

*David Kessler:* You know the one of the things that people go is I can't do this and I can't do this I get so triggered. I'm like your triggers are a map to your healing.

*[Music playing]*

*Lily Cornell Silver:* If you're willing to, I wanted to come back to the experience that you wrote about in your book about experiencing that shooting at the hotel across the street from the hospital where your mom passed. And you wrote about it, it was in New Orleans and one of the first like mass shootings that we experienced in the US and you were there.

And I think that's something a lot of people watching, unfortunately, because of the state that our country is in have experienced things like that at this point or have had loved ones that have experienced things like that. What was that trauma like for you and how do you see that shifting?

*David Kessler:* So yeah, it's interesting to talk about that idea that while my mother is dying, at the hotel across the street the shooting starts. The first mass shooting in the US. So at such a young age, I mean at 13-years old I deal with the shooting, my mom dying, all this kind of stuff. And there was no one there that knew like even how to help me. And in some ways, I talk about I've kind of grown up to become the person who maybe could have helped me.

And the other interesting thing that I talk about in the book is a few years ago I got a call out of the blue in my car from Vice President Biden. And you know, we talked about the death of his son and what he was dealing with. And he had actually had his wife and child die before Beau died. They had died decades ago when he first started in the senate. And what's amazing is as we talked about my work and his life and how he's known grief he started talking and he talked about after his wife and child died, he then had to get himself together to go to the senate and work.

And do you know what the first thing he had to work on and deal with? The shooting from my childhood. So we talked about this weirdness that both of us were impacted by loss at such an early age and this shooting that was this connector of both of us then and then decades later we connected back.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That's one of the situations that makes you feel coincidences are such a myth. *[Laughing]*

*David Kessler:* Exactly. Exactly.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That is so powerful. Wow, thank you so much for sharing that experience. And that's something watching the Democratic National Convention and hearing Vice President Biden talk so openly about his experiences with grief and loss was very, very powerful for me.

*David Kessler:* And let me bring this together with what's happening in the world now.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah.

*David Kessler:* When we talk about Covid we're almost hitting 200,000 people. I want you to think about this: that's the equivalent of 1,500 planes crashing, 737, like a Southwest plane, crashing since March. Over 1,500. That's like can you imagine if there were eight planes crashed a day what we would do? But the problem is there's no visual. There's no funerals, they're just numbers that change. That's unwitnessed grief. At the same time, we have the racial injustice that's going on. George Floyd's death, all of a sudden, we had a visual.

And we now are unable to look away from this untended grief that's been in the black community and the brown community for so long that both have had such unattended grief. And anger is part of grief. When people protest that's grief. And they're trying to make meaning and change things so that young black men aren't being killed because they're driving while black.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah and women as well, yeah.

*David Kessler:* And women, absolutely. And the abuse that goes on with women is just horrible and the inequality and my gosh, Breonna Taylor, you know I said, you know someone was saying well, you know, the police get it wrong. And I went, "You know what, they never get it wrong in my neighborhood. No one comes into my white neighborhood and shoots anyone in their bed."

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. And I think now a conversation that's being brought to light that should have been brought to light many, many years ago but is that content of intergenerational trauma and intergenerational grief that I think more and more people are understanding now especially as it exists in the black indigenous people of color community especially in the US.

*David Kessler:* You know talk about it's in us. It's in us, we're a part of it. We are a part of it. And you know, look, the reality, is the police force, I know them, I work with them, as a whole, good people. But the old saying that oh, it's just one bad apple. Uh, it's looking like it's a few bad apples for many years and we haven't been listening to our black friends who have been saying no, no, no, this is going on.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, absolutely. And thank you, I mean thank you for speaking to the nature of grief in that situation and especially to the nature of grief in Covid 'cause coming back to what you were saying about not all grief has trauma but all trauma has grief, I was reading something that like this is global trauma and that every single death that has happened from Covid is in a way a traumatic death. I mean have you ever witnessed or experienced a time, a period in life where we were experiencing this much traumatic loss?

*David Kessler:* When you look at things like the AIDS crisis, 9/11, Vietnam War, nothing like this. Nothing like this. So unseen, so unrecognized, so dismissed. And one of the things, after I was on tour on the new book, I was doing 30 cities and three countries and I, like everyone else came to a halt. And people started calling their grief group had closed down or their loved one was dying of Covid or something else and they couldn't see them and then they couldn't have a funeral.

And so, I started an online Facebook group. And I was so shocked, the first day I had 1,000 people join. There's now thousands of people, it's free. If anyone needs support with grief during this time, they can go to [grief.com](http://grief.com) and join that Facebook group.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* As an expert in the field, how would you advise navigating this time that we're in 'cause I think at a point, like for me, I've become almost desensitized to it. You know the amount of grief and loss that we're seeing as you said, there's no visual to it, you know, and so how would you recommend moving through that trauma especially for people who maybe haven't experienced trauma in

their life and all of a sudden they're experiencing like the biggest global trauma to ever exist?

*David Kessler:* Yeah. So you know, one of the things I say is first of all, think about how we're behaving and picture that with your loving parent or grandmother or someone who just had a horrible death and you're telling us about it. Would you ever say my loved one had a horrible death and the response being yeah, I don't believe it's happening. I don't even know that the mask thing is a real thing. I mean we would never not show up for the other person but go into our own stuff and move into the politics when you're – we would never do that. And yet we're doing that. We're doing that. I have a friend, his mother died of Covid and he talks about it and people get into a debate. You know like wait, someone's telling you their mother died your job isn't to go is that real?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Right.

*David Kessler:* Really, really? I mean would we ever do that in any other situation?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, never. Yeah, and I haven't even thought about it that way that that definitely seems like a very tangible way that the trauma is showing up.

*David Kessler:* We've got to make this real. And think about how we handle trauma and abuse. Think of whether it's emotional abuse or sexual abuse what do we do, the first thing we do is question the victim, is it real? Did that really happen to you? Instead of going oh my gosh, you were abused, let's do something. Oh my gosh, your loved one died of Covid, let's do something. Not, is it real?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. No, thank you so much for speaking to that 'cause I think that's something that can be very, very hard to conceptualize. And even, you know, I've had a lot of experience with grief and I feel totally desensitized to it and it is very, very difficult to conceptualize. Something that I've had to work on a lot in therapy and in my grief process is, deciphering what is my generalized anxiety disorder, what is my depression, and then what is grief and loss?

And because those, you know that's something that I have said this in other interviews but I would come into therapy in the first year

or two of my dad passing away and tell my therapist like, "I think I'm bipolar or I think I have a schizophrenia like I feel like I'm losing my mind." And she would say, "Okay, talk me through what's happening." And she would go, "You're grieving." You know and I'd say, "But it's been a year and a half." And she's like, "You're grieving just don't say anything else."

*David Kessler:* All right, let's talk about that. So first of all, people ask how long will I grieve? And my response is how long is the person going to be dead?

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

*David Kessler:* I said, "They're going to be dead a long time you're going to grieve a long time." It doesn't mean you will always grieve with pain. My hope is that someday you will grieve with love.

The second thing is you are not broken, you're in grief. You are not broken you are in grief. And we try to fix people in grief not realizing they're not broken.

The next thing is, when we talk about sadness and depression in our culture now, we no longer use the word sadness. We all use the word depressed. Literally, you know someone said to me, "Oh, my gosh, we got some bad news. We were at lunch; we were so depressed but we're okay now." I'm like, "Really, you were depressed at lunch? What'd you do did you go to a depression center and you're already out of it?" No, the word we mean to use and don't use is we're sad.

So depression becomes this umbrella that covers a lot of things that are not what we would call clinical depression. Now, there's clinical depression that needs to be diagnosed by a psychiatrist, then there's what I call situational depression. Grief is situational depression. Your dad died? That's depressing. My son died? That's depressing. The situation in itself is depressing. A lot of times what you'll find out in clinical depression is in clinical depression, people are feeling depressed when nothing's going wrong. We have a reason, there is something happening that is a cause for sadness.

Now, the next thing I want to sort of say about this there's a wall to my right and a wall to my left that you can't see. But let's say the wall to my right is complete mental health and the wall to my left

is complete mental illness. I actually don't know anyone on either wall. All of us are somewhere in between. Somewhere in between.

And when we realize that, as you know, people when you hear someone had a death by suicide we'll go, "Oh, they were mentally ill." And the person goes, "Well, actually, they weren't." But what happened is they were more mentally compromised and we all have different baselines. If I happen to be starting out at a strong baseline and I have a relationship stressor, a financial stressor, something in the world that's a stressor, a career stressor, I can still be in a safe zone. If someone's baseline is a little more off, but we all look fine, we all look fine during this, all of a sudden that financial stressor, all that can move them more in a danger zone.

And grief is what's inside of us. Mourning is what we do on the outside. So I can't go oh, she's crying more than he is, she's grieving right. I can't see the grief inside of anyone. I don't know who's grieving right or wrong. There's not right or wrong to know.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Something that I struggled with a lot especially when I got into high school is when my anxiety got really bad and feeling like in order to be truly happy or be the best version of myself I had to eradicate my mental health issues somehow. And I really, really appreciate that analogy of the spectrum because for me it's been, you know, as you said, like to note like I'm not broken.

You know there's not something wrong with me it's about learning tools to integrate my mental health issues into my daily life. It's about learning to integrate my grief into my life so that I can be a happy person and experience these things. You know and not feel like oh, in order to be happy I have to get rid of this somehow 'cause that's not the thing.

*David Kessler:* No, I mean some of the most amazing, creative people are, you know, all of us who are somewhere in between there. That's just the reality of that.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* So when it comes to someone who maybe already experiences mental health issues and then loses a loved one or experiences grief in some way, shape, or form—how do you see those two things kind of like come together and how do you deal with them separately?

*David Kessler:* Well, our job is to always witness grief first. To witness it, to see the pain, and to name it as grief. And we also have wounds besides grief. Our old wounds we project onto grief. Our trauma we project onto grief. So usually you work on the grief and it will lead you to an old wound or to something else. I think that our stuff comes up and tells us where to go.

You know one of the things that people go is I can't do this and I can't do this I get so triggered. I'm like your triggers are a map to your healing. You want to know how to heal yourself, the triggers are saying there's a pocket of pain here, a pocket of pain here. The triggers are where your pain lives but it also is where your healing can reside.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Beautiful. Yeah, that speaks very, very directly to my experience. And how, I mean how would you recommend like going about that healing because it seems kind of like a little bit counterintuitive. That it's like oh, the thing that is the scariest to me I need to run towards it, you know what I mean?

*David Kessler:* So first of all, there's no timeline in grief. Now that I say that I'm going to tell you something about timing grief. When people say to me, I have a term I use, my term is called early grief. If I went out to just the street and asked the average person in the coffeehouse when's early grief what do we think their answers would be? The first week, the first month. Early grief is the first two years.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. No, that was very much my experience. I mean I lost my dad right as I was finishing my junior year of high school and that whole summer in the first like half of my senior year, I was super high functioning and was getting a bunch stuff done. And kind of felt like okay, maybe I'm okay.

And it wasn't until eight, nine, 10 months later that I really decompensated. And I didn't have that information around grief except for like my therapist and my mom who are people who really understood it. But definitely, you know, it was other people were confused, I was confused, and I felt like I was doing it wrong.

*David Kessler:* So let me just throw this at you, even sometimes our language, you decompensated. I would go, "Did you, or did you organically feel what was going on and you began to recognize that?" You know, like even our language, she fell apart, he's having a breakdown.

Really? Grief is not a breakdown or a meltdown or falling apart but it's interesting the language we use, isn't it?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah.

*David Kessler:* And how it's so, we don't realize how judgmental our language is to our self.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Totally.

*David Kessler:* The other thing I just want to say since we're on the topic, language – just a little education and you, I'm sure know this – the term we want to use now is someone died by suicide or it was a death by suicided. We don't want to say they did it to themselves or it was a suicide or your dad's a suicide. No, your dad is not a suicide or your great-grandmother wasn't a pancreatic cancer. We're not how we die.

And so, we really have to just begin to look at some of that language that we use, that they committed suicide. There was no crime to commit, they were ill. So we got to get the words like committed and things like that out of our way of talking.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely. I wanted to circle back really quickly to the notion of self-medication and that's something that you spoke about with your son and something that, obviously, my dad struggled with in terms of self-medicating with drugs for untreated mental health issues. Is that something that you witnessed in your son and how do you see that affecting grief?

*David Kessler:* The reality about our feelings is we can't heal what we don't feel.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Right. Absolutely.

*David Kessler:* And if you're using drugs to numb feelings, which a lot of drugs do and addiction does and all that, it's not going to take you to the healing it's going to take you to the numbing. So it actually then takes us in a direction that's not going to be most healthful. So that's part of the challenge in that. Now, obviously, there are medications by a psychiatrist who's trained that can be helpful so you really want to have someone who really is an amazing, trained psychiatrist that's doing this all the time. Not your sports medicine doctor who sure, yeah, let's try this. Yeah, it could help.



*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. Yeah.

*David Kessler:* Yeah, I think the greatest accomplishment we can do is do something or say something that resonates with people. You know I can remember years ago when I hadn't really matured into the person I try to still be, you know people would go, uh, grief, how depressing. And I would go oh yeah, I guess it is and then I'd go feeling bad about myself. And I now learn when someone goes, "Uh, grief, so depressing, I'll go, "You know what, I used to think that but now I realize I get to walk into people's lives at some of the most difficult moments. And I can't take them away but I can make things just a tiny bit easier."

And that's so amazing, and when we have these discussions and what you're doing with this podcast or I'm doing with my book and we see things are resonating. You know one of the things I think about is people go don't get caught up in the numbers. And in your work, in my work, one of the things when we see the numbers that I realize it means people are listening to your podcast. It means people are reading my book. It means it's resonating.

You know when it just came out that *Finding Meaning* gets submitted for a Grammy for best spoken word, you know, that means people are clicking and resonating and we're in 2020 where grief is in the air and it's like maybe a grief book should finally get nominated for spoken word for a Grammy. Never happened before.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Congratulations that's amazing.

*David Kessler:* Yeah, there hasn't been a self-help book around grief ever nominated for a Grammy. If there's ever a year for that it's 2020 so I hope *Finding Meaning*, you know, people will remember *Finding Meaning* and you know, to help them in their own lives and to realize this work is valuable.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely. I mean congratulations, that's huge.

*David Kessler:* Thank you.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* And it's such a hopeful thing for me and really speaks to the fact that this is something people are finally opening up about and

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finally wanting to talk about, which is so vital. What is something that is giving you hope right now, David?

*David Kessler:* What's giving me hope is how when people have been isolated and disconnected between Zoom and everything else, we're still connecting. Like you can't keep the human species from not connecting.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Totally.

*David Kessler:* It doesn't matter what rules you give us, we're still connecting.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely.

*David Kessler:* And that gives me hope. I love that.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Totally. And finding new ways to do it too that are even more powerful.

*David Kessler:* Finding new ways to do it. And obviously, I want to say anyone out there who's struggling or you know, there's plenty of classes and free things on grief.com I hope they'll check that out to get some help. Because you know I often say if your air conditioner is broke you, of course, would call support. If your TV breaks you would call support. When we struggle, we're like I don't know, should I call someone? Yes, get a free class, watch some videos, get help, get support, call a therapist, find a group.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Thank you, David. Thank you so much for being here.

*David Kessler:* Thank you for doing this.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* It means so much to me, your work is very, very near and dear to my heart so thank you.

*David Kessler:* Thank you.

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