

GRIEF THAT DOESN'T HAVE A NAME



*A guide to the losses that don't come with funerals —
relationships, identity, possibility and the life you expected*

—
This workbook is for anyone carrying a grief
they have never quite been given permission to name.



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A note from me to you

You are probably reading this because something happened. Or something ended, so slowly you can't point to the day it actually left. And somewhere along the way, you started to suspect that what you're carrying doesn't quite count. That it isn't grief, not really, not the kind other people are allowed to have.

I want to say something plainly, before anything else. Whatever this is, it's real. You don't have to build a case for it, or convince me, or anyone, that it's heavy enough to deserve the word. This workbook exists to give words to exactly this kind of loss, the kind that may never have had any. To make space for what you've been quietly carrying, without judgement, without a hierarchy of who is allowed to hurt more, without asking you to explain yourself first. Whatever you have lost, or are losing, or have been grieving without quite realising that was what you were doing, it counts. You are allowed to grieve it. That permission, I have found, is often where healing begins.

Most of us grow up believing grief only has one shape, the kind that comes with a death, a funeral, a casserole left on the doorstep. Those around us know what to do with that kind. There's a structure, imperfect but present. The loss is named. The grief has somewhere to go.

But in more than twenty years of practice, the grief I have most often sat with is not that kind. It's the grief that has no funeral. That isn't always recognised as grief, by others, and sometimes not even by the one living it. Or that is recognised, but quietly felt to be illegitimate.

The end of a marriage, or a slow dissolution nobody would call an ending. An estrangement from a parent, a child, a friend who is still out there somewhere, just not reachable anymore. Watching someone disappear into dementia while their body stays. A career that ended before you were ready. A child who was never born. A future you had already furnished in your mind, that never arrived.

And sometimes the grief turns inward. We grieve the potential we didn't trust, the decisions we regret, the paths not taken, the version of ourselves that never got the chance to become. There can be a particular sorrow in looking back and wondering who we might have been, had fear, or trauma, or self-doubt not shaped things so strongly.

These losses are real. The grief they produce is real. And they are often harder to carry, precisely because they arrive without permission to mourn. No ritual for the loss of a dream. No condolence card for a life that didn't unfold. No shared language for the quiet ending of something that once held meaning.

What I have learned, personally and professionally, is that the absence of recognition doesn't make a loss smaller. It makes it lonelier. Grief that goes unwitnessed becomes grief we carry in isolation, one more weight stacked on top of what was already heavy enough.

In my own life, I have grieved many things. But the losses tangled up with regret have been the hardest to come to terms with, shaped not only by sadness but by shame, by the quiet conviction that I should have known better, chosen differently, seen it coming. For a long time, rather than letting those feelings be grieved, I buried them. Part of me believed that holding onto the regret would protect me, that enough

self-criticism might stop it from happening again. But grief doesn't disappear when we push it under. It just keeps working from beneath the surface, quietly shaping how we see ourselves and our past.

What I've slowly come to understand is that loss is simply part of being human. None of us move through life untouched by endings, disappointments, or choices we wish we could take back. What has helped me most was never self-punishment. It was trust, time, patience, and self-compassion. Not forcing a resolution but staying with what was lost long enough for it to be understood, and, eventually, to soften.

Grief is what happens when something that mattered is no longer here in the form we knew it. It's painful, and it takes time. But it's also one of the ways we stay connected to what we've loved. And when it's recognised, even quietly, even years late, it becomes something we no longer have to carry alone.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook, with space to write throughout. Print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a companion alongside your own journal, whatever gives you the most room to actually write.

Not every part of this book will fit the shape of your loss, and that's fine. Follow what pulls at you, and let the rest wait. You know your own grief better than any workbook does.

One thing worth knowing before you start. Grief doesn't move in a straight line, so a book about grief was never going to either. Some pages may open something bigger than you expected, a door that swings wider than you meant to push it. If that happens, go slowly. Be gentle with what comes up.

That isn't falling apart. It's closer to the opposite. Perhaps for the first time, you're letting yourself feel something that's been waiting a long time for the room to be felt in.

And if, at any point, what surfaces feels too large to hold on your own, turn to the final section. It maps out the support available to you, so you never have to carry more than you can hold alone.

If you are in crisis right now, having thoughts of suicide, or feeling unable to keep yourself safe, please reach out immediately, rather than waiting until you have worked through this book. In Malaysia, Befrienders KL: 03-7627 2929 (24 hours). In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans: 116 123 (free, 24 hours). In the US and Canada, call or text 988. Wherever you are, findahelpline.com lists confidential crisis lines by country. This workbook is not a substitute for that kind of support.

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SECTION 1

What grief actually is

And the many forms it takes

Most of us grow up believing grief only has one shape, the kind that comes with a death, a funeral, a casserole left on the doorstep. So when it shows up anywhere else, quieter, uninvited, wearing no black, we don't always know what to call it. We just know something in us has gone tender, and we can't find the shape of why.

But grief was never only about death. It's what happens whenever something that mattered stops being here in the way it was. A person. A relationship. A version of a future we were already halfway living in, furniture and all. Grief doesn't check first whether the loss looks like the ones the world knows how to recognise. It simply moves in, and asks us to somehow keep living inside a house we didn't choose.

At its heart, this is what grief actually is. Not a malfunction, not something to manage away. Love, with nowhere left to go.

We are much better, as a culture, at recognising some losses than others. When someone dies, we know what to do. We know the rituals, we know what to say, we know how to carry a casserole to a grieving door. But so many other losses arrive without any of that. No ritual, no acknowledgement, sometimes not even the word grief to hold them. They happen quietly, and we grieve them without ever quite naming what we are doing.

Perhaps you're missing someone who is still alive, still out there somewhere in the world, only no longer yours. Perhaps a friendship has gone quiet in a way that feels like mourning, though nobody around you would call it that. Perhaps a version of your life has closed, a career, a role, a chapter you thought you'd be living in for years yet, and the door shut before you were ready. Perhaps the loss lives inside your own body, changed by illness or injury or the slow arithmetic of ageing, and you find yourself missing a self you used to be able to rely on. Perhaps it's a life that was never lived at all, a path not taken, a version of you that quietly stopped becoming.

Each of these griefs has its own weather. Yours may look nothing like anyone else's. It may keep no timeline, answer to no schedule, and may not even be something you've let yourself call grief before now. But if something mattered, and it is no longer here in the way it was, it deserves to be named. Because when a pain has no language, we tend to turn it on ourselves instead.

We wonder why we're struggling, why we can't just get over it, why it still reaches us the way it does. Often the first real step isn't a big one. It's just finding the words. Being able to say, plainly, this was a loss. It mattered. Of course it affected me. Naming grief doesn't make it larger. More often, naming it is the thing that finally lets it start to move.

Exercise 1 Naming your losses

Taking them seriously

This exercise asks something that may feel unfamiliar, to take seriously, and to name, the losses you are carrying. Including the ones you have never been sure you were allowed to call losses.

Making the list

Include the obvious and the less obvious. The losses others recognised, and the ones that went unacknowledged. The ones that happened in a moment, and the ones that gathered slowly. Losses of people, of roles, of futures, of possibilities, of versions of yourself.

No need to justify

You don't need to rank them or justify them. You simply need to name them. For many of us, this is itself significant, the first time certain losses have been acknowledged at all.

Exercise 2 The loss that is most alive right now

Trusting your instinct

Of the losses you named, which one feels most present, most unresolved, most in need of attention? It may not be the most dramatic. It may not be the one you feel most entitled to grieve. Trust your instinct rather than your judgement here.

Writing into it

Write a little about this particular loss, what happened, what it has meant, and what you haven't yet had the space to fully feel about it.

SECTION 2

Ambiguous and disenfranchised grief

The losses that go unrecognised

There are two ideas I return to often, because they name losses so many of us carry without a word for them. Ambiguous loss. Disenfranchised grief. I bring them in because so many people arrive in my room convinced that they aren't allowed to be grieving at all.

Ambiguous Loss

There's a kind of pain that never quite ends. No day we can point to and say, this is when it happened. Just an absence that circles back, leaving us between holding on and letting go.

The family therapist Pauline Boss gave it a name: loss without the shape we expect loss to have.

Sometimes it's someone gone from our life but not our mind, like a letter we keep writing to an address that no longer exists. A person who disappeared. A family member drifted into estrangement, leaving only questions we never asked.

And sometimes it's the reverse, and harder still, the way a house goes on standing long after whoever lived there has moved somewhere we can't follow. A parent whose eyes no longer find us in the room. A partner who stayed but left long before they did. Someone disappearing into addiction, still beside us, already missed.

We carry this quietly, waiting for a permission that never arrives. The loss is real. It's the grieving of it that has nowhere to go.

Disenfranchised Grief

There's another grief that struggles to find air, the kind those around us don't know how to hold. We call it disenfranchised grief, a term we owe to Kenneth Doka, and once you have the name you start seeing it everywhere.

Sometimes it's the relationship that goes unseen. A friendship. An unofficial partnership. A colleague who mattered more than the word suggests.

Sometimes it's the loss itself no one counts. A pregnancy. A pet who was family. A role others file under change rather than loss.

And sometimes we simply don't feel we have permission, because the relationship was complicated, or no one understands why it reached us so deeply. But grief has never needed permission to be real.

When a loss is finally acknowledged, something shifts. This mattered. You mattered. The pain makes sense.

When it isn't, we carry it alone, and it doesn't disappear. It surfaces elsewhere: anxiety, exhaustion, numbness, a sense that something is wrong without knowing what. Sometimes the most healing thing is the simplest. Turn, and look at what was lost. This was a loss. It mattered.

Exercise 3 Has your grief been recognised?

By others

Thinking about the losses you named in Section 1, have they been acknowledged by those around you as significant?

By you

Or have you minimised them yourself, told yourself you had no right to feel so bad, that others had it worse, that you should be over it by now?

What it has cost

Write about the specific ways particular losses have gone unacknowledged, by others, or by you. What has that lack of acknowledgement cost you?

SECTION 3

How grief actually works

And the myth of the stages

At some point, someone probably handed you a map. The five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Five stops, in order, and if you just kept moving, you'd eventually arrive somewhere called acceptance and be done.

Except grief never quite read that map. And if you've found yourself back at anger after weeks of something like peace or skipped straight past bargaining and never felt it at all, you may have quietly wondered what was wrong with you. Nothing was. We simply asked more of that map than it was ever built to give. Grief isn't a road with a destination. It's more personal than that, less predictable, and often far messier than we were led to expect.

It doesn't move in a line

Because grief doesn't move from step one through step five the way we might hope, it can be unpredictable. We might have a relatively okay morning, and by afternoon find ourselves in a flood of tears. We might be laughing with a friend, and moments later feel overwhelmed by anger that seemed to come from nowhere. So many of these instances don't seem to follow any rhythm or reason.

There's nothing wrong with you for this. Unpredictable is simply the shape grief tends to take.

It doesn't look the same on any two people

Some of us cry openly while others turn intensely practical, reaching for the tasks that can be done because feeling can't be, yet. Some need to tell the story again and again. Others go quiet and grieve out of sight.

None of this is grief done well or done badly. There's no correct temperament for it. When we measure our grieving against someone else's, we usually just add a second sorrow on top of the first.

It doesn't end where we expect

We may think we've made peace with it, that the ache has finally quieted, until an old photo surfaces on our phone, or we pass the building where we used to work, and the whole thing rises up again as sharply as the day it happened. But healing isn't forgetting. What we call a continuing bond means the connection simply changes shape, and keeps living, in a memory, a habit, a value we kept, the countless ways someone shaped who we became. Not stuck. Just human.

It can arrive late

Sometimes grief waits. Some of us are flattened immediately. Others hold everyone together, return to work, do what needs doing, and only later, once the noise clears, does grief finally walk through the door. That isn't a breakdown. Part of us keeps its own time, and often waits until we're safe enough to feel what we couldn't afford to feel before.

A different perspective

Instead, I would like to share another perspective, one I feel can actually be a companion to the five stages, rather than a replacement for them. It comes from Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, and rather than stages, it describes grief as a tide, a movement between two places we live.

One faces the loss, where we remember and feel. The other faces life as it continues, where we adapt and slowly find our way back to purpose, connection, even joy. Healthy grieving isn't choosing one. It's the movement between them, out and back in, again and again.

Held together, the two ideas complete each other. The stages can still describe something true, the anger, the bargaining, the ache of acceptance, feelings that genuinely surface along the way. What the tide adds is the shape around them: that these feelings don't arrive once, in order, and then finish. They come and go, again and again, for as long as they need to, which is why we can be heartbroken and still laugh, miss someone terribly and still enjoy an ordinary hour. A good day was never forgetting. Grief doesn't ask us to stop living. It asks us to learn how to go on living while carrying something that still matters.

Exercise 4 How have you been grieving?

What you recognise

Looking at how grief actually works, what do you recognise in your own experience? Has it felt linear, or non-linear?

The way that's natural to you

Have you let yourself grieve in the way that is natural for you, or have you tried to grieve in the way you felt you were supposed to?

Delayed grief

Have you experienced grief arriving late, feeling something now that you couldn't afford to feel at the time?

Exercise 5 The grief that ambushed you

When it arrives unannounced

Grief often arrives unexpectedly, triggered by something small and apparently unrelated, surfacing just when you thought you were past it. Has this happened for you? What tends to trigger it?

What it feels like

What does it feel like when it arrives without warning? Understanding your own patterns, including the triggers, is a real step toward meeting them with more compassion, and less alarm.

SECTION 4

How unprocessed grief shows up

In the body and in behaviour

One of the hardest truths about grief is that we mistake its silence for its absence. But grief doesn't leave just because we stopped speaking of it. It behaves more like a held breath than a passing feeling: we can only hold it in for so long before the body finds its own way to let it out, through the body, through the things we do, through the ways we hold ourselves and each other. Because it can surface years later, wearing a different name entirely, many of us never connect the two.

We assume this is simply who we are. That we've always been like this, that there's no reason for it, it's just us. But sometimes what looks like a flaw in our character is really an old grief that never got the chance to be felt.

In the body

When we lose someone or something that mattered, the body answers before the mind catches up. Sleep changes. Appetite changes. Energy drains away. The chest tightens, breath comes harder, and the whole self can feel heavy, as though we're carrying something no one else can see. This is why we call it heartbreak, and why that's never really been just a figure of speech.

Grief carried too long without anywhere to be set down learns to speak more quietly instead. A tension that never lets go. An ache with no medical name. A tiredness sleep doesn't touch. For some of us it settles as numbness, not pain exactly, but not quite alive either, functioning and unreachable at once. For others, it's a heaviness that shows up even in the moments meant to feel light.

In behaviour

Unprocessed grief also shapes how we move through the world, and usually these patterns began as good sense. They were how we got through something we couldn't otherwise survive.

Some of us stay endlessly busy, so there's never a quiet room for the feelings to find us in. Some of us hold others at arm's length, because closeness once taught us it's only loss waiting to happen. Some of us carry an anger that seems far too large for whatever provoked it, because anger was always easier to reach than sadness, especially if sadness was never safe to show.

Some of us struggle with every ending, where goodbyes and anniversaries stir up far more than they seem to warrant. And some of us live with a low, steady sadness that's been there so long it stopped feeling like grief at all. It just feels like the temperature of being us.

Perhaps the hardest pattern of all is how difficult it can become to let ourselves be happy. Some part of us murmurs, quietly, don't get too comfortable, don't get too attached, it could all be taken again. That isn't

pessimism. It's a part of us that once learned safety can vanish without warning, and has been standing guard ever since, like a smoke alarm that never got the memo the fire went out.

The work isn't to judge these patterns, or force them off. It's to grow curious about them instead. To ask what happened that taught us to protect ourselves this way. Because what looks like a fault on the surface is almost always a reasonable response underneath, and once we understand what a pattern was trying to do for us, we can start meeting it with the compassion that actually lets it soften.

Exercise 6 Where does your grief live?

In the body

Thinking about what you are carrying, the losses you named earlier, where do you sense it in your body?

In behaviour

And where do you recognise it in your behaviour? Which of the patterns above feel familiar, even if you hadn't previously connected them to grief?

Getting specific

Write as specifically as you can. The more precisely you can locate where the grief has gone, the more available it becomes to be gently worked with.

SECTION 5

What grieving actually requires

And what it does not

Grief cannot be avoided, reasoned away, or ordered to leave, as much as we might wish it would, because it can pull us in all directions at once. So perhaps the better question is what it actually needs from us, what lets it move instead of hardening into something we carry alone for years. Over time, it seems to ask for a few particular things.

Permission

The first is permission. It sounds like the easy one. For many of us it's the hardest, especially when no one else ever recognised the loss, and when grief is pulling us toward guilt on one side and denial on the other, permission is often what lets us stop being tugged between the two.

So many of us have spent years talking ourselves out of it. It wasn't a big deal. We should be over it by now. Others have had it worse. But grief has never waited for anyone's approval before becoming real. Sometimes the first step is only this: letting ourselves say that something was lost, that it mattered, that of course it affected us.

Space

The next thing grief needs is space, though rarely as much as we fear. Not hours of anguished reflection. Usually something far gentler, small moments where we stop turning away and simply let ourselves notice what's there, rather than being pulled into either avoiding it completely or being swept entirely under.

A few quiet minutes. A few honest words on a page. Letting a memory rise without shoving it back down. Grief met in small, regular doses tends to move with more kindness than grief left to gather until it's too heavy to lift and pulls harder for having been ignored.

Witness

Grief also needs a witness. It's part of why we've always built rituals around death, a funeral is not only a goodbye, it's a way of being seen in our loss. But witness matters just as much for every loss that isn't a death too and rarely gets the same room.

For so many losses, that witness never comes. No gathering where those we love say, plainly, of course this hurts. It's one of the things I hope this workbook can quietly be, a place where what you're carrying is finally acknowledged. And there's something genuinely powerful in being witnessed by another person too, a trusted friend, someone we love, a therapist who can sit with us and take the measure of what we've been carrying. Grief pulls far less painfully in every direction once it no longer has to be carried entirely alone.

Time

And grief needs time, which is hard in a world that prizes moving on. It keeps none of our schedules. It circles back. A song comes on in the car, or a smell drifts past us in a shop, and without warning we're pulled somewhere we didn't expect to go that day.

None of this is going backwards, and none of it is failing to heal. It simply means something mattered. Learning to trust the movement of grief, rather than judging ourselves for it, is itself part of how we heal.

What grieving does not require

Just as important as knowing what grief needs is knowing what it doesn't.

It doesn't require closure. Closure promises a day when we shut a door and feel nothing more, and most losses simply don't work that way. We might think we're finally past a job that ended badly and then run into an old colleague at the shops and feel the whole thing rise up again, not because we're stuck, but because it mattered. Healing isn't the shutting of a door. It's learning to carry what happened, letting the loss become part of our story without letting it become the whole of it. To go on missing someone is not the same as being stuck. Love doesn't evaporate because circumstances changed. Sometimes grief is simply love, continuing, with nowhere left to put itself.

There's often pressure, too, to find the lesson in the suffering, to name what it taught us, how it made us stronger. For some of us, meaning does eventually become part of healing. But it can't be hurried. Reach for it too soon and we step straight over the pain that needed feeling first. Meaning, if it comes, comes later.

For now, the work is smaller, and harder. To acknowledge. To feel. To offer ourselves the same tenderness we'd offer anyone else in pain. Grief isn't something to defeat, or a single direction to be pulled toward. It's something we learn to carry, and to carry with love.

Exercise 7 What your grief needs

Listening for it

Thinking about the losses you've been reflecting on, what do you sense your grief most needs right now? More permission? More space? A witness? Simply time?

No wrong answers

There are no wrong answers here. The question is an invitation to listen to what is being asked of you, rather than what you think you should be doing.

Exercise 8 A letter to your loss

Optional

This one is optional, use it only if it feels right.

The letter

Write a short letter to someone, or something, you have lost. Not to send, just to say what has never been said. What you miss. What you wish had been different. What the loss has meant. What you are still carrying.

For you

You don't need to share it with anyone. It is for you. And for many of us, putting into words what has only ever been felt is itself a real form of release.

SECTION 6

Meeting yourself with compassion

Before meaning, comes kindness

Self-compassion in grief is, first and foremost, a companion for the process itself, something that walks alongside us and reminds us it's okay to take the time this actually needs.

That might look like acknowledging, quietly and without apology, I'm not having a good day today. It might look like reaching out to a trusted friend rather than carrying it alone for one more evening. It might be something as small as making the tea, going for the walk, cancelling the plan we don't have the capacity for, any of the ordinary acts that say, plainly, I am taking care of myself through this. Self-compassion, held this way, is less a feeling we're waiting to arrive and more a series of small decisions, made again and again, to treat what we're carrying as something worth tending to.

What self-compassion is not

Before going further, it's worth clearing away what self-compassion isn't, because so many of us carry the wrong idea of it, and that wrong idea keeps us from ever really trying it.

It isn't self-pity, and it isn't weakness. It isn't lowering the bar, or letting ourselves off the hook, or using grief as an excuse to stop functioning. And it isn't indulgence, some prolonged wallowing we should eventually snap out of. Self-compassion is not the opposite of strength. Often, it's what makes the strength sustainable, rather than something we're gritting our teeth to maintain.

What it actually is

At its simplest, self-compassion has three parts to it, and holding all three together is what makes it real rather than just a nice idea.

The first is kindness toward ourselves, instead of the harsh judgement so many of us default to without noticing. In practice, this might mean catching the moment you think, I should be handling this better, and offering something gentler instead: of course this is hard, this mattered to me. It's the difference between speaking to yourself like a disappointed critic and speaking to yourself like someone who's on your side.

The second is remembering our common humanity: that grieving, struggling, and hurting are not signs we are uniquely broken, but part of what it means to have loved something enough to lose it. Everyone who has ever loved has, at some point, grieved. In practice, this might mean noticing the thought no one else feels this much, or I should have moved past this by now, and gently reminding yourself that this reaction, however intense, is a human one, not evidence that something is wrong with you specifically.

The third is simply being able to notice what we feel, clearly and honestly, without either drowning in it or refusing to look at it at all. In practice, this might mean pausing in a difficult moment and naming what's

actually there, this is grief, this is the ache of missing what was lost, rather than either pushing the feeling away or letting it completely take over the rest of the day.

Held together, these three things change how grief is met. Not fixed, not rushed, not judged. Simply met, the way we would meet someone we loved who was hurting.

The cruelty we reserve for ourselves

There's a particular cruelty many of us reserve only for ourselves in grief. We would never tell a friend they were taking too long. We would never say to someone we love; it's been a year, shouldn't you be over this by now. And yet, alone with our own loss, that's often exactly the voice that shows up. Quietly checking whether we're still allowed to feel this. Quietly deciding we're not.

Grief has a way of making that voice louder. You should have called more. You should have known. You should be further along by now. None of this is cruelty for its own sake. Usually, it's an old part of us trying, in the only language it has, to protect us, by controlling what it can, which is us. It formed to keep us safe, often a long time ago, and never learned another way to help. Seen this way, the critic isn't an enemy to defeat. It's more like an overzealous guard, given a job long ago, who never got word the danger has passed.

That part was never going to grieve for us. Only we can do that. And it tends to soften, not when we argue with it, but when we turn toward our own pain the way we'd turn toward someone we loved who was hurting. Gently, and without needing them to justify it first. Not why am I still like this, but what happened, and what is this part of me trying to do.

Practising it, before you feel it

One thing worth knowing: you don't need to feel self-compassionate before you can practise it. The feeling is often what follows the practice, not what precedes it. It can begin in something as small as a gentler tone when you notice the criticism starting. A pause to acknowledge that something is genuinely hard, before moving on. A hand on your own chest. The simple recognition that a part of you is struggling and could use some kindness, rather than another verdict.

For now, that's enough. Before meaning, before moving forward, comes this: meeting ourselves with the same kindness we'd offer anyone else carrying what we're carrying.

Exercise 9 What self-compassion could look like today

Small decisions

Self-compassion is often less a feeling and more a series of small decisions. What is one small, concrete way you could take care of yourself today, in the middle of this grief?

Naming it

It might be resting. Reaching out to someone. Saying no to something you don't have capacity for. Simply naming out loud, even just to yourself, that today is hard. Write down what that could look like for you, specifically.

Exercise 10 Meeting the critic differently

Where it shows up

Bring to mind a recent moment when a harsh, critical voice showed up around your grief, telling you that you should be further along, or that you shouldn't still feel this.

What it's protecting

If this part of you could speak on behalf of what it's protecting, not the harsh words, but the fear underneath them, what would it say?

A different response

If you responded to it the way you'd respond to a frightened friend, rather than arguing back, what might you say?

SECTION 7

Finding meaning

When you and grief are ready

Listening to what grief may be trying to tell you

For a long time, grief seems to have only one thing to say.

“This hurts.”

And that deserves to be heard for as long as it needs saying. But somewhere inside the pain, there's also an invitation waiting.

It's worth pausing here to say plainly what this chapter is, and isn't, about. Meaning-making tends to get talked about only in the context of death, as though it's something that only applies when a person dies. But everything this workbook has been about, the ambiguous losses, the disenfranchised ones, the identities and relationships and futures that ended without a funeral, all of it can carry this same invitation. Whatever you've been grieving throughout these pages is exactly what this chapter is for.

Not an invitation to move on, or explain the loss away, or hunt for a silver lining. Certainly not to be grateful for what happened. Meaning was never about making a loss acceptable. As David Kessler puts it, meaning isn't found in the loss itself, it's found in what we do afterward, in what we choose to carry forward, in the ways the loss quietly reshapes us.

In time, other things begin to come through, underneath the hurt.

Perhaps grief is reminding us how deeply we loved, or how deeply something mattered. Perhaps it's showing us what actually matters now. Perhaps it's pointing at needs we've left unattended for too long, relationships worth tending, values we want to live by, parts of ourselves that have been waiting for care.

Sometimes grief asks a question. “What do I want to carry forward?” Sometimes another. “What matters enough that I don't want to lose it?” And sometimes what it's showing us is far simpler than any question at all. “I need to slow down.” “I need to find myself again.” “I need to let people in.” Small, plain truths that were there the whole time, waiting for something to finally slow us down enough to hear them.

Whatever grief reveals, it rarely arrives all at once, and rarely on demand. It keeps no schedule of its own. It can't be summoned, and there's no obligation to arrive at some grand lesson at all.

For some of us it looks like telling the story of who or what we lost, carrying its lessons forward in how we live now. For others it's becoming more present with what's still here, giving ourselves to a cause, finding our way back to something spiritual, or simply holding the ordinary moments a little closer than we used to.

And sometimes meaning is very small. Wearing a colour we'd stopped letting ourselves wear. Returning to a place that mattered. Keeping a practice or a value that came out of what happened. Speaking to ourselves more gently, because of everything we've lived through.

Meaning doesn't erase grief. The two tend to sit side by side, not one replacing the other. In many ways, meaning becomes one of the ways whatever mattered goes on living, in us.

It's worth naming one more thing before the questions that follow. Meaning-making can quietly turn into another way of judging ourselves, if we let it. Have I found the lesson yet. Am I doing this fast enough. Should I have arrived somewhere by now. If any of that sounds familiar, it's worth bringing back the same compassion we sat with earlier in this book. Meaning was never a task to complete or proof that we've healed correctly. It's something to stay curious about, gently, in our own time, with no deadline and nothing to prove.

Reflection questions

There's no need to answer all of these. Let yourself be drawn to the ones that speak to you and leave the rest for another time.

1. If your grief had something important it wanted you to know, what might it be trying to tell you? Write whatever comes to mind, even if it feels uncertain or incomplete.
2. What has this loss revealed about what matters most to you? Consider relationships, values, priorities, or ways of living.
3. What qualities, lessons, or memories from what you lost, whoever or whatever that was, do you want to carry forward? How might those continue to live through you?
4. Has this experience changed the way you see yourself, others, or life itself? In what ways?
5. Are there needs, feelings, or truths that grief has brought to your attention that you might otherwise have overlooked?
6. If that love, or care, or connection could take action, what might it look like now? What is one way you could express it in your life today?
7. What traditions, rituals, stories, or memories help you maintain a connection with what was lost?
8. What would it mean to honour this loss, rather than simply recover from it?
9. What do you hope you never lose from this relationship or this chapter of your life?
10. If meaning unfolds slowly, what might it be enough to remain curious about right now?

You don't need to have answers to any of these. Meaning is rarely something we discover all at once. More often, it's something that gradually reveals itself as we continue to love, remember, and live.

Exercise 11 Writing into the questions

However much feels right

Use this space to write into whichever of the reflection questions above drew you in. There is no need to be tidy or complete, a few honest sentences are worth more than a polished answer. Meaning tends to emerge in the writing, not before it.

SECTION 8

Finding the right level of support

From self-directed work to specialist care

Grief is one of the few areas of life where working through it on our own can genuinely carry us a long way. It is also one where the right support can change everything, when the grief is complicated, or prolonged, or has been carried alone for far too long.

If you need support right now

If grief has brought you to thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or you feel unable to keep yourself safe, please reach out to a crisis line now. You do not need to wait until you have finished this workbook, or until anything feels more sorted.

Malaysia — Befrienders KL: 03-7627 2929 (24 hours), or Talian Kasih: 15999 (24 hours)

UK & Ireland — Samaritans: 116 123 (free, 24 hours)

US & Canada — 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988 (24 hours)

Elsewhere — findahelpline.com lists confidential, free crisis lines by country.

These services exist for exactly this. Reaching out is not an overreaction.

What you can do on your own

Naming the loss, clearly, specifically, without shrinking it, is itself the work, and the exercises here are built to help you do exactly that. Many of us find that writing about a loss, even privately, even messily, begins to move something that has felt stuck for years.

Making our own rituals of acknowledgement is quietly powerful, and badly underused. Death comes wrapped in ritual for a reason. A ritual gives the loss a container, a marked moment where it is seen and honoured. For the losses that arrive with no ceremony at all, we can make our own, however small. Lighting a candle. Writing a letter. Returning to a place that held something. Marking a date. Simple acts that tell some deep part of us the loss was real, and mattered.

Letting ourselves feel, without rushing to manage or fix the feeling, is one of the simplest and hardest things grief asks. Grief moves when it is felt. Feelings pushed down do not leave. They gather. And giving grief a little of what it asks for, through tears, through writing, through talking, through whatever comes naturally, tends to bring movement rather than only more pain.

Seeking out the witness of those we trust, telling someone what we are carrying and letting them simply be with us in it, matters far more than most of us realise. We do not need them to fix a thing. We only need them to know.

When a therapist can help

Therapy earns its place in grief at particular moments. When the loss was ambiguous or disenfranchised and never properly acknowledged. When grief was delayed or held down for a long time and is now surfacing with a force that feels unmanageable. When it reaches back and joins hands with earlier losses that were never grieved either, until the weight is far greater than any single loss could explain. When grief has turned complicated, marked by a relentless yearning, an inability to accept that the loss is real, or a struggle to function that has lasted more than a year. And when the sheer isolation of carrying unnamed grief has become a second suffering all its own.

In therapy, grief finds the witness it has been missing. A good therapist does not hurry grief along faster than it is willing to go. They sit with it. They help you find words for what has never had any. They hold the loss alongside you, and that alone begins to ease the loneliness that unnamed grief so reliably brings.

In my own work, Compassionate Inquiry sits especially well with grief, above all when the loss has early roots, when today's grief is quietly fastened to an old attachment wound or a childhood loss that was never mourned. I lean on IFS too, particularly when parts of us have grown up specifically to manage the grief, to keep busy, to stay strong, to not feel, and those old protectors have started causing troubles of their own.

When a psychiatrist may be needed

If grief has brought on, or is sitting beside a significant depression, a low mood that will not lift, an inability to function, the loss of any capacity to feel at all, then a psychiatric assessment is a sensible step. What is sometimes called complicated grief, or prolonged grief disorder, can in its most severe forms respond to specific treatments, and sometimes to medication for the depression that travels with it. Your GP is the right place to begin.

A simple way to orient yourself

Begin on your own, with naming, writing, ritual, and the witness of those you trust, if you have some support around you and the grief, though painful, is not badly disrupting your ability to function.

Consider therapy if the grief has been carried alone for a long time, if it is complicated or ambiguous, if it reaches back to earlier losses that were never processed, if it is making daily life hard to manage, or if the isolation of it has become a suffering of its own.

Seek a psychiatric assessment if a significant depression has settled in alongside the grief, or if you are struggling to manage the basics of daily life.

Whatever level of support feels right, the one thing this workbook asks of you is small and enormous at once. Take seriously what you are carrying. Give it the standing of a real loss. Stop making it justify itself before you will let yourself grieve. The losses that come without a funeral are losses still. The grief they leave is grief still. And you are still, always, allowed to mourn.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of holding a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

WhatsApp +60 17-358 2563

Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

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This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

01 Anxiety

When worry has become the background hum of your life.

02 The Relationship with Yourself

The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the uncertain middle — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

06 The Burnout Workbook

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Understanding the patterns that draw us into painful relationships.

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A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

11 The Wounded Child

How what happened in childhood is still shaping your life today.

12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too. Explore the full collection at www.shelagh-psychologist.com

*Some losses are not seen.
Some griefs are not recognised.
Some endings do not come with rituals.
This workbook is for those losses.*



We live in a world that only makes space for certain kinds of grief. When our losses don't fit the expected script, we are left to carry them in silence. This workbook offers compassionate guidance, practical tools, and gentle space to honour the griefs that have no name but are deeply real.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  The many forms of grief that don't come with funerals
-  Why unrecognised grief can be so isolating and confusing
-  How disenfranchised grief affects your mind, body and relationships
-  Tools to help you validate, express and move through your grief
-  Ways to find meaning, connection and self-compassion
-  Gentle guidance for creating a life that makes space for both what was lost and what is still possible

*Your grief is real. Even if no one else sees it.
Even if no one else understands it.
You are not making it up.
You are not alone.
This grief matters. You matter.*



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)
BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice

Supporting thoughtful,
lasting change through
insight, compassion,
and connection.



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