



Anxiety in the Wake of Loss:

Strategies for Working with The Missing Stage of Grief

Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC

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Claire Bidwell Smith, worked as a therapist specializing in grief for over a decade and is the critically acclaimed author of three books of nonfiction: *The Rules of Inheritance* (Penguin 2012), *After This: When Life is Over Where Do We Go?* (Penguin, 2015) and *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief* (Da Capo, 2018).

***The Rules of Inheritance* is a coming-of-age memoir of a young woman forging ahead on a journey of loss that humbled, strengthened, and ultimately healed her. It has been published in 18 countries and is currently being adapted for film. Claire's work has been celebrated by mental health advocates like Maria Shriver and *New York Times* Bestselling Author Cheryl Strayed. Claire has written for various publications including *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *Salon.com*, *Slate*, *Chicago Public Radio*, *The Guardian*, *Psychology Today* and *Yoga Journal*.**

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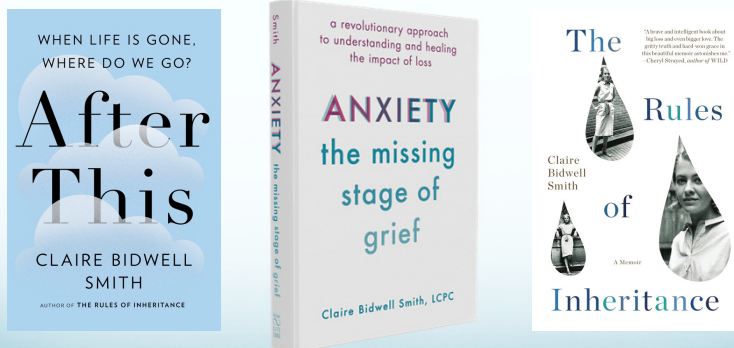
Anxiety in the Wake of Loss

Strategies for Working With the Missing Stage of Grief

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No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. – C. S. Lewis

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Introduction

Grief + Anxiety have become more important than ever to discuss in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Anxiety + Grief

Overview

- Grief and anxiety are inextricably linked. However this correlation is only just beginning to be recognized by the clinical community.
- Why is this symptom a common experience of grief?
- Why is this symptom overlooked?
- How does this symptom present?
- How is this symptom treated?

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My background with grief + anxiety

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The Correlation Between Grief + Anxiety

We experience anxiety after a loss because losing someone we love thrusts us into a vulnerable place. Loss changes our day-to-day lives. It forces us to confront our mortality. And facing these fundamental human truths about life's unpredictability can cause fear and anxiety to surface in profound and unexpected ways.

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The Correlation Between Grief + Anxiety

- Unsympathetic Grief Culture
- The Surprising Depth & Emotion of Grief
- New or Deepened Fear of Mortality
- Trauma
- Inadequate Processing
- Broad Effects of Loss
- Repressed Grief
- Inadequate Processing of Anxiety
- Failure to Face & Embrace Death

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Grief-Related Anxiety Symptoms

- Panic Attacks
- Hypervigilance
- Excessive Worry
- Hypochondria
- Irritability / Restlessness
- Social Phobias
- Racing and/or Recurrent Thoughts
- Insomnia
- Grief Attacks
- Uncontrollable Crying

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How is Grief-Anxiety Different from General Anxiety?

- The anxiety level is directly linked to the grief, either coming on for the first time close to a loss, or strengthening following a loss
- Anxiety about death
- Obsessive thoughts and rumination about the person who died
- Fear of death and hypochondria
- Obsessive worry about well-being of other loved ones
- Anxious attachments in relationships
- Avoidance of death/grief related matters

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Understanding General Anxiety

When I work with grief-related anxiety clients I always begin with a general lesson about anxiety in order to normalize their experience. Many clients are not sure if they are even suffering from anxiety, even when they are.

So what is anxiety?

At its core, anxiety is fear of something, real or imagined. Specifically anxiety comes from fear-based thoughts about things that are not necessarily occurring in the present moment, or which may never occur. Anxiety is intrinsically linked to our physiology. You may have a physical pain or sensation that then generates a fear-based thought or memory. Or you may have a fear-based thought that generates a physical sensation.

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- Anxiety is incredibly common.
- Recent studies show that 15% of the population of the United States, roughly 40 million people, have suffered from anxiety in the last year. Anxiety is leading far ahead of depression as the most common health issue on college campuses, according to a 2016 national study of more than 150,000 students by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Pennsylvania State University.
- And even higher than the national average, data from the National Institute of Mental Health shows that 38 percent of females ages 13 to 17, and 26 percent of males the same age, have an anxiety disorder.

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- Worry is the mind's expression of anxiety.
- Worry can be useful. You can worry about an exam you have to take, which will cause you to pay better attention to your studies. Or you can worry about preparing for a lengthy trip, which will help you think more clearly about what you need to pack.
- But when we find ourselves worrying incessantly about things beyond our control, that is when steps need to be taken to calm the mind.

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Anxiety Response

When feelings of fear become very intense or come on suddenly and feel overwhelming, without any specific cause, this is called panic.

The fear reaction, at both low levels of anxiety, and high levels of panic, is experienced in the body creating physical sensations. Muscles tighten and constrict, the heart pounds, breathing becomes strained, and you may feel dizzy or faint. In terms of anxiety these sensations arise in reaction to a *thought* you are having, rather than an actual physical threat, like a tiger, in the room with you.

Discussing anxiety with clients can cause them to become more anxious so be aware of this and bring it up for discussion in order to put them at ease.

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- Our bodies are trained to react to fear.
- If someone is coming at you with a baseball bat or if you are faced with a wild animal, your body goes into automatic fight or flight response, and with this response comes the same feelings that you may feel when anxious – racing heart, coiled muscles, dizziness.
- Our fear response system involves several brain and body systems that send messages that are transmitted over nerve pathways throughout our entire body, using a vast assortment of hormones, proteins and other neuroendocrine substances. When you encounter a situation that stimulates the fear response the entire body sends an alarm that prepares you to face the danger or choose to flee.
- Explaining this to clients can help them normalize the physical sensations they are experiencing.

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We do not even have to be actively thinking about these fears. Even when we push away anxious thoughts the subconscious continues to register them, exploring them in ways that we are not necessarily aware of.

After the death of a loved one, many of the fears that run through our minds can be perceived as more of a threat than before the loss.

Your client has witnessed someone die and now that inevitability is more real. So when the client has a fear-based thought about that person's death, or about their own mortality, or a worry about losing someone else, their body and mind are reacting stronger than before they experienced loss.

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The intense amount of emotions that come with grief can also heighten the sense of fear and danger. Most people have never felt such strong emotions as they do when they lose someone they love. It can be very frightening to find themselves overwhelmed with sadness or anger, and this can lead to even more anxiety.

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Anxiety can also perpetuate itself. Many clients tell me that what they are most anxious about is experiencing *more* anxiety. Once they have had one panic attack or one truly anxious spell, they find themselves worrying frequently that they will have another.

Anxiety can also become addictive.

Worrying about something can make a person feel as though they are doing something proactive about it, when really they are just perpetuating a heightened state of alert that keeps them in an anxious state.

Learning how to relax into a more regulated state of calm can make you feel like you won't be prepared for the thing you are worrying about, but that is not true. Allowing yourself to remain in an indefinite state of alert is exhausting and have a severe impact on your health.

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Anxiety Symptoms

Anxiety comes in many shapes and sizes.

It can look different for different everyone, but it also has a lot of common symptoms.

The most complicated aspect of anxiety is that it can manifest in very real physical symptoms.

These symptoms, ranging from heart palpitations to nausea, can deceive people into thinking there is something physically wrong with them, when really there is a deeper, underlying, psychological issue that must be addressed in order to alleviate the physical symptoms.

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Anxiety Symptoms

- Irregular heartbeat
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Shortness of breath
- Choking sensations and nausea
- Shaking and sweating
- Fatigue and weakness
- Chest pain and heartburn
- Muscle spasms
- Hot flashes or sudden chills
- Tingling sensations in your extremities
- A fear of going crazy
- A fear that you might die or be seriously ill

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In grief we experience fear for many reasons:

- Fear of how the future has changed now that an important person in our lives is gone.
- Fear of more loss, worrying that we might lose more loved ones.
- Worries about our health, concerned that we may die soon as well.
- Some people also have residual feelings of trauma as a result of witnessing or hearing details of the death itself.

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Normalizing Anxiety After a Loss

Help clients remember that anxiety is useful and normal.

Remind them that the combination of emotions and logistics that follow a loss are overwhelming.

Sitting with their feelings and talking about their fears and anxieties will help diminish them.

Many grieving people are spending time thinking about the future (what life will look like without their person) and the past (the events leading up to the death and what life used to be like with their person). Pointing this out and remind them to find ways to stay present.

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Understanding Grief

The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.
– Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

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What is Grief?

At its core, grief is the series of emotions we feel when we lose someone we love. Intense sadness, anger and frustration, disbelief, and yes, anxiety, are among the predominant feelings.

Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, and philosophical dimensions.

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Symptoms of Grief

The grief process is unique for everyone. How you experience grief depends on your personality, your environment, and the loss itself.

Most clients worry that they are “doing it wrong.” They long for a quick fix but there is not one. The key to healing through grief is really letting yourself feel it.

While each person’s grief is different there are some common symptoms.

Numbness. In the beginning you may feel nothing at all, or a heavy sense of numbness.

Forgetfulness. Clients report that they have grown forgetful in the face of the loss. They can’t remember what they did yesterday, where they put the car keys, or who just called on the phone ten minutes ago. This too, is very normal. Grief occupies such a large part of our brains that, for a while, it becomes hard to think about regular life as we once did.

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Symptoms of Grief Cont.

Crying. There may regular crying or even intense bouts of crying. This is normal. Crying is a terrific stress reliever and a healing way for your body to process intense emotions.

Frustration, Anger, Short Fuses. When we carry so many emotions around just under the surface the simplest things can set us off. I've had many clients tell me stories about unexpectedly snapping at the grocery clerk or the postman.

Anxiety. This comes in all kinds of forms. Panic attacks, general anxiety, social phobias, concerns about your body and health, or the wellbeing of the people around you.

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Symptoms of Grief Cont.

Lethargy, Hopelessness, and Depression. It's completely normal to feel a sudden lack of energy both physically and mentally. The simplest tasks like going to the grocery store, can become completely exhausting or overwhelming. Clients may find themselves wanting to sleep in the middle of the day or stay in the house more than usual. This is normal.

Clients may also find themselves not feeling as social as they once did. They could even go through a period of not wanting to see their usual friends and social circle. Going through a loss can make you feel like no one around you understands you any more, and this can cause you to withdraw, and also to feel lonely. Seeking out support groups or spending time with people who are also grieving loss is recommended.

While it's normal to have moments of hopelessness in these waves of depression, there is a fine line to watch for. If a client is displaying suicidal ideation follow mandated protocol.

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Symptoms of Grief Cont.

Feelings of Going Crazy. Lastly, clients may have moments of feeling like they're going crazy and of not feeling like their usual selves. They may also feel a sense of being unmoored, of the world feeling vast around them, and the unexpected lurking at every turn. This is also normal. Encourage them to take time to do things that feel grounding in these moments. Go for a walk, take a bath, call a friend.

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The 5 Stages of Grief

In 1969 a Swiss doctor named Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced a 5-stage model of grief, and today this is still the model that most people think of when they experience a loss. While there have been many other theories about grief introduced in the decades since, the five stages that Kubler-Ross coined – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance – continue to pervade our culture.

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5 Stages Cont.

Denial – This is the first stage of loss and it is one that helps us survive the initial emotional impact. The feelings of numbness, shock, and denial help us cope with the day-to-day survival in the first weeks and months after a loss. It is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed and like life feels meaningless. A range of emotions will return eventually.

Anger – According to EKR's model, anger is a necessary stage of grief. Anger is a powerful emotion that gives us strength and represents real feelings and an underlying pain. It is not uncommon to find yourself irrationally angry at family members, people who did not attend the funeral, or medical personnel who attended to your lost loved one. Try to be careful how you express this anger outwardly, but do find healthy ways to release it.

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5 Stages Cont.

Bargaining – In this stage grievers may find themselves bargaining with their higher power or with themselves, trying to find any way to alleviate the pain they are feeling over their loss. "What if" questions may preoccupy you throughout this stage, or you may find yourself wishing yourself back to the past. This stage is often short-lived, or one that filters in and out through your grief process.

Depression – Following the previous stages, grievers find themselves truly facing the loss in a way they had not yet. Often doing so brings on a heavy sense of sadness and feelings of emptiness. You may find yourself feeling hopeless about the future or about how you will ever live without your person. These feelings are normal and natural. Some people need additional support and work to move through this stage and return to place of better functioning, while others move into and out of this stage naturally.

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5 Stages Cont.

Acceptance – In this final stage, people reach a level of acceptance about the loss. You may not ever feel that it is “okay” that your loved one died, but in this stage you come to accept that will have to live your life without them, and hopefully embrace your “new normal.” Some of you may never feel *over* the loss, but you can learn to live without your person.

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Anxiety the Missing Stage

The Kubler-Ross model of the 5 stages of grief was originally intended for people who were *dying* not grieving.

Why this impacts the model.

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Where Does Anxiety Fit In?

Denial

Anger

Bargaining >> ANXIETY

Depression

Acceptance

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Where Does Anxiety Fit In?

Anxiety comes after anger but before, or alongside, depression. Ideally, I might actually replace bargaining with anxiety. Bargaining is the stage that I believe applies least to the grieving process.

It makes sense that we experience shock and denial following the loss of a loved one. Even with the death of someone who has had a long illness, it can still be startling to experience their actual absence, and there is often a certain period of denial, before the reality of the loss truly sets in.

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Where Does Anxiety Fit In?

The following stages – anger, anxiety, and depression – are all so fluid that it is hard to put them in a linear order. Some people never experience anger, but if they do it is often a way of masking deeper pain and sadness, so sometimes it does come before depression. Anger is a quick way to push away sadness. It's always easier to be mad than it is to feel pain. But few of us can stay angry forever.

When the anger subsides we are left facing the truth of what is at hand. We have lost someone very dear to us and our world has been forever altered. This is where anxiety comes into play. We are finally facing the loss head on and it is agonizing. We are horrified to find that our person is really gone. We are scared of the pain we are experiencing. We are fearful that more bad things could happen. And we are set adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

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Where Does Anxiety Fit In?

But along with that anxiety can also come depression. They go hand in hand. This has been well-documented for centuries. By facing the rawness of life in this way, comes an ocean of depression that we must swim across. Yet even after the depression sets in you may also continue to feel anxiety, the two of them interwoven, coming in waves.

But all of these emotions are just that – emotions. They don't last forever. We move in and out of them, release them, return to some, rest in one for a while, find meaning in another. Acceptance is the phase of embracing your new normal. This does not mean you are necessarily “over” the loss. For some of us, we may never be over the loss of someone dear to us. But we can learn to live with the loss as we would a missing limb. We can return to our lives and remember how to make meaning and purpose without that person by our side. That is what acceptance means.

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Different Kinds of Death

How we lose someone has a vast impact on the grief process. From sudden deaths to long, protracted illnesses, how the person leaves our world can have many different impacts on our psyches.

Most of the time, death is not easy – not for the person at the end of their life, or for their loved ones – but some deaths are more peaceful than others. Not being able to say goodbye to someone we love before they die can be very difficult to grapple with. Also sudden or violent deaths can take a long time for our brains and hearts to process. Both of these experiences greatly affect the grief process.

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How Long Does Grief Last?

The length of time a person grieves varies from person to person and is affected by several factors:

- The relationship they had with their loved one
- The specific death
- The personality of the grieving individual
- Multiple and secondary losses
- The grieving person's support network
- How willing the griever is to move through the grief process

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Questions to Ask

1. Do you feel you have properly grieved?
2. If not, take a moment and target the specific areas in which you feel you need to work on.
3. Do you feel you have experienced one grief emotion more than another? For example, have you felt predominately angry or have you been mostly steeped in depression? Opening up to other emotions may be the key to moving *through* the process, rather than dwelling in it.
4. Is there something blocking you from moving through your grief? Perhaps a stigma around experiencing emotions? Or a sense of guilt about something involving your loved one?
5. Do you feel you need additional support in order to continuing moving through your grief? If so, what/who would that look like?

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How to Address + Heal Grief Anxiety

- Help clients tell the story of loss
- Make amends
- Take inventory and take charge of life
- The power of writing
- Retraining the brain
- Being present
- Finding something to believe in
- Death planning

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Telling the Story of Loss

“You must get it out. Grief must be witnessed to be healed. Grief shared is grief abated. Tell your tale, because it reinforces that your loss mattered. In sharing our story, we dissipate the pain little by little, giving a small drop to those we meet to disperse it along the way.” – Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

It’s important to help clients tell the story of loss. It is a natural way of processing and also helps clients externalize the loss and make meaning of it.

In the beginning of a loss clients might feel the need to go over every detail leading up to the death and the death itself, multiple times. This is normal.

As they get farther out from the loss, the brush strokes of the story become broader.

Sometimes people get stuck telling themselves (and others) one version of the story.

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Storytelling Outlets

Join a grief group

Write about your loss

Anniversary or holiday gatherings

Online grief forums

**Find a safe friend or family member
who is willing to listen**

Find a therapist

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Storytelling Exercise

Ask your clients to write their story of loss. Help them find a beginning, middle, and end and encourage them to consider different beginnings. Think of three different beginnings.

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Making Amends

“Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death.” – Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

One of the most common roadblocks to processing grief is holding onto unnecessary guilt.

Holding on to this guilt can cause undue amounts of pain, which can lead to anxiety.

Helping clients process the guilt they feel can help lead them to a peaceful place, alleviating anxiety.

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Understanding Guilt

Reasons for Commonly-Felt Guilt

- Not being there at time of death
- Not saying goodbye properly
- Not apologizing for something
- Not doing something that could have prevented the death or suffering
- Behaving poorly towards the end
- Having negative thoughts about the person
- Feeling relieved about the death (usually after a long illness, mental or physical)
- Not spending more quality time together when given the chance
- Taking the person for granted

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Releasing Guilt

Questions to Ask Yourself About Your Guilt

What did you expect of yourself that you were not able to do?
Were those expectations realistic?
What could you have done differently?
Were you hindered by emotional stress?
Would your loved one forgive you now given the opportunity?
What would you tell a friend who made the same mistake you made?
What have you learned from this mistake that you can apply to your current life?

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Releasing Guilt Cont.

Steps to Releasing Guilt

- Recognize that feeling guilty after losing someone is a common experience
- Understand that releasing your guilt does not mean letting go of your loved one
- Examine the beliefs around your guilt and break them apart to see which are justified and which are not real
- Use creative exercises to say the goodbye or apology you didn't get to say
- Find ways to stay positively connected to your loved one

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Releasing Guilt Exercises

- Write a letter to your loved one
- Write a letter to yourself forgiving yourself
- Visualize saying goodbye or being there if you weren't
- Do something in honor of your loved one
- Visualize your loved one forgiving you
- Each time you find yourself having a negative guilt thought, replace it with a positive memory.
- Find someone you can talk to about your feelings of guilt

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Taking Charge of Your Life

When we suffer a significant loss many aspects of our lives are affected. Everything from finances to living situations to childcare can be impacted.

These changes can serve as severe stressors and cause anxiety.

Helping clients recognize these changes, empower themselves to take control of them, and also ask for help, is vital to alleviating anxiety.

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Resilient Grieving

Resilient grieving is the idea that we can take active measures and steps to find strength and learn coping tools in the face of loss, even when the pain seems unbearable.

Resilient grieving is about being proactive in your grief process. It's about letting yourself cry and mourn, but also taking a look at your coping methods and earnestly beginning to reshape your life. It's about not letting your world fall irrevocably apart as a result of this loss. For some people this may feel out of tune with your natural grief process – some people feel that dusting themselves off and getting on with their lives means letting go of their loved one, but that's not what resiliency is about.

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Resilient Grieving Methods

- Establish Routines
- Examine What is Working
- Ask for help
- Nurture your physical body
- Seek Positives
- Distractions
- Create Rituals
- Connect with others
- Make meaning
- Accept the loss

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Design a Resilience Plan

1. Begin by making a complete list of everything you need help with, including little things.
2. Share your list with a friend or family member and ask them for support.
3. Pinpoint any areas that you feel particular pain or fear around and examine why and find ways to work through these areas.
4. Share your list with your therapist or grief group and ask for support.
5. Take a look at the truth of your financial situation and see a financial advisor or ask advice from a family member or friend.

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Resilience Plan Cont.

6. Make a list of things in your life that are taking up unnecessary energy or time and begin to make changes to decrease these stressors.
7. Take up new hobbies or activities that bring you pleasure and joy. Maintain or increase your physical activity.
8. Actively seek out people who bolster your life in positive ways.
9. Continue to check in on this list as you make new changes in your life, checking things off, and adding new ones as they arise.
10. Consult with others before making big changes like moving or changing jobs. These impulses often comes up in the wake of loss, but be sure you are ready.

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Taking Inventory

Losing someone significant can be an opportunity for you to re-evaluate your identity and how you are living your life. Grief almost always serves as a reminder that our time here is short and that we truly must make the most of it.

Finding a balance between embracing life to its fullest potential, and also being responsible, is an important part of this journey. Don't be surprised if clients find themselves in this predicament – suddenly wanting to make major changes to their lives because they now realize what is truly important to them.

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Inventory Questions

1. What are some things in your life that you would like to change? Job? Family? Finance?
2. Do you have any bad habits you need to quit? Overeating? Smoking? Alcohol? The Grief Recovery Method Institute refers to these as STERBS (Short Term Energy Releasing Behaviors).
3. Are you holding onto relationships that either need to end or need to change? Review the people you surround yourself with and ask yourself if they are contributing to your life in meaningful and healthy ways.
4. Do you need to make amends with someone?
5. Do you have major life goals (writing a book, running a marathon, learning a new language) that you have been putting off?
6. Ask yourself Sheryl Sandberg's question: What would you do if you weren't afraid?
7. Take stock of any ways in which you feel you are contributing to the world at large (volunteering for a nonprofit, donating to causes, helping people in need) and think about ways you can increase or incorporate these activities into your life.
8. Make a list of positive things that you can do *because* your loved one is gone, and work to embrace them.

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The Power of Writing

Writing through grief is instrumental to clearing out all the weight we carry with us in the aftermath of a significant loss, six months or even six years later. Putting pen to paper or fingers to keys, is a direct way to relieve tension and stress and find a way to reconnect with our loved ones. We become anxious because we don't have an outlet for all that we are holding within us and writing can help us release it.

I use writing tools and exercises with each and every one of my clients at some point or another during our work together. The writing assignments I give them vary from person to person, always tailored to a specific need directly related to their process.

Writing about grief has been popular for a long time. From C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, about the death of his wife, in the 1960s to the proliferation of grief memoirs in the 21st century, both writers and readers alike have been drawn to stories of loss. It's not just that the writers of these stories feel catharsis in sharing their stories, but that we as the readers feel the same in reading them.

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Writing Exercises for Grief

Daily Journaling

One of the best practices you can cultivate during your grief process is to do this kind of free-writing every day. This comes in the form of daily journaling. Go to the bookstore or an art store and buy a beautiful journal. Then pick a good spot in your home and decide on a consistent time each morning to devote to this practice. I know that this can be difficult for some people who have hectic lives, so if it's not the same exact time or place every day, or if you need to write in the evenings or afternoons instead, that's okay too. The main goal is to be writing every day.

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Writing Exercises for Grief

Letter Writing

- Write a letter to your loved one filling them in on all that's happened in your life since they died.
- Write a letter to your loved one about something you feel guilty or sorry about that you wish you could apologize for.
- Write a letter of thanks to your loved one for all the ways they made you feel loved and supported during their life.
- Write a letter to your loved one about one of your favorite memories together.
- Write a letter to *yourself* from your loved one. Allow yourself to imagine what they might say to you if they could give you comfort during this time.
- Write a letter to *yourself* forgiving yourself for anything you feel that you could have done better during your loved one's life or death.
- Write a letter to *yourself* ten years from now. Tell yourself all the ways in which you hope to heal and move forward and who you hope to become.

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Writing Exercises for Grief

Remembrance/Memory Writing

- I remember when...
- I loved it when you...
- It always made me laugh when you...
- The first time we met was...
- You were so good at...
- You were most you when you were doing...
- You taught me...
- You were happiest when you...
- The funniest thing that ever happened to you was...
- You always wanted to...
- Your favorite song was...
- Your favorite food was...
- Your favorite hobby was...
- Your favorite clothes were...
- Your favorite place was...
- Your favorite movie was...
- Your favorite book was...
- Your favorite holidays were...
- You got through hard times by doing...
- You were admired for being...

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Retraining Your Brain

Learning how to harness your anxious thoughts is the most valuable tool you can acquire in the process of gaining control of, and relinquishing, your anxiety.

Learning how our thoughts work, the patterns they create in our bodies and our emotions, is a big part of eliminating anxiety.

One of the most effective and widely used treatments for anxiety is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. While this kind of work does not directly address the grief process, it very much works to alleviate and eliminate anxious thoughts that come on a result of loss.

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Thought Triggers

In grief many new thoughts come into our minds. Thoughts about mortality, about uncertainty, about painful memories, and worrisome visions of the future. Many of the thoughts that occur after a significant loss are new ones, but even if they are not new (i.e. death is an inevitability) the thoughts feel more real than ever before following a loss. And because a lot of these grief-based thoughts are scary, our bodies have an automatic fear response which, in turn, illicit anxiety.

Triggering Event

Loss of a loved one

Thought

Life is uncertain

Feeling

fear, anxiety

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Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pressure
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Weakness
- Tense muscles

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Cognitive Symptoms of Anxiety

- Fear of death or physical impairment
- Fear of being unable to cope
- Fear of going crazy
- Painful memories and images
- Perceptions of unreality
- Confusion, lack of concentration
- Trouble reasoning
- Hypervigilance for threat

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Behavioral Symptoms of Anxiety

- Avoidance of situations
- Escape plans
- Feeling the need for safety and reassurance
- Agitation
- A feeling of paralysis
- Trouble speaking

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Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety

- Feeling scared, even terrified
- Feeling nervous and tense
- Feeling on edge or jumpy
- Feeling impatient and frustrated

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Charting the Symptoms

Based on the previous lists help your client make their own personal list correlating all of the symptoms and behavior. Becoming aware of the link between them is the key to overcoming them.

Anxious Thought | Physical Symptoms | Cognitive Symptoms | Behavioral Symptoms

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

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Catastrophic Thinking

When we are suffering from anxiety we have a tendency to exaggerate and catastrophize the possibility of bad outcomes. This can range from finding a strange mole on your arm and immediately thinking you have cancer, to a family member being late to arrive home and thinking that something terrible must have happened.

Studies have shown that anxious thinking happens in less than half a second. It happens so quickly that most of us do not even realize our brains are processing a threat. It's like a computer that has an operating system set to perceiving and responding to threats in the environment. We must learn how to override this operating system, or create a new one altogether. Again, the key to this is learning how to recognize your anxious and catastrophic thoughts.

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Fear of Anxiety

By the time my clients come to see me, many of them have developed a fear of the anxiety itself. They are so overwhelmed by the periods of anxiety they have been experiencing that they are terrified of having more. Many people can even over-catastrophize their own anxiety, maintaining a belief that they cannot cope with it. Taking time to look at this belief and recognize that you *can* cope with it will help alleviate your concern about it.

Anxious Thoughts

Focusing on worst possible outcomes

Focusing on inability to cope

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Normal Thoughts

Focusing on realistic outcomes

Focusing on ability to cope

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Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing is breathing that is done by contracting the diaphragm, rather than focusing on the lungs. Air enters the lungs and the chest rises but the diaphragm, the muscle located horizontally between the thoracic cavity and abdominal cavity, contracts and expands.

1. Sit comfortably, or lie down in relaxed state, with one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain still.
3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale.

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Being Present

Mindfulness and meditation are extremely useful tools on the path to eliminating anxiety.

Teaching my clients this tool and helping them understand the foundation of mindfulness is one of my favorite aspects of the work we do together. And that's because I've never failed to see them achieve rapid results if they truly give this practice a try.

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Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the concept of compassionate, non-judgemental awareness of the present moment. It is a gentle way of paying closer attention to yourself and your life and an invitation to develop a deeper relationship with your own experience. This includes your experience of anxiety, fear and sadness. Cultivating this awareness takes time and practice, but the benefits are enormous.

Anxiety and panic arise from fear-based *thoughts*, rather than an actual physical threat. Anxiety is the feeling that something is wrong, rather than there actually being something in the room with you that is physical distressing. It's the fear of getting cancer, or of experiencing more loss, rather than something that is actually happening in the moment like a home intruder. This is why learning how to observe our *thoughts*, rather than reacting to them, is the key to gaining control of your anxiety.

When we have fearful thoughts it sends a message to our body to create a response. If we choose to let these thoughts dominate our brains then the amygdala becomes stimulated and fear-system activity is put in place, increasing our heart-rate, breathing, and adrenaline. Catching ourselves in the moment and working to simply be aware of the thoughts, rather than believe them, we are able to send a message to our brains that will begin to calm the central nervous system, instead of continuing to activate it.

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Mindfulness Cont.

Mindfulness breaks the cycle of anxious thoughts that are fueling your central nervous system. It also gives your body a chance to support the natural capacity of the cortical centers to interpret the situation in a safer context. You may not be able to stop the thoughts but you can learn not to identify with them or believe them. In this way, even though you have not stopped your thoughts, they begin to lose the power to control you.

The first step is in learning simple meditation techniques. Learning how to sit still and become aware of our thoughts as they arise is the initial work. Take a deep breath. Look around the room or environment you are currently in. Take note of the air temperature and how your body feels. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Hot? Cold? Bring yourself as fully into the present moment as you can. Remind yourself that this is the only moment that exists. The future scenarios you are feeling anxious about are not real and they may never be. You are right here, right now and you are alive and safe.

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Making Meaning of Loss

Religion, spirituality, and views of the afterlife are important to the client's process.

Helping them explore pre-existing, current, and potential belief systems can help them make meaning of the loss and find a sense of peace.

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Staying Connected

Finding ways to stay connected to our loved ones is a vital part of healthy grieving and can ease anxiety.

What are ways we can stay connected?

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Anniversaries & Holidays

These can be particularly trying times for clients. Helping them make meaning can alleviate anxiety.

- Cook their favorite meal
- Go to their favorite restaurant
- Visit their gravesite
- Donate to a charity in their name
- Plant a flower or tree
- Travel to their favorite place
- Write them a letter
- Go to church
- Watch your loved one's favorite movie
- Visit a place he/she always wanted to visit
- Wear an item of clothing or jewelry that belonged to your person
- Watch home movies or look through photos
- Hold a meal gathering and ask everyone to share stories

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Death Planning

The final step to eliminating anxiety about death is to prepare for it.

Most people push off the idea of preparing for death, feeling that there is no reason to prepare for it when they are healthy or young. But for those of us experiencing anxiety around death, taking precautions and making preparations can be the very thing to set us at ease. It should come as no surprise that you are thinking of death more than ever following a loss. Losing someone we love is always a stark reminder of our own mortality. Realizing you are not prepared to die yourself, and feeling resistant to making those preparations, or pushing away the idea of doing so altogether, can be the direct cause of underlying anxiety.

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Summary

- Grief-related anxiety is common and normal
- Understanding anxiety is key
- Honor the grief process
- Examine the grief story
- Take charge of life
- Embrace resilience
- Use writing to heal and empower
- Become aware of your thoughts
- Embrace the present moment
- Find a sense of connection
- Accept that death is part of life

