

GINA MOFFA

MOVING ON DOESN'T MEAN LETTING GO

'A must-read'

– YUNG PUEBLO, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Lighter*

A MODERN GUIDE TO
NAVIGATING LOSS

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Mom,

This book is *for* you and *because* of you.

Through space and time, you are always here.

To my courageous clients: I am so deeply grateful and privileged to be your traveling companion on one of the most important inner journeys you will take.

And to those who show up here with me, to the grief and unknown, and who keep showing up—my heart is with your heart.

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Grief is alive, wild, untamed and cannot be domesticated. It resists the demands to remain passive and still. We move in jangled, unsettled, and riotous ways when grief takes hold of us. It is truly an emotion that rises from the soul.

—Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*

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Introduction

When Josh first came to see me, he was a twenty-four-year-old, self-proclaimed “grief mess” who was in such distress, he struggled to explain why he was even seeking therapy. His girlfriend, Rebecca, had died a year earlier in a car accident that he had survived, unharmed. They had been headed to dinner to celebrate both of them getting the jobs they’d been working toward, when they were sideswiped by a drunk driver and slammed into parked cars on the side of the road at 55 mph. Rebecca got the brunt of the impact and was unconscious at the scene, passing away later at the hospital. It was coming upon the year anniversary of the accident when Josh decided to reach out for help.

Sitting on my couch, trying to catch his breath, Josh confessed that he felt frozen in his guilt around still being alive. Grief, he said, was “infiltrating everything” in his life: his relationships with friends and family, his new dream job—which he felt unable to show up for even though it was the work he had always wanted to do—even his sense of the world itself. The trauma and grief of that accident was continuing to give him flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and nightmares. He was coping (or, well, *not* coping) with a tremendous amount of guilt and shame by drinking to curb the intrusive thoughts and symptoms, but that only made him feel worse.

He felt stuck, jostling around in a disconcerting limbo not entirely in the past, but not quite in the present, either. Everyone around him had encouraged him to try to move on from the accident and Rebecca’s tragic death, but his body and heart just wouldn’t

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He wanted help, but he was also struggling to accept support, adding that he still felt too attached to Rebecca to “just let go.”

That made sense to me.

I’ve heard from a lot of Joshes over the years. People who have lost someone or something incredibly important and tried to get over it and keep it moving, only to find themselves feeling like an alien in their own life. Distant and disconnected emotionally, feeling out of sync with the world by a few beats, and genuinely confused by what’s happening at times. Mind, body, and spirit, the people who reach out to me are desperate for healing, but unsure how to move forward after losses that have shattered their world even, and perhaps especially, when nobody else seems to see the full extent of the damage.

As a grief and trauma therapist for more than a decade, I have seen the way that grief sits at the root of so many mental health challenges, from post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression, to substance use disorder and anxiety. A study done before the pandemic by AmeriSpeak found that 57 percent of Americans were grieving the loss of someone or something important.¹ That means every other person you see is grieving—and, yes, “is” grieving in the present tense; grief never truly goes away. Spring of 2020, COVID increased that number, bringing loss to millions more doorsteps.

There is no escaping or outrunning loss in our lives, individually nor collectively. Loved ones, friends, pets, identities, pregnancies, homes, health—the many losses that come with life might just be a matter of fact if we had any real clue how to cope when they come, but we struggle. Even many of my colleagues tell me they either do not feel comfortable working with grief or are not well equipped clinically. Grief and loss classes weren’t offered as a part of any mandatory clinical curriculum and even now, at best, it’s still just an elective.

If only grief were equally elective.

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You Are Not Alone

The people who sit on my couch are courageous. Some of them would shudder to hear me call them “brave,” but it’s true. Grief may be one of our most universal emotional experiences, but that doesn’t erase how isolating, confusing, and profoundly painful it can be. It takes a lot to look at your pain head-on, to see what’s under it. Josh struggled with that kind of vulnerability for a long time. He had always had a hard time expressing his emotions, and he’d pull himself up short every time he wanted to cry over his loss, telling me that his father always told him to stop crying and grow up. That forbidding voice echoed in every person who had told him to get over it or move on. After hearing it so many times from so many different people, it made perfect sense to me that Josh hadn’t yet figured out how to be where he was in his grief experience. He was living between the shock of his loss and the expectations of others.

Then one day he came into the office, sat down, looked me in the eyes clearer than I had ever experienced, and said he was ready to do it my way.

“My way, huh?” I shrugged. “Thing is, Josh, my way is for *you*. So, it’s *your way*, too.”

Which brings me to this moment right here with you. If you are reading this book, it’s likely that you’re enduring a loss, maybe for the first time. Maybe you’ve lost a parent, grandparent, another family member or loved one. Maybe you’re grieving a beloved pet, or a friend you used to call every day but haven’t spoken to for years, and you’re not sure why. Maybe you’re going through a major breakup, enduring chronic illness, or are struggling with painful fertility challenges. Or, maybe you picked up this book for a different type of loss. Your grief may be very fresh or you may now be ready to process a loss that happened years ago. Our losses can be ambiguous, such as those of

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miscarriage or dementia, and even expand to things like loss of expectations, hope, a future, safety, identity, and so much more. Or, maybe you've endured losses that seem to have compounded. Maybe it was a traumatic loss or maybe it feels traumatizing to *you*.

Whoever, whatever, and however you lost, I am sorry.

I am so, so sorry.

And I'm glad that you found this book.

While no book can substitute for one-on-one therapy or specialized grief support, I hope that these pages can become a safe space for you—just you and me in this vault with no judgment, no secrets, and no societal or ancestral rules, a space to come closer to our truest selves and gather tools for healing wounds, old and new, one step at a time.

To that end, I want you to make me two promises: First, that you won't judge yourself while you're here with me. And second, that you won't rush yourself through this book. The healing process isn't a Netflix series to binge so we can hurry up and learn what happened to Judy on *Dead to Me*. The only thing harder than our losses is the pressure we feel from ourselves and others about how long we can grieve (spoiler alert: not very!) before we need to "just move on." I think you already know, just from the feelings that have brought you here, that our *entire* equilibrium is thrown off balance when we suffer a loss, and as much as I wish it to be true at times, we can't just click our heels and find ourselves safely back in bed realizing it was all only a dream.

Loss can leave us adrift, feeling alone and terrified, without any real sense of direction in a land we never wanted to visit. I often imagine a strange and painful opposite land, where we don't know what we want or what we need and every time we get a clue about those things, they change on us, and then we want something else. Maybe we want company, then we want to be alone. Maybe we want to go home and cry, but then we find something funny that was left behind and find ourselves bowled over in laughter. We sometimes feel guilt for a million things—and especially that first moment of happiness after our

loss. We want to feel peace; we also want to go back in time and try again. It's a strange and wild ride. And, I see you.

Grieving When We Don't Know How

Grief can feel like a nasty tug-of-war between what *was* and what *is*. And, let's be honest—we aren't the same as we were before our loss. Like the worst version of Google Maps, our brain is busy “recalculating” itself as we try to find a way through the world and our future that doesn't feel utterly traumatizing and terrifying. Feeling so profoundly disoriented, some of us shut down emotionally, too overwhelmed to manage how we feel and how others say we're “supposed to” feel. I know the confusion and desperate need for something to hold on to that comes with loss, and hell, even the instinct to just keep tossing things and relationships away after loss. I know the anxiety that's grief's sidekick, looking around in fear, wondering who or what will be taken from us next. And yet, we still have to go on, only now looking closer at all we have left around us in our life, try to make sense of it all, and keep going... somehow.

It can feel unpredictable at times, especially if you're experiencing grief for the first time. But there are a few truths about grief that can help start the process and give you a sense of agency during an experience that can threaten to take you down. (1) It shows up in ways that are both obvious and more subtle. (2) It is *nonlinear*, meaning, there is no beginning, middle, and end to our grief, no timeline, and no real order to how things will come up for you. And (3) Grief is a full-on, full-body experience that exists on a spectrum. How grief shows up for you is based on the day, the circumstances, the level of exhaustion you feel, grief triggers, anniversaries, relationship struggles, and your emotional baseline. It's important that you can know and name this for yourself, because when we misunderstand what grief is, we dismiss it and, in the process, belittle its place in our lives, as well as its impact on our health and wellness. Grief is so much more than a feeling.

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After loss, in our own time and ways, we all try to regain a semblance of normalcy and control. I know how hard it is to feel people really *get it*, that anyone other than you really understands what you're going through. How could they? Did they know your loved one? Did they see the way your (now ex) husband used to look at you? Did they stay up all night talking with your friend, sharing all your secret worries and the joy of your accomplishments right up until the day they moved across the country and got a new best friend? Did they hold your pet's paw, telling them it would be all right when what you were really saying was goodbye? Did they get on their hands and knees and pray to God to heal or keep someone around, because they couldn't imagine living without that person and maybe didn't even know *how*? Did they know what it was like to have to tell people the baby you posted online about for nine months was no longer alive? *How could they know*? How could anyone really know what a loss means to someone? We can't.

So if you're thinking that grief is a singular feeling you just have to feel your way through and get right back to yourself again, I'm so sorry to be the worst of all messengers: This is an experience that will require your endurance, emotionally, physically, and yes, even spiritually, because your loss has changed your life.

Seeking out support and guidance during this time is courageous, and, I am sure, also exhausting and terrifying. I see your opening this book as reaching out and searching for connection during the hardest, maybe most confusing moment in your life. I know I already said it, but I'm really glad you're here.

A Little About Me

So, who is this person asking you to trust her with your heart and your hurt? Well, I am a psychotherapist with nearly twenty years of experience working in different types of institutions in New York City, from

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Mt. Sinai Hospital Center to 92NY (formerly the 92nd Street Y). I began in various social work roles and worked my way up to director positions, working with many different groups of people. This includes, in no particular order, Holocaust survivors and older adults in life transitions, low-income, inner-city populations struggling to attain basic daily needs, teens and adults deeply challenged by addiction of all kinds, and trauma histories, people enduring severe mental illness diagnoses in inpatient (and outpatient) hospital settings, as well as asylum seekers trying to escape further trauma and harm—people from all walks of life, grappling with the most challenging life (and death) circumstances. These courageous humans have been my teachers. I have been immensely privileged to journey alongside them during their darkest moments. My clinical expertise after years of being in the trenches with hundreds of clients is in the heart of these pages. A note on my social location: While, yes, I have worked with a wide variety of populations over my decades as a clinician, I am a white, cis female therapist who has a private practice on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, without the lived experience of being racially or culturally marginalized. For the purposes of this book, I will be speaking *specifically* to the clinical grief experience, while wanting to acknowledge the diverse racial and cultural needs and grief experiences that exist, and that also come through my door.

In addition to my work, I am also a motherless daughter, who in the same horrific week her mother died also had to struggle with losing her home, her job, and her health. At other points, just like so many people, I have lost partners, friends, loved ones, and several versions of myself that I treasured. I don't share this to compete in the Grief Olympics. (A) Those don't exist. (B) Nobody's loss is *ever* the same as anyone else's. Your loss is yours in the way your love is yours. It is sacred; nobody can take it from you. I share these losses with you, though, to assure you that I've also been around the block a few times, and that I may be able to help you find your way too.

One of the many reasons I wanted to write this book was that during the pandemic, there weren't enough hours in the day to help the number of grieving people who needed it. Week after week, I would speak with people from different states who were desperate for a grief therapist but did not have access to grief therapy for a variety of reasons. As the pandemic wore on, more and more calls came in from a younger crowd inquiring about grief and trauma therapy after loss. Some called because they'd lost friends and family to COVID-19, or their pet died during the pandemic, which sparked grief for all of the family. But many others reached out because they were in the midst of major life transitions like breakups, job loss, home transitions, and more. I was heartened seeing so many more people taking their mental health seriously and wanting to understand more about what they were experiencing. I was heartbroken not to be able to help more of them personally. My hope was that this book could be a hand reaching out to say, *I'm sorry, I see you, I am here, and I care.*

What I Hope You Get Out of This Book

I cannot promise that this book will fix your pain, but I *can* promise that it will be a steadfast companion. The road through grief is fraught and lacks comfortable accommodation, but I do have a well-worn map that shows the different routes you can take to find what you need: a sense of safety, understanding, courage, peace, and guidance, to name a few. If you allow your experience to unfold in its own ways, the words on these pages may help you shift that pain. It may also bring up memories or experiences that may feel initially uncomfortable. I'm sorry about that. There may be triggers that come out of the blue, too. We will go there, into the grit of your grieving.

My goal with this book is to offer a sense of agency over an intolerable, unpredictable, and exhausting experience. Although I do not subscribe to the five stages of grief, how they have evolved since Dr.

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Elisabeth Kübler-Ross created them for the terminally ill patient, I do believe in having a semblance of structure and some gentle guides to prevent you from flailing in a dark abyss. You should not be left to grieve indefinitely without a sense of relief. Perhaps counterintuitively, the path to that relief comes from tenderly facing your loss. This means I will challenge you to make contact with your most vulnerable feelings, dig deep for self-compassion in the toughest moments, and listen to your body's innate wisdom (you may not always be happy with that!). We will also identify different kinds of boundaries that aim to help you meet your needs and help others to help you, too. As unbelievable as it may feel at times, there is a way to move forward *with* your grief in a way that doesn't render you helpless or at the mercy of ever-shifting emotions. My promise is to be right beside you as we work toward taking the sting out of your daily grief experience a little at a time.

In these pages, I'll offer you some new ways of viewing your loss (and your life), practical tools, many reflections, and some stories from inside my therapy room that you may relate to, including my own story of loss and grief. By the end, I hope you'll have picked up some new ways to befriend and contend with your grief, and that you feel just a little less alone.

Grief is the deepest human wound there is, and it's everywhere. Even in places within our lives we didn't notice it. It deserves more than one-size-fits-all bits of advice. This book will ask you to open up your heart and peruse your painful memories and perhaps look more deeply at those wounds. It's no easy endeavor, even if you're eager to jump in. Where you go next and how you begin to find shreds of light and hope in your life again are the cornerstone of what's inside these pages.

In many ways, this is the book I wish I'd had when I was grieving the death of my mother. Perhaps I could have been gentler with myself through the chaos and confusion that was really just me trying

to push through it, deny it, see it, but then conveniently not have time for it . . . before inevitably answering the damn door and inviting that grief in. Trust me, though, like many of you reading this right now, if I could have drop-kicked grief in those early days and gotten back to my life with my mom still in it, I'd have done it. Instead, I warily dragged myself to the bookstore and searched for books that spoke to me, that I could point to and see myself. Sadly, I didn't see much of myself in those aisles.

Maybe I was picky. I wanted a book that spoke to my actual emotional experience and lifestyle of being a thirtysomething in a relentlessly fast-paced world with nonstop social media notifications and navigating friendships and a love relationship with this new, gaping wound. Not to mention that, at the time, not many people I knew had lost someone close to them through death. It felt lonely and exhausting. I wanted to learn how to better ask for what I needed, and sometimes, how to even know *what* those needs were. I was so used to working and caring for others' needs for so long, I hardly remembered how to take a deeper look at my own.

Grief can unravel us and we are then left standing over our lives trying to figure out how to put the pieces back together. Sometimes, it takes everything in us just to figure out where to start.

Now's as Good a Time as Any to Begin

There is never a "good" time to do grief work, or a time we may willingly throw open the doors to our soul and bare the pain and fragility and yearning within. Not usually without a really compelling reason, am I right? Yet, here we are, and here we will begin—not my way or your way, but *our way*.

So, right here and right now, I invite you into my office, asking of you only what I ask of my clients: Show up as best you can, and tell the truth.

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That truth you share in the exercises or simply notice coming up as you read will inevitably be the gateway to your emotional freedom and a stronger sense that you can, indeed, get through the worst of what has happened. Facing it all, head-on, at your own pace and with my guidance and gentle support, is a courageous step toward healing, even when it feels like falling apart.

You will hear me say in different ways that grief is a unique experience and very individually processed. The flip side of this is the fact that we find the path *through* grief by shared experience. As a result, being witnessed and having your feelings and experience heard and honored is the path toward reconnection. The stories—both my own and those of my clients—are my way of offering you that.

Humbly, this book is an invitation to be with your shattered heart in a quiet place, here with me in the pages that will be all about you and your experience. I'm sorry to be the jerk who says that time doesn't heal all wounds. It doesn't. What it does do, though, is help to make space for new understanding, new normals, new connections, and new experiences—all of which come with both the bitter and the sweet.

As impossible as this may now seem, I assure you that you *can* learn to live with grief's flow and rhythm. And you can become empowered by the very thing you think might swallow you whole.

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PART ONE



THE INNER GRIEF JOURNEY

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