and going over these things helped ease that.

The morning after he died, I dug out the list he'd had me make that day

and stared at it. I was numb with grief, but I was also the only one to take care of the inevitable tasks one must deal with after someone dies. “Write an obituary,” the list read. “Choose a crematorium. Call social security. Order death certificates. Alert the bank.” I smiled through my tears at the memory of the day he had me write these things down. Even in death, he was still with me, guiding me through life, and in that moment I was so grateful that he had pushed me to face these things with him.

I know it feels scary to think about it all, but the truth is that somewhere deep down, you’re already thinking about it. Not facing these things is manifesting in anxiety. The trick is to start small. You don’t need to tackle this all at once. Begin with something easy. Even just make a list of all the things you know will need to be taken care in the event of your death.

I turned to my friend Amy Pickard while I was working on this chapter. After the loss of her mother, Amy created a company called Good to Go! that helps individuals and families get their affairs in order.

When Amy’s mother died when Amy was forty-three, she left a mess for Amy to clean up. Amy was stunned to realize that her mother had put nothing in place in the event of her death, and Amy was completely overwhelmed with the tasks at hand. She was grieving her mother, a woman who had been her best friend in life, yet also forced to sort through a litany of tough questions and decisions in the midst of her grief.

“The only time I’ve ever had anxiety was when I was grieving, and I had my first panic attack,” Amy told me.

I knew it was directly correlated to the death. I remember hearing a story about a friend having a panic attack when he was four or five because he freaked out over the concept of infinity. I thought of this because it’s when something is bigger than you can understand or handle, that causes anxiety. And death is so big. It’s like my brain couldn’t process the hugeness of it, and so that directly inspired a panic attack. I think you have anxiety when you feel a complete lack of control, a complete lack of understanding.

When my mom died, I was completely overwhelmed. What I wasn’t anticipating was the amount of administration and organization that it took. She didn’t have anything in place. She had an old will from 1987, but we didn’t even find it until a month later. I didn’t even know she had a life insurance policy until the attorney told me. I was angry, too. Why do I have to figure all this out? Why is it down to me to handle all this? Even though I had been so close with my mom, I wished we had talked about these things.

In the year after her mother's death, Amy began to think about other people having to go through her dilemma, and she began to ask her friends and family what kinds of things they had in place. She was shocked to discover the majority had answered, "Nothing."

Soon after, she hosted her very first Good to Go! party at a friend's house. Combining her background working in music and her love of rock 'n' roll, she brought in a peppy death-related soundtrack and encouraged participants while they were young and healthy to treat it like a party, providing snacks and libations.

Amy's take is that doing this work doesn't have to be heavy and depressing, that if we can find ways to make it fun or even enjoyable, it will ease the enormity of the emotional task at hand. She also created a document called "The Departure File" that she brought with her to the parties she hosted and distributed to attendees.

"When I created 'The Departure File' for the parties," Amy told me, "I thought, what are the conversations I wish I'd had with my mother? What does she want me to do with her stuff? What does she believe happens after we die? How would she have comforted me in my time of grief?"

And these are the very things that Amy asks attendees to think about and answer. Today Amy hosts Good to Go! parties all over the country. In 2015 I hosted my own Good to Go! party, and while the experience was definitely intense, it was also cathartic.

A group of twelve of us sat around my living room and had very frank conversations about *our* end of life. There were so many more questions to think about, not just those in "The Departure File" but even more that arose from thinking about this big inevitability. However, we all left feeling a lot more peaceful and infinitely more prepared.

Here are some questions for you to begin thinking about on your own. Take your time with them. Create your own "Departure File," or reach out to a company like Amy's that can assist you in this task.

===== IN THE EVENT OF YOUR OWN DEATH =====

1. Do you have a will or advance directives?
2. Do your loved ones know your funeral and memorial wishes?

3. Do they know your burial or cremation wishes?
4. Do you have a list of all of your accounts and passwords?
5. Do your loved ones know where to find your legal documents (will, advance directives, birth certificate, marriage certificate, and car, home, and life insurance)?
6. Have you assigned someone to manage your assets or be a cosigner on your bank accounts?
7. Have you taken measures to protect your dependents financially?
8. Is there anyone in particular you would like notified about your death?
9. Have you thought about what you would like to happen to your pets?
10. Are there personal belongings you wish to go to specific people?
11. Are there memories or advice you wish to pass to your loved ones?
12. Are there things you would like destroyed (for example, journals and diaries)?
13. Is there anything comforting you can provide to your loved ones (for example, a letter telling them what you hope for them after you are gone)?

For more on these, please see [here](#) in the resources at the back of the book.



There are many components to end-of-life planning, some of them financial, some of them administrative, some involving health care, and some purely emotional. A few of the most basic documents to consider are living trusts and advance directives.

What is the difference between a **living will**, a **living trust**, and an **advance directive**?

A **living will** is basically the same as an **advance directive**. It is a document that allows people to state their wishes for end-of-life medical care, in the event that they are unable to communicate their decisions. It has no power after death. A living will or advance directive also allows you to appoint a health care proxy who is a person you deem appropriate to make health care decisions on your behalf.

Obtaining an advance directive or living will is as simple as downloading one from the Internet or asking your physician and filling it out. There is a standard form provided by each state that you can print, fill out, sign (you must have a witness and notarization), and then give to your loved ones or store with your health care documents. If something were to happen to you suddenly—a car accident or heart attack—your loved ones would have this important information available to help them in the process of medical decision making.

Living trusts and **wills** are documents that manage your assets. A living trust is a written legal document that enables your assets to be placed in a trust for your lifetime and then transferred to designated beneficiaries at your death by your chosen representative, called a “successor trustee.”

A main difference between a will and a trust is that a will goes into effect only after you die, while a trust takes effect as soon as it is created. A will is a legal document that states who will receive your property and assets at the time of your death, and it appoints a legal representative to carry out your wishes.

These days there are many online services that can help you create and complete these documents for a low cost, but there are also many attorneys who specialize in this area.

Beyond some of these larger administrative documents, there is a lot of emotional work to consider. From what you want to happen to your favorite sweater to certain memories you want to make sure your loved one knows about, creating your own documents around these emotional components can be very soothing.

You can create these however you would like, simply typing out lists or letters or writing things down in a notebook that can be kept with important documents. When a family is left to deconstruct the physical components of a loved one’s life, they are often left with a large amount of uncertainty about what to do with everything. Having some guidance from you can be enormously helpful.

I fully acknowledge that doing these tasks can be initially anxiety provoking, but return to your deep breathing, mindfulness, and thought checking as a way to move through it, knowing ultimately that this work will assuage any anxiety.

I’ve taken up the habit of meticulously recording events and data into

baby books belonging to each of my daughters, and I also frequently write them letters that they can read when they are grown up. It sets me at ease to know that if I were to die before they are grown-ups, they will have a place to turn to for answers to questions I won't be around to tell them in person.

I think the bottom line is that we, as a culture, could prevent much of our anxiety about death by becoming better equipped to handle it—and to handle it not just in the moment when we are hit with a tragedy but well in advance.

I mentioned earlier that I was pregnant with my first daughter when I was working in hospice and how I was struck by the realization that we do so much preparation around bringing a person into the world but very little when it comes to helping people exit. When I was pregnant, I attended birth classes, had a midwife, and enlisted the services of a *birth doula*, a person who serves as a companion during birth to assist the mother in providing physical and emotional support.

In recent years, I've been heartened to see a rise in the services of *death doulas*, who do essentially the same thing. For this chapter, I consulted Los Angeles-based death doula Alua Arthur, to whom I frequently refer clients. Alua helps people who are dying put their affairs in order, working with them on whatever it is they need to in order to die peacefully.

===== ALUA ARTHUR'S DEATH-BED TEST =====

The question that I always start off asking is "What is it that you must do to get peace with yourself so that you may die peacefully?" The answers are as varied as our DNA—for everybody it's really different. For some it's to control finances, for others it's about healing broken relationships. A lot of it is emotional. And I feel like that's the threshold—once we work through that, we can get to the other things.

I read a quote the other day by Atul Gawande that said that "the goal isn't a good death, but a good life all the way through to the end." What if we just applied the principle of good living through to the last moment or the last breath? A shift from fixing and making everything better, to surrender and acceptance of the fact that this life is brief, and at some point we've all got to take that big trip.

I also think a big shift that could happen is that we could bring dying into every day. We could do this more with old people dying at home and families still being close-knit, seeing grandparents die and get old. Right now they go off to a nursing home and you see them once a month if you're lucky, and then at some point they die and you go to a service, and then it's over. So it creates far more fear than if it were actually present in our day-to-day lives. And children aren't exposed to death as much anymore, which sets them up to not know how to deal with it later in life.

With my clients I create a death care directive, essentially. I call it advance-planning, big picture. I look at their desires for life-support and decision-making and what do you want done with your body, your possessions, all the things we've accumulated in life. Are there things you care about? Can you give some type of guidance for the people left behind so they have a little more piece of mind?

Inevitably, when we start talking about possessions people will say, "oh it doesn't matter what happens." But then they start thinking about the things that actually matter to them, and they say, "Well I'd hate it if all this just went to Goodwill." Figuring these things out does give some peace.

Another thing I really like about this document is that by the end of it there is something tangible, written by the person who died. So loved ones will still have a piece of them somehow, with very clear instructions.

For people that are experiencing a lot of anxiety, I do death meditations. I sit them down and take them straight into the fire. And I also help them with the planning. Once people start getting practical about it I think it really does quell the anxiety.

There's also a lot of relationship components. For example, "I don't feel clear about my relationship with my sister so what do I need to do today that would make it okay if I were on my death bed this evening?" Asking yourself am I comfortable with the way that everything is? If not, what do I need to do to fix it?

I call it The Death Bed Test. I use it often for myself, when I'm in conflict or when there's something I really feel like I need to get clear on. *If I were on my deathbed how important is this thing to me?* And the secondary thing is—that quote—"leave off 'til tomorrow only what you

would be comfortable leaving undone.” Of all the myriad things on the to-do list, how many of those things are that important?

One of the things that gives me a little peace is that most often right after someone dies their face doesn't look like it's in terror. They don't look like they're scared. Generally, they look pretty peaceful, and sometimes there's even a slight smile. And so I personally think that dying itself isn't very scary.

Practically speaking, just start planning. Begin looking at your finances, start looking at your paperwork, start looking at all your stuff. Think about what kind of mess you'd leave if you were to drop off the planet tomorrow, and start handling those things. We have such a need for control as human beings, so I think if we can control a little bit of it, it reduces anxiety and makes things easier. I think it's possible for everyone.



One last thing that I think many of us worry about is how *our* loved ones will cope with our deaths. This is a common worry, especially among people who truly understand what it means to grieve.

If this is something you are grappling with, take time to think about all the ideas presented in this chapter. Know that by tackling a lot of these preparations, you will be doing your very best to ease your loved one's process of grief in the event of your death. Use the death-bed test: ask yourself, if you were on your death bed right this very minute, what is it you will have wished to put in place?

Think about letters you can leave behind for your loved ones to read. Think about conversations you can have right this very minute. Take time to put your relationships in order, and strive to keep them that way. Talk to your loved ones in the near future about what it would be like if you were gone, and take the time to find out what it is that might be most helpful to them practically and emotionally after you are gone.

I know that doing this work can be frightening. But all the research points to the fact that avoidance of a scary thing does not minimize it. In

fact, the opposite is true. Facing your biggest fears is what will help you conquer them. Be patient with yourself as you move through this process. Read this chapter once, and let the ideas presented here settle for you. Then reread it again when necessary, with the knowledge that preparing for your own death might just be the very thing to set you at ease.

A NXIETY C HECK-I N

Let's check in with your level of anxiety. While the last chapter focused specifically on facing your own death, at this point in reading you have also learned a great many things, both about your particular grief process and a lot about how anxiety works and how to manage it.

Rate your current anxiety level on a scale of 1–10 (with 10 being the highest).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Check the symptom boxes that currently apply:

- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Dizziness
- ☐ Heart racing/palpitating
- ☐ Obsessive worry
- ☐ Hypochondria

Hopefully, by now you have noticed a big difference in your panic and anxiety levels. If you feel that you are continuing to struggle, then read back over particular chapters that resonated with you, or seek out the additional support of a therapist who can help you implement the tools you're learning here.

All of this work takes time, patience, and self-compassion. Remember that there is no quick fix to grief and anxiety but that small steps will truly help you begin to make great strides. Go easy on yourself, and continue putting in the effort to create space and healing for your work. You are not

alone in your experience of loss and anxiety, but you *can* heal.

12 | Death Is Not the End of Love

Death is our friend, precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here, that is natural, that is love.

—R AINER M ARIA R ILKE

DEATH IS NOT THE END OF LOVE. I T IS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW relationship with yourself and with your loved one. But truly understanding this takes time. Grief is a journey upon which we all must embark in order to reach a place of peace and acceptance. And often that journey is frightening. Yet it is also full of transformation. When we face our greatest fears, we can begin to overcome them. Exploring death and loss in the ways in which this book suggests can help all of us to live broader, more compassionate, and more peaceful lives.

While we may never get over the loss of a loved one, we can learn to live with the loss, and we can use the experience to find greater meaning and purpose in our lives. Grief is an extension of love and connection. You are sad because you have lost someone close to you. Grief makes us anxious because it illuminates all the uncertainty there is about living. But because you lost someone you love, it does not mean that you have to be sad forever, and it does not mean that you must live a life of fear.

Thomas Attig writes, “We can continue to ‘have’ what we ‘lost,’ that is, a continuing, albeit transformed, love for the deceased. We have not truly lost our years of living with the deceased or our memories. Nor have we lost their influences, the inspirations, the values, and the meanings embodied in their lives. We can actively incorporate these into new patterns

of living that include the transformed but abiding relationships with those we have cared about and loved.”

If nothing else, I want you to take from this book that you are not alone in your feelings of grief and anxiety. So many of us have experienced this with you, and there are bountiful resources in the world, and within yourself, to help you cope with this experience and reach a place of transformation.

I thought of every single one of my clients while I wrote this book. I recalled their stories of loss, their struggles to cope with the ensuing anxiety, and all the different things that helped them find peace. I designed this book with this process in mind, laying out each chapter so that you, the reader, may experience the same shifts they did. You picked up this book because you were anxious and unsure of how to cope with it. Hopefully, by now you have learned a great many tools that have enabled you to both decrease and manage your anxiety.

For me, this process is also a deeply personal one. Learning how to live in the world and embrace my life following the loss of my parents was a long and painful journey. At the time these events occurred, I did not have the resources that are more readily available today. I often felt that I was making my way in the dark, but what I discovered along the way led me to the work I do today, reassuring and helping others who also feel alone in the dark depths of grief and anxiety.

I continue to think of my mother and father every single day. Their deaths have impacted every aspect of my life. Yet in time, I have been able to see what a great gift grief has been to me, an unexpected companion that has taught me more about life and love than I ever imagined possible.

I hope that this book has softened you in some way, that it has opened you up to the beauty of grief, for it is truly a reflection of love. Taking time to acknowledge that, and to allow yourself to simply immerse in the process of losing a loved one, is half of the work. As we’ve learned in these pages, pushing away your grief or your fear does not make it disappear.

I want to remind you of your innate ability to cope in the face of tragedy. We are *all* capable of moving through incredible stress and sadness. Coping with it, finding strength and courage and resilience, does not mean you are letting go of your loved one. There are infinitely more ways to remain connected to, and honor, your person. But you must also remain connected

to, and honor, yourself.

Anxiety is a very real feeling. It can be overwhelming and debilitating. It can be frightening, and it can be sneaky. Throughout this book, though, I hope you have gleaned new insight into how anxiety works and how you can begin to manage it. There is no need to let your life be dominated by anxiety if you take a proactive approach to understanding it.

Honor your story of loss. It is one that you will carry with you for the rest of your life. Let it shape and mold you. Look for the beauty contained within that story—the cherished relationship and love you shared with someone important. Write your story, tell your story, give it a home in the world, and treat it with reverence. It is yours to tell, yours to examine, and yours to share.

Remember that holding on to parts of the story that don't fit or don't serve you will cause you to suffer. Make amends with your lost loved one, work through any residual anger, forgive them and forgive yourself for any transgressions you think you may have caused, and allow yourself to be the very real human you are. None of us gets through life without making mistakes or hurting people we love. But we can learn from those experiences and become better people as a result.

Take charge of your life again, and acknowledge the changes that you have incurred as a result of your loss. The entire landscape of your world has likely changed, but that does not mean you have to stop living and thriving. Ask for help, and find strength in the stories of others who have had to rebuild in the face of loss. You are not alone.

Find inspiration in your grief. Use your newfound knowledge of the fragility of life to enable you to live an even bigger and bolder life. Open yourself up to all the possibilities this world has to offer, and remember that your loved one would not want your life to get smaller as a result of their death. Instead, they would wish for you to grow and to flourish, to enjoy life as you once did when they were with you.

Use the gift of words and language to explore your loss. Write about it in stories, write about it for yourself, write down your memories, and write letters to your person. Pour your words out onto the page, just as I have done here, and know that this is part of your healing. Using language as means of unearthing your grief and the love within you is one of the most powerful actions you can take.

Think about your thoughts. Become *aware* of them. They are not who you are. They are thoughts, and they can be managed, changed, controlled, and transformed. Use your thoughts as a tool to change your perspective, to quell your anxiety, and ultimately to understand yourself on a deeper level. Doing this work will be a lifelong process that will serve you throughout all of your years.

Embrace the present moment. Acknowledge that everything that is happening right now, in this moment, is exactly as it should be. Allow yourself to breathe and find the quiet that lies within you. Take a step back from your active mind, and learn to simply exist in the moment. This is one of the most profound routes to finding a lasting peace throughout your days.

Remember that restoring a sense of connection to your loved one, however that looks, through whatever means, is the key to living a life without your person physically by your side. They are not gone from your life. Delve into your spirituality and ask yourself what it is you really believe. Open up to the idea that death is not the end of your relationship with your loved one. Acknowledging this, and letting your relationship continue to evolve, will bring a sense of relief and will soften your heart and your fear.

Step into the idea that you, too, will someday die. Embracing death will help you embrace *life*. Knowing that you have taken measures to prepare for your own death will allow you to release anxiety about leaving when the time comes. Preparing your loved ones for your eventual departure will help them, too. Planning for your death is really about planning for your life.

I hope that you can see that doing all the work contained within this book will lead you to a more fulfilling, meaningful, and purposeful life. I cannot help but look back on all of my experiences of loss, even the most painful moments of it all, with anything but gratitude. Losing the people I loved most in the world and walking through the fire of grief broke me wide open. Grief taught me compassion. Anxiety taught me peace and presence. Loss taught me how to live and love. It can do the same for you.

Acknowledgments

B EING A THERAPIST HAS BEEN ONE OF THE GREATEST PRIVILEGES OF my life. I am honored to walk alongside so many people as they grieve and heal and come to new understandings of themselves and the world. This book would not be possible without each and every one of you. I am so incredibly grateful for your trust in me and for our time together.

Thank you to my brilliant and tireless agent, Wendy Sherman, for her dedication in helping me realize my life's work. You have been there for me every step of the way through all three of my books, and also through all of my big life changes as I wrote them. My love for you is like that of a daughter, and I am so proud to have your support. Thank you to my masterful editor Renee Sedliar for understanding my vision right away and then helping me see it through. And thank you to the whole team at Da Capo—I am so grateful for everyone who dedicates their days to putting books on the shelf.

To all my friends who double as family. You never cease to amaze me with your unending support, camaraderie, laughter, and tears. Caeli Wolfson Widger, Jenny Feldon and Jillian Lauren, Kelle Hampton, Sarah Jio, Jennifer Mack, Melissa Pope, Francesca McCaffery, Katie Devine, Hope Edelman, Mark Sarvas, and Ron Purdy. Thank you, thank you. I have no idea what I would do without you.

To my daughters, Veronica and Juliette. You have been my greatest teachers, and from you I continue to learn compassion, humility, creativity, and the knowledge that even the most broken hearts can heal many times over.

Last, to my husband, Mark, the least anxious person I have ever met. You have held me steady since the day we met. I told you about the idea for this book one night over a campfire in Asheville, North Carolina, and you helped me see it through from that very moment on. Thank you for always believing in me.

About the Author

Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC, is a therapist specializing in grief and the author of three books of nonfiction: *The Rules of Inheritance* (2012), *After This: When Life Is Over, Where Do We Go?* (2015), and *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief* (Da Capo, 2018).

Claire maintains an office in Los Angeles and works with clients around the globe. Throughout the year she leads workshops and retreats and speaks at events. Claire's work has appeared on or in the *New York Times*, the *Huffington Post*, Salon.com, Slate, Chicago Public Radio, the *Guardian*, *Psychology Today*, *Yoga Journal*, and *BlackBook Magazine*.

Claire lives in Los Angeles with her children and husband. She deeply loves her work and seeks to further the conversation about death in order to help our culture reach a healthier understanding of how to move through grief.

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ALSO BY CLAIRE BIDWELL SMITH

The Rules of Inheritance

After This: When Life Is Over, Where Do We Go?

Praise for Claire Bidwell Smith:

“Claire Bidwell Smith takes us on a powerful journey of discovery. She asks the most important questions about life, love, death, and what it means to be human, and does so with equal measures of skepticism and a broken-open heart. ... Reader, follow her. You’ll be so glad you did.”

—Dani Shapiro, author of *Devotion* and *Still Writing*, on *After This*

“Smith examines staggering losses with the clarity of vision of one on a mission.”

— *Los Angeles Times*, on *The Rules of Inheritance*

“Smith’s frankness connects with readers. She explores death and dying and opens up about stumbling through youth without the mooring of parents.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

“In *After This*, Bidwell Smith, an enchanting, knowledgeable, and candid guide, bravely describes her idiosyncratic journey through the various landscapes in which her grief has manifested. Her two callings—writing and helping others confront death—dovetail beautifully.”

— *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“Smith’s voice is so assured, so curious, that it’s impossible not to want to follow her wherever she might lead us, from organized religion to shamanism to science.”

—SFGate.com, on *After This*

Resources

While there are a great many grief resources available today, these are some of my favorites and the ones I feel best complement the work this book has to offer.

ONLINE GRIEF COMMUNITIES AND WORKSHOPS

Deathoverdinner.org

Dinnerparty.org

Grief.com

Griefnet.org

Griefshare.org

Modernloss.com

Onlinegriefsupport.com

GRIEF BOOKS

A to Z Healing Toolbox: A Practical Guide for Navigating Grief and Trauma with Intention , by Susan Hannifin-MacNab

Bearing the Unbearable , by Joanne Cacciatore

How We Grieve: Relearning the World , by Thomas Attig

It's OK That You're Not OK , by Megan Devine

Modern Loss: Candid Conversations About Grief , by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner

On Death and Dying , by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler

WRITING RESOURCES

Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss , by Jessica Handler

Creativenonfiction.org—online memoir classes

Refugeingrief.com—online grief-writing courses

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL RESOURCES

The Anxiety & Worry Workbook , by Aaron T. Beck and David A. Clark

Beckinstitute.org

Dr. Pierce—drphilippierce.com

MEDITATION/MINDFULNESS

Artofliving.org

Full Catastrophe Living , by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Headspace.com

Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life , by Byron Katie

Mindful.org

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