

instant help solutions

grief recovery for **teens**

letting go of **painful emotions**
with **body-based practices**



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foreword

Life is full of change. As the author Doe Zantamata once stated:

If you were to open the front door and see that it had started raining, you wouldn't slam it and curse the clouds because it was sunny just an hour before. You'd get an umbrella and be on your way. Part of embracing change in life is knowing that you will be able to adapt. There is a comfort in the familiar, but new things can be better than before, or the change may even only be temporary. When faced with change that's not in your control, adapt, and be on your way.

No matter how catastrophic a situation is, you will eventually have to accept that trying times are simply part of life. Without these hard times, you will never experience the best days of your life. As hard as it is to see in the moment, our hardships make us into more loving, grateful people who are thankful for each and every thing on this earth. Everyone will experience loss and grief at some point in their lifetime.

I always knew that without loss, there isn't life, but I never fathomed that I would personally lose someone so dear to my heart. June 5, 2013, seemed like it would be an ordinary day; I had no way of knowing that my entire life was about to get turned upside down. That was the night my family received the devastating news that my oldest sister, Kaylie—my best friend—had tragically passed away from an epileptic seizure. I was stunned and wondered how this could even be. I was supposed

to be a bridesmaid in her wedding that winter. We were supposed to grow old together and be the crazy old sibling pair in the nursing home.

I quickly began to learn that grief is a roller coaster ride of a journey. The first few weeks after her death I was mostly all right, still in shock from the horrific event that happened. Once the initial shock ended, however, I was profoundly miserable, almost to the point of not wanting to live myself. I became the glue for my family, the person who held everything together, and it forced me to mature very quickly. Nothing seemed enjoyable, even things I used to love. I didn't know where to turn or what to do with myself. No one seemed to understand me. Some of my close friends just stopped talking to me because they didn't understand my grief, and I felt awkward around those who did. I felt alone, broken, and lost.

A few months after Kaylie died, my family and I attended grief camp, which is where I met Coral. I'd been hesitant about attending grief camp; I thought I would just be sitting in a circle crying with a box of Kleenex. Little did I know that it would forever change my entire perspective on life. After camp, I realized that I needed to change my way of thinking and turn a horrible situation into one filled with positive emotion. Now I strive to do everything I can to help others and make the world a better place. When I first arrived at camp, I was greeted by Coral's bubbly, caring attitude. She's the type of person you would want to help you through your challenges. She changed my life in three short days, and for that, I am forever grateful. We have remained in touch since camp, and I am proud to call her both my mentor and one of my closest friends.

Coral's knowledge and expertise on the field of grief and teens is amazing, and I can assure you that she and her book will change your life. I wish that there had been a resource like this book available after I lost Kaylie. I remember searching for

books and information about grief for teens and only being able to find picture books for kids and some books for adults. This made me feel even more alone than I already did. So, when Coral mentioned that she was planning on writing a book about grief for teens, I was ecstatic. It was absolutely my honor to assist Coral with her book, providing ideas and even feedback throughout her writing process.

While reading through Coral's rough drafts, I instantly wished that I had known some of the coping strategies mentioned throughout the book during my darkest hours. I tried some of them as I read and realized how well they worked. At the time, my main coping strategy had been journaling; wonderful as it was, journaling was not able to relieve some of the anger and other intense emotions that I felt, like guilt. My sister died of a seizure alone at her apartment, but somehow I still felt guilty, like there was something I could have done to prevent it from happening. I felt like I should've been there—possibly I could even have saved her life.

Many teens experience guilt throughout the grieving process, and, if you do, there is no need to be embarrassed. It is totally normal, I can promise you. You can follow some of the exercises located in the guilt chapter and throughout the book to help relieve your grief.

Regardless of your situation, I can assure you that this book contains coping strategies that will work for you. Be warned, though, that you need to keep an open mind when trying these activities and coping strategies, because the ones that work best for you might surprise you. Throughout your grief journey, there will be bad days and good days, but it is up to you to make the most of each day. Don't be afraid to talk about your emotions with others. In fact, talking with someone reliable is really one of the best healing practices I know of.

Again, no matter your situation, I promise that you will make it

through the heart-wrenching pain and grief, and this book will help, as will leaning on those around you, like your friends and loved ones. Don't be ashamed, though, if you don't see instantaneous results. The grief journey is a gradual progression with many twists and turns, ups and downs. When you lose someone you love, your life will never be the same, but you will adapt and begin to get used to the new you and your new normal. Sometimes your grief will engulf you like an ocean, and other times things will be calm. The truth is you just need to keep swimming through each and every day. It's the only way.

Thank you, Coral, for everything you have done and continue to do for me and all the other grieving children, teens, and their families. You truly have helped save many lives and turned countless others around, including mine. Love you, from the very bottom of my heart!

—Danielle Hogue

introduction

Why would I read about grief when I'm feeling it every day?

—Matt

Why does my whole body ache when my heart is broken?

—Katie

How do I deal with all that's changed? My life will never be the same.

—Emma

When someone you love has died, everything changes. The world you knew, the life you had, is different—and it will always be different. You think differently, you act differently, you feel differently, and your whole body hurts at times.

This book is about how grief not only affects your thoughts and emotions, but how it also affects your physical body. By that I mean how and why your muscles tense, why your stomach and head ache, why you're too exhausted to move, and why your body feels numb to the pain. You might sleep too much or not enough, or food may taste different; maybe you can't eat, or you overeat. You feel your heart beat faster, you can't breathe, and all these symptoms make you worry that you're going to die too.

You will be grieving a long time, maybe all your life. Grief is a journey that doesn't end, but it does change. Eventually your grief won't be as intense; it won't hurt as much or for as long or as often as it does right after someone you love has died. Understanding how and why your body reacts to grief, to the emotions and thoughts that go with it, will help you move along

that grief journey. When you understand why you feel nervous, annoyed, hassled, driven, blue, or inadequate, the thoughts and feelings, the reactions your body experiences, will have less power over you (Hansen and Mendius 2009).

Knowing why and how your body reacts, however, isn't enough to move you forward. Each chapter in this book focuses on the emotions most associated with grief and how they can affect our body and our minds. Our emotions aren't separate from our bodies; in fact, they physically affect our bodies. Though the chapters discuss the different emotions that affect grief, emotions don't happen one at a time; nor do they occur in any kind of order or end once you've experienced them. When we feel grief, our minds and bodies bounce around with varying degrees of emotions, and sometimes we even feel two emotions at the same time.

Once you've read the first couple of chapters and understand the mind-body connection and how grief, loss, and trauma affect us, you can turn to the chapter that you feel is most relevant to how you feel right now. Feel free to read different chapters as your emotions change.

The whole point of this book is to introduce you to skills and activities that will help you deal with the emotions you're feeling. There are a number of ways you can help your body when emotions and thoughts around grief bubble up or overwhelm you. For example, there are activities that can help you get through class when something or someone brings up a loved one who has died. There are things you can do to help you get to sleep more quickly or manage your anger when it's out of control. Visit <http://www.newharbinger.com/38532> for audio tracks, and worksheets related to the activities in this book.

Thousands of grieving teens have tested these activities. Some of them may work for you, whereas others may feel pretty weird and won't work for you. Try out the activities that you think

might help you; if they do help, keep doing them. But also keep an open mind. Once in a while, try an activity that doesn't seem like it would work, or even one that seems downright stupid. You never know what will help. You never thought you'd lose the person you love, you never thought you'd feel this much pain, and you're not sure how you're going to get through this grief, so why not try something you're not sure of and see if it helps?

The ideas and activities in this book are meant to move you closer to being in control of the anxiety, irritability, nervousness, depression, and general sense of “crazy” that grief—and life in general—can stir up. They will help you on your grief journey, especially on those “grief days” that come up when you thought things were getting better, and they may also help you pass your driver's license test, deal with your first job and a crabby boss, handle a breakup, or navigate college exams.

In this book you will get to know a few teens who are going through some of the same things you are; they all had a loved one who died. People react differently when someone in their life dies. Some teens want to let people know what happened right away, looking for support from others to get them through. Others don't want anyone to know that they're grieving, not wanting the pity of others or to be known as “the girl whose dad died.” In this book you'll meet Emma; her four-year-old sister Sophie died when the string of her hoodie sweatshirt got caught on the slide and strangled her as she went down. Emma lives with her older brother and parents in a small town. Her story is complicated, but it's also normal. Her experiences, feelings, and thoughts may be just like yours. However, each grief story is unique because it belongs to the individual.

You'll also meet Katie, whose mom died from breast cancer after a long, hard-fought battle. Katie lives with her twin sister, her dad, and her dad's new girlfriend. Katie's grief is totally

different from her sister's even though they both experienced the same loss. You, too, have your own relationship with the person who died—your own experiences, conversations, feelings, adventures, and arguments.

And then there's Matt, who struggles with an argument he had with his best friend, JR, who took his own life. Matt lives in a big city where suicide among school-age kids is not uncommon; Matt has even considered it himself. JR's suicide shocked everyone, and Matt has never felt this bad before. Here are their stories in their own words.

Matt: So I get a text lighting up my phone in the middle of the night. It's JR again, so I push the "off" button, roll over, and say to myself, *Later, dude, it's the middle of the night.*

The next morning, I look at the message, and it says, "Ready for a wild ride?"

Didn't know what that meant until I got to school and everyone knew but me. JR took his old man's car and ran it into a tree—on purpose. The cops think he was going at least ninety miles per hour with no seat belt.

Something was always going on with JR. He got suspended for drinking in school, he got beat up downtown at a concert, and his parents got a divorce after years of fighting it out. He broke up with his girlfriend last month. We had argued after school the day before he killed himself about him just getting over her; he said he didn't know if he could, and I told him he better. That night, he texted her and told her he couldn't—he wouldn't—live without her, and he said good-bye.

I guess he told me good-bye too, sort of.

Every day since it happened, all I do is wonder what would have happened if I had answered his text.

Katie: When my mom was first diagnosed, we all believed—we were all told—she would survive. There are all kinds of research and drugs and help out there for women with breast cancer, now that all the walks and runs and awareness are happening. We believed the doctors.

She got really sick whenever she had the chemotherapy treatments. She couldn't do anything, was always throwing up in the bathroom, and never came to dinner. A lot of times my twin sister, Kelly, and I had to get her away from the toilet and back into bed because she was so weak.

Seeing her that way made me sick, too, and scared.

She would rally, and we would think that she was better, that life would go back to normal, but then she'd relapse. We had to do all the mom stuff, like laundry, dishes, cooking for my dad, cleaning the bathroom, and changing her sheets. Sometimes it was easier when she was in the hospital.

The days before she died I just remember everything being quiet and hushed except for the sound of the machines around her. She moaned a lot, and her breathing was real funny.

Everyone says I should be glad I got a chance to say good-bye to her. I am glad, I guess, though I don't think anyone really should feel glad about saying good-bye to your mother for the last time.

Emma: That day started just like every other normal day of the past fourteen years of my life, with my mom,

dad, older brother, younger sister, and the baby. The baby of the family is—or was—Sophie. When I left for school, she was whining over her soggy cereal. When I got back from school, there was an ambulance in my driveway and her tiny little body was covered with a sheet while people raced to put her inside the ambulance. She died by strangulation. I still don't understand *how* that kind of thing happens. I know how it happened: her hoodie got caught on a screw or something, I just don't understand *how* it could happen to her. How could this happen to our family?

Matt, Katie, and Emma are composites of real teens with real grief they are living with and real questions that go unanswered. They represent teens who suddenly find themselves in a world of hurt and grief they didn't see coming and don't want to have to deal with. They, like you, just want to get back to being a normal teenager. You may wonder if "normal" will ever happen again, or you may stuff down your grief, sadness, and anger in an attempt to force a normal life. But things aren't normal anymore; someone you love has died, and things will never be the same. However, knowing some of the information in this book and doing some of its activities may answer your questions.

It may seem impossible right now to think about living normally after what has happened. This book will help you find strength, laughter, love, and joy, because you can—and want to—figure out how to live with the changes, find fun again, and get to a new normal.

chapter 1

your grieving brain

Get ready for a nerd alert. Knowing about the brain and neuroscience helps us understand why we think, feel, and act the way we do.

—Emma

Emma's right on track! This chapter is all about brainy, nerd-like stuff. Although it may be hard to connect the science presented in this chapter to how you feel right now, if you stick with reading this entire chapter, you'll see things more clearly. Understanding how your brain works, especially after a sudden trauma such as the loss of a loved one, helps take away some of the confusion over what is happening with your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Knowing more about your brain can also bring a sense of relief, because you can see that normal brain development is playing a big part in how you're feeling and what you're doing as a result of your grief. You're not just being or feeling crazy; rather, your still-growing brain is trying to catch up with your life experiences.

We begin with the brain because it is the part of our body that gives us the ability to move, feel, and think. Our brain controls all the functions of our body, holds our memories, and determines our emotional state; our brain lets us learn what we need so we can survive and thrive.

With teens, I usually start out any discussions about grief by talking about the brain and brain development. Most don't like it much at first; the information seems too confusing or like it doesn't matter. But as Emma said, "The more I heard, the more

I knew, the better I understood, the better I felt. Knowing that my brain—anyone’s brain—would find it hard to cope with having someone in my life gone forever gave me a sense of being a little closer to normal.”

By understanding how her brain works, Emma learned a lot about how to cope with her grief, her emotions, and the sometimes uncontrollable aches and pains she felt in her body. So let’s give it a shot.

Your Three Brains from the Bottom Up

Let’s first take a look at the structure of the human brain. It’s really made up of three parts, or three minibrains, if you will, that work together to integrate our experiences and to keep us alive. There’s the *brain stem*, which is the part of the brain that connects to the spinal cord. It’s responsible for all automatic life functions, such as breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. It keeps your body alive and moving. You were born with a completely developed brain stem.

Next to develop is the *limbic brain*, which is your brain’s emotion center. It controls feelings, mood, memory, and motivation. It’s also the part of the brain that feels fear and senses threat. It is partially developed when you are born and grows the most during adolescence (Siegel 2013). To understand how the limbic brain develops, consider this example: When we’re babies, we cry and scream when we’re hungry, being the little survivors that we are, and when our loving caregiver shows up to feed us, we learn about love and relationships. This experience grows our limbic brain. Through this process we start to remember what we need to do to get our needs met. Our memories are also stored in the limbic brain, which explains why emotions are so easily triggered when we remember or share memories of our loved one who

died.

Finally, there's the *cortex*, or thinking brain, which is the biggest part of the brain. It develops throughout your life and is the part of the brain that learns the skills of language, math, decision making, planning, and organizing. As the cortex develops, both our genetics—where we get our temperament and personality—and our life experiences make us who we are. We learn to walk and talk from this part of our brain. Once we can speak, our limbic brain starts storing our memories with words and stories. This is why we can't remember much of our lives before the age of four or five: our cortex wasn't developed enough to give us the words, the language, to store memories as stories we could tell.

Your brain is like a sponge, soaking up everything adults show and tell you until you're about twelve years old. Then your brain starts getting rid of all the stuff the sponge absorbed. This process is called *pruning*: information stored in your brain that is no longer useful dies off, leaving only the important stuff. We also call this process *maturing* (Siegel 2013).

The *prefrontal cortex* (PFC) is an essential area of our brain contained within the cortex (thinking brain) that kicks into high gear, developing at its fastest rate, when we are teens. The PFC is the part of the brain that helps us make good decisions, but it isn't finished developing until we're in our midtwenties. Being risky, making poor choices, and screwing up from time to time are part of PFC development.

The limbic (emotional) brain is at an all-time active period when you're a teenager, and the PFC is working overtime to balance exploring new possibilities and your curiosity with taking risks and making mistakes. In order to live independently of your parents, you need to form your own identity, and this normal developmental need is why you prefer your friends over your family most of the time. Once your brain has fully

developed, around your midtwenties, it can still change and learn new things, which is good news. No matter what happens in our lives, our brains can grow, change, and adapt to life experiences until we're well into our nineties.

Neuroscientist Dan Siegel developed this easy activity to help us understand our brains. It's a *handy* way to remember the three parts of the brain, how the brain develops from the bottom up, and how the three parts function together. All you need is your own hand!

1.1 A Handy Tool

Hold your hand in the air like you are going to high-five someone, then turn the palm toward you.

Picture your wrist and arm as your spinal cord and the palm of your hand as the brain stem.

Take your thumb and fold it over your palm (brain stem); your thumb represents the limbic brain, or your emotional brain. As you can see, the emotional brain directly touches the brain stem, which shows you how and why your emotions directly affect your body. Remember, the brain stem is what controls your body functions, such as breathing.

Curl your four fingers around your thumb. They represent the cortex.

The very tips of your four fingers, part of the cortex, represent the prefrontal cortex, or PFC. The PFC touches and affects all parts of your brain: the cortex, the limbic brain, and the brain stem.

Now you have a picture of your brain's bottom-up development, starting at the bottom of your brain with your palm (brain stem); next with your thumb layered on top (the limbic, or emotional, brain); and finally, at the top and last to develop, your finger, representing the cortex. Now you can understand how the teenage brain, especially the limbic (emotional) brain, works in overdrive; it's sandwiched right in the middle of all that brain development and is affected by both the brain stem and the cortex. So imagine what happens to your brain when it is dealt an emotional whammy with the death of a loved one.

Slammed with an Emotional Whammy

When the teenage brain hears the news of a loved one's death, shock and disbelief are usually the first reactions. This happens because the cortex, the thinking part of the brain, cannot yet process the reality of the news. The limbic (emotional) part of the brain doesn't process the feelings right away either. It's the brain stem that processes the news first.

The brain stem contains the *autonomic nervous system*. Basically, this system controls the functions of our body to keep it alive when something shocks it. This larger system is broken down into two others called the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. The *sympathetic nervous system* ignites whenever we are frightened or threatened in any way. The *parasympathetic nervous system* calms or relaxes our nervous system when the threat subsides. As you can imagine, grief kicks your sympathetic nervous system up a notch or two and leaves it there a while.

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems developed to help us recognize threats to survival, react, and then calm the brain and body back down. Most of this response takes place in a short amount of time. Imagine a caveman