

Ep #36: Why Everyone Is Experiencing Grief During the Pandemic



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Processing grief is a key element in mental health. You have to process what was in order to embrace what is. Your psyche only has so much room and it needs to reconcile what has happened.

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Here's your host, educator, coach and licensed psychotherapist, Nicole Symcox...

Hello, my friends. Welcome to episode 36. So, I want to talk today about grief. And I think it's something that feels so heavy to a lot of us that we don't want to talk about it and we sure as hell don't want to deal with it. And so, I'm sure you had a visceral reaction just as I introduced the topic of let's talk about grief. It's like, "Well that doesn't sound sexy or fun."

And it's not. But it's essential. It's important. It's incredibly valuable because I think grief can be this sneaky little thing that can cause us a huge amount of distress and discomfort. And sometimes, we, we don't realize we're grieving.

Sometimes, it's very obvious, like when a person dies, we're very aware. There's enough education in the world to make us aware that grief is a thing, and we're probably grieving. We can usually put those things together.

But what is less talked about and less realized most of the time is that you can grieve almost anything. Any time there is a loss, a transition, or something that feels unfinished, it can trigger a grief process.

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And there's a lot of times in therapy, sometimes that is the bulk of the work. Not always. I'm speaking very generally because this episode is on grief. But there is a grieving process. And it's incredibly painful because grief doesn't always respond to tools and strategies.

And for all my high-achieving badasses out there, you know, it's very frustrating.

It's very frustrating to be or feel like you're stuck in a grief process of pain and not being able to strategize your way out of it, not being able to use tools and strategies or feeling like that's enough. So, it's not that tools and strategies don't work. They definitely help. But they provide sort of a supportive framework to keep you going day to day, to help you to function, to help you to have relationships and do life.

But the pain of grief is truly walking through it and learning how to experience your emotions in healthy ways, having to support yourself. And a lot of that is going to come into relationship to yourself and the relationship with the thing that you have lost.

So, for example, grief can get triggered when you lose a job. Grief can get triggered when you feel like you're losing your identity. Believe it or not, that is a huge one. We all create identities at different phases in our lives. And sometimes, circumstances or things change and that identity gets challenged and we have to create a new way of relating to ourselves and others. We have to create a new identity or give support to the old one.

And so, this is when we see ourselves go into crisis. The way we see ourselves, and then if that's not allowed to happen anymore, can cause a lot of problems internally. And there's only so many tools and skills you can use before you need to go to therapy and process through the hardship of the emotion.

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There is this whole thing, there is this whole process of unburdening. For many of us that have been through really hard experiences, we end up storing a lot of that painful emotion. And there is an unburdening process of letting that pain go. But in order to do that, we have to swim through the waters of it.

And that is what people like to avoid. And this is the problem. The more we avoid our grief and our pain, the more problems get created. So, I touched on this a little bit in the previous episode around healthy and unhealthy emotions. Processing grief is a key element in mental health. You have to process what was in order to embrace what is.

Your psyche only has so much room and it needs to reconcile what has happened. And so, when you don't give yourself space to process what was, you know, there's not a whole lot of space to grow. And we want to grow. Because when you grow into change, when you grow with what's happening, you find your power. You find a new identity. You find a new way of being.

But grief carries this weight of pain. And the pain says it's final. Think about the logic in that. It actually makes sense. If grief is an emotional process that shows up when something has ended, it is only logical to conclude that the feeling stuck inside of you would be, "This will never end. This is a feeling that will not go away."

And so, usually, we meet that with avoidance. Usually, we meet that with, you know, self-medicating of some kind, like food, alcohol, people, whatever it is, shopping. Name your addiction, it can be an addiction.

And so, we get scared to face this because we're up against a traumatic belief. And so, I want to empower you that grief is so fucking painful – and that doesn't sound empowering, but hear me out. It is fucking painful. And it has to be walked through because there is beauty on the other side of it. That is what I want to encourage you with.

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There is beauty on the other side of grief. There is strength on the other side of grief. There are new perspectives, new beliefs about yourself and others to be found on the other side of grief.

Seasons change. If you look at nature, like seasons change, the weather changes. Things change. And being able to be resilient and moving with the tides of change and learning how to relate to yourself in supportive ways is the way to go.

But if you freeze in time, if you let that grief fester, it can cause a lot of things. And so, it's very interesting, because I work with so many high-achievers, one of the things that they come back and say is, "I don't understand, I've done all the tools, I'm doing all the coping, I'm taking care of myself, I'm doing all the things," in other words, "I'm doing all the right things and yet I feel plagued with guilt, I feel plagued with sadness, I feel plagued with obligation. I feel plagued and heavy with all of these things and I don't understand why."

And when we pull back the layers, we find there is a grief process that has yet to be done. And so, as I said, the tools, the strategies, that is all very good. It's helpful. It's going to get you through the day. But you have to do the deeper work as well. And grieving is so much more than just crying.

Crying is healthy. There's been studies on this, that we have different kinds of tears that we cry. There's stress tears, there's tears that are just tears. Crying is not a bad thing. Crying is a release. But I think that's the fear and grief that we're going to get stuck in the tears, we're going to get stuck in the crying, and it will never end.

And that goes back to the beginning of the episode. That is what you are grieving. Your brain and your body are trying to find a way to reconcile the old story so you can move forward with a new story. That's some of the dance we are doing.

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Now, the tricky part in that is if you have traumatic grief – grief has so many levels – traumatic grief is incredibly painful and you can feel extremely stuck. And so, I highly, highly recommend therapy at that point. Do some EMDR. Find an EMDR clinician in your local state of residence.

Figure out how to move past that because shaming and blaming yourself for not being able to change or just feeling stuck and frozen in time, that's not an empowering option. And there are therapy modalities out there that do really support moving forward. That doesn't mean it's not going to be painful. But it does mean it has the potential to be worth it.

So, if you're listening to this and you've decided, "Wow, I really am grieving," especially amidst everything that's happening in our world right now, as a collective experience, we are all grieving. As a world, due to this pandemic, we are all deeply grieving our old lives.

I mean, it feels like a lifetime ago that you could get on an airplane with ease, that you could travel and you could think about your future and make plans. And for a lot of us, that has come to a halt. We are living in a new reality.

And so, keeping in mind that a lot of the pain most of us are experiencing – I mean, there's a huge amount of variants, of course, but collectively, we are all grieving. We are all grieving what was and we are unsure of what is. It's a great demonstration just of how grief plays out.

Because beyond this pandemic, grief plays out this way. And so, you want to think about, how do I support myself in these times of change? Because I'm sure you've heard, there are five stages of grief.

Now, the thing about this is that the five stages of grief were originally designed by Kubler-Ross and she originally came up with this. This had to do with the five stages of when someone is dying, or when someone is terminally ill, that there is a grief process that takes place.

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But as that information got out, people kind of generalized it to being the five stages of grief. And so, I think it's a good model for conversation. But I want you to fully know and understand that nobody follows these five stages easily. There's not order to it. There's no whatever. But I do think that it creates a good conversation and some tangibles about what grief is and how you could be experiencing it.

And I think in the midst of this pandemic, we can see all five playing out. Our old life feels so long ago, and now we're in this new reality of uncertainty. And that's very much what grief can feel like. So, even if we weren't in a pandemic, you know, maybe you've lost a job or maybe a relationship is changing, or maybe you're entering a new phase of life.

Those tend to be very, very painful. Like, if you've ever heard of the quarter-life crisis, that's an identity crisis, or mid-life crisis identity crisis. We have these certain developmental phases in our lives that can trigger a grief process.

And so, or those of you who don't know what the five stages of grief are that Kubler-Ross came up with, one is denial, which is, "This isn't happening. This isn't real." Very, very common. And sometimes, denial can be matched with numbness.

Like, on top of, "This isn't real, this isn't happening," you can also kind of be mixed in there with, "I don't feel anything." Sometimes our emotions can be shut off. And more common than not, this actually shows up first. But again, there's no rules to this.

The biggest thing in grief is there are no rules. There is only your experience and learning how to honor and move with that and give yourself the support you need. So, the other one is anger, and anger is like, "What the fuck?" You're enraged over it. You're pissed. You're mad, "Why is this happening? It shouldn't be happening," on and on, super-angry.

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Bargaining, like – and so, for people that have a faith-based ideals, like they believe in god or they believe in spirituality, a lot of times, bargaining is like, “What can I do? If I do this, then, god, will you do this for me?” Like, it’s bargaining. Like “How do I make the pain stop?”

And then depression. Depression seeps in. and again, this is also another phase where numbness can sort of seep in because numbness and depression can go together. But depression, you know, when it comes to grief is like, “I’ve lost motivation. I don’t know what to do with myself. I feel really sad.” You know, there could be a lot of crying in depression. There could be a lot of feelings of defeat. And so, that can be one of the parts.

And then, the last phase in these five stages of grief, if you were following them, is acceptance. And that’s the thing about grief is that I don’t think we just get over it and forget about it, although people do a good try at it. I think the goal is to come to acceptance, like, “I am at peace with what happened,” or, “This is my new reality. I don’t like what happened, but I’ve learned how to accept what is and move forward in a way that feels aligned and true to me and honoring to my past experience.”

We never want to erase our past. We want to work with it, “What do I learn from this? How can I grow and mature into the person that I want to be?” And so, even within those five stages, there can be a wide array of emotions that show up.

So, there can be, like shock and belief for example, it can be really, really hard to even believe what is happening. And I think, in this pandemic, there was a huge amount of that. We’re like, “What? Our freedoms are gone? What the hell just happened?”

Because it happened so suddenly. For a lot of us, we just felt like one day we had a life and the next day we were being told to shelter in place. A lot of people were given this 24 hours and none of us really knew what that was.

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And so, there was a huge amount of shock and just being like, “What is this?” But again, beyond the pandemic in your life, whatever the triggering event is, you might be experiencing a lot of shock and disbelief over it.

And then, of course, grief comes with a profound amount of sadness. And it's important for you to express the core of that sadness. Suppressing it creates a host of issues; guilt. Guilt is actually a very, very common emotional response in the grief process. You might regret not doing things a certain way, or if you feel like if you did things better then this wouldn't be happening and it kind of goes in that.

This is when we feel guilty, we start to bargain. It goes along with that phase of, like, “What can I do to atone for this?” And so, processing through the guilt or the shame you might be feeling around it.

Anger, huge, huge, huge, huge. Anger, and then even more complicated when it's added with fear. Fear is a huge component of the grief process. When we get fearful, we get angry. When we get angry, we get sad. And when we get sad, we get angry. And when we get angry, we get fearful. Do you see? They all go together.

This is why grief is a clusterfuck of pain, okay. It is all the things. And so, that's why you should never do grief alone. You should be working with a therapist. You should be in a support group. You need safe people. You need support in that because isolation and feeling alone is a huge part of the grief process as well. And people can get stuck there.

And so, that is what's key and important in this is you want to continue to move through these phases. You don't want to get stuck in them. When you get stuck in them, you, a lot of times, need really string support.

Getting stuck in anger, getting stuck in fear, stuck in guilt is going to unconsciously inform how you show up in the world. You may not even be aware of it. A lot of times, we get blind spots in these areas. We don't even

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realize that we're leading our lives with fear. We don't even realize that we're hurting people without realizing it because we're so angry over the past and we're displacing a lot of that emotion onto other people or onto other things.

This is how things start to go haywire for us and we don't understand because you have to keep in mind, any emotions that you're not processing and you're blocking starts to log in your unconscious. And your unconscious controls, by far, more than you know, quite literally.

And so, that's part of the healing process, bringing what is unconscious to the conscious so you can do something about it, so you can heal and move forward. As long as it's buried in your body somewhere deep, it has the opportunity to play out in ways that you may or may not realize. So, this is critically, critically important, to make sure that you are processing this stuff.

Okay, so, how do we deal with this? So, number one, of course, is going to be acknowledging your pain. You first have to even acknowledge that you're grieving before you can even do anything else with it. Like, that is one of the first steps; acknowledging your pain.

You also need to have an awareness that grief can trigger a lot of different emotions, and figuring out, what is the pain that is coming up for you and using what you know will help support you. What will help you grow through it?

And if you don't know the answer to it, it's probably needing therapy. There's nothing wrong with that. There's no shame and blame. I don't know why people wait until the last minute. It's like they have this idea that they have to wait until they can't handle it anymore before they go to therapy. And I don't know why you want to put yourself through that much pain before you go to therapy.

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And there's tons of different therapists. You might try one out and you don't click or like them, and that is totally fine. Go find someone else. It's not a big deal. It's part of it. Therapists are all unique. They're all different. They all come from different trainings and theoretical backgrounds. And so, just finding the one that matches with you, it's all good.

Number three, understand that your grief process is going to be unique to you. So, you need to stay away from shoulding all over yourself, "Well I should be responding this way. I should be this way because this person is acting this way."

Do not get into the comparison game. Your grief is your own based on your personality, your experiences, your emotions, what is true for you. Own your experience and allow someone else to own theirs. There is a clear boundary between you and someone else.

And, of course, I want you to support yourself emotionally by taking care. We've done lots of episodes talking about how self-care is really taking care of your internal world. It's so much more than just bubble baths and massages, which we can't even get massages right now anyway. So, even more paramount to understand, how do I internally support myself? And it might be reaching out for help.

And then, find your safe people. Who are your friends? Who are your family members? Who are your people that can support you as you process this grief? Now, keep in mind, using your friends and family members as therapists is not a good plan.

You're not going to get the support you need from them and they're going to get burnt out. As long as you are staying in this realm of treating them like friends and family members and maintaining those boundaries, but find your support system. It is beautiful when you have a therapist that you're working with plus you have supportive friends, family members, maybe a support group even.

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I think support groups right now, especially during this pandemic, are incredibly important because groups are great at squashing isolation. And right now, we're all kind of siloed. I know, in California, we're still majorly sheltering in place. We don't have a whole lot of anything from our past that is available to us and it's going to be like this for a while, from what I understand.

So, trying to find your tribe of people – and it may not be in your current circle. You might have to join a support group of some kind to find those people. And that's great. How empowering is that, to find your people, rather than settling for maybe a support system that doesn't feel that great, taking control of your reality and making it what you want it to be?

And, of course, lastly you know how I feel about journaling. Journaling is incredibly important to just get all of that, what I call all this emotional electricity out on paper. Just mind-dump it out. Don't judge it, don't criticize it. Just let your feelings out on paper.

Or you can do art. You can do art journals. You can do writing journals. You can exercise. But have that energy get channeled into something. Move through it. Don't stay stuck in it because that doesn't help you.

And I want to encourage you, grief can be processed. Grief is not forever. Grief is a painful transitional phase from the old into the new. That is the simplest way to break down what grief is. A very simplified statement for a very complicated process.

So, don't let grief overwhelm you. There are ways to work with it. I want to empower you. The grief will end. Pain does end. You just have to learn the way through it. And if strong emotions came up for you or you felt triggered, overwhelmed, or stuck, if you are grieving and you feel stuck, please reach out for mental health support in your local state of residence. It's probably the best thing you can do for yourself right now. Don't stay stuck.

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If you're having strong emotions, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. And there is no shame and blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence. I cannot stress it enough, especially right now when we're all collectively grieving.

Check out Psychology Today. It's a national website. You can plug in your zip code, you can plug in your state, and you can even plug in what kind of a therapist you want. But make this easy for yourself. Don't wait on it. And if you enjoyed today's episode, make sure you're on my email list so you can get all the details of what's coming up and stay in the loop.

Alright, my friends, I will see you next time.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Mental Health Remix. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, go to nicolesymcox.com.

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