MOVING FORWARD - NOT MOVING ON

THE GRIEFCASE

HOW TO CARRY WHAT CAN NEVER BE LEFT BEHIND



BESTSELLING AUTHOR | BEREAVED FATHER

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The Griefcase

How to Carry What Can Never Be Left Behind

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DEDICATION

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

~ Kahlil Gibran

This book is dedicated to Jonathan Taylor Kelly, who joyfully lives in my words, my heart…every moment of every day.

PREFACE

It's the great mystery of human life that old grief passes gradually into quiet, tender joy.

~ Fyodor Dostoevsky

If you are reading this, you are probably now in a fellowship you did not want to join. My intent throughout this book is to offer practical support to anyone who has experienced the loss of someone dear, so they might keep moving forward, not moving on.

I will not lie or offer half-truths simply to make the pain feel smaller. Your loved one is gone, and there is no way to bring them back. Many of us had a full and ordinary life before the loss, but that life cannot be restored as it was. What we can do is work toward a place where the memories no longer stop us, and where they can, at times, bring a smile instead of only pain.

My own path into this fellowship began in 2003, when my mother died. One evening, while watching television, she said she felt a chill. Before my father could return with a blanket, she was gone. A few years later, cancer took my father after a slow and difficult decline.

I mourned them both yet pushed much of the grief deep inside. Along with the natural urge to appear strong, I carried regret for not visiting them more often in their later years. Whenever the pain rose, the regret rose with it. I eased both by tucking the emotions away and moving on with my life.

Two years after my father died, I tragically lost my teenage son and only child to heart failure. For a time, I refused to grieve his death. The same pattern that I had used with my parents seemed workable again. I returned to daily life and, for a time, functioned

at the level I had before the loss. At that point, it just felt like a natural, normal response for me.

This was my son, however, and the love I carry for him would not stay buried. The need to grieve his death eventually surfaced, and with it came the unresolved grief I still held for my parents. I knew I needed help. I had begun to face the emotions, yet a part of me still resisted seeking professional support.

I turned to books instead. I looked for ones written specifically about grief and found few that spoke directly to the way I was carrying my pain. So, I began researching emotions on my own. I started with the nature of emotion itself, then moved into clinical studies on how both men and women process their feelings after the loss of a loved one.

Along the way, I was also fortunate to meet a Professor of Psychology renowned for his work in thanatology, the study of death's impact on the living, and to be taken under his wing. Through our conversations and my study of his research and teachings, I came to a much deeper understanding not only of the emotions of grief, but of how powerfully emotion shapes everyone, whether they are bereaved or not.

I was grateful for the clarity my studies and my guru brought me. Much of what they showed me should have been obvious, yet in my own case I had been standing too close to see it. The deepest insight was not about any particular trait or habit, but about the nature of emotion itself.

Emotion functions much like one of the five human senses of sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell. The data that arrives through these senses is usually processed and resolved in some way. Emotional data, however, is often held inside and left unattended. Over time, that unexamined weight becomes destructive.

As part of my own movement forward, I eventually wrote and published "Sometimes I Cry in the Shower." After it was released,

I left corporate work and devoted my time to grief support. It has been the most meaningful work of my life.

After the book became a best-seller, I found myself involved with several large grief and bereavement support organizations I had not even known existed before. In their gatherings, I met compassionate people who quickly became lasting friends. At my first conference, I expected a solemn gathering. Instead, I walked into a room filled with people who were smiling, talking, and supporting one another. These groups are more than worth seeking out.

A part of my ongoing grief mission is simply connecting people to these groups. They exist to offer a hand up to anyone who is carrying a heavy loss. Most of the people in them have walked a similar road and understand that helping others is part of their own journey of moving forward, not moving on.

I also know that not everyone will choose professional help. That was true for me. Ego can make the step feel impossible. At the same time, no two people grieve in exactly the same way. If you are open to professional support, I encourage you to seek it. Do not choose someone at random. Look for a person who has specific training or experience in grief and bereavement support. Many great professionals actually pursue additional studies in this area because it is often only briefly covered, if at all, in university education.

I will not soften the truth in these pages to come. You are here because you have lost someone you deeply love, and you are not looking for platitudes and assurances that everything will simply be fine. Only you can do the work of moving forward, and moving forward means living a full life again. It does not mean living without the love and memories of that dear one who is gone.

No one fully recovers from the death of someone deeply loved. What we can do is keep walking the path toward a future that still holds room for hope, peace, and purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Grief is love's souvenir. It's our proof that we once loved.
~ Glennon Doyle

If you are carrying a Griefcase, it is not a punishment. It is simply the proof of undying love you hold for someone no longer with you here on Earth.

This book is not about pretending your Griefcase is lighter than it is, or about waiting for time to do the work for you. Time does not empty the folders inside of your case. It only gives you the days on which you can choose to open them. The Griefcase is a practical, metaphorical way to do that work, one folder, one emotion at a time, so the weight becomes something you can carry instead of something that holds back life.

Inside the case are the emotions that arrived with your loss: anger, sadness, guilt, fear, longing, and more. Some of what you find in those folders is true. Much of it is not. False-guilt, old reactions from earlier pain, and the same thoughts appearing in every folder all at once add weight that does not belong there.

The work is to visually open one folder, sort what is true from what is not, and set aside what no longer needs to be carried. You will not empty the case. You are not meant to, as the truth will always remain. The goal is only to remove what is making the case heavier than it has to be.

You will find, in the lid of every Griefcase, one folder that requires no work, and its tab reads "Unconditional Love". It is already organized. It stays with you. When the other folders feel too heavy to open, this one can steady you long enough to begin.

The chapters that follow show you how to use the case on both ordinary and difficult days. You do not need an hour, as ten or fifteen minutes with one folder is enough. You do not need to finish anything in a single sitting. You only need to open the case when you can and close it when you need to.

The practice is not dramatic. It is repeated. Over time, the folders grow thinner, lighter, the waves come less often, and ordinary days become more frequent.

The method of using the Griefcase does not require that you fit any stereotype. If you are willing to open the folders instead of waiting for them to lighten on their own, the Griefcase will serve you. If professional help is the right path for you, take it. The case does not replace a skilled counselor. It gives you something practical to do between the sessions, or in place of them if that is the road you choose.

You will not find easy answers here. The person you lost is gone and nothing in these pages will explain that or bring them back. What you will find is a way to carry what remains; the love, the memories, and the emotions that still belong to them, without letting the weight decide every hour of your life. That is the work. It is not quick, and it is not to be finished. It is simply the next folder, and then the one after that.

Open your Griefcase when you are ready. The Unconditional Love folder is already waiting for you inside.

THE GRIEFCASE

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CHAPTER ONE ~ RECEIVING YOUR GRIEFCASE

Grief can't be shared. Everyone carries it alone. His own burden in his own way.
~ Anne Morrow Lindbergh

You are carrying a Griefcase and likely know the very moment the weight first settled on your heart. You certainly did not ask for it, did not want it, and like me, probably never thought about having it. Absolutely no one does. Yet once you have yours, no matter how heavy and burdensome it may seem at first, you will soon consider the Griefcase to be one of your most important tools for moving forward in this grief healing journey.

My Griefcase was handed to me in a hospital recovery room when the doctor stepped back and I knew my Jonathan was gone. At that point, someone I did not even know before handed me a new, overwhelming weight that I now carry with me for the rest of my life.

At first, it felt impossible. I could not set it aside and certainly could not leave it behind, even for a moment. It was heavy, cumbersome, and seemed to gain even more weight as the days ahead came and went. When I was not stumbling over it, my case seemed to be an anchor that held me in place. If I had the need to interact

with others, I knew they would witness my struggles, so I often chose to avoid most encounters.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? If so, it is because everyone who has experienced the traumatic loss of a loved one is also carrying a Griefcase. The deeper the love, the heavier the case, as it carries all the powerful emotions of loss felt in our hearts and minds. It is the container of our feelings. The truth, however, is that we often carry far more in our case than we really need to, but there is more on that to come.

In our society, the word grief is so often used and said so casually that it has become the default description for any painful emotions felt after a loved one has passed. Early in one's loss, however, if asked how he or she feels at the moment, that someone might say they feel angry, sad, scared, and lonely. Yet another newly bereaved soul might respond to the same question by saying they feel sorrow, anxiety, confusion, and fear.

It would be rare, however, to find any griever, regardless of time since loss, who responds to that question by saying "I feel grief." That is because grief is simply not a feeling. It is not an emotion. It is a broad descriptor used to encase the multitude of feelings, or emotions, one feels after a loss. It is a carrying case for our feelings. It is our Griefcase.

Going back again to our two bereaved souls, if you were to ask how either felt at some future time, you would most likely get different emotional responses than the first. That is because the emotions carried within grief are many individual feelings that come and go in articulating waves with no prescribed timetable, often two or three at once.

They arrive in no fixed order and have absolutely no respect for anyone's schedule. Some fade as well, while others build and come to the front. Your Griefcase will evolve over time, and it can be up to you just how it does that.

To help better visualize your Griefcase, picture an ordinary brown leather, business-style briefcase in your hands. Remember, like so many others, you were not expecting to carry this, and your mind is probably swirling with painful thoughts. You do sense, however, that you must open the case and see what it holds inside.

When you first open it, you find numerous manila file folders carelessly strewn about the bottom. Each one is clearly labeled and the pages found inside seem to refer to the emotion written on the upper tab.

Those emotions printed on each upper tab might read Shock, Anger, Sadness, Fear, Despair, Longing, or so many others. Early on, most, if not all the folders appear thick, with various pages loosely spilling out of the sides. It is easy to tell that they were quickly tossed inside and are completely unorganized.

There are some, regrettably, who might opt to close the Griefcase and do their best to ignore its contents. In early, acute grief, ignoring might sometimes be an understandable option, but only for a brief time. Suppressed emotions, after all, will only increase in strength until eventually spilling out on their own. When this happens, your ability to healthfully control each one will be a more difficult task. It is best, therefore, to take charge of your Griefcase as soon as possible.

Once you do open your case, you will take hold of one folder at a time, starting with the one that weighs heaviest on you. Then, you begin intentionally examining its contents. Your goal, over time, is to remove or rearrange any thought-pages inside that are false, erroneous, or redundant, actually belonging in or already present in another emotional folder. Yes, there is work to do here, griefwork, but like most worthy tasks, successful assignments begin with acknowledgement, understanding, and organization.

The intention of working through your Griefcase is not to completely empty any of the emotional folders. In truth, you will

not be able to discard any of them or remove all their contents. Each file folder represents an emotion you felt for your lost loved one at the moment of loss. It cannot be tossed away as if that feeling never existed.

For me, I never want to lose those painful emotions I still feel for the loss of my son. To do so, I would also be leaving behind parts of the love I have for him. I would be moving on and not moving forward.

The desired result of working through the emotional folders in your case is to simply remove the destructive falsehoods and unnecessary bulk so that only the truth remains inside. That unwarranted bulk is what weighs us down. Purposely removing it is how we lighten our case and relieve the emotional burden that slows our grief healing journey.

Today, I still carry all my file folders in my Griefcase for Jonathan. They are all much thinner and certainly better organized than once before. Yet there are times when some thicken again, such as during the holidays or his birthday, or even when I hear a song I know he enjoyed. When that happens, I open my Griefcase, find the folder demanding my attention, and work with any new thought-pages that may have arrived. The practice does not end. Instead, it becomes something I know how to manage.

In honesty, it took me several months after the loss before I knew it was time to open and face my Griefcase. Then, often late at night, I would find time to sit at the kitchen table and try to write down everything I was feeling. The pages would fill with overlapping sentences that outlined my anger at the doctors, my guilt for not protecting my son, my fear of the empty years ahead, and my deep longing for one more day with my child. It all seemed like one tangled mass.

The Griefcase concept would give me a practical way to separate my jumbled and confusing feelings so that I could face them

one at a time. Doing so, I would learn to pick up the folder that was loudest, heaviest, on my heart that night and begin thinking about the related feelings I truly had inside. The next night, I might open a different folder and do the same but knew this was not going to be a race. It remains my marathon. My case remained heavy for some time, but it slowly began to lessen in weight and its burden on my days.

Understanding that we cannot leave our Griefcase behind is important, but it is not punishment. It is, instead, a reminder that emotions will not stay behind when you leave the house. You will take them to work, to the store, and to social gatherings. Knowing that does not make the weight lighter, but it does stop the surprise of discovering the case is still there when you thought you had set it aside.

I spent the first several months after Jonathan passed believing I could leave my Griefcase in the car or at the house. I ignored it but then stumbled over it as I tried to walk away. I seemed to have no choice but to take it back into my hands. In addition, it felt much heavier on my heart than before. Once I stopped fighting that fact and recognized that it was now a part of me, but not who I am, I had more energy for the actual work to be done.

Inside the lid of every Griefcase is one file folder that is very full but always well organized. Its tab reads, **Unconditional Love**. It is filled with the perfect love that you have for your lost loved one. It belongs with you and needs no maintenance. When times are most difficult, holding it brings a sense of steadiness and makes the rest of the hard emotional work possible.

I did not notice mine at first. I was too busy looking at the other messy, overflowing folders. When I finally opened Unconditional Love, I understood the reasons I needed to work through all the others. It still does that today.

Be prepared, as new folders of emotion can appear months or years later. Old ones can thicken again when life triggers a fresh reminder in your heart. When this happens, you do not have to start over. You open the case and begin again with the new folder or the one that has unnecessarily become heavy again. That is the practice and not a one-time event. It is a way of living with the love we have for the one we have lost here on Earth.

In Griefcase workshops, first timers are asked to name three folders in their case. They choose one and then sit with it for ten or fifteen minutes. When they look up, most say that the room feels different. The weight is still there, but they have proven to themselves that they can open the case without being destroyed by it.

That small proof is often the beginning of movement for them. One man told me he had been carrying his case for over two years and had never once acknowledged what it held inside. All he knew was he could no longer manage the burden.

After the man wrote the names of three folders on a piece of paper, he said the case still felt heavy, but it no longer felt mysterious. He now had a deep interest in exploring what had become a tremendous burden over the past few years.

Some people resist the Griefcase metaphor at first. They say grief is not a briefcase, or that organizing one's feelings seems cold, and that is understandable. The analogy is, however, not meant to reduce the love, or assign the pain to mere paperwork. It is only meant to give the mind a picture it can work with when everything else feels so chaotic. The love stays, and some pain. What changes is your ability to face one piece, one hurtful emotional thought at a time, instead of trying to hold the entire weight in your arms.

The Griefcase also travels with you into places where no one else can see it. You might be sitting in a meeting or standing in line at the store and the folders are still there. Knowing that lets you make different choices. You can decide, in the moment, whether

this is a time to discreetly open one folder or whether it is best to keep the lid closed and finish the task at hand. Both choices are available once you know the case is with you.

I have carried my Griefcase into work, where the expectation was that everyone would be fine with my grief by now. The case did not disappear just because the others preferred it that way. What helped was knowing I could open it later, in private, instead of pretending it was not there. The people around me did not need to see inside. I just needed to know the folders existed, so I was not overwhelmed later by one or more of them.

If you are early in loss, your case may feel too overwhelming to open right now. That is normal. You do not have to empty it today, nor will you be able to. You only have to know it is there and that it has a structure based on the undying love that you have for the one you lost. The folders have names and you can choose one when you are ready. The Unconditional Love folder is already waiting in the lid. It will still be there when you decide to look.

The Griefcase is not a cure. It is a tool and tools do not do the work for you. Instead, they make the work possible. Once you can acknowledge the case and recognize what is inside, you have something you can return to on the days when the weight feels impossible to carry. That is the beginning and there is no end. There is only lightening the burden and returning to a life filled with peace and purpose.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name the three folders that feel heaviest for you right now. Write them on real paper if it helps.

~ Describe in one sentence what "lightening the load" would look like for you this week.

~ Choose one private place and spend ten minutes there with one folder open. If another emotion tries to interrupt, note its name and set it aside. You will return to it later.

~ Open the Unconditional Love folder for a moment and write one sentence about what is still true about the loved one you lost.

CHAPTER TWO ~ INSIDE YOUR GRIEFCASE

Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
knits up the o'er-wrought heart and bids it break.
~ William Shakespeare

The Griefcase works because it turns a seemingly boundless and shapeless burden into something you can visualize and handle. Grief is never filled with just one emotion. It is a collection of the feelings you experience after a loss and they remain with you. Instead of trying to push them away, ignore them, or wait to see if they simply disappear, the Griefcase gives them a structured place to live as a part of you. You have a case you can open, sort, and gradually lighten over time.

If we must have a Griefcase, let us own it and wisely put it to use, so that we may begin moving forward in our grief healing journey.

MOVING FOLDERS INSIDE YOUR GRIEFCASE

Imagine sitting at a table and setting your Griefcase in front of you. The clasps release and the lid lifts to reveal its contents. Inside, you

see a stack of thick manila folders at the bottom, the contents of each overflowing and uneven. Papers stick out at odd angles. These "thought-pages," if you will, are bits of that emotion labeled on that folder's tab, such as Anger, Sadness, Despair, or so many others, and it all looks rather chaotic. That is because it is chaotic, especially early in loss. Nothing about these file folders and the pages inside seem very helpful to you at the start.

In the back pocket of the lid sits one folder that is always there. Its tab reads "Unconditional Love." When you unsnap the pocket and pick it up, you immediately notice the difference. The pages inside are many but appear to be organized and in good order.

Holding this folder does not erase the weight of the others, but looking through it for a moment does steady you enough to face them. You try to set it on the table outside the case, but your hand will not release it. Only when you slide it back into the top pocket does your grip loosen.

That is because the Unconditional Love folder always rests in that back pocket. It cannot be removed, unless present in your hands, and does not need to be. It is the one folder that needs no work and serves as your lighthouse whenever safe harbor is needed for your heart.

You then reach for the heaviest file folder in the bottom of the case. This one may well be labeled "Confusion," and stuffed so full that the tab is barely visible. Intimidated, you try to set the folder on the table outside the case, but it will not leave your hand. That is because folders must reside either inside the Griefcase or be held in your hands. You can move and reorganize folders inside the case, but they cannot be abandoned or tossed away. The case, your Griefcase, is where they exclusively exist now and into your future.

Maybe you are still not ready to tackle the Confusion folder and, unable to set it aside on the table, move to slip it in the top pocket with the Unconditional Love folder. The pocket, however,

will not unsnap. It will not accept it. That is because no folder can be placed in the top pocket, alongside Unconditional Love, unless it has been resolved to the fullest extent possible at that moment. That does not, however, mean it is empty.

FALSE, ERRONEOUS, AND REDUNDANT FEELINGS

You have found the love-inspired strength to pick up your first emotional file folder and are prepared to look through the frenzied mess. Your work here is to reorganize or remove those thought-pages in each folder that are either **false**, **erroneous**, or **redundant** in your grief. What eventually remains will only be truth.

False feelings are, without question, the most caustic agent in our journey. They are often born in that empty space where answers are missing. One of the worst is **False-Guilt.** "If I had called that morning, this would not have happened." "I should not have allowed them to go." "If I was there, they would still be alive, so this is all my fault."

The mind is desperately reaching for explanations of the loss, because the absence of *why* is often unbearable to the heart. Most of the time, these self-accusations do not hold up under closer examination. Early grief, however, does not often leave much room for examination. The thoughts stay until someone, or something, holds them up to the light.

There is also **False-Anger.** For me, my son passed away following a non-emergency medical procedure at a renowned Children's Hospital. Long after, I would carry great anger toward that hospital, the surgeon who worked on my child, and even hospital staff I did not even know. I remained this way until I used my Griefcase.

In doing so, I found the strength to review an independent investigation into his death. What I discovered, in short, was that my son's heart was simply tired. It had been through a tough sixteen years. Further, the professionals who tended to him in surgery made every effort to save his life when he crashed. Then, I knew that all of my anger was unfounded.

As a result of removing that one piece of unnecessary burden, false-anger, from my Griefcase, it was already much lighter. In fact, I would later be offered and accepted a position on an advisory board within the very same hospital where my son lost his life. In my role, I was honored to provide the hospital staff with the perspectives of a bereaved parent.

Erroneous feelings are unthinking, automatic responses based on how one reacted to other deeply emotional events in the past. These are often carried over from earlier pains in life and brought forward by the subconscious mind. The subconscious believes it is providing learned experiences from a troubling past event to aid in the more recent one.

A woman grew up with a father who often told her she was careless and that bad things happened because she never paid attention. When her adult son dies in an accident, that old voice returns at full volume.

After being left by a partner, a man learned to expect people would always pull away when things got difficult. When his father dies, he ignores the offers of help from friends, convinced their concern will disappear when he needs them most.

Because of prior poor experience, the subconscious allowed erroneous feelings to delay the healing journey of both these grieving souls.

Redundant feelings are thought-pages that already exist in other emotional folders, yet early grief repeats them everywhere at once. Loneliness appears in the Anger folder. Guilt shows up inside

Confusion. Fear of the future surfaces in the middle of a memory that should have been only Sadness. The same thoughts keep landing in every folder because the mind has not yet sorted out what belongs where. Afterall, the shock of loss alone is enough to jumble even the stoutest heart.

These thoughts also come from the subconscious mind. It is not trying to harm you. The subconscious knows no malice. It is only trying to protect you by offering memories and reactions it has stored from similar events in your past. It is trying to help you survive.

This can be especially useful in day-to-day life. In grief, however, it often adds weight you simply do not need. The subconscious does not know the difference between a thought that once kept you safe and a thought that now keeps you stuck. That distinction is yours to make in the conscious mind.

SORTING THE FILE FOLDERS

It is time to open a folder, and Anger may be one of the heaviest among them. Looking at the first thought-page, you wonder if it belongs there at all, since it seems more like Sorrow than Anger. Thinking it through, you realize feeling sorrow has only made you feel angry, so you pull that page.

You then find that Sorrow folder in your case, only to discover the same thought is already there. When you try to add the duplicate, the page in your hand goes blank, so you crumple it up and set it outside the case, almost surprised that you are allowed to just let it go. Your Griefcase, however, recognizes it is redundant and not needed.

On to the next thought-page, which seems to be related to Loneliness. It is simply entangled in Anger for the time. You remove that from Anger, open the Loneliness folder, and easily slide the page inside where it truly belongs.

Going on, another page appears to belong in Fear, yet when you read it carefully you realize there is no real reason for fear in this instance. It is False-Fear. When you do, the page goes blank and you ball it up and toss it aside.

As you continue, some pages of true thoughts are moved to their proper folders. Others disappear once you see that they are false, erroneous, or redundant. They are not useful and are allowed to be fully removed from your case.

Your griefwork will be slow, and you may not feel immediate and dramatic effects. Most of the time it is much like sorting a junk drawer in the kitchen. You pull out one item at a time, decide whether it still belongs, and either return it, put it elsewhere in the correct place, or simply throw it away. After a while, the drawer is not empty, but what is there belongs there and you can now close it without force.

When only a few thought-pages remain in the Anger folder, you understand that they are true feelings and belong right where they are. As a truth, you cannot discard them, so you leave them in the folder and begin to embrace a small shift in your well-being. The cloud of Anger may now lift enough so that you can better see the other folders in the case.

At that moment, you hear a faint snap and the top pocket in the back of your Griefcase slowly falls open. You then instinctively slide the Anger folder in, behind Unconditional Love, and re-secure the snap. It has been resolved to its fullest, for now, and can be removed from the mess below. The case is still heavy, but less so than before. It is time to move on to another emotional folder.

SORTING MEANS FEELING THE PAIN

Sorting the thought-pages is not an intellectual exercise. It is the deliberate act of facing the painful feeling that the page represents. Each time you pull a page from a folder and ask whether it is true, false, erroneous, or redundant, you are choosing to feel the emotion instead of continuing to avoid it. The pain you have been trying to keep closed will rise. That is the griefwork.

In truth, you are not sorting paper; you are allowing the feeling to surface long enough to see it clearly and decide what still belongs. The discomfort is not a sign that you are doing it wrong. It is the evidence that you are finally addressing what has been left unattended.

This is the part most people underestimate when they first open the Griefcase. For weeks, months, or even years, the mind has worked to keep certain feelings from fully arriving. It has redirected them into busyness, into other folders, or into the simple act of keeping the lid closed.

When you finally hold one page and purposely face it, the feeling that was blocked now has a clear path. It comes, and it can feel sharper in that moment than you anticipated. This is not, necessarily, because the emotion has grown stronger, but because you are no longer spending energy trying to push it away. The rise in pain is temporary and necessary. It is the cost of stopping the avoidance that has kept the folder and your Griefcase heavy.

Facing the feeling does not mean you must stay in it until it exhausts you. Nor does it mean you are failing if the pain arrives with force. The goal is only to meet the emotion long enough to see it for what it is and to decide whether the thought that carries it still belongs inside that folder. Once you have named it, tested it, and either moved it, discarded it, or returned it to its proper place, you are free to close the case for now.

The feeling may linger for a while afterward, but it no longer has the same power to spill into every other folder and every other hour. Each time you willingly open a page and stay with the pain it brings, you reduce the weight that avoidance has been adding. Over time, the folders become lighter, although not because the feelings disappear, but because you have stopped paying the extra cost of leaving them unresolved.

WHAT RESOLUTION ACTUALLY MEANS

No folder will ever be completely empty. That includes the Confusion folder. Some feelings may never be fully resolved. Anger may shrink but never fully disappear. Sorrow may loosen its grip without vanishing. That does not, however, stop your griefwork with that emotion. It may still need to be tended to throughout your life, but now it will be so much easier, so much lighter to carry, as its foundation holds only the truth.

The true emotions of each folder never vanish. Once experienced, they become part of who you are. Had you not felt love for the one you lost, you would not feel that emotion. After all, the deeper the love, the deeper the grief. To empty the folder, to completely lose the pain of truth, would be moving on from the love and not moving forward.

The ultimate goal is not to erase them, but to organize each folder to the point of truth. Then, the feelings, going forward, can be addressed without consuming every hour of your day.

A father like me who lost his son may always feel a sharp edge when he sees a group of teenagers. The edge does not have to cut into him every time. A widow may always notice the empty chair at dinner. The chair does not have to dictate whether she dines at the table that evening or not.

Resolution in your Griefcase means the emotion no longer spills into every other folder and every other hour of your day. It has a place. You can open that place when you choose, and you can close it when you need to.

Unfortunately, there are times when emotions will not wait for a convenient time. They arrive in waves and do not care where you are or what you are doing. A wave can rise in a grocery store, in a meeting, or while you are driving. When it hits, open the case and work with whatever folder is loudest that day.

You do not have to finish that folder. You only have to open it long enough to see what is there, instead of what the wave is insisting is there. If you believed you had earlier resolved this emotion, do not worry. It will have removed itself from the top pocket and will be found waiting for you in the bottom of the case.

Later, as acute grief begins to wane, the waves seem to space themselves a little farther apart. This allows you to continue the work in those quieter stretches. Working on the case between waves can sometimes bring on another wave, another emotion, but knowing it may happen makes it less surprising for you. Each time you lighten a folder, you reduce the unresolved grief you carry into the next day.

No one else has a Griefcase just like yours. Grief is as unique as snowflakes and fingerprints. Two people can lose the same person and carry different folders, or the same folders at different weights. One may have a thick Anger folder and almost no Guilt. Another may carry the reverse, and that is normal.

Comparing your folders to someone else's is one of the ways the Confusion folder stays heavy. Your case is yours. The only standard that matters is whether the case is lighter this month than it was last month.

That does not mean you always have to carry it alone. When the weight becomes too much, it is not only acceptable but wise to

seek help from family, your faith community, grief support groups, or professional counselors. Your Griefcase remains yours, but others can certainly help you lighten the load.

MAKING SPACE

Over time, you will move many of the folders to the top pocket, along with Unconditional Love. As space opens in the bottom of the Griefcase, there is room for moments of peace, small purposes, and ordinary days that no longer feel impossible to handle. The case remains with you, but it becomes so much lighter to carry.

You may still open your case on difficult days, such as anniversaries or when a memory arrives without warning. The difference now is that you open it by choice more often than by force.

You know where each folder belongs and you know it can only hold your true feelings. You will know which ones still need attention, and which ones can stay in the back pocket for now.

Griefwork is not quick, and it is never easy. It is, however, practical, necessary, and healing. You open one folder and sort thoughts, or pages, that are true from those that are not, and reorganize or discard what is delaying your journey. You move what you have resolved as far as you can. Then you close the case and carry it until the next time you are ready to open it again.

There is no finish line. There is only the next folder, the next page, and the next decision to keep the case from becoming heavier than it has to be. Soon, however, you may very well find enough room within your Griefcase to toss in a pair of flip-flops and suntan lotion and begin to once again live a life of peace and purpose.

Start with whichever folder is loudest today. You do not have to know the entire contents of the case before you begin. You only have to open the lid and move forward again.

Today, many years beyond my son's passing, I carry my Griefcase and open it as often as I can. It carries the love and the cherished memories of my child. I will proudly open it and show anyone of my joy in being his father, and how blessed I was to be a part of Jonathan's life while he was here on Earth, as well as still today.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name the Loudest Folder - Sit with the Griefcase for five minutes and identify the single emotion that feels heaviest right now (Confusion, Anger, Guilt, Loneliness, or another). Write only the name of that folder on a blank page but do not open it yet. The goal here is to simply acknowledge which folder is demanding attention, so the others do not blur together.

~ Sort One Page - Open the folder you named. Pull out one thought that has been repeating and ask yourself three questions: Is this false (not actually true about this loss)? Is this erroneous (an old reaction from a past wound)? Is this redundant (already living in another folder)? Move it, discard it, or return it to its proper place. One page is enough for this step.

~ Return to Unconditional Love - After sorting, open the back pocket and hold the Unconditional Love folder in your hands for one full minute. Do not try to fix anything. Notice what steadies in your mind and in your heart and then close the pocket. This step reminds you that this lighthouse folder, showing you safe harbor, remains available even when other folders are still heavy.

~ Track One Wave - The next time a wave of emotion unexpectedly rises (in a store, at work, or while driving), pause long enough to name the folder it belongs to. You do not have to resolve it in the moment. Instead, simply note which folder opened on its own. Later, when you have time, intentionally open that folder and purposely sort one page from it.

~ Measure the Case, Not the Finish Line - At the end of the week, ask only one question: Is the case lighter than it was seven days ago? You are not looking for empty folders. You are looking for fewer false, erroneous, or redundant pages spilling across all the other folders. Then, write one sentence about any well-being shift you notice, however small. This becomes your record that the work is moving forward even when no folder is finished.

CHAPTER THREE ~ THE BIG QUESTION OF WHY

Love and death are the two great hinges on which all human sympathies turn.

~ B. R. Hayden

Before you even open your Griefcase, there is usually one elephant squarely sitting in the room, and it holds the interest of nearly every bereaved soul. Why did our loved one have to die? It feels so unfair. It feels as if there must be some grand explanation, if we could only reach it.

When something terrible happens, such as the loss of a loved one, many of us are wired to search for the reason it took place. We want the cause, the sequence, and sometimes more importantly, that action or inaction we could have done differently to avoid the loss.

I remember the morning Jonathan died with a clarity that still surprises me. We had been in the hospital for what was supposed to be a relatively routine procedure. His heart had been monitored for years, and he had been through earlier cardiac surgeries and recoveries that felt, at the time, like miracles. I watched him fight and come back many times when the odds were against him. That morning, however, the monitors went silent and the doctor stepped

back from his bed.

I held my son as he took his last breath and the question arrived: Why? It did not leave when I walked out of that room. It followed me home. It lingered with me in the shower when the water was the only thing loud enough to cover the sound of me forcefully asking it over and over again.

I would stand with my forehead against the cold, wet tile and say the question out loud, because saying it felt better than letting it rattle around inside with nowhere to go. That lack of an answer to why may have done a great deal more in initially delaying my grief journey than any of the caustic emotions I felt. If I could not answer that question, after all, how could I even begin my healing journey?

I have not received the answer to that question, but I soon began moving forward through my faith in God. This is not a religious book, so know that you do not have to share in my beliefs for everything else in these pages to be useful for your journey. For me, however, I recognized a comfort in my faith, and in knowing that the child I lost had his own relationship and plan with God.

Perhaps the mortal answer, at least for me, lies within that plan. I came to appreciate that I was divinely chosen to play a role in their design and humbled to have that child and his love in my life for sixteen wonderful years. That helped me begin to move forward and not move on.

My core beliefs do not explain the why, but it does testify to the love that was felt for me by both God and my son's soul. I am still here as well, and that can only mean my own plan has not finished. I may not be fully aware of what it holds, but I surely know I have much yet to do as I move forward.

Even after that recognition, the "why" still returns for me. It returns on anniversaries, in the middle of the night, when a song plays, or a smell hits me. We will probably not get the answer until

we also leave this Earth. Yet it helps knowing that the question does not have to consume our every thought. You can set it in its own emotional folder, acknowledge it when it appears, and keep working on moving forward in your grief healing journey.

THE OTHER WHY QUESTIONS

There are often other why questions that follow close behind, such as: Why is it so hard to move forward in grief? The pain is so very real for everyone who experiences loss of a loved one. Some of us, shaped by family, culture, profession, or simply the habits of a lifetime, have learned to keep our emotions private. That conditioning can be useful at certain times in our lives, yet costly in others.

Expressing what you are feeling does not require you to become someone else or to have an audience. For a long time, my only safe harbor was in that shower I mentioned before. The water seemed to cover the sound, and no one could see me. I could tell God I was angry, beg for my son back, and cry until the intensity dropped enough that I could step out and face the rest of the day. That private release was a vital part of my beginning to move forward, and I never had to change who I was to do so.

Your safe harbor might be a car during a long commute, a workshop in the evenings, a closed office door, or a walk where no one is waiting for you to explain yourself. The location matters less than the decision to stop hiding the emotions from yourself.

I have spoken with people who have never found that private place and simply kept their Griefcase closed for years. The emotions inside did not go away. They actually grew heavier until something finally forced the case open and they spilled out. It is better, in my experience, to choose opening your Griefcase and maintaining control of what happens next.

I have also sat with people who were told, directly or indirectly, that their continued question of why was a sign of weak faith or insufficient progress. Those messages only add to the confusion and anger in grief. The "why" is not a failure. It is a human response to an outcome we could not control. In truth, you can honor the question of why without letting it rule your life.

In workshops, I sometimes ask attendees to write the why question exactly as it arrives for them and then set that page aside. The act of writing it down does not answer the question, but it does something else; it shows the mind that the question is valid but is not the center of our world.

One man told me afterward that he had been asking the question for five years and never once wrote it down. After he did, he said the question still came, but it no longer felt like it was the only question in his heart.

There are also other versions of the why question that are really about fairness. Why him and not someone else? Why now and not later? These versions are harder to set down because they touch the part of us that wants the world to make sense. Yet there is still no clean answer for them.

What I know is that our Griefcase still has to be carried whether the world makes sense or not. The question can ride along with us, but it is not allowed to drive.

I remember a workshop where a woman described how she had stopped asking the question of why aloud because she was tired of people trying to answer it for her. She said the responses, even the well-meaning ones, were all over the place.

What helped her was finding one person who could sit with the question without trying to answer it for her. She did not need a solution. She needed a witness. That is different from needing an audience. A witness does not require you to perform your grief. A

witness simply stays in the room while you ponder your thoughts out loud.

There is also a quieter version of the question that shows up years later. It is less about the original event and more about the ongoing absence. Why does this still hurt so much after all this time? Why do certain days still impact the whole week? These later questions are not a sign that you have failed to move forward in your journey. Instead, they are a sign that the love you have for your lost loved one is real.

Some bereaved souls worry that if they stop asking the question out loud, they are somehow leaving behind their lost loved one. That fear is real, but never the truth. Having peace with the question is not the same as forgetting. The one you lost here on earth is not diminished by your ability to set the question down for an afternoon so you can do the other work of living.

I have watched people in corporate settings carry this same question into rooms where no one expects to talk about grief. They sit in meetings and the question is still there, just waiting.

As you will discover, the Griefcase method does not require you to show your feelings in the meeting but does require you to know it exists. This way, it will no longer surprise you later in the parking lot. Acknowledgment is often enough to keep the question from running the rest of the day.

If you are reading this and the question feels too large to write down, start smaller. Write one sentence that begins with, "The question I keep asking is…" and stop there. Put the page somewhere that you are sure to see it again. You do not have to answer it today. You only have to give it a place in your life that is not the center of your heart and mind. That small act is still considered working through your Griefcase.

The "why" will likely never be answered while you are here on Earth. That is not a failure of faith, of effort, or of love. It is the

nature of loss. What you can do is decide that the question does not get to occupy every thought or room in your mind. It has a place and you know where it is. You can look at it when you choose to, and you can let it rest as long as you like. That is all part of griefwork. It is neither glamorous nor fast.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Write the "why" question on a piece of paper exactly as it arrives in your mind. Put the paper somewhere nearby and just leave it there for now.

~ Identify a private place where you can let one emotion surface this week without an audience.

~ Notice, without judgment, what happens in your body when you simply consider opening that place in your heart and expressing it.

~ If the question of why returns this week, practice writing it down and setting it in the selected space in your home.

~ Write one sentence that you believe is true even while the question remains unanswered.

CHAPTER FOUR ~ GRIEFCASE GRIEFWORK

The only way out is through."
~ Robert Frost

GRIEFWORK

The term Griefwork was originally coined by Sigmund Freud. In a 1917 essay, Mourning and Melancholia, Freud described griefwork as the internal psychological work a person must do after a loss.

Freud's essay explained that griefwork included purposely revisiting memories, accepting the reality of the loss, and gradually loosening the emotional bonds so that life could continue for the bereaved. What can be taken from that is griefwork will be no less strenuous than digging a ditch or solving an almost unsolvable riddle. Yet it must be done to live a purposeful life.

The Griefcase, our tool to aid in performing such a task, is not meant to be opened once and then simply set aside. It is a tool you return to over and over again.

Chapter Two showed you how the case works, how to sort what is false, erroneous, or redundant, how to move what can be resolved, and how to keep the Unconditional Love folder within

reach. The ultimate goal is that only truth and love remains. This chapter is about putting that method into play on both difficult and ordinary days as your routine griefwork. The goal is not to finish the case. The goal is to lighten it over time so that you can live a life of peace and purpose.

A SIMPLE PRACTICE

During early loss, most grieving souls do not need an hour in their Griefcase. Ten to fifteen minutes is enough for most sessions. Choose a place where you will not be interrupted, such as a kitchen table after others have gone to bed, a parked car, a closed office door, or the same chair you use for quiet time.

Visualize setting your Griefcase out in front of you, opening the case and naming the folder that feels heaviest or loudest to you at the moment. You do not have to know why it is that way. You only need to acknowledge that it does.

Lift and pull one page from that folder and ask the three questions from Chapter Two: Is this false? Is this erroneous? Is this redundant? If the answer is yes to any of those questions, move it or throw it away. If the answer is no, neatly leave it in there in the folder.

Early on, one page from a folder is a complete session. If you have the energy for a second or third page, go ahead, but be easy on yourself. When done, simply close the case. Your Griefwork is finished for now because short, regular sessions keep the folders from growing heavier between the waves of grief. Consistency matters much more than time spent on a task.

CHOOSING THE FOLDER

Some days, one folder is obviously heavier than the others. Other days, several compete with each other. When that happens, start with the one that has been interrupting your attention most often during the last day or so.

If none stand out, begin with the Confusion folder, as it is frequently the one that hides so many pieces of the others. Opening it first can make the rest easier to look at. You are not required to finish any folder in a single sitting, either. Instead, you are only required to open the one you chose and sort at least one page per session.

WHEN A WAVE ARRIVES

Waves of emotion never wait for a convenient time. They rise in grocery stores, in meetings, while you are driving, or in the middle of an ordinary conversation. Remember, you do not have to resolve the wave in the moment. You only have to name the folder it belongs to. Say it silently if you need to: "This is Anger," or "This is Loneliness."

Naming the folder interrupts the sense that the entire case has opened all at once and beyond your control. Later, when you have ten minutes or so, open that same folder and sort one page from it. The wave may return, but that is normal. Each time you meet it with a short, deliberate sorting session, it loses a little of its power to interrupt your day.

USING UNCONDITIONAL LOVE ON PURPOSE

The Unconditional Love folder is more than just a steadying presence in your Griefcase. It is a powerful folder that can be used as an amazing starting point for especially difficult sessions. To do so, think of holding it for one full minute before you open that other folder. Go through the organized pages and feel the comfort in your heart. Then, recall one specific moment or quality of the amazing love you carry for your lost loved one.

You do not have to feel peaceful. You only have to remember that the love is real and that it does not require the other folder to be empty. Then, open that other folder and begin the session. Many may find that the minute spent with Unconditional Love makes that next folder easier to work with. It does not remove the weight, but it keeps the weight from being the only thing on your heart.

TRACKING WITHOUT PERFORMING

Right now, you do not need a complicated system. At the end of each week, ask yourself one question: Is the case lighter than it was seven days ago? You are not looking for empty folders. You are looking for fewer false, erroneous, or redundant pages spilling across the case, or for one folder that no longer interrupts you as often.

Write a single sentence about whatever you notice in your heart and mind. Some weeks, the sentence may well be "Anger still rises, but it no longer fills the whole afternoon." Other weeks, it may be "I opened the case twice and that was enough." The record is for you, and it shows movement even when all folders still seem disorganized.

COMMON STICKING POINTS

I opened my Griefcase and nothing changed.
Rarely will one page produce a dramatic shift or reduce the burden of your Griefcase. The change is usually cumulative over time. Keep your sessions short and regular and the case will lighten through repetition more than through intensity.

I keep putting the same page back.
That page may not be ready to move, or it may belong in a different folder than you first thought. Set it aside for a day and return to a different page. You can also hold the Unconditional Love folder again and ask whether the page is true about this loss or whether it is an older reaction.

I do not have time.
Ten minutes is enough. If even that feels impossible, name the loudest folder out loud or write it down on paper and close the case, because naming it still counts. The goal is to keep the folders from operating entirely outside of your awareness. Acknowledgement and understanding are paramount in your griefwork.

A folder came back that I thought was settled.
This is normal. Resolved does not mean an emotional folder will be gone. Resolved means that only the truth remains inside. When and if it gets heavy again, open it and re-sort the file. Is this recent emotional thought true, false, erroneous, or redundant? Sort it and, when ready, move it back to the top pocket if it still belongs there. You are not starting over. You are simply maintaining your case.

CLOSING THE SESSION

When you finish a session, deliberately close the lid of your Griefcase. You are not ignoring all the other folders. Instead, you are

choosing to carry them closed until the next time you are ready to open it again. The next session may come tomorrow, or it may be later the same week. Both are acceptable. The Griefcase remains with you either way.

What changes is your ability to open it on purpose, with intent, sort through what does not belong, and then close it again without force. Over time, those short sessions will create enough space inside your Griefcase for ordinary days to feel possible again.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Set a Ten-Minute Practice - Choose one consistent time and place this week. Open the case, name the loudest folder, and sort one page. Close it when the ten minutes end, even if more pages remain.

~ Name the Wave - The next time a wave unexpectedly rises, pause long enough to name the folder it belongs to. You do not have to resolve it then. Later, open that folder and sort one page.

~ Start with Unconditional Love - Before your next sorting session, hold the Unconditional Love folder for one minute. Recall one specific truth about the love you still carry. Then, open the folder you intend to work on.

~ Write the Weekly Sentence - At the end of the week, write one sentence that answers: Is the case lighter than it was seven days ago? Keep the sentence. It is your record of movement.

~ Handle One Sticking Point - Notice which of the common sticking points appeared this week. Choose one small response from the list above and use it the next time that sticking point returns.

CHAPTER FIVE ~ THE "FALSE" YOU IN THE GRIEFCASE

Forget the self and you will fear nothing, in whatever level or awareness you find yourself to be.
~ Carlos Castaneda

You will move forward or you will try to move on. That is not optional. Time does not pause while you decide whether you are ready or not. I am certain you are here to move forward.

You now understand the concept of your Griefcase and that grief is not an emotion. The word "Grief" actually comes from the Latin word *gravare*, meaning to make heavy. Today, we use it as that carrier word for every painful emotion that arrives after the death of someone we love. Inside our Griefcase, each manila folder holds all the thoughts that create that emotion, and in order to move forward, we begin by separating, sorting, and organizing the thoughts, or pages, inside.

Remember, when feeling peace and purpose, the emotional folders are still there in your case. Even when you have resolved an emotion as far as it can be resolved, a tender scar will always remain. Years later, when something brushes against that scar, be it a song, a date on the calendar, or the sight of someone who reminds you

of the one you lost, the feelings may strongly rise again. The difference is that any tears, if they come, are more often tears of joy and cherished memories more than tears of despondency.

EGO, SELF-WORTH, AND SELF-ESTEEM

There could very well be an odd manila folder in your Griefcase and, if there, it will require your prompt attention. Not doing so could hinder your healthful progress along the journey. It usually tries to hide itself among the other jumbled folders when first opening your case and is labeled **Ego.**

Ego is certainly not an emotion. It can be, however, an immensely powerful gatekeeper to your true feelings. It is that part of you most concerned with how others see you and whether you are living up to that version of yourself you always present to them.

In grief, ego often insists that even in unbelievable anguish, you stay strong, stay quiet, stay useful, or stay in control. You must be the same version of yourself that others expected before the loss or you might be perceived as weak. Worse, you might perceive yourself as weak. Until that Ego folder is opened and sorted, lies and truths, the rest of the Griefcase may be far more difficult to manage.

While they may seem interchangeable, ego is not the same as self-worth or self-esteem. **Self-worth** is the deeper, mostly subconscious awareness that you are a good person of value and meaning. It forms early in life, shaped by the people who mentored you by their words or presence. They instilled, within you, that you mattered and that you were worthy. Self-worth is not easily changed, as it is the very foundation of who you are today.

Self-esteem, on the other hand, is more fluid. It exists in between the conscious and subconscious mind and rises and falls with

your recent successes and failures. If you receive a raise at work for your performance, your self-esteem will be high. If you are passed over for a promotion, your self-esteem takes a major hit and becomes low. It is your mind's consideration of how you feel about yourself at the moment and is subject to frequent change.

Ego, by contrast, lives mostly in the conscious mind and often wants to be heard long before self-worth or self-esteem. Ego wants others to see you in a certain light, even if that light is not entirely accurate. For example, one of the major phobias for a man is that others may discover that he is not all that he shows himself to be.

I think of ego as Edging God Out (E.G.O.) of my life. Early in adulthood, I carried a clear sense of self-worth, largely shaped by my parents and by the belief they placed in me that I was a good person and a child of God. When I became a sworn police officer, I leaned hard on the identity I had already earned as a former Military Policeman in the United States Marine Corps.

In my new job, I was the rookie, and my self-esteem was in danger of taking a hit. I was not yet competent in civilian law enforcement and concerned others would look down on me. As a result, my ego let me treat my past career as a kind of armor.

My coworkers already respected my military police background, so my ego used it for show. Over time, however, I began to believe I actually was the confident, highly skilled person I put forward to them, even though inside I was pushing back an intimidated and unsure rookie who was still learning a different skill set. Was my ego putting myself and others in danger?

When my parents died, I told myself and others that their deaths were simply part of life. I remained the rock others could always count on. The pain was real, but I kept it inside my Griefcase and did not open it. The ego folder stayed unaddressed, and my life simply continued on.

When my son died, the same pattern held for months. There were arrangements to make and people who needed a steady presence. I was to be that person. I quickly returned to work, not allowing anyone there to see a crack in my armor.

My ego folder convinced me that strength meant ignoring my feelings or else others might see the real me. Only later, in a moment I have written about in another book, did I recognize how ego had temporarily blocked the strength of love I still carry for my son. The Unconditional Love folder had been there the whole time, but my ego simply kept me from opening it at first. Thankfully, unconditional love cannot be denied.

I might be considered a typical man, but the same dynamic appears in women, though the shape of the ego folder is often different. A woman who has always been the reliable one in her family may believe she cannot fall apart because others are counting on her. She manages the funeral, answers the calls, and keeps the household moving while her own folders remain unopened.

A woman who has built a professional identity around competence may fear that showing grief will cost her credibility at work. She answers emails from the hospital parking lot and tells herself she can take the time to feel the pain later.

A woman who learned early that her value lay in keeping everyone else calm may continue to manage the room long after she has nothing left to give. In each case, the ego folder is doing the same work of protecting an image at the expense of feelings that need to be tended to.

WHAT THE EGO FOLDER ACTUALLY HOLDS

When you open the Ego folder, the pages inside are usually a mixture of old expectations, half-true stories about what others need from you, and the fear of being seen as weak, selfish, or unable to

cope. Some of those pages belong to earlier chapters of your life. A man who was praised for never showing fear may now believe that any visible grief will disappoint the people who once counted on him.

A woman who was told she was "the strong one" may now treat any moment of tears as a failure of character. A parent who always handled crises by taking charge may now feel that pausing to grieve is the same as abandoning everyone else.

Those thought-pages are not entirely false in their origin, as they once might have served a noble purpose. They are irrelevant, however, as they now pertain to this loss of a loved one.

Use the Unconditional Love folder in your Griefcase as the lighthouse leading you into safe harbor. Hold it long enough to remember that the person you lost truly loved you without any armor.

Then, begin sorting through the Ego folder. Some pages inside will go blank once you see they are no longer true or useful. The belief that "everyone is counting on me to be fine" often dissolves when you realize that the people who love you are not asking you to perform feats of strength. Instead, they only need the real you.

Other pages inside the folder can be moved to a different one, such as Fear, Guilt, or Loneliness, where they may belong, if at all. The distress of being poorly judged for openly crying belongs in Fear. The belief that you should have concealed your pain from everyone belongs in Shame, although both should really just go blank and be tossed away. Regardless, what remains in the Ego folder is usually smaller and quieter.

While possible, you may never completely empty your Ego folder. Although it is not an emotion and not part of the love you have for your lost loved one, most people cannot do it. A man may still feel the urge to go over funerary details again and again, just to give a steady appearance while others are around. A woman may

still catch herself reassuring others before she has checked her own feelings.

Recognizing that the Ego folder is being purposely addressed, however, keeps it from acting on your behalf without your conscious control. You do not have to become someone who has no concern for how others see you. You only have to stop letting that concern decide which folders you are allowed to open.

LIVING WITH EGO AFTER THE LOSS

Living with some ego is ordinary, as there is such a thing as a healthy ego. You will still care, at times, what people think. After all, you still coexist in society. Yet you may still feel the old impulse to appear steady when you are not.

The difference is that you can now see the impulse for what it is. When a wave rises in a meeting or at a family gathering and your first thought is "I cannot let others see this," you can name the folder. You can open it long enough to ask whether the thought is true or whether it is ego protecting an image that no longer serves the love you carry.

Sometimes the answer is that a moment of visible grief will not undo your own thoughts about yourself or the thoughts from the people around you. Sometimes the answer is that you need to step outside, open the case in private, and sort a page or two before you return to the group. Either choice is available to you once the Ego folder is no longer acting on its own.

The true self, the one that can hold both love and pain, is still there. Ego does not erase that. It only attempts to cloud it over. Once you can tell the difference, the rest of the Griefcase becomes even easier to work through. You open one folder and sort what is

true from what is false at the time. You close the case when you need to, knowing that, when needed, you can open it again.

The work is not finished. It is simply no longer blocked by the false-you that grief did not create but that grief has a way of exposing. The Unconditional Love folder remains in the top pocket. It has not and will not ever go away. Ego may have only briefly kept you from remembering it was there.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name the Armor - Write down the single phrase you most often tell yourself when grief rises. For example, "I have to stay strong," "People are counting on me," or "I can't let them see this." Seeing it makes it harder for the folder to stay closed.

~ Hold the Light for One Minute - Open the top pocket and hold the Unconditional Love folder. For sixty seconds, recall one specific way the person you lost truly loved you without requiring you to be strong, useful, or composed. Then close the pocket. This step uses the one folder that ego cannot override as your starting point.

Sort One Ego Page - Open the Ego folder and pull out one thought that has been protecting the image. Ask yourself, is this still true for this loss, or is it an old expectation? If it is no longer true, let the page go blank and set it aside. If it belongs in Fear, Guilt, or Loneliness, move it there. One page is enough.

~ Catch the Impulse in Real Time - The next time a wave rises in public, and your first thought is to hide it, pause long enough to tell yourself, "This is the Ego folder." You do not have to open the case in front of others. Simply naming the folder interrupts the automatic response and gives you a choice to step away to sort one page or stay and allow a moment of honesty to stand.

~ Check the Gatekeeper Weekly - At the end of the week, ask yourself one question, "Did the Ego folder decide which other folders I was allowed to open, or did I decide?" Write one sentence about any moment you noticed the difference. The goal is not an empty Ego folder. The goal is that it no longer acts as the unchallenged gatekeeper to the rest of the Griefcase.

CHAPTER SIX ~ IGNORING YOUR GRIEFCASE

You do not see the river of mourning because it lacks one tear of your own.

~ Antonio Porchia

It bears repeating that continuing to work through the emotional file folders in your Griefcase is paramount to moving forward. Obviously, it is not going to be easy, as there will be times when the anguish seems to be overwhelming. There will be times when it just feels easier to hold it all inside. You want to move forward and not just move on, however, and came here looking for the Griefcase to help you do just that.

One of the most important reasons for not repressing or holding in your emotions within grief is that it will do you even more harm. Not only will it negatively change your perspective on life, but it can affect your health as well. For those reasons, it is important to understand how repressed emotions can affect you.

THE EMOTIONS WITHIN GRIEF

When it comes to grief, the more common emotion of sadness can be enhanced by so many other feelings, such as longing and fear.

Regardless, you did not choose to have these unpleasant feelings, and given the opportunity, never would have. No one wants to be sad.

It is actually human nature to be happy. Whether you believe we walked out of the Garden of Eden or that mankind crawled from some primordial ooze, our overwhelming mission from the start has been to create a better, happier, life. We built dwellings to avoid the misery of the elements. We hunted food to avoid the agony of hunger. It is in our very DNA to seek happiness, and given the choice between that and sadness, humans will always choose happiness.

Having sadness come to you in grief, then, is against your will, and not in your very nature. It really is no different than a virus being introduced into your body. The sadness of grief is a foreign invader to your well-being. If ignored and not tended to, it will sicken your heart and mind, making the possibility of your grief healing journey more difficult than it need be.

The reason behind this difficulty is that when these caustic emotions of grief are held in, repressed and ignored, over time they begin to become who you are. Just as a strong, false-ego could eventually move to the subconscious, repressed emotions in grief will find a way there as well.

Why would they go to your subconscious? Because you have gone day after day learning to cope with the pain and it is becoming a normal, albeit negative, part of your personality. Your conscious mind is in survival mode, and the subconscious will soon take that as a necessity. It collects and stores that which helps you survive.

If you hold those powerful, often caustic emotions of grief inside, and do not make a conscious effort to work through them, where else would they go? Instead of being worked out, they become an "instinctual" part of your personality. Then, like the other

traits that might reside in the subconscious, these feelings act autonomously on your behalf in very destructive ways.

Emotions, like all else that flows into the body, must not be ignored. They must flow out again.

THE EMOTIONAL DAM

Every human is made up of the natural surroundings of our planet. Our flesh and organs are made of the same atoms as trees, marsh grass, and the deer who drink from a stream. There is a natural flow to life on all levels, and as humans we are subject to that as well. To retard that natural flow of life can have incredibly harmful effects.

Consider just the three substances you must take into your own body for living. The food, water, and air, once taken in, eventually flow back out in the form of energy. In fact, the average adult has as much energy stored in body fat as a one-ton battery. This energy will flow back out as internal and external actions, including thought. Everything that flows into the mind and body must flow out again.

If you will, imagine a picturesque stream whose waters quietly wind through the forest. It is seeking its natural flow back down to the sea. Over time, this steady, healthy flow of water allows the growth of beautiful foliage to grow and thrive along its banks. It is all so serene.

As time goes by, an annoying beaver discovers the stream, and doing what beavers do, begins to build a dam. It is not a big one at first, since the little beaver really just needs a place to avoid issues that make him uncomfortable. Some water still flows beyond the dam, so it is hard for anyone else to notice the impacts at first. Behind the dam, however, the water begins to back up and overflow its banks.

This is metaphorically similar to what many of us already do with our human emotions, which should flow into us and then easily back out again. Yet we purposely build a dam across our stream, using it as a means to avoid uncomfortable issues.

In truth, most build their dam somewhere around the heart. This is that very sensitive spot where we often feel the most vulnerable. Our hearts, after all, are where others might get a glimpse of our true feelings and see us as weak. We certainly cannot have that.

Back at the beaver dam, it does not take long before the restricted flow of water begins to submerge and destroy the peaceful, natural environment behind it. In reality, this is our self-esteem, confidence, relationships with friends, and more. All of this was once part of a thriving persona that is now being slowly choked out by the flooding blockage we, our beaver, has created.

Stagnant water begins to turn dark and murky, caused by the dying rot of vegetation. The now decreased flow of water beyond the dam also becomes a muddy slur, and more obvious to those downstream. Those are our family and friends, who had come to enjoy what was once our abundant waters flowing through their life.

One day, a sudden, unexpected and furious storm arrives, just as it did when we experienced the loss of our loved one. Those new storm waters then rush downstream, seeking their own natural flow to the sea. Instead, this powerful flow meets the dam.

The dam may hold the new rushing waters, at first, but this causes even more flooding behind it, or inside of us. There, any remaining beauty, including compassion and kindness, is now being destroyed by the rising, repressed waters.

Not only will we be dealing with the often-heavy waters that come with daily life, but also now the roiling, potentially destructive floodwaters of grief. The dam is eventually going to give, one way

or another. It will explode, and when it does, that muddy, debris-filled water will rage outward, beyond the dammed heart, without our ability to control it.

These rampant waters spewing out from our dam will have little mercy on anything that gets in the way. This could include any remaining friendships, passions, and the potential for a joyous life. All the while, we can do nothing more than stand by and watch the emotional stormwaters rage outward and out of our control.

You need to cast your beaver aside and use the methods in your Griefcase. Immediately begin slowly, methodically, tearing down your dam. The storm waters are already upon you, but there is time to do so before the dark water explodes without your conscious control.

Alleviate the restricted flow's impact on your life now with your Griefcase. Make sure you remove the debris and cast it aside so that it does not explode downstream where it could harm others. They are certainly looking forward to seeing your beautiful stream once again flowing through their lives.

HEALTH ISSUES OF UNRESOLVED GRIEF

Going through the emotions within grief, even with the methods used in the Griefcase, can be physically exhausting. While you are absolutely doing the right thing, expect times of restlessness and insomnia, which will lead to a lack of REM sleep and dreams.

Lack of an appetite can be common as well, causing a loss of nutrition and energy needed to properly function both mentally and physically. Even though you are headed in the right direction, pay attention to the needs of your body and mind. You have a big task ahead and will need your strength.

A greater caution, however, is about unresolved grief. Your grief healing journey will take time, so understand that there will be emotions you will still be experiencing even when you leave this world. Yet, letting them go unattended will have a huge impact on your body, mind, and soul.

We have already discussed how holding the emotions of grief inside will damage your self-esteem, relationships with others, and a purposeful desire for life ahead. Unresolved grief will attack your health as well. Studies show that people who hold in grief are at a higher risk for hypertension, heart disease, and substance abuse.

It might sound like something you would hear from well-wishers after your loss but take care of yourself. It is more than just a passing thought. Purposely face your emotions. Being strong inside and out will be of great service as you move forward on your journey.

UNRESOLVED GRIEF IN THE SUBCONSCIOUS

We must recognize that there will always be bad events that are beyond anyone's control. No one asked for the tragic loss of our loved ones. Living life, including one of peace and purpose, means that sometimes bad things just happen to good people.

Even in our grief, we remain in control of our choices. For you, absolutely no one can take away your choice to either remain in a cloud of unresolved grief or seek to move forward again. That is on you. I know, however, you will choose moving forward.

Grief can be heavy and, at first, it can often seem difficult to see any rays of light. When influenced by so much confusion and pain, there might be those who opt to remain in sadness, but that is not human nature. To continue in sadness means there is a virus inside and a battle to rid oneself of a foreign, invading body.

If someone does choose to live with the dark, murky pain inside their mind, the emotions of unresolved grief will find their way to the subconscious. There, over time, those caustic feelings will become personality traits that act without asking. It is not who you are, or you would not be here. This clearly means you have made the healthy and natural choice.

Use your Griefcase and remove that pesky little beaver. Keep the emotions flowing out as nature intended for all of us to do.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name the Dam - Identify one way you have been holding back grief (staying busy, staying silent, staying "strong," or avoiding certain conversations). Write it down in a single sentence. Seeing the dam clearly is the first step toward deliberately taking it down instead of waiting for it to break.

~ Release One Controlled Flow - Choose one small, intentional way to let emotions move today. Write for ten minutes, speak one honest sentence to someone safe, or sit with the Unconditional Love folder without fixing anything. The goal is not to entirely remove the dam right away but only prove to yourself that a controlled release is possible.

~ Check the Downstream Effects - Notice one relationship or daily habit that has grown heavier since the loss (irritability with family, withdrawal from friends, or neglected health). Ask whether the beaver dam is affecting life downstream. Write one sentence about what a slightly clearer flow might look like in that area.

~ Protect the Body While You Work - Griefwork is physically hard. For the next three days, protect one basic need: a consistent bedtime, one real meal, or a ten-minute walk. Unresolved grief raises health risks, so tending to your body while you sort through folders keeps you strong enough to continue.

~ Reclaim One Choice - You did not choose the loss, but you still choose what happens next. Write one sentence that begins with, "Today I choose…" and finish it with a small action that moves you toward peace and purpose, rather than deeper stagnation. Then do that one thing. The Griefcase works only when you keep the flow moving.

CHAPTER SEVEN ~ YOUR INVISIBLE GRIEFCASE

I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll 'say something about it' or not. I hate if they do, and if they don't.

~ C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

You alone know how deep the grief sits inside you. Others may see you standing there, but they cannot see the Griefcase you hold. They cannot feel the weight of the folders or the effort it takes to carry them through an ordinary day that no longer feels ordinary. That gap between what you carry and what others can see is one of the quieter hardships of this journey.

Grief has become something society prefers to keep brief. We hold a short service, bury our dead, and then everyone is expected to return to routine life. The old outward signs of mourning have largely disappeared. The next time you pass a funeral procession, notice how few cars pull over. Horns sound and drivers cut in. The pause that once marked respect seems like a thing of the past now.

You may have felt a more obvious change yourself. For a few days after your loss, the house was full. People brought food, checked your mail, and sat with you when the silence grew too loud.

Then the service ended and the cars pulled away. The refrigerator slowly emptied of casseroles and your phone fell silent. What had felt only a short time before as a circle of support suddenly thinned into ordinary distance.

Friends and extended family returned to jobs, their children, and travel schedules that did not allow them to stay. This is not usually indifference. It is the shape of modern life. You, in reality, do not get to return to the life you once had. You remain in the club no one chooses to join.

DEALING WITH OTHERS IN EARLY LOSS

Against your will, you were handed your Griefcase. One of the first folders that many newly bereaved may notice is Shock. Confusion and Anger often follow, but there is little time to open any of them. Arrangements must be made. Phone calls must be returned. Decisions about services, obituaries, and a dozen smaller logistics press in from every side.

Many, both men and women, find themselves closing their Griefcase for a while simply to get through the necessary tasks at hand. The impulse to take charge can come from personality, from family expectations, or from the simple need to do something when everything else feels out of control.

In those first few days, closing the case can feel like the only workable choice. Yet the weight does not disappear just because the lid is shut. It rides with you from the funeral home to the kitchen table to the parking lot, present even while your hands are busy with other things. You carry it closed because the moment does not allow anything else.

During those days, you meet people who care and people who are merely polite. Most of them have never carried a Griefcase.

They may feel genuine sadness for you and the departed, yet they do not fully understand that their quiet presence can matter more than any spoken condolence they offer.

I have stood at services where the family was already surrounded. I made eye contact, nodded, and left without approaching. Later on, when I saw members of those families, each one told me that simply knowing I had been there meant more to them than any words I might have said. I did not fully understand that until I stood in their place.

GRIEF CONDOLENCES

Good-hearted people who are uncomfortable with grief will often say things that seem to miss the mark:

~ Time heals all wounds.
~ She is in a better place now.
~ He had a long life.
~ At least he is out of pain.
~ I know how you feel.
~ It was God's will.
~ God needed another angel.

In the first few days and weeks of loss, your mind is often too full to register every phrase spoken to you. Later, when the noise settles, you notice that some of those sentences can sting. The intention behind them has not changed. Most people are reaching to give comfort and landing on whatever first comes to mind.

A smaller number of remarks cross into genuine insensitivity, such as "You can always have another child," "You should be over this soon." "Maybe you should get a puppy to take your mind away from the loss." These may deserve a sharper, yet still tactful response from you. The rest are usually clumsy attempts at kindness

offered by people who found the courage to comfort you, even though they did not really know what to say. Give the benefit of the doubt and thank them.

GRIEF INSIDE AND OUT

Once the formal gatherings end, the circle of extended family and friends suddenly shrink. You return to work, to errands, to ordinary places, and you meet friends and acquaintances who may not yet know what happened. There is no rule that tells you whom to tell. Some days you have the energy to say the words. Other days you do not. Both choices are allowed.

You may not be walking around with a sign that says "Use Caution," yet your mind often tells you that one is there. A common feeling, no matter where you are on the journey, is that the pain is so great inside your heart that others must somehow sense it and will automatically give you room.

At work, where your coworkers know of your loss, you may put on a steady face and keep moving through the tasks in front of you while thinking, "They can't expect my best. They have to know I'm hurting." In reality, most of the people around you see someone who looks okay, because you are putting on a brave face, and they want you to be okay. They have no window into the case you are carrying. Your grief remains hidden because nothing on the outside actually telegraphs your pain on the inside.

If you do decide to tell someone who is unaware, be prepared for the conversation to shift. Sympathy appears and the questions will follow. "What happened?" can arrive more than once in a single afternoon and each retelling of the loss forces you to walk back through details and pain your heart is still trying to manage.

When you are already near your limit, it is reasonable to save the story for another day. Your emotional energy is better spent

moving one folder forward than repeating the same painful sentences to people who cannot carry the weight with you.

THE CASE ONLY YOU CAN SEE

Most of the people you meet do mean well. A few will disappoint you. None of them can see the Griefcase. That does not make the case less real, and it does not remove your authority over it. Even with support, you are the only one who can open the folders, sort what is true from what is not, and decide how much of the weight you are willing to set down on any given day.

You do not have to explain the case to everyone you meet. You do not have to perform strengths you do not feel. You only have to keep opening the lid when you are able and closing it when you need rest.

The Griefcase stays with you. Over time, and with steady attention, it becomes possible to carry it without letting it decide every step you take.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name the Gap - Notice one moment this week when someone treated you as if everything were normal while the Griefcase felt heavy. Write a single sentence that begins with, "They could not see…" Completing the sentence makes the invisible weight more concrete and less surprising the next time it happens.

~ Separate Intention from Impact - The next time a well-meant but clumsy condolence lands, pause and ask: "Did this person mean to hurt me, or were they simply uncomfortable?" Write the answer in

one line. Naming the intention keeps the remark from adding unnecessary pages to an already full folder.

~ Protect Your Retelling Energy - Before you tell someone about the loss, check how heavy the case feels that day. If repeating the details will cost more than you have to give, it is acceptable to wait or to keep the conversation brief. Your energy belongs first to the folders that still need sorting.

~ Set One Boundary in Advance - Choose one phrase you no longer want to hear. Decide now how you will respond to it calmly, briefly, and without apology. Having the words ready keeps you from being caught off guard when the remark appears.

~ Return to Your Authority - At the end of the week, remind yourself of one truth: other people cannot see your Griefcase, but you can open it, sort it, and close it when you need to. The work remains yours. This is both the hardship and the healthy path forward toward peace and purpose.

CHAPTER EIGHT ~ NATURE, NURTURE, AND YOUR GRIEFCASE

Nobody's perfect. We're all just one step up from the beasts and one step down from the angels.

~ Jeannette Walls

The Griefcase does not arrive with just the loss inside. It also carries the older patterns we brought with us, including the traits shaped by nature and by nurture that influence how we express the painful emotions of grief.

By nature, I mean the practical adaptations humans developed over centuries of hard living. By nurture, I mean the more recent influences of family, culture, and the people who raised us.

Some of those patterns and personality traits certainly help us. Others quietly keep the Griefcase lid closed long after the reason for doing so has passed. Understanding where they came from does not erase them, but it does make them easier to see and, over time, easier to work with. This way, the case does not stay heavier than it need be.

After my son died, months passed before I could directly face the pain, because strong instincts from both nature and nurture urged me to keep grief at a distance. Soon, however, those instincts

were not strong enough to override the unconditional love I carry for my child. That love, after all, is the real me. Recognizing the difference between the programming I had received and the true person I am was one of the vital steps toward first opening my Griefcase.

It also taught me that I was okay. I was not going through my grief in a right or wrong way. Instead, I was simply experiencing it in manners I was pre-wired to use. With that understanding, I would soon be able to bring forward those traits I knew would bring value and set aside those that would not. More importantly, I began my real grief healing journey without any need to change the true person that I was and continue to be today.

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE

Nearly 150 years ago, Francis Galton coined the phrase, "Nature versus nurture." The debate over how much of who we are comes from our days on the Serengeti, and how much comes from lived-life experience has divided the psychology field ever since. In 2004, researchers on both sides largely agreed that both play a role.

The precise balance continues to be argued in academic circles but, for our purposes, the argument itself matters less than the practical result: both nature and nurture influence how we process and express emotions within grief. They influence which folders feel loudest, heaviest, and which ones we have been taught or pre-programmed to keep closed.

Not every man processes their emotion the same way. Nor does every woman. Typical tendencies largely exist, however, just as we know the average man is taller than the average woman. Yet we all probably know women who are taller than some men. There are large tendencies, but they are never absolute.

Men tend toward systemizing and mechanical thinking. They analyze, explore how things work, and look for outcomes they can influence or control. On the other hand, women tend toward empathizing and mentalistic thinking. They notice the emotions of others and respond in ways that build connections.

These are, again, typical male and female patterns but not rules that bind everyone. Plenty of men are highly empathic and plenty of women are skilled systemizers. Yet the general patterns remain useful because they help explain why certain folders in the Griefcase may feel heavier for one person than for another, and why the same loss can produce such differing ways of carrying it.

HOW THE PATTERNS FORMED

Our nature tendencies have deep roots. Over generations, females developed stronger empathizing skills out of social necessity. In early human development, anticipating the needs of an infant who could not speak improved the chances that both mother and child survived. Reading faces and unspoken expectations helped a young woman navigate life among relative strangers after marriage, when she often left her own family and entered a new one.

Males developed inherent skills for different reasons. Hunting required the suppression of fear and anxiety during long periods of silence and solitude. Building shelters, defending a village, and maintaining hierarchy rewarded the ability to focus on tasks and outcomes, rather than on the emotions those tasks stirred. The invention of tools and the need for coordinated effort further strengthened the preference for analyzing problems and producing results.

These, and so many other early adaptations, became valued traits and found their way into evolutionary patterns over time.

They are pre-programed survival skills, and nothing is more paramount than surviving.

In modern grief they still surface. Many women feel a natural pull to talk about the loss and to check on the feelings of others around them. Natural instincts tell them that when emotions are high, even when the emotions belong to someone else, they need to be noticed and responded to.

Many men in grief feel a pull to contain the pain, stay stoic, and turn toward tasks that restore a sense of control. Rather than talking at length about the loss, they may throw themselves into projects that give a clear sense of accomplishment.

I know the second pattern well. In the months after my son died, I completed a large outdoor pergola and accompanying oak prayer bench for his ceremonial garden, a wooden plaque engraved with his name, a steamer-trunk coffee table, a wall-length entertainment center, and a dozen other woodworking projects.

Had I not opened my Griefcase when I did, I would not have a piece of store-bought furniture in my home today. Yet each project gave me something I could both start and finish at will, as well as an outcome that remained completely under my control. The work felt real and useful at the time. Yet it was really a way of keeping the Griefcase closed, as I purposely avoided the pain of loss.

Nature is only half the story, as nurture supplies the rest. For generations, boys were conditioned by fathers, coaches, peers, and cultural images to treat emotional expressions as a risk.

The father who worked from sunup to sundown displayed toughness over conversation. His lessons largely came through example but also through words. Big boys don't cry, stay focused, stay steady, don't show fear, are some of the more common ones.

Sports coaches rewarded fearlessness and threatened the loss of a place on the team for anyone who could not "hang with the big boys." Popular culture offered stoic heroes who, with ice in

their veins, picked apart opponents with ease and never appeared shaken. In the workplace, the message often continued for young men that the people who advance are the ones who make decisions without letting their feelings get in the way.

Girls received different but equally powerful mentoring as boys. Caretaking, keeping the peace, and managing the feelings of everyone else were taught by maternal lesson and example.

The mother who smoothed over tensions at the dinner table and absorbed the moods of the household taught that emotions mattered more than self-expression. Her lessons often came by example, but there were also words, such as be nice, don't make a scene, put others first, smile, and don't be so sensitive.

Friends and older sisters rewarded harmony and the ability to soothe hurt feelings, and a girl who openly competed or showed anger risked being labeled difficult or mean. Popular culture offered heroines who quietly sacrificed, kept the family together through their care, and rarely expressed needs of their own.

Both sets of upbringings can keep a bereaved soul holding folders they believe were not meant to be opened, even when those folders grow heavy enough to slow the healing journey.

DEPROGRAMMING WHAT NO LONGER SERVES

You would not be reading this unless you were ready to move forward. That means learning to see the traits, whether inherited or taught, that might tell you to keep the Griefcase closed. Over time, any traits that provide no value in your journey can purposely be recognized and relieved.

As a young man, I was a United States Marine, and Marine Corps Boot Camp offers a clear example of how one's behavior can be thoroughly reconditioned. In order to provide value in that

environment, certain traits had to be aggressively engrained in young recruits that were not normally a part of civilian life.

For example, the unquestionable and immediate response to orders given by a superior was utmost for all. In combat, if a Marine hesitated, even for a second, to immediately follow orders, others could die. That, and so many other military-centric traits were forced into the very subconscious of every man and woman who served their country.

Some military reprogramming remained useful later in my civilian life. Others did not. Easing the ones that no longer fit took time and began only after I recognized and acknowledged them, thereby stopping them from operating entirely from my subconscious. Then, I had to purposely determine if they held value for me or no longer did. If it was the latter, I slowly, consciously, let them go.

The process of loosening what no longer serves is available to anyone willing to directly look at it. Acknowledgement brings the trait from the subconscious forward into the conscious mind. There, it can be addressed under purposeful control and altered as needed. Is it still a value, or does it no longer enhance the true me?

The same process applies to the nature and nurture traits that keep grief locked inside. You may not be able to easily relieve every instinct that says, "do not acknowledge this." That is ordinary and, in the early days of loss, may even be preferable for a brief time. Fundamental change is taxing, and early grief already demands a great deal from you. An internal struggle at the moment may not be healthy.

What immediately matters is the urge to hide the pain from yourself. Unconditional love is stronger than that urge. It does not require an audience. In the months after my son's death, I returned again and again to the shower. Beyond just personal hygiene, the

water and the noise gave me permission to let the worst of my feelings surface without anyone watching.

At first, the release felt foreign and almost wrong. Over weeks and months, the anguish began to ease enough that I could see it was helping me move forward, albeit slow. I had not yet overcome the reluctance to express grief in front of others, but I no longer needed to hide it from myself. That alone lightened the case and made the remaining folders easier to approach. I was on my journey.

You can do the same. Identify the traits that tell you the folders must stay closed, whether they come from a parent's example, a coach's voice, a cultural message, or an old survival pattern. You do not have to overturn every one of them today. Naming them is enough to stop them from acting entirely on their own. Then use the Unconditional Love folder as the lighthouse to your safe harbor.

Find a private place, like the shower, the car, a walk, or a closed room, and let the feelings that have been held back come into the open. They do not have to be polished or complete. They only have to be acknowledged. Once they are no longer trapped in the dark of the subconscious, where they can act without your consent, the rest of the Griefcase becomes easier to open and sort.

Some of your traits of nature and nurture will always be a part of you. They simply no longer have to decide, all by themselves, how heavy the Griefcase remains or whether you are allowed to release any of the burden.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name One Inherited or Learned Pattern - Identify one message you received, through family, culture, or experience, which tells you certain emotions should stay hidden. Write it in a single sentence.

Seeing the pattern clearly is the first step toward deciding whether it still serves you.

~ Separate the Useful from the Costly - Look at that same pattern and ask: Does this still help me carry the Griefcase, or does it mainly keep the lid closed? Write one sentence about what it costs to keep following it without question.

~ Create One Private Outlet - Choose a place and a time where you can let one repressed emotion surface without an audience. It may be the shower, a drive, or a few minutes alone. The goal is not performance. The goal is to stop hiding the feeling from yourself.

~ Use Unconditional Love as the Switch - Before you open any other folder today, hold the Unconditional Love folder for one minute. Recall one specific way the person you lost loved you without requiring you to be stoic or composed. Then open the next folder that feels loudest.

~ Check the Subconscious Weekly - At the end of the week, notice one moment when an old trait tried to close the case for you. Write a single sentence that begins with "I saw the pattern when…" Naming it in the moment keeps it from acting unnoticed.

CHAPTER NINE ~ THE GRIEFCASE OF OTHERS

Grief can be a burden, but also an anchor. You get used to the weight, how it holds you in place.

~ Sarah Dessen

After the loss of a loved one, you are not the only one likely carrying a Griefcase. A traumatic loss will impact immediate family members and often reach into extended family and close friends who shared a genuine bond with the person who passed away.

Each of us carries our own Griefcase. No one else can carry it any more than someone can carry another's love. Still, when you remain aware that others are carrying theirs, you can help ease parts of their journey without abandoning your own.

There are many combinations of people who profoundly grieve the same loss. The loss of a child is deeply felt by both the mother and father, and by any brothers or sisters who survive the loss. The death of a spouse is deeply felt by any children in the family and often extends to the late spouse's parents and siblings.

Your actions and the way you interact with these others may well affect how they move forward, just as their actions will affect you. Being expressly aware of that fact helps avoid adding weight to someone else's Griefcase while you are still learning how to lighten your own.

LOSS OF A CHILD

Everyone can agree that it is not the natural order of life for a parent to outlive a child. One of the most primal drives of nearly every living creature is to reproduce so the species continues. As humans, we seek a mate, have children, and hope to grow old enough to leave those children to continue the cycle.

Psychological research has long described the birth of a child as one of the strongest expressions of masculinity for men and femininity for women. When a traumatic child loss occurs, that fundamental sense of identity can be stripped away, although wrongly, for both parents at once. As a result, while the father is lugging a heavy Griefcase, so is the child's mother.

Failure to recognize this by one parent or the other can bring even greater pain after the loss. It is an unfortunate fact that when a husband and wife need each other most, the normal and natural differences in how each of them instinctively express emotions can push them apart if those differences go unspoken.

You have probably heard the claim that roughly eighty percent of couples who lose a child will divorce because of the loss. That figure may not be so hard to imagine when you are in the middle of intense grief, yet it is simply not true. Empirical data, including formal studies of bereaved parents, places the actual number closer to only sixteen percent. Further, in many of those cases, the loss of the child was not even given as the primary reason the marriage ended.

That more realistic figure tells you that the strong and loving bond between a husband and wife can do so much to hold the marriage together after the loss. Even any difficulties that might

arise can be likely avoided with mutual understanding and compassion for the differing ways men and women tend to express emotion.

From the very onset of loss, assume that your relationship can remain strong even when those differences appear. Expect shock and intense, acute grief for at least the first two weeks. This is a sensitive period when patience and clear communication matter more than perfect words.

After that, both of you will likely experience several months of strong grieving before a steadier process of moving forward begins. Grief itself does not disappear. Both of you will continue to indefinitely feel some level of the loss.

It is important that you let your spouse know exactly what you are feeling, even when those feelings are hard to put into words. A woman may more openly express her emotions. A man, who generally processes feelings more internally, may cause her to misread that natural inward tendency as a lack of love for the lost child. She needs to hear that this is the farthest thing from the truth.

On the other hand, if the man is deliberately holding his grief back, he needs to tell her that as well. Openness and honesty between the two gives a far better chance of moving forward together. Each, when within a relationship of strong love, can be instrumental in helping the other partner process the loss once there is an understanding of what is happening inside the other's Griefcase.

You should also share what you have learned about the common differences in how men and women tend to express emotions, especially in grief. These patterns are not absolute, as many men express grief more openly and many women process more privately. The more typical averages, however, are real enough that they create friction when left unexplained and not limited to the days immediately after the loss.

Common male tendencies may include instinctively trying to hold back the emotions of grief, subconsciously feeling personally or socially inadequate, delaying grief because of guilt or the need to support others, grieving more inwardly when it does arrive, attempting to control any outward show of emotion, and immersing himself in work or physical activity as a way to cope.

Common female tendencies include showing emotions more externally, exhibiting lengthy periods of open crying, looking to others to measure the appropriateness of their own emotions, talking a great deal about the loss, and becoming more active in organizations or support groups.

With these diverse expressions of emotion, a man may have difficulty understanding the outward crying and repeated demonstrations of pain from his wife. She may feel resentment that he seems less tortured, or she may feel alienated as the only one who speaks aloud about the child.

These animosities often go undiscussed early on, because neither person wants to "attack" the other while the pain is still raw. Yet unresolved feelings only grow in intensity and tend to surface later in more uncontrolled and harmful ways.

Neither the man nor the woman is inappropriately grieving the loss. Open discussions about what each is actually feeling goes a long way toward moving forward together. A healthy, loving relationship will actually become stronger when challenged by tragedy and both choose to stay present rather than pull away from the other.

LOSS OF SPOUSE OR PARTNER

In a strong relationship, one partner may not fully realize how much the other contributes to daily life, emotionally, practically, and in the quiet running of the home, until that person is gone.

With the loss of your spouse or partner, you must deal with the deep emotional weight of their absence while also taking on sole responsibility for the household and any children. If there are children, whether still living at home or grown and on their own, each of them will carry a Griefcase of their own.

Minor children will need help with their grief, and that role now primarily falls to you. However, you may still be heavily involved in early preparations or overwhelmed by your own painful feelings. In that case, it may become essential to seek some level of initial support for the children from trusted friends and relatives.

Children also need to be able to discuss the loss. As hard as it will be, give them the facts surrounding the passing, including your own feelings. Listen to what they have to say and be prepared to hear and discuss the same thing over and over again.

When you talk with your children, correct any misunderstandings that they may have formed and never offer half-truths simply to spare them pain. A child's grief, like yours, will last the rest of their life and can resurface at unexpected times. In adulthood, the discovery that even a small white lie was told in childhood can create new grief issues that might have been avoided.

Children of varying ages understand death in different ways. Surprisingly, many of them can be more matter of fact about death than adults. Regardless of age, quietly sit down with them, preferably at home, and discuss the loss as reasonably soon as you can.

Be aware that a child's grief is often accompanied by anxieties and fears. They may be turning over thoughts such as:

~ Does everyone die who gets sick or hurt?
~ Did Mommy (or Daddy) die because of something I did?
~ Will you die now too?
~ Am I going to die now?
~ Who will look after me now?

Be prepared to answer these questions, and others, as openly and honestly as you can. Even if children do not show it, they need to feel safe and secure. The sudden loss of a parent can shake that sense of security to its foundation.

If the children want to attend the funeral services, you can let them. Kids as young as two and a half can often understand the idea of saying goodbye. Answer their questions. They may want to know what is happening with the parent who died and whether that person is being cared for properly.

Infant children up to the age of two will recognize the absence of a parent when that parent is suddenly gone. Between the ages of two and three, a child will often expect the parent to reappear at any moment. From three to five, they grow more accustomed to the absence yet may still believe that someday the parent is coming back.

Throughout childhood, the death of a parent can set a child apart from peers at school and create additional stress. Certain times of the year, such as birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, or other family holidays, may be especially sensitive. Make sure child-care providers and teachers know about the loss and the dates when extra watchfulness may help.

Use caution in their younger years not to give the impression that the parent was "taken" by God or went to live in Heaven. That framing can create anger and blame toward God and lead to long-term spiritual difficulties for some children.

As children reach preadolescence and beyond, most develop a more rational concept of death. If you observe negative behavior that seems tied to the loss, directly talk about it, but do not allow grief to become a permanent excuse for harmful behavior.

With teenagers, the loss of a parent can add weight to the ordinary pressures of adolescence, so do not be surprised if they seek

guidance from friends outside the home. Be aware that this is not a judgment on you.

You should be more observant about behavioral issues such as drug or alcohol use. These are often offered in normal peer-pressure settings. A strong home life helps teens make the healthier choice, yet that choice can become harder after a parent loss, when their self-esteem is low.

Throughout childhood, make sure everyone knows it is always okay to talk about the loss and the parent who died. Children carry their own Griefcase, so while you are dealing with yours, you will still need to help them arrange and lighten theirs.

Grown children living outside the home also carry a Griefcase. They may grieve either openly or more privately, and they may closely watch to see how you are handling the loss. Be prepared for differences in how each of them express grief. Sit down with them and tell them exactly how you feel and how you are grieving. Sharing what you are experiencing inside can lighten their Griefcase as well as yours.

Whether they appear to be holding in their grief or expressing it freely, let them know it is safe to talk about the parent they lost and about the emotions they are carrying. They have lost someone very dear to them and are still learning how to carry that weight.

LOSS OF AN EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBER

There are so many possible combinations of loss within an extended family that no single section can cover them all. The common denominator is that each survivor, including you, will carry a Griefcase. How heavy that burden feels depends on the closeness of the relationship and the amount of love that was shared.

A wife may lose a parent, a brother, or a sister. While the husband may have warm feelings and some level of love for the departed, she will almost certainly be more devastated than him. She will need his support and may expect him to feel the pain as deeply as she does.

The husband may lose someone on his side of the family. The wife may express a great deal of grief, yet much of that pain may be exclusively for him and the other family members, rather than solely for the deceased. She is an empathizer, and her Griefcase may be filled more with concerns for others than with her own.

You can add many other variations of relationships and closeness, yet the essential point remains the same: others will carry a Griefcase and you must be respectful of that fact.

Awareness of one another's Griefcase does not remove the weight, yet it can keep you from adding to it and can keep the family from unnecessary strain, as each is still learning how to carry what they cannot leave behind.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Have one direct conversation with your partner this week. Tell him or her exactly how you are grieving, what you feel inside, what you are holding back, and what you need. Ask them the same questions and listen without defending or fixing. Use the differences in how men and women tend to express grief as a starting point, not as a debate.

~ Sit down with your children and give them a clear and honest update. Correct any misunderstandings they may have. Answer their questions, including the hard ones about whether you will die

or who will take care of them. Make it clear that talking about the person who died is always allowed.

~ Identify one extended family member who may be carrying a heavier Griefcase than you realized. Reach out with a short, sincere message that acknowledges their loss and yours. You do not have to match their level of visible emotion but let them know you see that they are carrying something too.

~ Protect time for your own Griefcase while you support others. Choose one concrete action, such as a walk, time in the garage, a page in a journal, or a quiet hour alone, that you will do for yourself this week so supporting your family does not become another way of avoiding your own grief.

~ Write down one sentence you can use when someone expects you to more openly grieve. Something simple and true, such as "I care about them and this hurts, even if I don't show it the way others do." Having the words ready reduces the chance that unspoken pressure will add weight to both your Griefcase and theirs.

CHAPTER TEN ~ TAKING YOUR GRIEFCASE TO WORK

There is no grief like the grief that does not speak.
~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

No matter what personal devastations come in life, the world continues to turn. You and I, Griefcase in hand, are part of that turning. For most of us, that means returning to work often sooner than feels right or wise. The sense of responsibility we carry tells us we must show up, do what is expected, and take care of others, even while we are still trying to understand the loss in our hearts.

While the loss of a spouse or partner often occurs later in life, the death of a parent or the devastating loss of a child frequently arrives during the years when many survivors are at the height of their careers.

You will return to the office, factory floor, classroom, or wherever your work takes place, and it may feel nearly impossible at first. Whatever the reason for returning early, or after an extended absence, you will be reentering an environment that requires self-preparation and understanding.

RETURNING TO WORK

"When you come to work, leave your home life at the door." We often hear that, yet nothing could be farther from the truth. Even before your loss, you carried the emotions, pressures, and private concerns of your personal life into the workplace each day. That is simply human nature. Now you also carry your Griefcase.

The first task is to be easy on yourself. You have a great deal on your mind and a heavy case in your hand. Expect to be more distracted and less productive for a while. As you begin to move forward, remain aware that your focus, memory, and reflexes may not respond as quickly as they once did.

If you feel fatigued, overwhelmed, or unfocused, tell your supervisor or other appropriate person that you need a little more time before taking on a particular task. Do not resume work that requires full attention until you are confident you can safely and competently do it.

Once you have returned, meet with leadership, even if you are the one in charge. Tasks still need to be completed, and some carry risks or sensitive consequences. The more you can clearly describe how you are doing, the better others can adjust resources and expectations around you.

The average worker in the United States will spend approximately 90,000 hours on the job throughout their life. Many of us will spend more waking hours with coworkers than with those at home. Relationships form in that time, and a number of those people genuinely care about you.

Before you walk back in, ask your supervisor to speak with your coworkers about your loss. Some will have attended the services and know the details. Others will have heard only fragments of it. Still, others will know almost nothing and want to know more.

On your return to the floor, if coworkers know little about your loss, you may find yourself speaking of the details several times to those who want to offer comfort. As noted earlier, this can be emotionally draining. Do not push past your current comfort level.

Be careful with the part of you that wants to appear strong and quickly recovered, especially if others look to you for steadiness. The loss of a loved one is greater than most difficulties the workplace has prepared you to handle. Reminding yourself of that fact can keep the urge to fully perform from overriding the need to be honest about where you are.

Be patient with coworkers as well. Some may not know how to act or what to say. They want to be supportive, particularly if they see you as part of their team, yet they may feel awkward or afraid of saying the wrong thing. If someone does say something unhelpful, remember that it is almost never said with malice.

Some will say nothing at all. Mortality makes people uncomfortable. Your loss can place them, even briefly, in the imagined position of losing someone they love. If a coworker has unresolved grief of their own, facing you may reopen pains they are not ready to meet.

It would be rare for a workmate who has already experienced a significant loss and is moving forward themselves, to avoid you entirely. They may give you space out of respect, but they usually will not disappear. They have felt the weight and generally know how to move with and around you.

As time passes, many at work will appear to quickly "get over" your loss. In a relatively short period, it may seem almost forgotten

by them. Forgive them. They do not go home with you. They do not live the altered daily life you now live. Nothing in their own homes or routines has changed.

Because coworkers are not directly affected by your loss, the memory of it will quickly fade for them, along with the awareness that you may still be in significant pain. This is not cruelty. From the outside, you may look functional again. You may even be functional for stretches of the day. What others cannot see is that you are never without the Griefcase. The emotions inside still arrive in waves, and those waves often demand attention no matter where you are or what you are doing.

People who have not experienced a traumatic loss often do not understand this. To them, you had the loss, felt the pain, and seemingly returned to the person you were, because that is what you are showing on the outside. When a wave hits and you need a moment, a break, or a quieter day, do not be surprised if some, including supervisors, wonder why you cannot simply "get over it."

Let the people who lead know that the influences of grief do not disappear on a schedule. You can say, calmly and directly, that there may be times ahead when you need a little consideration, such as an occasional day, a short walk, or a few minutes of privacy. These accommodations tend to protect productivity rather than reduce it.

An employee who is given room to manage the waves is usually more reliable over time than one who is expected to pretend the waves do not exist. If no understanding is available, it is reasonable to consider whether a different workplace would better support the long work of healing.

A job change may be difficult, if not impossible, but know that your emotions will continue in waves for some time. The intensity may lessen, but the waves will still come. You do not want them to create harm for you or for others on the job. While it is natural to

care about the opinions of employers and coworkers, your greater concern must be a healing and sustainable future for yourself.

WORK AS A DISTRACTION

In the first few days after loss, very well-meaning people may have urged you to "take care of yourself." For some, this might be taken as advice to stay busy. After all, returning to familiar tasks and throwing yourself into the job can feel like a responsible way to keep the mind occupied with something other than the pain.

You may have also been told that time heals all wounds. While this is not reality in loss, the mind may want to believe that at first. On the strength of that hope, however, it is tempting to fully dive back into the job and trust that enough distraction will make the pain fade before you have to directly face it.

In practice, it may be some time before you can work without the emotions within your Griefcase heavily weighing on your heart. Pushing an emotion away, however, does not weaken it. Often, the feeling only returns with greater force and demands full attention at a moment when you cannot easily give it, such as during a task that requires precision, safety, or sustained focus.

Returning to work at full intensity can also be an attempt to regain a sense of control. The death itself was outside of your control. Your job, by contrast, is an area where you have skill and some measure of influence. It is natural to try to replace the helplessness of the loss with visible competence at work.

If you notice yourself staying later than usual, skipping breaks, or gradually becoming a workaholic, recognize that these patterns delay rather than advance healing. The emotions in the Griefcase need to be faced if you are to continue moving forward. Distraction

may offer temporary relief, but it does not empty the case. Keep it open, even on the days when work feels like a safer place to be.

BEREAVEMENT LEAVE

Most employers offer only a few days of paid bereavement leave. Three days is still the common average, even for the death of an immediate family member. In the United States, the Department of Labor does not require it. What a company provides is a matter of policy, and that policy is usually written for consistency rather than for the needs of individual employees.

Some employers will let you add earned vacation, sick, or personal days on top of bereavement leave. Others will pay for the short bereavement leave and then allow unpaid time. Policies differ by the size of the organization and the impact of any single absence.

Do not be surprised if a company strictly holds to its written policy. In a litigious world, making an exception for one employee while denying it to another can create legal risk. Many organizations choose consistency over flexibility for that reason.

If you are still in the early days of loss and have not yet returned, take every day your employer will allow, paid or unpaid, if your financial circumstances permit. If your work affects the safety or outcomes of others, speak with the right leaders and try to negotiate additional time off or a gradual return. Being clear about what you need is part of protecting both yourself and the workplace.

If you have already returned, the same limits still apply. Many people go back before they are ready because the granted leave was short, they felt pressure to resume normal duties, or they had need of uninterrupted income. That does not mean the decision was wrong. It means the system is limited.

What matters now is recognizing where you are and protecting yourself inside the constraints you have. Being clear about what you still need, whether that is a reduced schedule, a temporary change in duties, or simply the right to step away when a wave hits, is part of carrying the Griefcase while you work.

COMPANY INVOLVEMENT IN GRIEF

A few major U.S. companies are beginning to recognize that supporting bereaved employees in the workplace improves overall morale, welfare, and ultimately, profits. Perhaps they became aware that a study by the Grief Recovery Institute estimated that U.S. businesses annually lose an average of $71 billion to grief-related impacts on the job.

Adjusted for inflation, as that well-excepted study is over two decades old, the figure is now well above $100 billion of grief impact each year, and little has changed in support by the majority of organizations. Regardless, the underlying data largely came from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Vital Statistics and was not based solely on subjective surveys.

The measured impacts of the recently bereaved included trouble concentrating on the job, which raises the risk of workplace accidents and workers' compensation claims. They also had more unscheduled absences, were less productive, and showed less creativity. Morale and motivation dropped. Conflicts between employees and managers increased. Companies paid to hire and train more replacements. Customers and partners were disrupted. Counseling costs went up. Turnover rose. Memory suffered, and moods or behavior became harder to predict.

The National Institutes of Health reports that each year an average of five percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 65 will

lose a spouse, child, or parent. As a result, a large company with 100,000 employees stands to experience approximately 5,000 employees suffering a profound loss at home each and every year.

Also, the CDC tells us that around one million recognized miscarriages, plus another 20,000 stillbirths occur each year in the United States. These grieving mothers all fit within the working age of the average employee and are a large part of the American workforce.

Further, many employes over a multi-decade career will experience the loss of more than one immediate family member during their service to the company. This is all a great deal of grief influencing the workplace.

Businesses that recognize the negative workplace realities of grief are seeking help beyond a basic Employee Assistance Program. Some now bring in specialized grief-support organizations or counselors to train executives, managers, and front-line supervisors. Some are sponsoring peer-to-peer grief support groups at the jobsite to provide a compassionate workplace for those who need it.

The goal is practical: reduce accidents, protect productivity, and retain good employees. Further, these compassionate and forward-thinking companies are providing their bereaved staff with a safe and supportive path through the pains of carrying their Griefcase.

As you move forward, you may find yourself in a position to encourage this kind of awareness and support inside your own workplace. An employer that understands grief does not just "go away" provides an environment that is safe and more stable for all employees and, yes, is ultimately more profitable as well.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ Name your current work constraint - Write one sentence that describes the single biggest limit you are facing at work right now (short leave, pressure to appear fine, safety-sensitive tasks, or the urge to stay busy). Keep the sentence short and specific. This keeps the Griefcase visible instead of letting it hide inside the job.

~ Prepare one clear sentence - Draft a short, calm statement you can use when a wave hits: "Grief still visits me. I need ten minutes." Practice saying it once out loud so it is available when you need it. Do not wait until you are already overwhelmed to find the words.

~ Schedule one recovery pause - Before the end of the week, block ten minutes on your calendar for a private break with no attached task. Use it only to open the Griefcase and name the loudest folder. Protect the time the same way you would protect a meeting.

~ Tell one person the real timeline - Speak with your supervisor or one trusted coworker and say, in your own words, that grief does not follow a fixed schedule and that you may need occasional short breaks or a lighter load on certain days. Keep it factual. You are not asking for special treatment; you are reducing the chance of harm or error.

~ Check the distraction pattern - At the end of one workday this week, note whether you stayed later, skipped breaks, or kept yourself busier than usual to avoid feeling the loss. Write one sentence about what you observed. If the pattern is present, choose one small way to interrupt it the next day. Distraction does not empty the Griefcase.

CHAPTER ELEVEN ~ THREE PERILS IN THE GRIEF-CASE

To spare oneself from grief at all cost can be achieved only at the price of total detachment, which excludes the ability to experience happiness.

~ Erich Fromm

Within each Griefcase, there are three heavy emotional reactions to the loss of a loved one that can immediately present themselves. Caustic on their own, if combining with other early feelings found in grief, they can become overwhelmingly destructive. These three emotions are Despair, Guilt, and Anger.

DESPAIR

Given the potential for physical risk to the griever, we must first take on the feeling of despair. Despair is defined simply as one's "complete loss of hope." It is normally when someone has gone through a succession of actions or considerations which lead them to the perceived conclusion that nothing can be done to improve a dire situation.

Despair can sometimes wrongfully lead a person to also believe there is no longer a reason for living. For those grieving the loss of a loved one, life before was "normal." It went on day by day with the loved one right there. Afterward, the awareness that life, as it was, would never be the same again can be traumatic.

This may be further complicated when the newly bereaved consider their future without that someone who was a major part of their anticipated life. Not only is the future a conscious concept, but so confident is the heart in that future, that it subconsciously relies on it and acts on it as well.

Suddenly, that loved one is taken, along with a daily life filled with immediate love, affection, companionship, support, and so much more that was mutually shared. The future, which the bereaved trusted would always include loving and being loved by the departed, is now thought to be gone.

The misperception that love is gone and the future is no longer there can be disparaging on its own. Now, blending in shock, insecurity, fear, anger, and probably confusion, it can be understandable to have passing thoughts of despair. Understandable, but not acceptable.

In this case, passing thoughts of ending it all because of despair should not be left alone. Like all other emotions, it, if ignored, will eventually find its way into your subconscious, where destructive actions might be taken on your behalf and without your conscious control.

If despair does reside in your subconscious, then it becomes self-perpetuating and speeds up a path to harm. With despair acting on your behalf, every bit of light or hope that might come your way is snuffed out before you have an opportunity to consider it with conscious thought.

Although not so much due to despair, there is another urge that could lead the newly bereaved to consider taking dire actions.

Initial thoughts of "joining" a lost loved one may pass through the mind early in loss. Many have stated they simply could not imagine living without the one they love.

Often those that are deeply loved are interwoven into every fabric of one's life. When they leave, so does the physical connection of seeing and interacting with them each day. The thought of openly giving and receiving that unconditional love seems to be gone too. It is not, however, as unconditional love never goes away.

As you move forward, especially early in grief, the thought of joining your loved one might only be a passing thought but let it be just that. Let it pass and be aware that you will see your loved one again.

I am convinced that you are here to begin the path to moving forward, although it will not be easy. Despair may often try to get in your way. Remember, you do not want it to hide in the darkness of your mind. There will be times in the future when things seem more difficult than anything you have ever faced, and it may seem hard to go on.

You will, however, go on. You have your own plan with the Creator and life is about living, regardless of the hardships. That unconditional love you feel for the one you lost here on earth will never go away. While it may be hard to believe now, the love and the memories that you share will give you even more strength in the future.

Turn to your family members, your faith community, and close friends for love and support. Open your Griefcase and the Unconditional Love folder it holds to mitigate any despair you might feel. Also, look to the many grief and bereavement support groups meeting in your area, in person or online. Reach out to them for aid. If you want to witness others who have been down your path, including despair, but now live a meaningful life filled with joy, you will find them there.

If despair becomes overwhelming or suicidal thoughts persist, please put down this book right now, call a crisis line, tell a family member, and seek immediate help from a mental health professional.

Your life is well worth living. You have felt a love that will never die. Let that love keep you moving forward toward peace and purpose.

GUILT

Guilt can be an extremely negative and invasive emotion in grief and can keep us from the task of facing the other emotions in the Griefcase. With the passing of a loved one, most likely it is False-Guilt. It is self-blame for an action, lack of action, or even words which one feels, erroneously, led up to or allowed the death to happen.

Earlier in this book, we discussed the question of why. As we know, this is the question that has no answer, yet it does not diminish our urge to search for one. That powerful question, which tugs at our hearts, often begins for some at the very moment someone is lost.

To make it more difficult, many times the cause of a loss is not immediately known, and this does not sit well on the heart or the mind. One of the inherent traits of humans is to find a reason for an unwanted outcome. Deep down in our DNA, most of us want to understand why it happened, if only to answer that ugly question.

Unfortunately, that means that when the cause of death remains unknown and the silent urge inside screams for reason, you must find something or someone to blame. The mind tells you there must be a starting point to understanding and rationalizing the cause. When nothing else can be pointed to, watch out, as you

may falsely point to yourself. Since nothing else makes sense, you convince yourself it must have been something you did, or did not do, that caused such a horrible thing to happen.

Guilt can be incredibly powerful. Even when the cause of loss is known, many newly bereaved will still go back before the death and establish self-guilt. Something you said or some action taken, surely contributed to the death. You do this because the passing of your loved one happened outside of your control, and at your very core, you need control.

Assigning self-guilt also means you believe you can begin to understand why the loss occurred, even if only in some small way. Additionally, your inherent traits urge you to immediately take action when something traumatic happens, and assigning blame to yourself allows for that, even if that means wrongfully punishing yourself.

Take just a moment to consider the definition of "guilt" in criminal law. For a court to find someone guilty of an accused crime, there had to be intent to commit the criminal act. The accused had to willfully and purposely know he or she was committing a crime when it was carried out.

Malice has to be present for a conviction in a criminal act as well. Malice is the desire to do ill-will against another. You will not, however, find your own malice in the death of your loved one. What you will find, instead, is that whatever you did or did not do, said, or did not say, you certainly had no intent or malice in what happened to your loved one. Think about it. Regardless of what caused your loved one's passing, would you ever do anything to intentionally cause them harm? The answer, of course, is no.

Guilt is almost certainly a folder in your Griefcase as you begin moving forward in this healing journey. As you work through shock and confusion, make sure you recognize your natural traits for taking action and ensure that does not lead you down a path of

falsely blaming yourself.

Again, turn back to Unconditional Love in your heart and in your Griefcase, and remind yourself there is nothing you could have ever done to wish or cause the loss. The guilt is simply false and, therefore, keeping you from healthfully addressing the other emotions in the Griefcase.

ANGER

Anger is both a normal and healthy emotion, even after the loss of a loved one. It would actually be unusual if you were not angry, regardless of how your loved one passed away. It is a powerful part of human emotions, and you have lost someone you dearly love. Anger was most likely in your Griefcase when you got it.

There may be very valid reasons for anger, as well. While the vast majority of our loved ones pass from natural causes, there are those who did not. Medical errors, delayed diagnosis, negligence, violence, suicide, or an accident caused by someone else's actions can all generate justified anger toward doctors, systems, other people, or circumstances.

First and foremost, you cannot allow your anger to physically harm yourself or others. You never want to let it come to that. If wrongs must be righted, you will do no good to yourself or others if you are incapacitated in a hospital bed, or worse yet, in jail.

Second, you cannot allow anger to block out the need to face your grief. Anger can be a very powerful emotion. Allowing it to occupy all your thoughts, though, might actually seem emotionally inviting. When simultaneously hit with several painful grief emotions, it could be very easy to convince yourself that all your thoughts need to be focused on anger.

It cannot be said enough that, especially in early grief, emotions do not come just one at a time. You might be hit with many all at once, in what seems like a never-ending barrage of intense feelings. This is often what evokes confusion in grief, and you might wrongly turn to anger as a tool to push confusion away.

If the passing of your loved one was the result of an action that justifies your anger, you must find a way to channel it away from physical or mental harm to yourself or others. Find someone who will let you get angry. As a grief support advocate for others, this is part of what I do. I invite the angry bereaved to channel their wrath through me.

You might also do the age-old practice of hitting the gym and taking it out on the heavy bag. Go out to the workshop and build something, or destroy something no longer needed. Breaking things on purpose can be incredibly therapeutic, as long as you do not wrongfully harm anything or anyone in the exercise, including yourself.

If less physical actions will help, think of a role model in your past with an even disposition and imagine yourself in his or her shoes. Go for a walk in the woods or a drive to no place in particular. Consider taking up meditation and focusing on your emotions. Do not judge them, though. Just label them positive or negative.

Anger can actually be channeled to very good outcomes. Healthfully directed anger over a child's death caused by a drunk driver once started a powerful social movement still influencing the United States today.

The energy from the mother's anger allowed her to organize other families, lobby for tougher laws, and help change public attitudes toward drinking and driving. Within a very few years, her new organization, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, contributed to an extreme drop in alcohol-related traffic deaths, showing that yes, even grief-anger can be used for good.

Anger is understandable and expected in grief. Do not let it keep you from you Griefcase and delay you from your journey of moving forward.

FALSE-ANGER

Anger is a common response when loss hits this hard. It can arrive quickly, especially when the pain feels unbearable, and it often serves as a short-term defense that interrupts the hurt, even if only for a moment.

In the early days after loss, however, that anger is frequently based on incomplete information, sudden assumptions, or the raw confusion that comes with shock. What feels like a clear reason to be furious may later prove to have been only partly true, or not true at all.

Anger can also land on doctors, nurses, or other people involved in the final days, sometimes before the full facts are known. Because confusion is usually the strongest right after loss, it is easy to lock onto an explanation that feels certain in the moment and then stay angry at it long after new details appear.

This is the kind of anger that needs careful handling. It is real in the sense that you feel it, yet it can be built on shifting ground. New information, new memories, and new emotions continue to surface for a long time.

If you treat every early surge of anger as settled fact, it can harden into something that weighs down your Griefcase and slows your movement forward. Face the anger when it comes but stay willing to revisit it as more becomes clear.

You may also feel anger at the person who died for leaving you to face life alone. Think it through, though. In most cases your dear loved one did not choose to leave you. Even when the death was

by suicide, where it can feel as if they deliberately chose to leave, the decision was almost always driven by overwhelming pain, mental impairment, or a distorted belief that others would be better off without them. It was not a free or rational choice to abandon you.

Your anger, while seemingly real, cannot change what has already happened. Holding it against your lost loved one only keeps you tied to the moment of loss and turning it on yourself only deepens a wound that was never yours to carry. The harder, quieter work is to let the anger surface long enough to be named, then release it without demanding that either of you should have been able to stop death.

The immediate goal is not to deny the feeling of anger. It is to keep it from allowing an unhealthful response or incomplete picture to close your Griefcase before you have had the chance to sort what actually belongs inside of it.

OTHER EMOTIONAL PERILS

There could be other very troublesome folders in your Griefcase, and one of them is Regret. It may be different from guilt, but when extremely intense, can often be referred to, and as difficult as guilt. It is an emotion comprised of earlier actions or words, done, or undone, between you and your lost loved one.

These actions or words typically came before your loved one passed and are normally unresolved relationship issues. However, they could be so painful or sensitive after a loss that they keep you from moving forward in grief.

To give an example, I will use the passing of my own dear mother. I certainly had unconditional love for her, but in the latter part of her life I was not around as much as I could have been. While I had the opportunity to visit often, I simply took it for

granted that my mother would always be there.

From the very moment she passed, the intense regret of not spending more time with my mother lived in my heart and remained there for a long time. The regret had nothing to do with her passing, but it certainly created an emotional folder in my Griefcase and played a large role in keeping me from dealing with my grief for her.

Long after her funeral, I would often think of my mother, but feeling the painful sting of regret caused me to consciously chase her from my mind. As a result, dealing with her loss was held back because I simply did not want to face the painful thoughts of regret. It attacked my ego and it emotionally hurt me.

How many other examples could be given? Maybe a father that passed away and it had been years since he was told by his son how much he was loved. Maybe a daughter that unexpectedly died while at college, yet during the last phone conversation with her grandmother was only chastised for poor grades.

These are sorrowful examples, of course, but you could easily think of a dozen more if asked. Remember this instead; those examples can easily be mislabeled as guilt. Yet guilt is something that has a direct cause and is done with malice. Instead, these and other similar examples are actually the emotion of regret.

Along with regret, Shame is a similarly powerful emotion, yet it has its distinct difference. Shame is the painful emotion in which one feels that some aspect of themselves is fundamentally flawed, inadequate, or unworthy.

In child loss, a father may believe he failed to protect his child. Worse, he may feel shame if he happens to break down in front of coworkers. A mother who experiences a miscarriage might feel inadequate as a woman and unable to do what other women can naturally do. She may feel shame for still being alive when her child is not.

In these and similar examples, shame must be addressed in its emotional folder inside the Griefcase. There, it may even be identified as another false or unnecessary weight. Either way, avoiding it means avoiding your feelings and not moving forward.

If there are any positives to regret and shame, it includes knowing they are intended to help you develop as a good person. The mind urges you to feel them after inappropriate actions in order to understand how you should have acted. Without these two emotions, you might consider truly poor behavior committed today as normal and acceptable behavior tomorrow.

While grieving, any regret and shame may be painful, and you may want to stop their hurt by completely shutting down the thoughts which brought them on. Unfortunately, the only way to do that may be by shutting down the grief process altogether, and you do not want to do that.

Regret and shame, whether true or false, can also attack your ego. If you have Edged God Out of your life with ego, then regret and shame can easily attack your self-esteem. This is another threat for shutting out your grief.

Shutting out your grief, even for a moment, means closing the Griefcase as well. That keeps it heavy and no less a burden than it was earlier. It also means that you never learn the intended purpose for the emotions of regret and shame, so you live in a repeating cycle of a false you.

Open your Griefcase and face any regret and shame head on. You will absolutely have to do this to move forward in your journey toward peace and purpose.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON OUR PERILS

Early on, despair, guilt, and anger can be three of the heaviest folders you may find in your Griefcase, and each one can slow your progress on its own. When they arrive together, or when regret and shame join them, the weight can feel almost unbearable. The danger is not that these emotions exist. The danger is that you will close the Griefcase to escape them and then wonder why the burden never lightens inside your heart.

You have already begun the work of naming them. Despair is the unfounded loss of hope, not the final word on your life. Guilt, in nearly every case after a loss, is false and built on the mind's desperate need for an explanation and control. Anger is both normal and healthy when it is honestly faced, yet it becomes destructive when allowed to harden around incomplete facts or when it is used to push every other emotion away.

Regret and shame may sting the ego, but they are not proof that you are fundamentally flawed. They are simply more folders that need to be opened, examined, and kept from running the rest of the case.

None of these emotions will lighten because you ignore them. They will, however, lose their power over you when you keep returning to the Griefcase, name what is inside, and refuse to let any single folder slam the lid shut.

The unconditional love you shared with the one you lost is still present. It does not cancel the pain, but it can keep you oriented toward the path ahead. Your life still has purpose. The work now is to keep the Griefcase open long enough for that purpose to become visible to you again.

NEXT STEPS FROM THIS CHAPTER

~ If you have had thoughts of not wanting to live, tell one trusted person today and contact a mental health professional or crisis line. Do not wait for the thoughts to become stronger.

~ Write down the strongest perilous emotion you felt this week (despair, guilt, anger, regret, or shame) and one sentence that describes what triggered it. Then write a second sentence that asks whether the feeling is based on complete information or on early confusion.

~ Identify one piece of self-blame you have been carrying and test it against the standard of intent and malice. Ask yourself, aloud if possible: "Did I ever intend to harm the person I lost?" Record the answer.

~ Choose one physical or quiet outlet for anger this week (a workout, a drive, a walk, time in a workshop, or a conversation with someone who can tolerate the feeling). Use it once and notice whether the anger softens or simply moves.

~ Open your Griefcase for ten minutes. Name every emotion that is present, including any regret or shame. Then close the time by reminding yourself of one specific memory of unconditional love you shared with that dear one who passed away.

Chapter Twelve ~ Definitions in the Griefcase

Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
love leaves a memory no one can steal.
~ From a Headstone in Ireland

Moving forward after loss is certainly difficult. It can be even more so when kind-hearted people give advice and frequently use words or terms not normally part of our past. Knowing the meaning of more common ones can make the path a little clearer and help you from feeling lost when the emotions inside your Griefcase grow heavy.

The definitions below are given as they apply to the loss of a loved one. Some of these words carry other meanings outside this book, but those meanings are not included here.

Moving Forward

Moving forward is not moving on. Moving on means leaving the hurt, the memories, and your lost loved one behind in order to resume what you believe to be a normal, emotionally pain free life.

Moving forward is the personal act of facing the deeply painful emotions inside our grief so that none of them leave you stuck in a constant state of anguish, fear, anxiety, or confusion.

It is one of the most important ideas in recovering from the loss of a loved one. Moving forward means you choose to address each emotion on purpose, even while you know the process will be difficult and take time. The decision to keep moving forward should stay with you throughout the journey. Without it, the Griefcase remains closed and the weight inside has no chance to lighten.

We never move on. We are moving forward with our precious loved ones always on our minds and in our hearts.

GRIEF

Grief is not, in itself, an emotion. Nor is it a personality or mental disorder. The word "Grief" comes from the Latin *gravare*, meaning to be burdened, loaded, or oppressed. It is the normal and natural response to loss and can include a wide range of intense emotional reactions.

The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be. The deeper the love, the heavier the grief. There is no fixed time limit. Each person processes the emotions inside grief on their own reasonable schedule.

Emotionally, grief can bring sadness, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, or sudden mood swings. Cognitively, you may first experience disbelief or an inability to take in the reality of the death. Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who died is common.

Physically, grief can show up as tears, a tight throat, heaviness in the chest, emptiness or churning in the stomach, fatigue, weakness, restlessness, insomnia, or unexplained pain.

In early grief, mental functioning is often disrupted. Some people experience symptoms that resemble post-traumatic stress or difficulty with attention and focus. Socially, you may feel a strong need for companionship and support, or you may withdraw and isolate. Spiritually, grief can challenge long-held assumptions about safety, fairness, justice, or even the existence of God.

MOURNING

The word "Mourn" comes from the Middle English *mournen*. One suggested meaning is simply "to remember."

Mourning refers to the rituals and customs a society recognizes after a death. Examples include wearing black, lowering flags to half-staff, wearing a black armband, sending flowers, and attending funeral or memorial services.

Although cultures widely differ, mourning is usually observed for a period of time during which the survivor and close relations withdraw from ordinary activities and show quiet, respectful behavior toward the person who died. The process is intended to help the bereaved face the reality that their loved one is gone and begin, slowly, to accommodate that fact into a daily, functional life.

BEREAVEMENT

The word "Bereave" comes from the Old English word *berēafian*, meaning to rob, to deprive, or to seize. In this sense, bereavement is not simply the experience of missing someone. It is the state of having been taken from. When death removes a person you love, you are left deprived of their presence, their voice, and their place in your life. That is what it means to be bereaved.

Bereavement is the overall experience of both grief and mourning after a death. Grief refers to the emotional reaction to the loss, while bereavement refers to the state of having lost someone. When a person is grieving and participating in mourning, they are described as bereaved.

ACUTE GRIEF

Acute grief is the intense, immediate response that typically follows a significant loss. It is often marked by debilitating waves of emotion, such as shock, longing, sadness, and anger, along with physical symptoms such as fatigue, disrupted sleep, and changes in appetite. Concentration and ordinary functioning become difficult.

Acute grief is usually strongest in the first days, weeks, and sometimes months after the death. It can feel overwhelming, yet it remains a natural reaction to the reality of our loss.

There is no true fixed timetable for how long acute grief lasts. For many, the sharpest intensity begins to ease within the first few days or weeks, yet some remain in that raw, consuming stage for a longer period. The length of time depends on the nature of the loss, the relationship that was shared, the circumstances surrounding the death, and the support available afterward.

While we all grieve on our own timeline, there does come a reasonable point when the bereaved should healthfully move out of acute grief. A failure to do so becomes "Complicated Grief," where the intensity has remained locked in place long past the point where daily functioning should return. If so, he or she may need additional support to help from the overwhelming acute state into the more integrated, normal grief.

NORMAL GRIEF

Normal grief, also called uncomplicated or typical grief, is the natural process of adapting to loss over time. It includes the full range of emotions and reactions that appear in acute grief, yet these gradually become less constant and less disruptive as the loss is integrated into daily life.

Normal grief does not follow a fixed timeline or a set of stages. It initially moves in waves. It allows extended moments of relief or connection to exist alongside the pain. It does not prevent one from eventually re-engaging with relationships, work, and daily life in a meaningful way. As time goes by, one will experience normal grief at some intensity for the remainder of life, although it loses the ability to debilitate.

COMPLICATED GRIEF

Complicated grief is a condition in which a person remains caught in deep, debilitating thoughts well beyond the early period of loss. Signs can include continually replaying the circumstances of the death, incessantly worrying about the consequences, or persistently avoiding any reminder of the loss.

In complicated grief, the finality and consequences of the death may feel impossible to accept, which leads to ongoing avoidance and despondency. Professional support is recommended.

Complicated grief occurs in approximately seven percent of people after a traumatic loss and should be addressed so that moving forward can begin.

UNRESOLVED GRIEF

Unresolved grief occurs when one or more emotions inside the Griefcase are either avoided altogether or become so incapacitating that they occasionally interfere with one's ability to handle daily responsibilities.

Unresolved grief can arise for many reasons. Guilt is one of the most powerful and can keep the bereaved from facing the pain. A new loss can reopen unresolved grief from the past. Multiple losses at once can create a burden that feels impossible to process.

Unresolved grief can hold one back from moving forward and lead to psychological and physical problems. Common signs include avoiding:

~ Talking about the loss at all
~ Memories of the person who died, even good ones
~ Places and events once shared with them
~ Photographs or other reminders
~ Locations or occasions that bring the person to mind

Unresolved grief should be addressed with focused support from family members, the faith community, grief support organizations, or professional counseling.

CLOSING WORDS

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.
We are spiritual beings having a human experience.
~ Dr. Wayne Dyer

It is my hope that you can put to use the metaphoric concepts inside your Griefcase. We already carry an instinct to organize, manage, and apply tools in many other ways in our lives. To that end, your Griefcase is a practical visualization tool that will help you do exactly that as you move forward in your grief healing journey.

On that journey, each of us handles grief in our own way and on our own timeline. At the same time, there are some typical milestones we should reach throughout the passage. They are not easy, and they are not comfortable to accept. The purpose here has never been to soften the truth. The purpose has been to keep moving forward and ensure we are not just moving on.

In so, we first accept the reality of our loss. Second, we use the Griefcase to face and work through the emotions that keep us standing still in pain. Third, we recognize that every day we are finding and adjusting to our life, where that someone we love is no longer physically present but always in our heart. Fourth, we recognize that experiencing the memory of that loved one brings with it far more joy than pain.

Without question, the first three milestones are difficult. Yet they become worthy of your efforts when you begin to experience the fourth. You will need, however, to actively work with the loss. This is the griefwork in our Griefcase.

By purposely working to face emotions and seeking the right support when needed, you travel through grief in a way that rebuilds a steadier sense of self, clears some of the weight from self-worth, and brings buried reactions out of the subconscious. There, they can be seen and handled. The work also helps a broken heart begin to heal.

I do hope that, whether through the Griefcase or your own faith, you continue to not only heal but also turn and hold out a hand to others along the way. We may not have asked to be in this fellowship, but here we are.

Take heart. There will soon come a time when you will purposely, joyously open your Griefcase to show it to others. Inside, they will witness the unconditional love you hold for that one who is no longer with us here on Earth.

Then, may you continue your journey with peace and purpose.

MORE GRIEFCASE EXERCISES

What we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose,
for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us.
~ Helen Keller

THIRTY EXERCISES IN GRIEFWORK

You have finished the book. Fantastic. The Griefcase is there with you and your griefwork has either begun as you were reading or is now purposely beginning. Either is fine.

These thirty actions that follow are for the journey ahead. They are not meant to be done all at once. Choose what fits the moment. You can return to any of them, and to the book itself, whenever a folder grows heavy again.

1. Write the date you finished the book on the inside cover. Under it, write the name of the one folder that still feels heaviest. This becomes your starting point for the next stage of the work.

2. Choose one private place in your home or car that will be your regular Griefcase spot. Tell yourself that when you sit there, the case is open. Use it at least once this week.

3. Open the Unconditional Love folder and write one full page about a specific memory that still brings warmth. Keep the page. Read it the next time a heavier folder tries to take over the day.

4. Set a recurring ten-minute appointment with yourself once a week. Put it on your calendar as "Griefcase." Keep the appointment even if all you do is name the loudest folder and close the case.

5. Tell one person who matters to you that you have finished the book and that you are working with the Griefcase. You do not have to explain the method. Simply naming it aloud makes the work more real.

6. The next time the question "Why?" arrives, write it on a piece of paper exactly as it comes. Place the paper in a drawer or envelope labeled "Why." You are not answering it. You are giving it a place that is not the center of the day.

7. Identify one false thought that still appears in more than one folder. Write it down, then write one sentence that shows why it does not belong in every folder. Keep the page as a reminder.

8. Spend fifteen minutes sorting only the Ego folder. Pull out one expectation you still place on yourself about how you should appear to others. Decide whether that expectation still serves the love you carry.

9. Choose one physical action you will take when anger rises (a walk, time in the workshop, a drive with no destination, or a heavy bag). Do it once this week so the response is already practiced when you need it.

10. Write a short note to the person you lost. Tell them one thing you still wish you had said or done. You do not have to keep the

note. The act of writing moves the thought out of the Guilt or Regret folder and into the open.

11. Look at your calendar for the next three months and mark the dates that are likely to thicken certain folders (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays). Decide in advance one small way you will open the case on each of those days.

12. Return to Chapter Four and reread only the section on a simple practice. Then do one ten-minute session exactly as described. Afterward, notice whether the case feels any different.

13. Name one relationship that has grown heavier since the loss. Write one sentence about what a slightly clearer flow in that relationship would be like. Take one small step toward it this week.

14. If you have children or other family members who are also carrying a Griefcase, choose one conversation you have been postponing. Tell them one true thing about how you are grieving. Ask them one true thing about how they are grieving.

15. Create a simple record. At the end of each week, write one sentence that answers: "Is the case lighter than it was seven days ago?" Keep the sentences in one place. Over time they become proof of movement.

16. The next time a wave rises in public, pause long enough to silently name the folder. Later that day, open the case and sort one page from it. You are training the response, so the wave has less power to run the rest of the day.

17. Identify one place or activity you have been avoiding because it belongs to the person you lost. Go there, or do the activity, for ten minutes. Take the Griefcase with you. You do not have to stay longer than you can manage.

18. Write down the single phrase you most often tell yourself when grief rises ("I have to stay strong," "People are counting on me," etc.). That phrase is the tab on your Ego folder. Seeing it written down makes it harder for the folder to stay closed.

19. Hold the Unconditional Love folder for one full minute before you open any other folder this week. Recall one specific way the person you lost loved you without requiring you to be composed. Then begin the session.

20. Choose one coworker or friend who has seemed uncomfortable around your loss. The next time you see them, give them a simple, true sentence such as "I'm still carrying it, but I'm working with it." You do not owe them more than that.

21. Return to the Definitions chapter and reread the entries for Unresolved Grief and Complicated Grief. Write one sentence about whether either description still fits any part of your case. If it does, decide one concrete next step.

22. Set a boundary in advance. Choose one remark you no longer want to hear. Decide now, in writing, how you will calmly and briefly respond. Having the words ready keeps the remark from adding pages to an already full folder.

23. Spend one session sorting only for redundant thoughts. When you find the same idea in two folders, keep it in the folder where it truly belongs and let the duplicate go blank. One cleared duplication is enough for the session.

24. Tell yourself, aloud, the difference between guilt and regret. Then name one thought you have been calling guilt that is actually regret. Move it to the correct folder.

25. If despair has recently visited, write the sentence "My life is still worth living because…" and finish it with one true thing. Keep the page where you will see it. If the thoughts grow stronger, contact a professional or crisis line the same day.

26. Look through the Next Steps sections of the chapters you found most useful. Choose one step you skipped and do it now. The book is still a tool. You are allowed to return to it.

27. Create a small ritual for closing the case. When you finish a session, say or write one sentence that marks the end ("The case is closed until next time"). The ritual helps you carry the folders without leaving them open all day.

28. Identify one way you have been using work, projects, or busyness to keep the case closed. Write it down. Then schedule one ten-minute Griefcase session in the middle of a workday this week so the pattern is interrupted on purpose.

29. Write a short list of three people or groups (in person or online) where you could speak honestly about the Griefcase if you chose to. You do not have to contact them today. Knowing the list exists reduces the sense that you must carry the case entirely alone.

30. On the six-month anniversary of finishing this book, open it again to any chapter that still feels relevant. Read for ten minutes, then open your Griefcase and sort one page. The work does not end. It simply continues, one folder at a time.

A Place for Your Notes

A PLACE FOR YOUR NOTES

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A PLACE FOR YOUR NOTES

About the Author



R. Glenn Kelly is a bereaved father, best-selling author, and speaker who has spent over a decade supporting the bereaved through grief and loss. After the 2013 death of Jonathan, his only child, he began writing as a way to make sense of the broken road ahead. What started as private pages became the EmpathGrowth Series of practical, honest books written for anyone carrying a Griefcase.

In addition to writing, R. Glenn has delivered keynotes and workshops for organizations, including Delta Air Lines, Bereaved Parents of the USA, Bereaved Families of Ottawa, The Compassionate Friends, and others.

He has appeared on television, radio, and podcasts, and has served on a bereavement advisory board for Children's Hospital, as well as collaborated on grief recovery with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and The Coca-Cola Company. He continues to speak and write from his home in Florida, where he remains committed to showing that peace and purpose are still possible after profound loss.

If this book has been helpful to you, please consider leaving an honest review on Amazon or the site where you purchased it. Your words help other grieving readers find the support they need.

You can learn more about R. Glenn's work and the full EmpathGrowth Series at rglennkelly.com.