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[Music playing]

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver and welcome to Mind Wide Open my mental health focus interview series. Today I am **talking** to David Kessler who is the world's foremost expert on grief and loss. He has written six books and today we're going to be talking about his most recent book entitled *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

David and I are going to be talking about our own experiences with grief and loss and what it looks like to find meaning in grief and loss of any kind. Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy.

Hi, David, thank you so much for being here.

David Kessler: Hey, I'm so glad to be with you, thanks for having me.

Lily Cornell Silver: Of course, of course. You're somebody that my mom has talked to me about for a long time and she told me the other day, she's like, "David Kessler is like my One Direction." *[Laughing]* So there's the analogy that we have going forward.

David Kessler: That's so funny I'm someone else's Beyonce and now I'm someone's One Direction. I love that.

Lily Cornell Silver: All compliment. All compliments.

David Kessler: Oh, appreciate that.

Lily Cornell Silver: You are known as the world's foremost expert on grief and loss and you have a new book that I have right here called *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. Could you briefly tell us about the experiences that led you on this life path and led you to write your latest book?

David Kessler: Sure. You know, one of the things I want to say up front that I think is so important especially during this time is we think grief and we think the death of a loved one. But we often don't think grief is break-ups, grief is divorce, grief is job losses. It's a gig being canceled, it's a tour shutting down, all those things are actually grief.

Yeah, let me tell you about the book and how that came about, I was privileged to work with Elizabeth Kubler Ross who was really the person that started the whole awareness about death and dying and grief and loss. And she did the stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. I was fortunate to work with her on those stages as we adapted them in one of our books for grief from dying.

And I'll tell you the one thing we always say to people is they're not linear, they're not a map, you don't have to do them one after another. I can get angry and get depressed all like in the space of an hour they don't have to follow any rules.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

David Kessler: And so, as a grief expert and specialist I've dealt with so much **loss** in my life. I was a child who came out of a shooting when my mother was dying. I've had my share of grief and working with people for decades. And then four years ago my younger son unexpectedly died. And it's as brutal as anyone could imagine, for me, for his brother, his sibling, for everyone involved.

And while I was a dad, I was also someone who still had the grief expert's mind. And I would have moments that I would go, "Yep, you're in the stage of anger. Oh yeah, you're in denial." You know, I'd be like, "I can't believe this is happening." When I got to acceptance and wrestled with that and go oh, how am I going to accept this, it wasn't enough, the more I wanted to find meaning.

And that became the sixth stage because I think when someone we love dies; we just don't want to leave it at that, we want to do more.

Lily Cornell Silver: Thank you so much for that, for bringing that idea of a sixth stage of grief to light in finding meaning because this series for me is absolutely a huge part of that. And as someone who like I make music and I consider myself an artist, it was very difficult for me to

put my grief and loss into art in the way that like I typically would because the feelings were almost too big.

So it took some time to get there but this series definitely, for me, is a way to find meaning. And I absolutely agree that once you reach acceptance it does, for me, that was absolutely my experience. It felt like now what do I do with this acceptance.

David Kessler: Right, we're just going to accept it and just let this horrible thing and the idea that you can turn pain into purpose is powerful.

Lily Cornell Silver: Absolutely.

David Kessler: Powerful. It's the birth of creativity. Anyone we know that you admire has gone through horrible challenges whether they talk about it or not. So many things get born out of our deepest pain. And that's part of my meaning to try to help people and my son died of an accidental overdose. And I'll tell you, life has changed so much. You know, for someone of my age, my son had just had a fight with his girlfriend that any 21-year old would have and he called up his friends and they went out and they got high.

In my day I did that a lot. I did it with pot. I did it with alcohol. Now it's heroin, it's meth, it's fentanyl, and people don't get how deadly the world is today.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that experience, I know it's very, very vulnerable and can be kind of an intense thing, but in my personal experience, sharing, be able to share your experiences with others is something that's so powerful and brings so much more healing, to me, anyway.

David Kessler: When we keep things a secret, shame needs secrecy. And we begin to become ashamed. And you know, we have to get rid of the stigma of mental health issues. We have to get rid of the stigma of addiction. And if I keep that a secret it becomes this shameful thing and when I bring it to the light and talk about it, it can't survive. Shame needs secrecy to survive and the shame dissipates.

Lily Cornell Silver: Absolutely. I lost my dad to suicide, lost one of my best friends in high school to suicide a year before and intermittently also lost two grandparents to natural causes. So it was like I went through this process of seeing very, very traumatic losses with not as traumatic losses, you know.

And all of that had a very profound impact on my mental health and still has a very profound impact on the way that I deal with my mental health today. Did you have any experiences like did you struggle with mental health issues before you experienced grief or how did those two play into each other?

David Kessler: **You know**, I've been fortunate that my mind has been okay around mental health but here's what I witnessed. I witnessed my son, David, struggle with mental challenges. And I witnessed and I'm very open in the book about it, about the voices he heard in **his** head at times. You know, the side effects of medications and you know, him being challenged with the possibility of taking his own life and what his mind said to him. And then the addiction and I'll tell you when it's in your life you learn very quickly this is not a choice someone's making.

I mean I hope your generation is the first generation that doesn't see it the way my generation did. We mistakenly thought that people were like oh, I can be mentally ill or I can be completely healthy what's my choice? You know, self-harming thoughts or be completely healthy, what's my choice? It's not a choice it's an illness in our mind. And that illness when you have a loved one like I did with my son David, like you did with your father, other loved ones, so many people who are listening you know it's not something they would ever choose.

And when we realize that, we can take the stigma away. There's a man who you might see reruns of him on a TV show called *Little House on the Prairie*, his name's Michael Landon. And Michael Landon was an actor that I had the privilege of helping to care for and it's shocking to imagine, it's I don't know, 20 or 30 years ago, he wanted to go on late night TV and talk about having cancer. And that had never been done on TV. No one had ever admitted they had cancer and talked about it and joked about it.

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow. Okay.

David Kessler: My hope is that in 10 years we're going to go can you believe there was a time that self-harming thoughts and mental challenges and addiction was secret and shameful and we didn't see it was an illness.

Lily Cornell Silver: Where do you think that stigma comes from? Where do you think that's born from?

David Kessler: I think it comes from this idea, whether it's cancer or anything, that somehow we're doing something wrong and that's why we have it. And whether it's cancer or addiction or mental illness you're not doing something wrong, you didn't choose it. It's your illness to deal with.

Lily Cornell Silver: Absolutely. There is a quote in the book that struck me so profoundly. You say, "Healing doesn't mean the loss didn't happen it means it no longer controls us." And that applies to so many things in my life and not even just grief losses from death but as you said earlier, break-ups, loss of relationships in any way, shape, or form. And you told a very incredible story in the book about returning to the hospital where your mother passed away. Could you give us a brief synopsis of that and what that was like for you?

David Kessler: Sure. When I was a child and my mother was dying, I was down in the lobby of the hospital. I wasn't allowed to be with her because I was too young. I was like literally 13 and you had to be 14, like they couldn't have made an exception. But I just would stand outside the doors and never be let in. And decades later when the hospital was closed, I was finally able to go in and sort of stand in the place, you know I got to stand once when a ____ nurse let me in like decades later.

And I realized I had survived that loss and I could now remember my mom with more love than pain. And that I didn't have to be a victim anymore I could be a victor. And you know, when we talk about that quote you said around healing so many people have grown up with emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental challenges, addiction, so many things, people dying, break-ups, divorces, everything. And those things happened but they didn't happen because of you.

And when you begin to realize, you survive those things and you don't have to be a victim of them. Now when I say victim, I mean a victim identity in our mind. There will be perpetrators and victims but some of us, you know, leave the situation but stay in a prison. And that's my work to help people out of that.

Lily Cornell Silver: Do you have any tips in terms of finding meaning? Like I know it's very specific towards healing for each individual.

David Kessler: Sure. So a few things about finding meaning. First of all, meaning is not a quick, spiritual bypass of the pain. You can't skip the pain. I mean the only way out of the pain is through the pain that's just a hideous reality of this world. And at a certain point, I like to plant the seed of meaning, that meaning is possible.

Now when we talk about meaning, meaning is not in the death like a horrible event. There's no meaning in child abuse, there's no meaning in sexual abuse, there's no meaning in a murder or a loved one tragically dying, or an addiction. Meaning is what we do afterwards. Meaning is what's inside of us. Meaning can be how we honor the person who has died. Meaning can be recognizing we're forever changed by knowing them, by loving them.

Meaning can be something like you're going to make the world a better place so that other people aren't killed from that same thing or don't die from that illness or aren't abused in that way. Maybe your meaning be that you're going to become a social worker or a nurse or a therapist or you're just going to fight for a law or give money to a charity.

And the other thing is, meaning is in meaningful moments. You think oh, I got to make meaning, is it a charity, is it a foundation? No. Meaning is in this conversation you and I are having right now. My hope and prayer is that someone's listening that it becomes a meaningful moment for them.

Lily Cornell Silver: Definitely. And I mean in that vein of finding meaning as well, in your work with other people do you see a place where they shift from that feeling of victimhood and saying like I can't believe this happened to me to finding meaning? Like what do you think it is that creates that shift? Is it time or is it like putting the work in?

David Kessler: Here's the shocking thing, it's a decision in you. It's a decision we have to make. You can call it whatever you want, a decision to live again, a decision to live fully again. Like I can remember after my son died an amazing woman, Diane, who's a friend and was the head of the Elizabeth Kubler Ross Foundation she called me maybe a month into it and said, "I know you're drowning and you're going to be drowning for a long time. And at some point,

you're going to hit bottom and when you do you have a decision. Do you stay there or do you swim again?"

All of us whether you've been abused, addiction, illness, someone's died, we have that decision. Are we going to be paralyzed by what happened, are we going to grieve fully, and then make a life that maybe honors the life you should have had or the person who died or changes the world?

Lily Cornell Silver: That is so powerful and speaks very directly to my own experience. I do feel as though it was at some point a decision for me because for me, I had a lot of fear around grief and a lot of fear of going through that process. So I locked a lot of it up inside and then started experiencing really intense anxiety again, really intense dissociation. And it wasn't until I took some time off school and I allowed myself to fully dive into that grief and not run from it anymore is when I feel like I made that decision to find meaning and to actively heal as opposed to pushing it away.

David Kessler: I'll tell you the story, which you may remember from the book of the buffaloes. I was so surprised at this that I was researching of all things, buffaloes, I never thought I'd research buffaloes. But buffaloes when there is a storm they run into the storm and by running into the storm they minimize the time they're in their discomfort. Us, on the other hand, we keep grief five feet behind us and stay stuck in it forever versus allowing it to heal.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Exactly. Yeah, that's such a good metaphor and that is exactly, I mean that's exactly what it felt like, the second I allowed myself to run head first into that storm was when the healing felt like it really started.

I heard you recommend that people not compare their grief but there are macro griefs and micro griefs. And can you explain that a little bit what's the difference?

David Kessler: So important, glad you raised that. So some rules about grief; there's very few rules about grief. The first rule is you can't do grief wrong. You literally can't do it wrong. You can do it your way there's no one right way to do it.

Number two, grief is a no judgement zone. We judge other people's griefs, we judge ours, we need to stop judging.

Number three, comparisons never work 'cause if you compare, if you win you lose, so that's not good.

So this idea about macro and micro was a way I'm saying big and little griefs. When someone dies that's a huge grief. On the other hand, if you cancel your wedding that you've been planning since you were five then that's a grief. If you have to cancel your production or your tour or the record you were making or the creative project you were doing that's a grief. Your graduation cancelled.

This whole world we're living in now is full of grief. Small griefs and we don't realize the discomfort we're feeling, the sadness, it's grief. Like I went down to my local street and I saw oh no, that restaurant's closing forever that I loved. All those things about our new world. Now, the comparison what I want people to know about it is when someone says in my presence, they had to cancel their wedding and they're heartbroken I don't go, "That's not grief, my son died, that's grief.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Right, right, right, right.

David Kessler: No, no, no, their wedding being canceled is – you know, when people say to me, "What's the worst grief?" I always say, "Yours." That's her worst grief. The world is big enough for everyone's grief. Her grief doesn't take away from my grief. We all get to have different griefs together. And they connect us and make us human.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. You write about death that is connected to trauma and then death that is not necessarily a traumatic loss and I spoke to this a little bit but I lost my maternal grandmother. She had a very, very long battle with dementia and Alzheimer's and I watched the very slow decline, which was very, very difficult to see. But when she passed away, it was very peaceful and I was there.

I saw her and it was not a scary thing. It didn't feel terrifying. It was all very peaceful. I was there with my family and we were in her home and I don't look back on that experience with fear or with trauma I look back on that experience as a meaningful experience and to feel lucky that she's not in pain anymore. And then three months later I lost my dad very tragically to suicide and that

absolutely had trauma connected to it and I still experience some PTSD from that.

What does grief look like with trauma and without trauma and how do you navigate those differently?

David Kessler: So important. All grief does not have trauma but all trauma has grief. If you were abused in any way, someone tragically dies, it's going to have trauma in it. Now one of the distinctions I help people with is understanding the grief separately from the trauma, separately from the traumatic incident and moment. So for example, if I may?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

David Kessler: Your dad's death was a traumatic time you went through that actually lived in space and time. And that traumatic moment is over. When people don't realize it's over, they stay in it and they still feel the feelings as if it's occurring now and that's post traumatic stress. I want to help them move from the traumatic moment out of that to realize your dad is not dying in this moment, my son is not dying in this moment that trauma, traumatic moment has ended.

Now, we're still left with the grief and the trauma and we actually, many times, have to work through the trauma before we even can get to the grief.

Lily Cornell Silver: And that process too is something that I've had to learn and something my therapists reminds me of all the time is that is so non-linear.

David Kessler: Oh, absolutely.

Lily Cornell Silver: And when it comes to like anniversary time, you know you have that preprogrammed muscle memory and your subconscious is so powerful and sometimes it can feel like it's happening all over again. So reminding myself that grief is nonlinear and if I feel another wave coming that doesn't mean I'm regressing.

David Kessler: Absolutely. In fact, the word bereaved, actually, the Latin word means to be robbed. You were robbed of; you know people who were abused were robbed of their innocence in their childhood.

People who have a loved one die were robbed of that person. And I say the thanaversary, I used the word thanno 'cause it means death. Thanaversary 'cause anniversaries are usually something we want to celebrate.

The thanaversary is a return to the scene of the crime. In our heart we go right back to when it happened. The other day was the thanaversary of my son's death. It was like rocks on me. People don't understand how much you feel grief and trauma in your body. I work with Paul Denniston, Paul Denniston is the creator of grief yoga. And Paul talks about the body remembers. The body stores our trauma and stores our grief.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah, that's so real. I had a woman on the series, Monique Minahan who does grief informed like sematic experiencing and trauma-based yoga. And that practice in and of itself has been so, so, so helpful to me because I didn't realize how much I was holding it in my body until I started doing those practices and it did feel like such a weight was lifted.

David Kessler: Right. Absolutely.

Lily Cornell Silver: I lost one of my close friends in high school to suicide when we were 15 and a big part of my healing process has been connecting with his family. And his parents and his older sister who are like now some of the people I love most in the entire world and getting to connect with them and connect over how much we loved him. And we'll do things like on his birthday or on the anniversary of his passing, you know we'll go on a hike and connect with one another somehow.

So I'm wondering if you have any of those traditions maybe like with your son, you know, ways to find tradition and to find that healing without necessarily re-exposing yourself to trauma.

David Kessler: So here's the thing about that, it's very tricky in grief. Rituals are helpful when they're helpful and they usually are helpful in life. And sometimes we can't inauthentically feel something. So for instance, the other day was four years since my son died, I know as the grief expert people would love for me to go I had this beautiful ritual and we all gathered and we all shared a favorite story. I know they would love for me to tell them that and here's my 10 tips on how you can too.

But the reality is the day sucked and I was really angry. That was the day. So one of the things I tell people, if a ritual will help you, do it. But on those horrible days you also sometimes got to let the day be the day.

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally.

David Kessler: If it feels bad, normalize that, of course it would. The pain will change in time. I ask people to remove two words from their vocabulary, never and always. When we say I'm never going to be happy again or I'm always going to be in pain, that's not true, but you got to admit I'm in pain today but I don't know about the future.

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