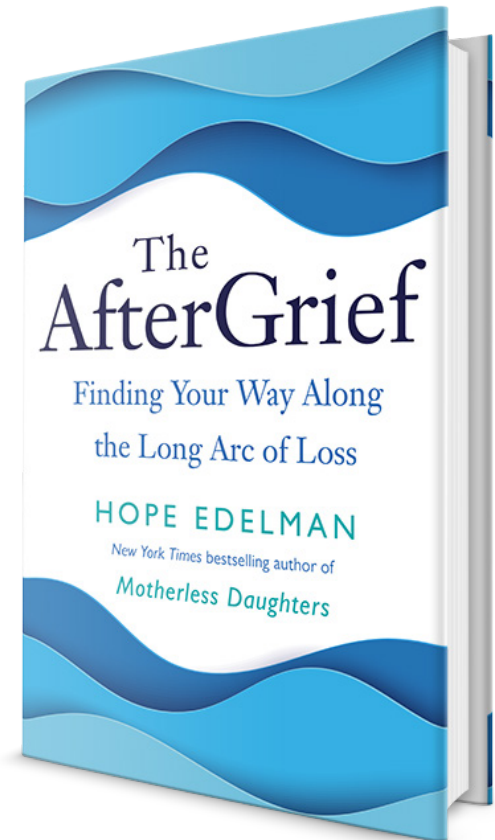


The AfterGrief

HOPE EDELMAN

READING GROUP GUIDE



Hello readers, and thank you for spending time with *The AfterGrief*!

Of all my books, this one is particularly close to my heart. It's the culmination of more than twenty-five years of thinking about and living along the long arc of grief, as well as four years of intensive interviews and research on the topic.

You learn a lot from living with a subject for that long. One thing I discovered was that the true experts on grief are the people who've experienced it, the ones who've been revisited and changed by it at different points in their lives.

If you've read this book, it's probably because you faced one or more big losses in your life. You're not alone. Virtually everyone will lose someone they love at some point, and some of us will go through this several times.

If you've been bereaved at any point in the past, the questions that follow have been designed with you in mind. Although you can answer them on your own or in your journal, they're meant to be discussed with one or more compassionate others. That's because the social component of the aftergrief is so essential. By sharing our stories of loss and having candid conversations about the lingering effects, we give others permission to do the same. And when they share their stories, they give others permission, too. And so on, and so on.

Story by story: That's how we'll change the larger conversation around grief and loss.

In solidarity,
Hope



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you lost someone close to you? How long ago was that?
2. How would you describe your present-day relationship to that loss? (E.g., at peace with it, angry about it, still confused about the facts, found meaning from it, etc.) It's okay to have several answers to this question! Emotions are complex, and we often feel more than one at a time.
3. Different times in history have fostered different ideas and behaviors with regard to grief and mourning. What messages about grief did you receive from family members, friends, other adults, and the culture at large at the time of your loss? Which ones stuck with you? How do you feel they are still helping or hurting you today?
4. What messages or suggestions do you wish you'd received at the time? At what point did you realize this would have been helpful? Can you think of a scenario in which you might be able to share those suggestions with others today?
5. Compare the way Western society mourns today to the way it acknowledged death and grief in the past, such as with community gatherings around a deathbed, or the elaborate funerals and burial monuments of Victorian times. Do you think one era adopted healthier or more helpful practices than another? What modern-day rituals have you observed or participated in?
6. How do others around the globe mourn their dead? What rites or processes do you wish were included in Western culture? Have you incorporated any multicultural traditions into your grief?
7. Novels, fairy tales, television shows, and films offer a wide variety of models for coping with loss. Did any in particular speak to your experience or help you over the years? What scenes or characters were most memorable?
8. After the death of a loved one, did you ever feel that you had to wear a "mask" in public and adopt the face of someone who was not grieving? If you were to draw or describe that mask, what would it look like? What would your real expression, the one behind the mask, look like or say?
9. Edelman posits that unexpressed grief may be "one of the most overlooked public health crises of our time." Think of a person you know who has been unable to speak about a past loss or perhaps you have been in this situation yourself. In what ways (physical, behavioral, emotional, mental) might grief that's been buried or pushed aside be trying to come out?
10. Efforts to quantify grief—Freud's "work of mourning," the Five Stages of Grief based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work—have been popular in the past. Do you think they've helped or hindered the grieving process? Why do you think people turn to them?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 11.** Has one grief model or way of thinking about grief been more helpful to you than others? Why?
- 12.** What are your thoughts on continuing relationships with the deceased after they've departed? In what ways can this be done?
- 13.** How has hearing someone else's story helped you in your grief? Have you shared your own story with anyone? What was their response? How did you feel after?
- 14.** Sharing stories about departed loved ones is an important way of keeping memories of them alive—and of reaffirming that inner relationship. What would you like the group to know about your loved one? Introduce them to her or him.
- 15.** Have you learned anything new about that person since they died? Has it changed your image of them? If yes, how?
- 16.** Is the story you tell today about a long-ago loss the same story you would have told soon after it happened? If not, in what ways has your story changed? Why do you think that is?
- 17.** Have you expressed your grief in creative ways such as writing, painting, dancing, acting, or any other self-expressive means? What form(s) did it take?
- 18.** Do you think current events have reshaped the way we grieve or mourn? If yes, in what ways?
- 19.** Edelman describes grief and the aftergrief as two different phases of adjustment. Grief, she says, occurs soon after the loss. The aftergrief picks up where grief ends and extends for much longer. Do you agree with this description? Which parts of it do or don't resonate with your personal experience?
- 20.** When did the aftergrief begin for you? Can you remember a distinct event that marked the transition, or was your process more gradual?
- 21.** And now, for a creative, fun journey into metaphor:
 - ☐ If grief were a color, what color would it be, and why? What color would the aftergrief be, in comparison?
 - ☐ If grief were an animal, what animal would it be, and why? What animal would the aftergrief be, in comparison?
 - ☐ If grief were a musical instrument, which one would it be, and why? What instrument would the aftergrief be, in comparison?
- 22.** What is your biggest takeaway from the book? Has it changed how you view your own grief and your relationship to your story of loss? How?



ACTIVITY

Chapter 12 examined issues of identity surrounding loss and talked about how we may feel compelled to create a fractured life story—one that's split into **Before and After** periods.

Maybe the period Before a loved one died consisted of idyllic years when you felt loved and cherished, and After left you feeling lonely and bereft. Or perhaps your experience was the opposite, fraught with difficulties when that person was alive and an After period that was marked by relief and guilt.

Either way, a life story that's split into Before and After gives a single event a lot of prominence in the story of a whole life. It also makes it difficult for a continuous identity to exist.

The following activity is an example of **Story Repair**. It's designed to help mend the rift when a life story is fractured by the death of a loved one.

To do this activity, you'll need:

- ☐ two blank sheets of paper
- ☐ a writing implement
- ☐ an eagerness to think about your life story—and also your identity—in a new and different way

This activity can be done on a screen, but you may find that old-school paper and pen work best.

STEP 1: Start with a blank sheet of paper. Draw a vertical line straight down the middle. That line symbolizes your loved one's death—or perhaps their diagnosis and death, if that feels like the more accurate dividing line in your life story. The column on the left represents the Before portion of your story, and the column on the right represents the After.

STEP 2: At the top of the left column, write BEFORE.

STEP 3: Now make a list of all the qualities that defined you before the loss occurred. List just one word at a time (loved, secure, spoiled, confused, etc.). Don't worry about being right or wrong, or about what other people in the group will think. No one has to see this but you. If you were too young when the loss occurred to know or remember who you were in the Before, step into the imaginal world. How do you imagine a child of that age would have felt, behaved, acted?

If you feel comfortable, share some or all of the items on your list with other group members.

STEP 4: Now write AFTER at the top of the right column.

STEP 5: Write down all the single words you would use to describe who you were or are after the loss. Again, write down as many adjectives that come to mind. It's okay if some of them are the same as ones on the left. Just be as honest as possible. You can decide if



ACTIVITY

“After” means immediately after, many years after, or both. Again, if you feel comfortable, share some or all of the words with your group.

STEP 6: Now turn to the second sheet of paper. At the top of this page, write I AM.

STEP 7: Write down all the qualities that describe you when the loss is removed from your story. In other words, who did you come into the world to be and who would you have become—no matter what obstacles were put in your way? Think about your core characteristics, the ones so baked into your DNA that a loss couldn’t change them and may even have amplified them. Perhaps some of them have already appeared in both of your prior lists. For example, if you were a sensitive or creative child before a parent died, and you continued to be sensitive and creative afterward, put “sensitive” and “creative” on your I Am list.

This third list is where your life narrative finds its continuity. The qualities on this list describe a person whose story is much larger than a story of loss. Yes, the experience changed you in very specific ways. But you also have a core identity that’s been immutable and indestructible.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE #1: Which pieces of this identity would you like to nurture and develop more? What are some small, manageable ways that you can begin? Make this promise to your younger self

moving forward. Share it with the group if you’d like. Making a commitment out loud, in the presence of others, often inspires us to follow through.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE #2: Look at your Before and After lists together. Does movement from the left column to the right column tend to shift from a list of negative attributes to a list of more positive ones? That’s an example of what psychologist Dan McAdams calls a “Redemption Narrative” (Chapter 12).

Or does the tone of your story, as you move from the left column to the right, shift from positive to negative, and happy to sad? That’s what McAdams calls a “Contamination Narrative.”

Do the stories in your group contain more Redemption Narratives, more Contamination Narratives, or a mix of both?

Most life stories can be viewed both ways. Think about how your story also moves in both directions. Discuss this with your group. Does anyone have more adjectives to add to either or both of their Before and After columns?

The purpose of this challenge is not to override or cancel out anyone’s original story, but to help identify alternate narratives that might be equally true so they can travel side by side.



RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

When someone close to us dies, anniversaries and annual events can serve as painful reminders of what was lost. But with just a small amount of reframing, we can also view these events as opportunities to remember the lives they lived, and—if the relationship was a positive one—to engage in rituals that commemorate the times we shared.

Rituals connect the world of the living to the world of the dead. They reaffirm our inner relationships to the deceased. They're also an important way of marking time and, when conducted annually, offer structure, predictability, and meaning. Instead of leaving us to focus mainly on an absence, ritual can help our loved ones be a presence on annual occasions, at certain times of the year, or even every day.

The following suggestions come from the thousands of stories I've heard over the years. Still, they're only a beginning. You can build upon any of them to create personalized rituals and activities to mark a loved one's birthday, the anniversary of their death, Mother's or Father's Day, your birthday, a special holiday, or any day that's meaningful to you. And check out the Rituals page at theaftergrief.com for ideas about how to honor a loved one on the anniversary of their death, and how to mark the occasion of reaching and passing a parent's age when they died.

1. Share a story about your loved one with someone who never knew them. Describe their most defining characteristics and talk about what reminds you of them today.
2. Spend time with children in the family and tell them a funny story about Uncle Jim or Grandma Ann. Share some of their trademark sayings.
3. Contact someone who knew your loved one and ask for a story or piece of information that you don't already know.
4. Prepare a meal your loved one liked or would have liked, and invite others to share it.
5. Play a piece of their favorite music or a song from their favorite band and dance or sing along.
6. Engage in a hobby or activity that your loved one enjoyed. Let go of any desire for victory or perfection and focus on just having fun.
7. Was there something your loved one always wanted or wished for you? Is it something you want too? If so, take the first step toward making it happen today.
8. What values did this person embody to you? Choose one and turn it into some form of action for you or others today.



RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

9. Watch their favorite television show, wear their favorite color, or eat their favorite dessert.
10. Create a small altar in your home with a photograph of your loved one (if you have one), a candle, and any mementos that remind you of this person. Sit quietly in front of the altar when you want to feel their presence and converse with him or her (out loud or in your head) in this space you've created for the two of you.
11. Participate in a natural cycle of life by planting, feeding, or tending to a living thing. If you have outdoor space, plant a tree or bush and hang notes on its branches when you have a question or want to send a message to your loved one.
12. Write a letter telling him or her what's going on in your life. Consider starting a designated journal in which you write these letters on special or annual occasions.



Resources and Contact Information

For information about Aftergrief courses, workshops, and online offerings:
theaftergrief.com

Join the Aftergrief Community online at Facebook:
facebook.com/groups/3497675726911131

For Motherless Daughters retreats, workshops, online courses, and events:
motherlessdaughters.com

For information about Hope's writing courses and other books:
hopeedelman.com

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