

Monique Minahan: Grief is often the first time, where it's like it's the first thing we can't run from or hide from. It's there at the end of the day. It's there at the end of the bottle. It's there. We can't get away from it.

Music Song

Lily Cornell Silver: Hi, I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome back to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental-health-focused interview series. Today I am talking to Monique Minahan, who is a writer, mother, yoga teacher and creator of the Grief Practice, which is a trauma-informed yoga that welcomes grief. Monique shares really powerful insight into what grief is and how it intersects with our mental health, as well as how that manifests for us somatically. Thank you so much for watching, and I hope you enjoy. Hi, Monique. Thank you so much for being here. So as most know, grief has been a really significant part of my journey with mental health and just my life journey thus far. And around the one-year period that I lost three loved ones to suicide, I also lost two grandparents to natural causes. So I'm super familiar with the different facets of grief and the different forms that grief and loss can take. I became familiar with your work a couple years ago when a therapist recommended that I follow you on Instagram at the Grief Practice, and I know that your decision to get into this field was rooted in your own journey with grief and loss. Could you give some background on your own experiences and how you came to start in this field?

Monique Minahan: Yeah. When I was 25, my husband suddenly died, and it was for me a really – just a really devastating experience, because I often think that the way that we experience grief is rooted in all of our previous experiences, what we bring to that moment. And so for me I had struggled with major depression since I was a teenager, and when he died, I had been on antidepressants for about five years. So I didn't have a lot of what I call resources, and because I was so young – this was back in 2002, and so there wasn't the grief-support community, especially virtually, that there is now. I at the time was in more of a talk-therapy-based – I was on antidepressants, and I also was in talk therapy, and I understand now that that was not – it was not what I needed at the time, because I was having an overwhelming experience. All of my biology and physiology is in survival and threat mode, and here I am going and trying to – somebody's trying to talk to me about, "It will be okay. How do you feel?" I don't even have words for how I feel. And so for me, something like yoga was – I can move, and I

can move some of that energy that had been kind of mobilized but not fully able to cycle through that practice and then also get in touch with feelings that didn't have a name. There's lots of things we can – depression or sadness, but there's lots of both/and feelings that don't have words, but we know they're there, and so over time I was able to get to a place where I felt like, okay, now I can start to integrate the words and the experiences and feelings and all of that. It can make things, I'll say, worse in a way if we try to force these words that are not our lived experience.

Lily Cornell Silver: That's something that I talk about in therapy all the time, and if my therapist is watching this, she's gonna laugh. Yes, something that she has to remind me of all the time is you can't think your way out of how you're feeling. And she's like, yes, that's all great, and it's super good to label those experiences, but none of that – you can do that for hours and hours and hours, and it's not gonna negate your emotions. It's not gonna get you out of that process of having to actually feel the feelings.

Monique Minahan: We're so good at talking about how we feel and not so good at feeling what we feel, 'cause it's hard to feel, and so much of the wellness world is like – we're so good at feeling better but not necessarily feeling. I felt very alone in my experience and very misunderstood, and so it went from bad to worse for several years, and there was a good stretch where I was definitely suicidal and just felt like there was no way through, like there wasn't anything on the other side of this experience. That is a lot of motivation for me just to keep being a voice in the sea of voices.

Lily Cornell Silver: I mean, it was absolutely my experience with grief and loss was that feeling of isolation and that feeling that no one can really understand what I'm going through and that I don't have the support that I need, even though I had a huge support system and had my resources. I think there's almost an irony in that, because basically everyone on the planet experiences grief and loss at some point, and almost everybody also experiences that feeling of isolation. Could you speak a little bit more to your experience with isolation and how you found a community within that or how you coped in those moments?

Monique Minahan: Yeah. I think of it a lot as people who're trying to help me, but they didn't know how to connect with me where I was. And so, they didn't reach me where I needed to be reached and in the way that I

needed to be understood, and there was a lot of, I think, _____ experienced a lot of trying to fix it or make me feel better. And that just isn't, as we know, I think, useful, because there's nothing to fix. It's such a tremendous human experience. For me, when I started to explore yoga about five years after my husband died – and it provided this framework where I was able to get some embodied resources, kind of connect and notice what was happening in my physical experience. And so I just all of a sudden was able to see a new way through. So from there I started to find community and just a way forward that I had never imagined before. But it definitely had to completely collapse for me to find a way through that.

Lily Cornell Silver: Grief and loss really shaped the way or changed the way that I deal with mental health, because it's all intertwined, but they're still separate experiences. Grief isn't necessarily a chemical imbalance. So what has been your experience with mental illness or mental health issues and grief? How do you carry those simultaneously?

Monique Minahan: After my husband died, I would have these – I call 'em the loop. It was these visuals and memories that – it was like a broken record, and I would have them for – and it would drive me crazy. And it wasn't like I had – I didn't feel like I had a choice to stop the replay. It would just kind of accost myself. So I feel like in grief it's normal to have memories, and there'll be sad memories or good memories or whatever, but that kind of replay, broken record –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right, obsessive thought, yeah.

Monique Minahan: Right, is more on the line of trauma response. And so, those are things that can definitely be worked with with an appropriate kind of therapy and a therapist. One of the hardest things can be to open and let ourselves love in any capacity again, because it's such a vulnerable thing. And there's a lotta fear around that. That's been my experience.

Lily Cornell Silver: So you are a practitioner of somatic experiencing, right?

Monique Minahan: So right now I'm in the training to be a somatic-experiencing practitioner, and what I've been doing so far is I do weave a lot of somatics into the trauma-informed perspective that I take, whether it's grief-specific yoga or other pieces, because that's such a fascinating thing to me. It really helped me understand not only my

own experience but just how human beings respond to tremendous loss and that there's nothing wrong with the way that we respond. And it's so unique but also universal. I mean, it's in our DNA, and sometimes it's easy to forget that or not even understand that it's there.

Lily Cornell Silver: Cool. That's beautiful. So, because what grief and loss really look like is such a stigmatized thing in society, as we know, there's a very limited understanding of how it shows up in mind, body and spirit, and that's something that I still really struggle with deciphering in my own experience. Could you give some examples of how grief manifests in the body, whether it's personally for you or just how it might show up for others?

Monique Minahan: I think because our society doesn't really think in terms of – we're very literal. We're very favoring more of the cognitive process and thinking our way through things that we don't give enough credit to the chronological response to loss, which is it's a threat to our survival often. And when our bodies perceive a threat, we have a whole system that starts to come online to help us through that, to help us survive. The biological response of the nervous system responding to a threat or lack of safety or however we perceive it then turns into a physical experience, right? We might feel our heart racing. We might feel like a sinking in our stomach. We might have gut issues. There's lots of ways that that can manifest physically, but we can't think our way out of how we feel for a lot of reasons, but we can feel our way into a new state of thinking.

Lily Cornell Silver: Something that you preach a lot and that you spoke about just now is how nonlinear grief is. And I think that's something that's so widely misunderstood but is one of the main aspects of grief. I mean, you were saying that you – it progressively got worse for you, your feelings of grief, and that was definitely my experience after I lost my dad. I was so completely locked up. I was in such a state of shock, but I was super high-functioning. I was doing my college applications. I was back in school. I was working a lot, and then around that eight-, nine-month mark is when I tanked and was crying constantly, couldn't get outta bed, was super disassociated, experiencing really intense depersonalization. And, societally, that's kind of around the time where people expect you to just be getting better. That's the time where people are like, "Okay, it's been eight or nine months. Move on. You're okay now. You should be back to being a functioning human being." Could you talk a

little bit more about your experience with kind of slow – with things progressively getting worse and how you managed that?

Monique Minahan: The fact that we don't, as a culture, respect that process, that it ebbs and flows just like waves, and so there's some times that things are better, and there's some times that things are worse, and it doesn't mean anything's wrong. But, yeah, mine definitely was – I had the – I think of it as the first four or five years, or – I always called it stuck until I came across this phrase by a psychologist, and his phrase he uses is stuck, not broken. I always thought of stuck as it was this wasted period of my – five-year chunk of my life. Stuff is happening even in that stuck period. I think of babies in the womb or seeds in the ground. There is a lot that happens in the nothingness, and I think that that shows up in a few different ways. I noticed years later, so about – I remarried ten years ago, and I have a son who's now six. And when I had my son, what I noticed was that the feelings of love that I had for this human were very similar to my experience of my feelings of grief, in that they were very overwhelming, and they were very – they felt like I couldn't control them, feeling you will go here, and – right?

I feel like so much of our – it is what it is, but grief is often the first time, where it's like – it's the first thing we can't run from or hide from. It's there at the end of the day. It's there at the end of the bottle. It's there. We can't get away from it, and it's the first time we have to actually face something that we can't find something that feels better or distracts us in a way can basically manage and get through it. It overwhelms us often. For me it's been 18 years, so I've had a lot of time to kind of notice how it's checked in and changed. And when I met my now-husband, I noticed that I was able to unpack pieces of my experience and grief in a new way, because I now had, right, a new sense of safety, because I had, right, a regulation of this other person that felt safe to me, actually felt safe. We put a lot of judgment on ourself. It's like, "I should be over this." There's a lot, especially in the wellness world, about letting things go and moving on, and I think that's – I don't buy into that, because I feel like we need to let it out. It needs to be expressed, yes, integrated, yes, but nothing to let go of. This is a part of being human.

To understand grief in the body is to understand hope in the body, because there's a reason why we feel stuck. It's like our bodies and our nervous system and all that's happening is always trying to

keep us surviving and keep us functioning. And sometimes that means it limits what we can take in, right? Sometimes it means that it limits our capacity for joy, and because it also limits our capacity to feel this deep pain, which is where I think the – some of the somatic-based either therapies or practices are useful, 'cause they allow us to have a graduated experience. Sometimes we've been kind of swept away by this big wave, and so we don't even – the water in general, it can be very scary, and so we have to kind of retrain our system, our nervous system, to be able to sit with a piece of that experience and maybe even a very small piece.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. And I think that idea of the body's responses being there to protect you and as a means of the body trying to help you survive is something that I've really had to grapple with. And after that period that I was talking about, where I was pretty numb and in a state of shock and very high-functioning, and I was being rewarded by society for being very high-functioning – and after that state, when, inevitably, I broke down and I wasn't able to keep that level of high functioning going, I experienced really intense disassociation and depersonalization, which is, for me, manifested as feeling as though I was on drugs all the time or that I was in a dream, and nothing felt real, and that was one of – that's one of the scariest experiences I've ever had, 'cause it lasted probably three or four months consecutively of every single day and every experience I had just not feeling real. And that's when my suicidal ideation started, 'cause I was like, "I can't live this way." And we've spoken about this. Losing that part of your brain that tells you, "This isn't permanent –" and in that time, I'm like, "Okay, so this is my life forever, and this is how it's always gonna be," because that's what happens in grief. You lose that part of you that's like, "This is a temporary experience, because all experiences are temporary." Looking back on that experience now of how disassociated I was and how intense my depersonalization was, I recognize it as my body literally doing the only thing it could to protect itself, 'cause so much grief came pouring in that if I had – if my body had tried to process it all at the same time, it wasn't possible. It couldn't have done that. So that's something I try to keep in mind, even the really – the things that feel really negative are my body protecting itself.

Monique Minahan: Yeah, and that's such a powerful experience, I think, for people to probably hear and understand that they have probably – many people have had a similar experience and that it's not – we're not

going crazy, even though _____. But, yeah, parts of our brain go offline, depending on the nature of our experiences, especially when they're overwhelming, which is – that's all that trauma is. It's something that overwhelms our ability to cope. When I started to do more of an embodied practice – were things that – yes, they were useful in processing my initial experience of loss, but even as life went on – I've had four miscarriages, and the things that were anchoring, they were the – it's like it was the real-life experiences that I was able to sit with. It wasn't like, in my yoga practice I'm – they're useful there also, but it was crying on the kitchen floor, being in intense emotional or physical pain. And so, I think that to learn things and to continue to adapt to whatever feels supportive, truly feels supportive, they're lifesavers, because even when we're by ourselves, we can connect to those if they're already part of our lived experience.

Lily Cornell Silver: How do you manage your depression now?

Monique Minahan: It's been an interesting path for me, because I – after my husband died, I stayed on antidepressants for another five years. So it was _____, and then I just decided I didn't want to do this anymore, and so I went off of them, and I – it was very scary, 'cause I thought, "What's gonna happen now?" And at that time, though, I had yoga. I had surfing. I had a lot of activities to kind of counter – which I didn't have any of those before. I don't really notice any backtracking with depression. I definitely felt like I was able to now have the things that – where I could help myself if I needed help. So I went through a phase where I was really into – it's called regulation, where it's like I'm trying to – I'd have a stressful day, and I'd come home, and I'd juggle balls and walk, balance on my garden boxes, go outside. I mean, there's no end to the list of tricks that – to bring my whole brain online and all this stuff. And I went through a big phase, and I was like, "This is great. I'm –"

Lily Cornell Silver: You're like a circus performer.

Monique Minahan: Basically, basically. And then that was before I went into the – and I was like, "This is great. I've got a trick for everything," and then I was like, "It's time to go back. I'm ready to do more to kind of revisit therapy." And so that's when I started to go back to a somatic-experiencing practitioner for my own therapy. And that's when I really was like, I don't need to regulate. I don't wanna regulate my life away. I didn't have a capacity. I had a capacity, but

I didn't know how to hold things that felt too much. And I know that with the right support and with the right graduated process, I can have a bigger capacity for love and for relationship and for life. At my age, I'm 44, I felt like if I have 40 more years, this is – I think this is not a dress rehearsal. I would like to explore my full capacity for being a human. The only reason to go diving into old pain and old traumas is if you're looking for a better quality of life. But it's hard. It's not an easy conversation, for sure.

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally. And that's a huge part of what I appreciate about your work and something I'm wanting to do with this series is provide as many people as possible with that vocabulary and with that languaging and knowledge of how to support yourself in those experiences but also support others in those experiences to kind of negate some of that isolation that we feel. You provide a ton of information, and it's super accessible, and that's the keyword that I'm going for with this series is accessibility. So are there any tools and practices or some of those regulatory or anchoring things that you could provide to the people watching?

Monique Minahan: Standing up and balancing is one of the – I do a lot of balancing, because when you balance, physically – I'll just give it a really short little explanation. There's a lot that happens. Your core has to pull into itself. Your brain has to organize and communicate with your body so that – the most important thing is not to fall. And even though it's a super-simple thing, it actually demands a high level of attention, which is mindfulness, paying attention. And so it's a really easy way to get here right now, and it's not that we need to stay here forever. It's just that it can give us a pause to look around and go, "What do I need here?" not, "What do I need from back there or from the future?" but, "What do I need right here?" But another little practice I love to do – I do in airports when I'm standing in the TSA line, 'cause it's so stressful –

Lily Cornell Silver: It's so stressful.

Monique Minahan: – but just looking around. I look around when I'm in the airport, and I look around for three or four things of the same color. And I often start my yoga classes like this, around, "Look around your space, and find three blue things," or – and all that does is – one of the ways that humans feel safe is by orienting. If you ever see someone walk into a party or a room, the first thing they do is look around, because that's how we – right, neuro-reception, that's how

we assess – one of the ways we assess safety. And so when we're kind of in our experience and not really aware of where we are right now, looking around at physical objects can be a way that not only reminds our bodies that we're here but also reminds our bodies that it's okay right here and right now.

Lily Cornell Silver: What's something that's giving you hope right now or bringing you hope?

Monique Minahan: The first thing that comes to mind is the voice that I've been seeing. So, my husband watches a lotta basketball. We're Laker fans, and I used to watch a lotta basketball, not so much now. But I have been just so impressed by the voice that they're giving to not only grief but also to the Black Lives Matter message. That gives me hope, because I feel like I always think of – these conversations are not – it's wonderful if somebody's an expert or has a particular education, but these conversations, it's not for a certain group of people. It's for humans, and we need, as just – anybody can sit with somebody and be really present and listen and not try to fix them, and that's what we need more of. And I think an organization or individuals with a major platform like that, really not sugarcoating it and _____ as it is, is kinda – it's a wake-up call to a lotta people, but there's no turning away. And sometimes the discomfort is a useful thing.

And so I just feel like that I guess maybe because I've – that's been a part of my process is to find a voice and find the courage to have – to keep the voice and all of that. And I just feel it's very inspiring for me to see people in their own way, yeah, kind of making it a bigger conversation, because otherwise it's – we don't want these conversations to fizzle. We want to keep awareness around them.

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally, totally. Well, thank you so much for being here. It truly means the world to me, and I'm really, really happy I got to connect with you on this level, 'cause I've been an admirer from afar for quite a few years, and your work really has changed my experience so much, and the accessibility of it means a lot to me, and it's super inspiring to me. So, thank you so much for being here, Monique.

Monique Minahan: I really _____ .

Lily Cornell Silver: I did, too.

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