

The Grief Club

The Secret to Getting Through All Kinds of Change

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Introduction Welcome to the Club

The doctors walk into the room, a room quiet except for the whooshing sound coming from the machines forcing air into my twelve-year-old son's lungs. "It's an illusion," a doctor says. "He's not alive. His brain died days ago. Your son is gone."

"There's hope," I say.

"No, there isn't," the doctors say back.

You're wrong, I think. There's always hope—isn't there? At least there was until now.

"You've got until one o'clock this morning to say your good-byes," another doctor, a woman, says. "Then we're shutting down the machines."

Conversation over. No options are offered to me. I go into the family room created for the people doing vigil with my daughter, my ex-husband, and me. I pick up the Bible. I'll read where the pages open, I think. I'll get a sign. I've gotten messages that way before. The pages fall open in my hands. I read under my thumb. It's the story of how Jesus brings Lazarus back from the dead. Even if I won't admit it, I know the truth. This isn't a sign. It might mean something, but I don't know what it is.

I go back into the intensive-care room. People filter in to tell Shane good-bye. When they finish, I hold Shane in my arms. He's covered with bandages, hooked up to tubes. A nurse turns off the machines. The whooshing noise stops. I hear one faint sound. It's Shane exhaling his last breath. A nurse rests her hand on my shoulder. "It's going to take a long time. Eight years at least," she said. "It's going to be hard, but you'll get through it. I know. My daughter died when she was nine."

All I can think is, I don't want to be like her—have a dead child. I don't want to go through this. Somebody made a mistake.

It takes years to understand the meaning of that brief conversation: I had been welcomed to the club.

It wasn't the first club I unwillingly joined.

The man is tall, gaunt with a long, thin face. He used to drink too much. That's why his wife left, he lost his job, his car broke down, and his dog bit him. Then he joined AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). When he stopped drinking, his wife came home, he found a different job, bought a new car. His dog stopped biting him and licked his hand instead. With all the differences between this gaunt man and me, the first time I heard him tell his story, I found something we had in common. He never liked himself, didn't feel like he belonged. That's why he started drinking too much—alcohol eased the pain of being alive. Then his buddy alcohol turned on him. It destroyed his life. When he tried to quit drinking, he couldn't stop. The AA program and a Higher Power did for him what he couldn't do for himself. Now he stands by the door when I walk into the sparsely furnished room—twenty metal folding chairs piled around three chipped Formica tables. "Welcome," he says. "I'm glad you're here."

I'm not glad I'm there, but I don't have anywhere else to go. The gratitude comes later, when the program changes my life.

Fast-forward eight years. I walk into another room. This one is filled mostly with women. I see only two men. A long table is spread with cookies, lemon bars, steaming pots of coffee, hot water for tea. A perky woman runs up to me. "Welcome to Al-Anon," she says. I step backward.

"I'm not an Al-Anon," I say. "I'm a recovering addict."

"Oh, that's great!" she gushes. "You're in AA and Al-Anon. You're a double winner."

I don't feel like I've won anything, much less two things. My husband drinks. I've been clean and sober our entire marriage and I'm the one who has to go to meetings and get help? Go figure. I sit down at the table. I listen to people tell stories about how much being married to an alcoholic hurts, how crazy we get when we love someone who drinks, and what we can do to help ourselves instead of obsessively trying to fix the alcoholic and letting him make us insane. I've been avoiding feelings for so long I forgot I had any. Now emotions flood me. Yeah, it really does hurt to watch alcohol destroy our love. That's all I wanted—a family. A husband and kids. Was that asking too much? For the first time in years, I cry. Crying is the miracle that begins my healing. I feel my own feelings instead of trying to fix, help, blame, control, or wish I was dead.

Al-Anon didn't save my marriage. It saved me.

Most of us find ourselves joining clubs whether we want to or not. Someone dies and we join the You Weren't Supposed to Go Away and My Heart Is Broken Club. Or the phone rings and we're thrust into the Why Do I Have Cancer? Club. Or we call our mom and she doesn't recognize our voice. When we say our name, she becomes more confused. "Who is this?" she asks. At first we joke about it, say things like, "I'd tell you to make a list so you don't forget, but you'd probably forget where you put the list." Then we realize it's not funny. The person we love is in there someplace, but we can't find her anymore. A stranger has taken over. We belong to the Somebody I Love Has Alzheimer's Disease and We're Saying a Long Good-Bye Club.

Then comes the day we look in the mirror or someone shows us a picture of ourselves, and we reel in shock. Do we really look like that? We're members of the I Still Feel Young but I'm Getting Old Club. We're not sure if we should get a face-lift, have a noninvasive procedure, or let ourselves wrinkle up. Sometimes the clubs sneak up on us. One day we realize we're spending more time in doctors' offices than we are hanging out with friends. Somewhere along the way, we've joined the I've Got a Chronic Illness Club. There are the I'm a Financially Broken Man (or Woman) and the Empty Nester clubs. The list goes on. Then there's the last club

we'll join, the My Time Is Running Out and I'm Going to Die Club. The lucky ones are the ones who've consciously joined clubs before then. We know how it goes: initiation, transition, then we're changed. The luckiest ones know death isn't an ending; it's a transformation too.

Some of the clubs are formal. Some aren't. We meet people one at a time going through the same experience as we are. When a problem first appears, we think we're the only one who has it. We feel alone. Before long, it looks like there's an epidemic going on. We wait for life to be like it was, then one day we get it: Life as we know it is gone. It's never going to be the same again.

After my son died, I sat in my office surrounded by books about grief. Some were books people had given me because they wanted to help. Other books I bought. I'd open a book, start to read it, then either put it on my library shelf or hurl it across the room. It's not that the books aren't good. Many are important and well written. The books didn't help me. Not one book led me to believe that this process I was in was a mysterious, transformational one. I couldn't find anyone to tell me each minute, whatever I experience is a valid, beautiful moment—however tragic it is. That's what I needed to hear: Grief is a sacred time in our lives, and an important one.

What helped me most were two things. One was reading stories about life after death, because that gave me the feeling that my son was okay. When you love somebody, it's important to know where and how that person is.

The second thing that helped was stories—hearing honest accounts about how people felt, what they went through, and what helped them, not contrived stories saying how they thought they were supposed to feel and what they thought they should do. I promised myself then that if I ever came out the other end of this tunnel, I'd write a book about grief that I wouldn't have tossed across the room. At the time of writing this book, it's been more than fifteen years since Shane died. Only recently have I felt I have anything valuable to say.

This is a book of stories about people going through many different losses. Writing this book held several surprises. I was amazed at how eager people were to share their stories with me. I thought people would be reluctant to talk about painful parts of their lives. Early on I saw that wasn't true. People wanted to talk, and they wanted me to listen. They wanted to know their pain counts and what they went through can do some good. Telling our story to people who listen and care is a powerful, healing thing to do.

Something else that surprised me is that many people insisted I use their names. I disguised some people's identities to protect their privacy. No stories are composites. I've changed names, ages, places of residence, and certain details so you can't recognize some people. Even if you think you know the people I've disguised, you don't. No experiences have been exaggerated. I haven't altered important facts. If anything has been changed, it's similar to what it replaced. My name is on the book's cover, but to all the people who shared their stories goes a warm thank-you. This book belongs to us.

I chose common loss experiences, a different one for each chapter. In each chapter, I also include secrets or milestones that apply to anyone and to any kind of loss. So even if the loss in a chapter doesn't have anything to do with your life, the secrets in the chapter are universal and likely will apply to whatever changes you're going through. You can search out the chapter that has a loss like yours, but don't miss the milestones in the other stories too.

I'm not approaching grief from the classic five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has written books about that. These stages are valid and worked into the stories. I'm looking at grief as a transformational process. The book is about getting through the time that starts when something happens that turns our world upside down and we lose our old normal, until the new normal begins.

Some people think I'm an expert on codependency, but if I'm an expert at anything, it's how to take care of ourselves when we're going through grief. I'm not writing this book to tell you to do it my way. If you're going through pain, you either already are or soon will be an expert too. My hope is that this book will help you find comfort in your life and the circumstances taking place right now. I want to give you confidence that you'll be guided, led, and able to figure out what to do.

At the end of each chapter, I've included activities. Some have to do with the loss covered in that chapter. Some have to do with the secrets I've touched on in the story. You'll probably find activities in each chapter that apply to you even if you aren't going through that chapter's loss. Some activities are basic, such as teaching how to write comfort letters to people going through grief or how to be more nurturing to people in pain (including ourselves). You don't need to do all the activities for each chapter; that would be too much. I've given enough different activities for each chapter that you're likely to find at least one that works for you. I do suggest that you do the first activity in this book—the Master List of Losses. Another important activity is the list of What's Left. It's the third activity in chapter 12, "Facing Change." Other than those two activities, use your judgment about which ones to do. Sometimes the activity that might be most helpful is the one that makes us groan when we read it. We think, Oh, I don't want to do that, but often what we resist is what we need most. Other times we'll be drawn to an activity. We'll look at it and think, That would be interesting. Anyway, you choose.

You don't have to be in raw grief to benefit from this book. The stories and activities will work on old loss too. I've included statistics and information at the end of each chapter about aspects of that story. Some of these statistics may surprise you; some stunned me. I've included references: national phone numbers and Web site addresses for information, help, and support. I can't guarantee how long they'll be accurate. I don't include footnotes, but the thinking in this book is based on and backed up by other books, experts, and authorities. I've either attributed sources within the text or listed references in the bibliography.

Choosing which losses to cover was difficult. We encounter so many problems. Everyone and everything we have will eventually pass away. There are enough losses and problems to write volumes. I hope the secrets, tips, and activities will help you whether I've touched on your loss or not.

Of the thirteen books I've written, I expected this to be the most painful yet. Surprised again. Of all the books I've written, this one brought me the most joy. The people, the stories, the work have given and taught me so much. I'll miss the writing when it's done.

On a radio show, the host asked me to tell the guru story I wrote at the end of the introduction to *Codependent No More*. It's one of my favorite stories. I'll tell it again.

Once upon a time, a woman seeking enlightenment traveled to the mountains in a land far away and found a guru to teach her. "I want to learn everything there is to know," she told him. "I'm not leaving until I do."

The guru led her to a cave, then left her with a stack of books. Each day he returned to check on her. With his walking stick in hand, he hobbled into the cave and asked, "Have you learned everything there is to know?"

"No," she'd say.

When she said that, the guru raised his stick and whacked her on the head.

This scenario repeated itself for years. Each day it was the same. Then one day the guru entered the cave, asked the same question, heard the same answer. But this time, when the guru raised his cane, the woman reached up and grabbed the stick. She stopped his assault in midair.

She expected to be scolded. This was her turn to be surprised. The guru smiled. "Congratulations," he said. "You've graduated. You've learned everything you need to know. You've learned you'll never learn all there is to know and you've learned how to stop the pain."

One of my teachers told me this story. One of his teachers taught it to him. It summed up the theme of *Codependent No More*—stop controlling other people and start taking care of ourselves. Although I've written many books since then, this book picks up where that one left off. But this is more than a follow-up or upgrade.

A woman I barely knew was talking to me about the pain I experienced after my son's death. I was telling her that the first year hurt, the second year hurt more, and year three hurt too. She listened to my story, then tried to explain away my feelings.

"Isn't that codependency, this prolonged grief thing you're in?" she said. "Aren't you just feeling sorry for yourself? Maybe you need to read your own books? Let go?"

I wanted to bite off her head. I bit my tongue instead. I know—and most of the time remember—not to expect people to understand what someone is going through unless they belong to the same club.

“No,” I said. “It’s more than that.”

“Then which stage of grief do you think it is?” she asked.

“It’s more than that too,” I said.

The more time that passes since writing *Codependent No More*, the more I’ve come to believe that grief plays a much larger part in codependency than I used to think it did. The low self-esteem, the pinched face giving off the miseries, the bitterness that comes from all that pain and guilt. The repression, depression, denial, the whirlwind of chaos we create trying to stop the losses heading our way when we’re involved with someone who’s in trouble with alcohol, drugs, rage—they all come with codependency, but they also come with grief. So does not wanting people we love to leave.

We can’t always put life, people, and our behaviors in a tidy box. And no matter what the guru in the cave said, sometimes we can’t stop the pain.

If you’re living the Great American Dream or if you have a problem that you can easily solve and your life soon returns to normal, maybe this book isn’t for you. It’s not a book about overcoming. In many ways it’s not a classic how-to. It’s for people in transition, people going through change and loss. It’s for people in pain, people who are numb, and people who aren’t sure what they’re feeling. It’s for people who are broken; it’s about trusting God and life to put us back together again. It’s about radical faith, enough faith to eventually turn to the same God who allowed the disaster to happen—whether a disaster is personal or global—and ask for help finding and fighting our way back to life. It’s about knowing that when we’re too confused or angry to ask for help, God is guiding us then too.

“I met death and it transformed me,” said Maggie, who you will meet later in this book. “It was dark, ugly, and I was alone. I spent two years driving around looking for a building tall enough to jump from and die. I was doing everything people suggested—going to therapy, doing the right things. But nothing helped. Life didn’t have meaning anymore,” she said. “I lost all hope.”

“What happened that triggered all that pain?” I asked. “Was it one thing? Several things happening at once?”

“It was an avalanche,” she said.

This isn’t a book with a no-pain no-gain theme. It’s about that time in our life when what was familiar disappears, we’re not who we were, and we’re not yet who we’re becoming. Our instinctive reaction during times of loss is to try to control things around us. It’s normal. We’re scared. We don’t want any more pain. We want to cut our losses, and we think control keeps us safe. But when we get tired of controlling, there are other things we can do. The stories in this book will show what others have

done when their lives got turned upside down. My hope is that you'll be able to see some of yourself in them.

I ended the introduction to Codependent No More with the guru story. It seems right to end this introduction with a story like that too. This is a version of a story about a woman who went to a Buddha for help. (I don't know who first told the story. I've read different versions in many books but can't find a source to attribute it to.) Unlike the woman in the guru story, this woman wasn't seeking enlightenment. She wanted help stopping her pain.

"My son died," the woman said to the Buddha. "Please bring him back to life." The Buddha said yes, he would do that. At the thought of having her son back, the woman's pain began to lift. "But there's something you have to do first," the Buddha said. "Bring me three rocks. Each must come from a person or family who hasn't experienced loss."

The woman went in search of three people who qualified to give her the stones. A long time passed before she returned to the Buddha. When she did, she held out empty hands. "I couldn't find people who could give me the rocks," she said.

"What did you learn?" the Buddha asked.

"I learned we all suffer and lose someone or something we love."

After a loss happens, this journey of learning begins. We learn we're part of—one with—this universal club. We're unique but not as different from others as we think. Coincidentally (or maybe not) it's the path to enlightenment too.

One secret to going through change and grief is this: It's all done with mirrors. If we're alone, we can't see who we are. When we join the club, other people become the mirror. We see ourselves when we look at them. Slowly we accept who we are. By being honest about who we are and how we feel, we'll be a mirror for them too. Seeing us will help them love and accept themselves.

The day will come when we'll welcome others to the club and we'll know we're making peace. I was at the drop zone one day (the place where skydivers jump out of planes). I saw a woman who had just lost her thirty-five-year-old son. He was a skilled skydiver and a Hollywood stuntman. He'd fallen off a ladder and fatally injured his head. I put my hand on her arm. "It's going to take a long time. It's going to be hard. But you'll get through this," I said. "I know. My son died when he was twelve."

One of the darkest places is that place where we don't get or understand ourselves, and we think nobody else gets us either. We feel lost and alone. We lose touch with the connection we have to ourselves and each other. It's this connection that keeps us in Grace. When someone gets us, when they understand us, we understand ourselves. Then somehow the unacceptable becomes okay. We might not be happy about it—whatever it is—but we'll find peace. It's not a clinical description of the process, but what we're talking about here isn't a clinical thing.

It's part of the mystery we'll explore in this book.

I was talking with a new friend I made when I began writing *The Grief Club*. I felt comfortable with him the minute we met. I told him about the struggle I'd been going through ever since the phone rang and the doctor told me I had hepatitis C. "I've spent so much of my life feeling unlovable and untouchable," I said. "Now I'm riddled with this disease? I've worked hard the past two years to learn how to take care of my liver and health. But I've been waiting for this time to be done so I can start living my life. I've been frantically trying to control this, make it go away. I've been obsessed. I horrify myself with visions of dying a torturous death.

"But lately I've been remembering what I learned in the past," I said. "I asked myself, what is my problem? What's the matter? I'm healthy. My liver is in good shape. The hepatitis virus is almost gone. I'm the same person I've always been. This thing about trying to make the problem go away so I can begin living my real life is crazy. There hasn't been one single thing that's happened to me that isn't an important part of my path. I'm not dying from hepatitis; I'm living with it. I don't have to wait for anything to happen to be whole. I'm already complete."

"Tell me about it," my friend said. "I went through that whole thing twelve years ago when they told me I had HIV."

That's why I feel so comfortable with him, I thought. We belong to similar clubs.

Later that day I was talking to another friend. He asked how I was.

"Great," I said and meant it. "Now that I've finally surrendered to having hepatitis C."

My friend smiled and said (you guessed it), "Welcome to the club."