



GRIEF EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION COURSE

WEEK 4:

# Feel Your Feelings



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification Course taught by Dr. David Page through The School of Grief.

# Week 4: Feel Your Feelings

The first need we have as grievors is to have our grief witnessed. The second need is to feel our feelings. God is our creator and giver of emotions. He created us to grieve and designed us to feel our feelings and express our emotions.

It's important to fully acknowledged and experience all the emotions you are feeling in your grief, even if they are painful, in order to truly heal and mover forward. Don't avoid or suppress your feelings, but instead, allow yourself to feel them completely.

Feel all the feels is an expression that means to allow yourself to feel and have emotions, regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

The emotions that we feel in grief, as raw and overwhelming as they are, reflect the depth of our love for those who have died.

## **They Took Our Daughter Away**

Two guys from the mortuary came to our house after Jackie died. They parked the van at the bottom of our driveway and walked up to our house. It was time to take Jackie to the van. "We'll go get the gurney to carry her down to the van," one of them said.

"Guys, she's forty-two inches tall and only weighs about forty pounds. How about I just carry her down to the van instead?" I replied.

They agreed it was a good idea. I picked up her little body, carried it to the van, and laid her inside. The van drove down the road on St. Andrews Court, turned left onto Birch Way, and disappeared into the distance with our baby inside.

We stood there watching for what seemed like hours but was just a few minutes. We were in shock. Tears welled up in our eyes. We felt so helpless. So hopeless. Nothing in life prepared us for a moment like this. We had experienced a catastrophic loss and knew we were in deep weeds and needed help.

I didn't know what to do, where to turn, or how to deal with my pain. I called a Christian counselor in town to begin grief therapy. She shared with me the importance of expressing my emotions. She explained that God made our bodies to feel pain and that grief was a natural part of life. She encouraged me to process the pain I was feeling inside by crying into a pillow. She gave me grief homework to do.

I remember curling up in a fetal position and crying. I cried so hard and for so long to the point where I didn't think I could cry anymore. I was cried out. For a while, my tears just wouldn't come out. My tear ducks dried up. I had never experienced such a thing. I asked the counselor about it, and she said not to worry. She assured me that the tears would flow again when they were ready. And sure enough, they did.

I remember screaming into my pillow to release the pent- up anger inside. It was ugly. I screamed at the top of my lungs. I made guttural sounds I'd never heard myself utter before. It was like my soul was verbally vomiting and letting go of all the toxic stuff inside. I remember howling like a wolf at the universe.

I was crying so hard that I collapsed on the floor. I got up and looked in the mirror only to see my swollen eyes, tears on bright red cheeks, and drool running down my mouth. I was dehydrated, unable to stand, think, or walk. Sentences were hard to put together and didn't make sense.

### **Reoccurring Nightmares**

I went back to the therapist for another appointment. I informed her that this grieving stuff was hard work. She smiled and said, "Yes, it is." I told her I didn't think I was doing very well.

She asked what my biggest challenge was. I shared that I was having nightmares every night of the two men from the mortuary driving my daughter away in the van.

Each time I dreamed about it; I would wake up in a cold sweat.

"What can I do to get rid of the nightmares?" I desperately asked.

"Try reframing the situation. Instead of picturing two men taking your daughter away, imagine two angels coming down from heaven and gently taking Jackie home," she said.

Now, that sounded good. I gave it a try. The nightmares continued. I knew I needed further help.

### **Jerry Sittser's Wise Counsel**

As I mentioned before, Jerry came and spoke at the weekend services at our church in Auburn. After lunch, I drove him back to the Sacramento airport.

On the way, he asked me how I was doing in my grief? "Pretty well except that I keep having this recurring nightmare of watching the two men from the mortuary take my daughter away and disappearing," I replied.

I shared about the advice given by the Christian therapist of picturing angels coming to take her away.

"How is that working for you?" he asked.

"It's not. I still have nightmares about it every night," I said.

"That crap didn't work for me either," Jerry said empathetically.

We burst into laughter together. I was surprised by his reply, but thankful for his honesty.

“Dave, you need to embrace the pain. You must feel the feelings to get better,” he continued.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“When the drunk driver hit our minivan, it was carnage, just awful. My four-year-old daughter died immediately from a broken neck. My wife was seriously injured but was still alive as was my mother. They both died a few minutes later. My six-year-old son had a broken femur and almost died, but thankfully survived. My other two kids were dazed, crying, and screaming but were relatively unhurt. It took an hour before the emergency vehicle reached us,” he explained. I was speechless as he shared the tragic details.

“You need to go back and relive the event in your mind, facing your fear and watching those two men drive away with your daughter. As crazy as it sounds, you embrace the pain. You feel the feelings all over again and let them sink in,” he said.

My first thought was, this sounds counterintuitive, but he certainly knows what’s he’s talking about, so why not give it a try? I chose to relive the experience again and to feel the painful emotions associated with the experience.

In my mind, I pictured the two men driving my daughter away from our home. I felt a piercing pain deep inside. I sat with my pain and let it marinate. I stayed in the moment, felt the feelings, and welcomed the pain streaming through my body.

I named my painful emotions and owned them. I felt my feelings to the core of my being despite the unpleasantness. I confronted the experience head on and felt a sense of dread over the finality that my daughter was gone for good.

After facing and embracing my pain, feeling my feelings, and expressing my emotions, the nightmares disappeared.

## **Feelings Matter**

Author John Bradshaw in his book *Homecoming* said, “You can’t heal what you don’t feel.” He saw a relationship between feeling and healing. If we don’t name it, we can’t feel it. And if we don’t feel it, we can’t heal it.

Acknowledging and naming feelings are the first steps to dealing with them and healing them. The process of becoming friendly with your feelings fosters growth and healing from your loss. Feelings can be harsh, so it’s important to be kind to yourself in the grieving process.

## **Don't Bury Your Feelings**

A hundred years ago, industrialists thought they could bury toxic waste, and it would just go away. We've since learned that doesn't work. Rather, the waste leaks into the water, contaminates the crops, and kills animals.

Burying grief does the same thing. It leaks into our emotional system and wreaks havoc. It distorts our perceptions of life, ruins our relationships, and keeps us stuck in our grief. My point is it's important to feel our feelings and not to bury them.

Our culture doesn't do a good job of teaching us how to deal with difficult emotions. It's intriguing to identify what you were taught about feelings as a child. As a boy, I was taught, "Big boys don't cry." As a high school basketball player, my coach told me not to show emotion and not to talk back to referees, even if they made a bad call. Essentially, I was taught to stuff my emotions inside, erasing any trace of them completely.

The idea that emotions are something to stuff was woven deep inside my subconscious. I decided this understanding of emotions didn't serve me well as an adult. The death of my daughter forced me to examine my beliefs about emotions and to rewrite my own narrative about my feelings.

## **There's No Crying in Baseball**

I love the movie *A League of Their Own*. A classic line is when Tom Hanks proclaims, "There's no crying in baseball!" In real life, some people, men in particular, are told not to cry. I'm here to tell you that's terrible advice. Don't let some macho saying prevent you from crying and from experiencing your subsequent healing. Crying, whether you are a man or woman, is actually very beneficial. I've learned to cry since the passing of my daughter. The good news is it really helps.

## **A Fear of a Gang of Feelings**

Sometimes we try not to feel what we're feeling because we have this image of a gang of feelings. If I feel sad and let that in, it'll never go away. The gang of bad feelings will overrun me. The truth is a feeling moves through us. We feel it and it goes and then we go to the next feeling. There's no gang out to get us. It's absurd to think we shouldn't feel grief right now. Let yourself feel the grief and keep going.

## **Emotional Suppression**

Emotional suppression is an emotional management technique that tries to control uncomfortable, overwhelming thoughts and feelings. Numerous studies have shown that we can experience short-term mental and physical reactions when we suppress our emotions.

Suppressing negative feelings may also have a negative impact on your long-term well being. Clinical psychologist Victoria Tarratt suggests that "Suppressing your feelings can cause physical stress in your body and can influence blood pressure, memory, and self-esteem."

Denying our emotions further strengthens them. If you suppress your feelings, you will end up bringing much more stress to your life in the long run.

People are afraid to feel their feelings because they think they will be opening Pandora's box of pain and that it will never end. This parable from Greek mythology that you don't want to open a box that could bring worse pain and suffering on you is just that, a myth. I remind grievors that we are in Pandora's box. We are experiencing pain and suffering in the moment.

We often forget the point of the parable. What remained after Pandora's box was opened was hope. Hope was in the box along with trouble and pain. Hope is found when we feel our feelings and express our emotions—the hope that no feeling is final, you won't cry forever, and when your feelings are felt they are then released.

### **Express and Release Your Feelings**

To express and release our feelings, we need to allow room for them to come out and be open to processing them. If we don't express our feelings and continue to suppress them, they will find their way out in other ways. Unfelt feelings don't just go away; they resurrect like a zombie in a horror movie.

Your emotions are data for your experience of life. If we ignore or repress our feelings, not only will they come out later, but we miss vital information about the origin of those feelings.

I had a great deal of anger after my daughter's death. I needed to feel it, express it, and get it out. I hit things and screamed a lot. We all need to find ways to express and release our feelings. When Forrest Gump lost Jenny, his wife and the love of his life, in the movie Forrest Gump, he began to run across the country to deal with his grief. My wife began running after Jackie died. She went on long runs to combat the pain.

The goal is to allow our feelings to be and not to resist, but instead, to move through them. Psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that whatever you resist persists. The more you resist anything in life, the more you bring it to you. Resisting feelings and avoiding potential pain brings more pain upon you. When we don't feel fully, we can't live fully. Our minds want to protect us from the pain and distress, but feelings must be felt.

### **Feel All the Feels**

The key is to feel your feelings. I guarantee it's going to hurt, but every moment you're weeping, you're doing the work. Every moment you're hurting, you're healing. The only way out of the pain is through.

### **Do the Laps**

Laird Hamilton is a big wave surfer—arguably the best of all- time. Big wave surfing is a discipline within surfing reserved for experienced surfers who paddle into, or are towed into, waves that are at least 20 feet high. Hamilton once shared that big wave surfers need to be in incredible shape to ride such big waves because when you wipe out, you can be under the water for minutes.

To succeed, he says, “You have to do the laps.” He’s referring to a training regimen of swimming many laps in a pool to build up the stamina and strength needed to save your life when you go down riding the big waves.

It’s the same way with grief, which produces its own big waves. Swimming the laps in the pool is equivalent to identifying your feelings and feeling them. It’s hard work but necessary to survive.

### **Pay Me Now or Pay Me Later**

Feelings are an emotional state or reaction; they are vibrations of energy. There is power in feeling our feelings. Feelings say, “Pay me now, or pay me later, but you will pay.” Grief will chase you down. Grief in the end will always get its way.

When you’re grieving, you experience a wide variety of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Your emotions may seem strange, but they are a true expression of where you are at the moment. Rather than denying your feelings or being victimized by them, learn to recognize, and learn from them. Trying to keep going in life suddenly didn’t work anymore. I needed a different strategy. I decided to venture out of my comfort zone and to feel my feelings and express my emotions.

Ask yourself, “What am I feeling right now about my loss today?” Allow your thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment. Look your grief in the face and say hello to your feelings. I empower grievers to discover their feeling language and voice. Grievers often teach me about grief by explaining what they are feeling and experiencing in their soul. Grievers need space and encouragement to trust and express their feelings.

Life is a series of peaks and valleys. When you are in the valley of grief, don’t fight your emotions but acknowledge your reality and feel your feelings. It’s messy and it’s uncomfortable, but if you don’t deal with your feelings, you will get stuck in your grief and in managing problematic behavior.

Feelings are your friend, connect with them. Remember that God is with you in the peaks and valleys in life and will give you the courage to feel your feelings.

### **Embrace the Pain**

Solomon wrote, “There is ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4).

“Pain is a gift,” according to Dr. Paul Brand, a British surgeon and author of *The Gift of Pain*: “Pain is one of God’s great gifts to us.” That’s the last thing grievers want to hear after their loss. Many people view pain as one of God’s biggest mistakes. Prior to my loss, I never viewed pain as a gift, but I do now.

Pain is a gift because it demonstrates we have a capacity to feel. Pain informs us that we are still alive. What if we couldn’t feel things in our body and soul? God created us with the ability to feel pain for a reason.

Dr. Brand's work with leprosy patients in India revealed that pain is an indicator that lets us know something is wrong; pain has a value that becomes clearest in its absence. Leprosy is a deadly disease because it keeps the nerves from informing the brain about the pain.

Pain is a gift that none of us want and yet none of us can do without.

Pain is both an essential and unavoidable part of life. A key to navigating grief and loss is learning how to respond to pain. We often seek to avoid our painful feelings or go under- ground with them and bury them.

### **Jesus Wept**

Jesus was fully divine and fully human. He knew what it was like to feel his feelings and express his human emotions. His dear friend, Lazarus, died. Friends of the family were sitting Shiva with Lazarus' sisters, Mary, and Martha. If the grieving person wanted to talk, then you could converse. It's a way of saying, "I love you. I'm here for you. You're not alone." You might sit for hours or days: "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews with her weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33).

"Where have you laid him?" he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,'" they replied (John 11:34). "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

Then, the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" (John 11:36). Jesus' tears were evidence of his love for Lazarus.

The shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most freeing verses in Scripture. Those two words, "Jesus wept," give us permission to weep in our sorrow because they reveal how Jesus modeled his grief. Grief is not a disease; it's a natural response to loss.

Jesus ends up raising Lazarus from the dead and yet he still weeps. His power does not rule out his grief. His ability to raise the dead doesn't rule out the pain and sorrow in his heart. He feels his feelings head on and weeps. You can have great faith in God and still weep. In fact, I believe spiritual maturity goes together with tears.

King David said, "I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears" (Psalm 6:6). If there's one thing I've learned, it's that whatever you're feeling in that moment is okay. It's okay to feel anger, shock, denial, or fear. It's okay to have no answers, no explanations, and even no words.

In some religious traditions, there is a perception that weeping and mourning means that you doubt God, so people aren't encouraged to grieve. Please don't ever think it's more spiritual to hold in your tears.

I don't know how long ago you experienced your loss or if it was just last week, but I'm so sorry for your loss. Please don't avoid your feelings and think they will just go away. There is a high cost to holding onto your feelings. Loss brings pain and pain brings grief.



If you've never freely grieved, those feelings are still trapped somewhere inside. Allow yourself time to mourn and weep. If you try to hold in your tears and ignore your pain, there will be serious problems later. God gave us tears to shed in our grief, an outpouring of our inner pain. Jesus has power over life and death. He knows the beginning from the end. Jesus knew that a few minutes later, he would raise Lazarus from the dead and call him out of the tomb so that he would live again, and yet Jesus still weeps.

I think people all over the world would be well-served by watching Jesus weep. It might give them permission to weep and to fully grieve. Weeping is the language of the soul.

If the Son of God needs a good cry, then maybe so do I. And maybe so do you.

### **The Tears of Jesus**

Poet Ann Weems suffered heartbreak when her twenty-one- year-old son, Todd, was murdered. She poured her grief into writing her own version of lament psalms. Here she writes a lament about the tears of Jesus.

Jesus wept,  
and in his weeping,  
he joined himself forever to those who mourn.  
He stands now throughout all time,  
this Jesus weeping,  
with his arms about the weeping ones:  
“Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.”  
He stands with the mourners,  
for his name is God-with-us.  
Jesus wept.  
“Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted.” Someday.  
Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel’s eyes.  
In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
there is a deafening alleluia, rising from the souls of those who weep,  
and of those who weep with those who weep.  
If you watch, you will see the hand of God,  
putting the stars back in their skies one by one.

### **The Health Benefits of Tears**

Crying is a phenomenon unique to humans, and is a natural response to emotions, from deep sadness and grief to extreme happiness and joy. In essence, tears are liquid emotions. Our bodies produce three kinds of tears: reflex, continuous, and emotional. Each kind has different healing roles.

Emotional tears have special health benefits and are especially relevant to us as grievers. Biochemist and tear expert, Dr. William Frey, discovered that emotional tears contain stress hormones that get flushed from your body through crying.

Crying stimulates the production of endorphins, our body's natural painkiller and feel-good hormones. Bottom line, crying is good for you. It's healthy and it makes us feel better.

Emotional tears heal your heart. Crying is essential to resolve grief when waves of tears regularly come over us after loss. Tears help us process the loss so we can keep living with open hearts. Otherwise, we are prone to depression.

While the eyes of all mammals are moistened and soothed by tears, only human beings shed tears in response to grief and sadness. God designed your body with the capacity to cry and provides health benefits with every tear, so feel your feelings and let the tears flow to help heal your heart and soul.

### **God Collects Our Tears in a Bottle**

King David said, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book" (Psalm 56:8 NLT). The idea behind keeping our tears in a bottle is remembrance. While God may not have a literal bottle filled with our tears (He may), He does remember every tear that falls from our eyes. This includes every tear we shed with the passing of a loved one or a significant loss. Our tears matter to God, and He remembers them all. The fact that God remembers my sorrow and tears brings me great comfort. I hope it does the same for you.

That being said, it's important to note that God does not merely collect tears. The tears of suffering humanity deeply move God. They call Him into action to restore that which has been lost, to rescue the brokenhearted, and to usher in a new creation. Tears are just temporary; someday, they will all be wiped away. Sadness will be turned into joy and mourning into dancing. Everything will be made new.

THE END



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification  
Course taught by Dr. David Page through The  
School of Grief.