

# Grace Grief Notes

## The Comfortable Presence of a Death Doula

To live ... is to breathe ... is to die, the natural and inescapable rhythm of human life. Deep down, we understand this. But in our death-averse culture, many of us need help remembering how to live into death, on our own terms.

### Special points of interest:

- Anticipatory Grief and COVID-19
- Book Review: *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*
- Volunteering

Death doulas – officially referred to as end-of-life doulas – provide emotional, non-medical support to the dying and their loved ones

during the long hours between visits from medical and hospice teams. We are comfortable with death and feel called to this work. While often certified by a training program and experience working in end-of-life settings, we are there simply to provide

the support people in years past knew how to offer each other ... back when dying was a more common experience.

While the end-of-life doula role is still new in Minnesota, our numbers have increased significantly, and a handful of innovative hospices, including Grace Hospice, now offer the opportunity to work with an end-of-life doula.

Importantly, doulas have no agenda; we listen and follow the lead of the person we're there to help, without judgment. We give them space to vent, talk about fears and worries, take stock of their life, prepare final messages for loved ones, and express how they'd like to be tended to in their final days. For family members, we help them anticipate the dying process, the death, and after-care of the body. Less encumbered by fear, they're better able to find meaning in the experience.

Example: A woman wanted help to send notecards to those she loved before she died. On my first visit, I found her hunched in a wheelchair, struggling to lift her head but ready to work. I set my iPhone to record and she dictated her loving messages in a frail but determined voice. Three visits later, I had the cards written and ready to mail. I found her in bed, semi-aware, and in pain. Holding the envelopes up, I repeated in her ear, "Your beautiful messages are done. Your cards will be mailed today. Well done." She died that night.

Example: I was asked to sit with an unresponsive elderly man until his family arrived. Unexpectedly, his daughter was there, clearly  
*(continued on next page)*

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preparing to endure a terrible thing. Instead of addressing her anxiety directly, I sat down next to her father, made light physical contact, and spoke calm, affirming words. She watched me carefully, and

eventually began to repeat my words to her father. As I left, she hugged me and told me how honored she was to be present for this important moment in her dad's life.

*Kat Shea is a professional writer and end-of-life doula volunteering with Grace Hospice. She welcomes conversation and questions via [katsheadoula@gmail.com](mailto:katsheadoula@gmail.com)*

## Anticipatory Grief and COVID-19

During this time of COVID-19, it common to have greater feelings of stress, discomfort, and grief than ever before. Our world and lives are filled with uncertainty, and ever-changing information. Grief may seem like an unusual word to describe what you're feeling, but upon further examination, we realize that we've been grieving the loss of routine, normalcy, and connection. Grief is something all of us are familiar with. Whether it's related to the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, or the loss of a job, we recognize that grief is a universal experience. With each loss, our grief reaction tends to be somewhat different than the last. We have an understanding that grief makes us feel a roller-coaster of emotions and causes us to have good days and bad. With the onset of this global pandemic, you may find that you are grieving many more things, but these feelings of grief may be surfacing even before the dreaded event occurs. This situation is often referred to as anticipatory grief.

Anticipatory grief is made up of all of those emotions that happen before something comes



to an end, such as a loved one's life. Anticipating the death of a loved one can cause us to have many of the same

feelings that we experience after their death, and create feelings that are just as intense. When we feel our loved one's life coming to a close, we can be overwhelmed by anxiety, sadness, fear, irritability, frustration, and many other reactions to this pain. These emotions develop from the anticipation of what's to come. With COVID-19, there have been many health and safety precautions implemented. One being the lockdown of care facilities, which has caused many to be unable to visit their loved ones. Perhaps we are able to connect with them via phone, or video chat, but it is not the same as being able to be physically present with those we love. We are unable to hold their hand, see their smile, or talk to them while they rest. This can cause us to have overwhelming feelings of anticipatory grief.

Please know that if you have experienced these feelings over the past few months, you are not alone. It is normal to long to be with our loved ones when we are unable, and to grieve the loss of missing out on precious time. For some, their anticipatory grief aides them in preparing for the death of their loved one, but for others it feels like a more drawn out and difficult process. Although we can never be fully prepared for the death of someone we love, anticipatory grief allows us to recognize that the end is near and to begin to process our emotions.

## Grace Hospice Book Review

By: Gretta Sullwold, Grief Support  
Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage  
of Grief  
Copyright 2019 by David Kessler

David Kessler along with his mentor, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, first introduced us to the 5 stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) years ago. Now, Kessler introduces us to the 6<sup>th</sup> stage, meaning. In *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, David Kessler uses his years of experience as a grief expert as well as his personal experience in losing his son to remind us that there is “life after death” – that is, there is potential for meaning in every life and in every loss.

Kessler draws upon stories from clients, family, and friends to illustrate pain and struggle as well as

triumphs and how they move towards meaning. He guides the reader through the many diverse ways meaning can come about and the challenges within this; as well as his personal struggle when his own grief and loss surface. He reminds us that meaning is personal and individualized. It cannot be rushed and is not a “cure” for grief and pain. It can be as simple as a moment of sweet

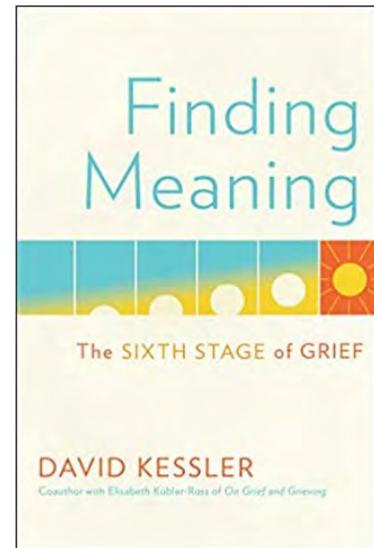
remembrance of a loved one, or as extravagant as starting and leading a non-profit in someone’s honor.

It’s important to feel and experiences the 5 stages of grief fully, although these stages do not necessarily occur in a linear pattern. These can be felt in different times, in different ways, and you can float back and forth between them. Without doing so, Kessler argues that we cannot truly start to heal. Feeling the pain is a necessary part of remembering the love. He states quite literally, “you can’t heal what you can’t feel.”

Working through the pain and suffering of loss is necessary, the only way is through.

Kessler also explains how sharing your pain always has meaning and we should ask ourselves three

questions after a loss: How can I honor my loved one? How can I create a different life that includes them? And, how can I use my experience to help others? Thinking about these questions can lead us to experience “post-traumatic growth.” Post-traumatic growth, Kessler says, can manifest itself in many different ways: stronger relationships, discovering a



new purpose, finding an inner strength, deepened spirituality, and renewed appreciation for life. Possibly the most beautiful sentiment of Kessler’s is, “Ensuring that the good qualities of your loved one will live on in your own life is perhaps the most meaningful of all legacies.”

Meaning will look different for everyone and is different for every loss. It’s not something that can be prescribed or described by anyone else but ourselves. Kessler’s *Finding Meaning* is one way to help guide us along a journey to finding that meaning in our own lives and in our own losses.

***“Feeling the pain is a necessary part of remembering the love.”***

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*The mission of Grace Hospice is to serve God by recognizing that every person deserves to live out his or her life with respect and dignity, free of pain, and in an environment that promotes quality of life.*

## Interested in Volunteering?

As you may be aware, we offer volunteer services to our patients and their families. Most of our volunteers come to us because they know first-hand about the comfort and support these volunteers provide to others. If you or someone you know would like an opportunity to give back to the hospice program, we encourage you to consider volunteering for Grace Hospice.

Our volunteers can visit patients and families, offer short respite for families needing to attend appointments, bake cookies or special treats, make phone calls, read mail or books to those who can no longer make out the fine print, watch movies, play games, or simply be a comforting presence. We invite you to consider putting your talents to use by helping those that need a little extra support.

Please feel free to contact Sarah Matthews, the volunteer coordinator for Grace Hospice, if you are interested in becoming a hospice volunteer, or learning more about our Hospice Volunteer Program. You can reach Sarah by phone at 612-843-6816 or by email at [smmatthews@gracecaring.org](mailto:smmatthews@gracecaring.org).

