

Navigating the Waves of Grief



Healing Prompts & Reflections
to Move You Forward

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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians or mental health professionals. The reader should consult a physician or mental health professional in matters relating to health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention. If you are feeling suicidal, thinking about hurting yourself, or are concerned that someone you know may be in danger of hurting himself or herself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). You can also find help in locating a mental health professional by consulting with your health care provider.

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Introduction

As I went through my new computer, freshly loaded with transferred content, I stumbled upon an audio file long forgotten. Knowing that my extended family would also enjoy hearing Grandpa's voice again, I decided to listen to it before emailing it out in case anything needed further explanation. I settled in, heart prepared to hear Grandpa read a story, and pressed play. I had closed my eyes to take in the experience, but seconds after I pressed play, my eyes flew open. My heart rate skyrocketed as *Grandma's* voice filled the room. Here was a wave of emotion that I didn't see coming. I had completely forgotten her introduction of the story and was not prepared to hear her voice. At all. The tears poured out before I could process what was happening. I paused the file to ground myself before restarting it and receiving the love of Grandpa and Grandma.

If you are reading these words, it is safe to say that you are familiar with grief and its accompanying, sometimes unpredictable waves like the one I experienced. Grief waves are inevitable, and they do not adhere to a predictable, convenient schedule. However, grief waves can lessen over time

in duration, frequency, and intensity if you are willing to put in the work.

The tools in this book will help you to process the layers of your changed reality and release the emotions that might otherwise keep you trapped in this season of grief so that you can move forward as a changed person. Death and other losses change us, yet if we accept that fact and embrace the change process, we can heal and reengage with life. I am proud of you for taking this important step in your healing.

The Elephant in the Room

The common classification for this type of resource is “devotional journal,” but those words are weighted with many interpretations and, for some, might serve as a barrier. To assuage any possible concerns you might have in that regard, let’s get a few details out of the way.

First, though written specifically with Christian grievers in mind, this book is easily adapted for those who believe in Jesus but not the church—welcome, deconstructers!—those who believe in another divine reality, or for those who are broadly spiritual. As I state in my previous book *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief*, faith is meant to assist us in processing grief, not to impede it. Second, the word “devotional” carries with it a certain connotation and expected formula, and yes, I make occasional biblical references, but the goal of this work is to help grievers walk through to the other side of grief. Period. There is no preconceived end goal, or starting place for that matter, related to if or how your faith is used or impacted by engaging this work. I do encourage people to set goals for their faith (perhaps you want to maintain, pause, dig deeper, or explore), but I do not prescribe a goal because that decision is personal. No one—not me, not a pastor or faith leader, not a trusted friend, not even a therapist—has the right to set that goal for you. That is for you alone.

Third, if you read *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief*, you know I encourage a variety of journal writing techniques along with other forms of creative expression, but if you are not a “Dear Diary” person, fear not. Even the pages with prompts can be completed without writing. Try. Just try it. I believe you will be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

Is This Tool for Me?

If you selected this book seeking help working through your grief, the simple answer to this question is an unequivocal “yes!” For those who need a bit more assurance than that, I’ll offer this. *Navigating the Waves of Grief* is for griever, whether that grief is the result of death (human or animal) or another kind of loss. Loss tugs at the heart; it upends what is and causes disorientation before you can find stability in your new reality. For the remainder of the book, I will reference grief as caused by death, but if the source of your grief is not death, know that you can still benefit from this work.

What If My Grief Is Not the Result of a Loving Relationship?

Yes, grief does still follow the death of a person with whom you had a strained, broken, estranged, or unfulfilled relationship. This is the case for adoptees whose birth parent died before they could meet, for those whose parent abandoned them emotionally, mentally, or physically, for those who were betrayed by friends, and many other similar relationship scenarios.. Despite the reality of this kind of pain, when they were alive, there remained a hope, no matter how small, of reconciliation and forgiveness. You might be grieving the person they never were or the person they became, yet you are still grieving. This guidebook will help you navigate those waves of grief too. Keep going; this tool is for you.

What If It's Been a Year or More?

I want to be clear about this from the outset: You do not need to be within the first year since the death to use this guidebook. No matter how long it has been since the death, if an old grief is reawakened, never went away, or is related to another type of loss, this guidebook is for you.

How to Use This Book

As with *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief, Navigating the Waves of Grief* breaks the mold of similar books, so I'll take a moment to explain how I've designed this book to work. First of all, grief is far too unpredictable for you to proceed through this book from beginning to end, so when you sit down with it—we'll discuss frequency in a moment—go to the section that best fits the moment. You might move within all four sections in a week, or you might complete one section before moving to the next, but the *how* does not matter. The only thing you need to do is show up and do the work.

Second, this book is composed of four sections that correspond to different aspects of grief work: Emotions, Connection, Identity, and Through. These are not stages or phases of grief, but aspects or features of grief that you'll experience in most of its phases. Each section has its own introduction that provides a more in-depth explanation of what it covers and when focusing on that aspect of grief might be most useful. For now, know that whenever you pick up this book, you can turn to whichever theme you prefer, but before you begin a section, read through its introduction.

Third, this resource is designed to be used in the moment, in preemptive preparation, or to help you find solid ground after a wave knocks you down. You can use it every day or as needed, whatever frequency you need. In addition, you may find there are stretches of time when the grief waters

are calm and, especially the further out from the death you are, blissfully free of waves. Sometimes a break from grief work is needed. Go at the pace your grief needs: nothing more, nothing less.

Fourth, Toolkit pages and Reflection pages (here are my replacement words for “devotional” and “journal” pages, respectively) are scattered throughout the four sections of this guidebook; there is a combined total of twenty-five per section. You will not find the first half of the book to be only Reflections and the latter half only the more practical Toolkits. This is intentional. It reflects the changing needs of grief—where the work is always a combination of thought and actions—and allows this to be a more versatile tool. You choose whatever looks helpful each time you open the book. I’ll keep saying it: Make this work for *your* grief.

Fifth, there are a few Toolkits that repeat throughout this guide:

- **Object Lesson.** This is the first Toolkit in each section and is meant to capture the way your grief changes as you do the work. I encourage you to complete one of these as your *first* activity to capture how your grief feels on the day you start this work. The other three Object Lessons can be completed at any time.
- **Guided Free Association.** This is a tool to help you discover emotions and thoughts you cannot access or are avoiding. It is in each section, but the suggested focus changes slightly depending on the section’s theme. You may complete these in any order.
- **Horizon Line.** You will find this activity in sections two through four, and it is meant to help you focus on what is ahead. Again, you can complete these in any order.
- **Trajectory Tracker.** You will find one of these at the end of each section. You can elect to complete them at random or reserve them for when you finish a section,

but do not save them all for the end. Similar to the Object Lesson Toolkit, the Trajectory Tracker Toolkit is another way to help you visualize your forward movement through grief; therefore, spacing these out over time will increase their benefit.

Sixth, each thought-provoking Reflection ends with a simple Action Challenge related to the Reflection. Most challenges are intended to be completed in the moment, though there are a few that you'll be asked to complete on a different timeline. For those challenges, I encourage you to set a reminder in your calendar to come back to the page and record the outcome. Additionally, a few Reflections include a Next Level challenge beyond the action challenge. You choose when and whether to complete that challenge.

Finally, because this book will likely stir up a lot of feelings and insights, it might be challenging at times. I encourage you to reach out to a therapist or trusted friend to further discuss and process what rises to the surface. One of the both/and truths of grief is that it is meant to be experienced both alone and with others. *Navigating the Waves of Grief* can be a starting place to experience grief both alone and with others, if you're willing. Regardless of how you implement it, this book is designed to be an anchor to prevent you from capsizing in the waves. In these pages I trust you will find what you need to take command of these inevitable waves of grief.

Faith Doesn't Erase Grief: The Basics

I wrote *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief* for all the grieverers who are also believers who arrived at my office for bereavement counseling burdened not only by their grief but also by the weight of shame or guilt heaped upon them by their pastor or another leader in their church. Session after session, I witnessed clients wrestle with wanting to—needing to—grieve

while being pressured at every turn to simply rejoice that the person who died is now in heaven. “I’M STILL HERE!” was the refrain from each client. “Yes, they are in heaven, but I’m left to do life without them.” Some clients went a step further, adding, “And I don’t want to rejoice. I’m not okay with their death, and I’m certainly not ready to rejoice.” Grievers who are religious often feel this way because faith truly cannot erase the human, natural experience we call grief. *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief* was written in honor of all those clients longing to both grieve and believe.

It is not necessary to have read *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief* for this guidebook to be useful, though you will notice that the Reflection pages and most Toolkit pages include quotes from *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief*, so you will get a sampling of that book as you work through this guidebook. *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief* paints in broad strokes with primarily an abstract, informational purpose, whereas this guidebook provides practical tools and personal interaction that apply specific teachings from *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief*. The first book is passive and reflective; this book is active and instructive.

Because the two books do go hand in hand, though, there are a few basics that are worth reviewing before you work through the sections ahead. The most important piece of information I want you to know from *Faith Doesn’t Erase Grief* is about the grief process. Many models of grief exist, and there are things to be learned from each of those models; however, I find that they are generally too prescriptive. For this reason, I propose a more phasic approach to grief, breaking the grief trajectory down into Early Grief, Middle Grief, and Lasting Grief, each of which are referenced throughout this resource.

These phases are fluid, meaning grievors might find themselves straddling two phases at once, and as concepts they are meant not to direct what you do with your grief but to help you locate yourself within grief. Each phase, discussed next, is defined in part by a range of time, but it is important

to note that those timelines are most relevant only for those experiencing grief without trauma. If there is any reason you were unable to begin grieving immediately following a death (as can happen with trauma), these timelines might feel off. If this is the case for you, consider when you were able to start grieving—perhaps the court case ended, your person was found, or the results came in—and set that as your day one. Doing so might help the timelines of each phase feel like a better fit.

Early Grief begins the moment of the person's death (or the moment you first truly registered the loss) and can last anywhere up to five months. It is the time when grief is raw, you feel numb, and there is no escaping the weight of it. It is a constant companion that cannot be outrun. This is the phase when people describe feeling like a different person or disconnected or uncomfortable in their own skin. It's all too much too fast. It is also the phase in which grievers live mostly in the past with very little thought of the present, and the idea of the future is laughable. The body takes on new pains, the brain doesn't function well, and emotions are unpredictable. In short, Early Grief is about daily survival. Complete the needs of the day, and if that's all you can do, that's okay. The rest will still be there tomorrow.

Middle Grief is the marathon phase, beginning as early as month two and lasting up to month ten, but there is good news: In this phase, grievers begin to experience things that are more comfortable. Laughter, smiles, reconnecting with friends and family, and hope all begin to creep back in. As difficult as these are to find and genuinely experience in Early Grief, in Middle Grief the experience shifts. It is in Middle Grief that grievers begin fully accepting and integrating the death into their daily lives. They live more in the present and eventually begin to consider the future. They find that fatigue lessens, the brain fog clears, and tolerance of others increases. Middle Grief is the "doing" phase, and it is filled with opportunity.

As for Lasting Grief, I struggled with naming this third phase because I needed a word that captured the fact that grief doesn't truly end. It changes in the impact it has and in the level of intrusion into your daily life, but you don't stop grieving; you don't just stop missing the person who died. I settled on *lasting* because it reflected those realities while also feeling gentler than saying, "You're never done." Grievers can transition into Lasting Grief as early as month eight, though some do not reach it until after the first year. This phase is marked with a full acceptance of the death and a complete return to engagement in life. The griever has learned who they are now and knows the direction they are heading. They can remember the person with more joy (or at least closure) than pain, and they can share memories with gratitude or at least a sense of peace. It's a time of hope, direction, and purpose. A time when grief shifts from being a person's whole identity to just an aspect of it.

Beyond these proposed phases of grief, there are two additional concepts taught in *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief* that I will explain here so that you feel prepared when you come upon them as you work through the pages ahead. The first is the concept of a continued albeit changed relationship with the person who died. I regularly use the phrase "physical presence" throughout this guidebook as a reminder that though their physical presence is gone from this world, many other aspects of them remain. It is these pieces of your person that you choose to connect with, to whatever degree. A continued connection is not necessary to move through grief, but it can help. Take your time with this concept if it is new to you and allow it to unfold in the pages ahead as you come across it. You do not need to make any decisions right now. Just know the concept is included and be prepared to interact with it however you see fit.

The second concept to understand is that there is no moving on; there is only moving forward. The word "on" carries a connotation of leaving something behind or closing a book.

That is not the goal of grief work. The goal of grief work is to adapt to your loss and integrate it into your whole sense of self so that you can continue living, even carrying your person into the future with you, if that makes sense to you. The grief no longer dominates your life, but it remains, and moving forward represents living in that adjusted reality.

Finally, it was not my goal or intention in *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief* to tell you what or how to grieve, nor is that my intention here. As a therapist, my job is to walk alongside you, point out what you might miss, help you consider additional perspectives, and empower you to take control in ways that work for you, your faith, and your grief. If something in this guidebook or in *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief* doesn't fit you, leave it. That's okay. Just like in therapy, it will only benefit you if it resonates. All I ask is for you to try.

I cannot do this work for you. No one can. I can, however, through this guidebook, help you along the way. Are you ready?

Your Power over the Waves of Grief

When the disciples stepped into the boat with Jesus that day, there was no indication of a brewing storm. I imagine that before it hit, those on the boat were catching up on things not related to the teacher, using the time he napped to take their own breaks. Then, suddenly, light became dark. Calm became panic. Peace became fear. Flat water became foaming, roaring waves. I envision the disciples scattering throughout the boat, trying to stay upright while also working to prevent capsizing, their bodies overwrought with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. And all the while, Jesus slept.

Whether out of sheer disbelief and frustration that he was still asleep and *not helping* or because they suddenly realized he could do something they could not, Christ's followers finally woke him. At last, Jesus stood and commanded stillness. And the waves? They obeyed.

The initial reactions of grievors are often similar to those exhibited by the disciples when the storm first appeared. The sudden rush of emotion is enough to uproot us and fill us with dread. We try everything we know to find our bearings and gain solid ground, yet nothing works. The longer we go without relief, the more power the waves appear to have. Here's the truth we all need to hold: Just as the disciples had with them the one who could calm the storm, so you have within you the ability to command the waves of grief. Waves seem to have all the power, but they do not hold absolute power.

Will you ever learn to stop grief waves altogether? No. There are far too many variables outside your control. You can, however, limit the impact. *Navigating the Waves of Grief* is a training manual to do just that.

About the Author

Kate J. Meyer, MDiv, LPC, is a speaker, ordained minister, and licensed professional counselor who has worked with people as their chaplain or grief counselor in both private practice and hospice care. The majority of her time is spent working with the bereaved as they navigate grief and faith. Kate's background, education, and practice create a fulcrum balancing both the theology and psychology of grief. Kate is also the author of *The Red Couch* and *The Yellow Dress*. Visit katejmeyer.com to sign up for her newsletter, follow her on social media, or contact Kate directly there as well.