

# Navigating Grief:

**The Mindful Way To Cope With Loss**

**BY HEATHER STANG, MA, C-IAYT**  
MINDFULNESSANDGRIEF.COM



# Hello.

The fact that you are here and reading these words means you are grieving. And while I wish that wasn't the case, I am glad we have found each other.

My hope for you is that **Navigating Grief** will help reduce your suffering during this journey and give you some coping skills for grief and beyond. You may want to read through the whole booklet first, then go back and savor each step. This will let you know what tools are available and what to expect along the way, but grief is not something you can rush. There is no set time, and no set stages.

**Navigating Grief** is based on my bestselling book [Mindfulness & Grief](#). It offers you plenty of room for you to grieve in your own way. Your experience is as unique as the relationship you have with the person who died. No other relationship is exactly like it, or ever will be. At the same time, grief is universal. No matter who you are, where you live, or what you believe, we all face this if we dare to love.

This booklet is also infused with my own experience of love, loss, and post-traumatic growth. When I was in elementary school, my mother's brother, Uncle Doug to me, died by suicide. My father's brother, Uncle Don, died when I was an infant. By the time I was seven, my entire family was steeped in grief on both my mother's and father's side. This is why I do the work I do today.

My most recent grief experience happened while I was earning a master's degree in thanatology, which is the study of death, dying and bereavement. During my last semester, my stepfather died suddenly after surgery for a pulmonary embolism. Our dog died one week later, and my grandfather, three months later.

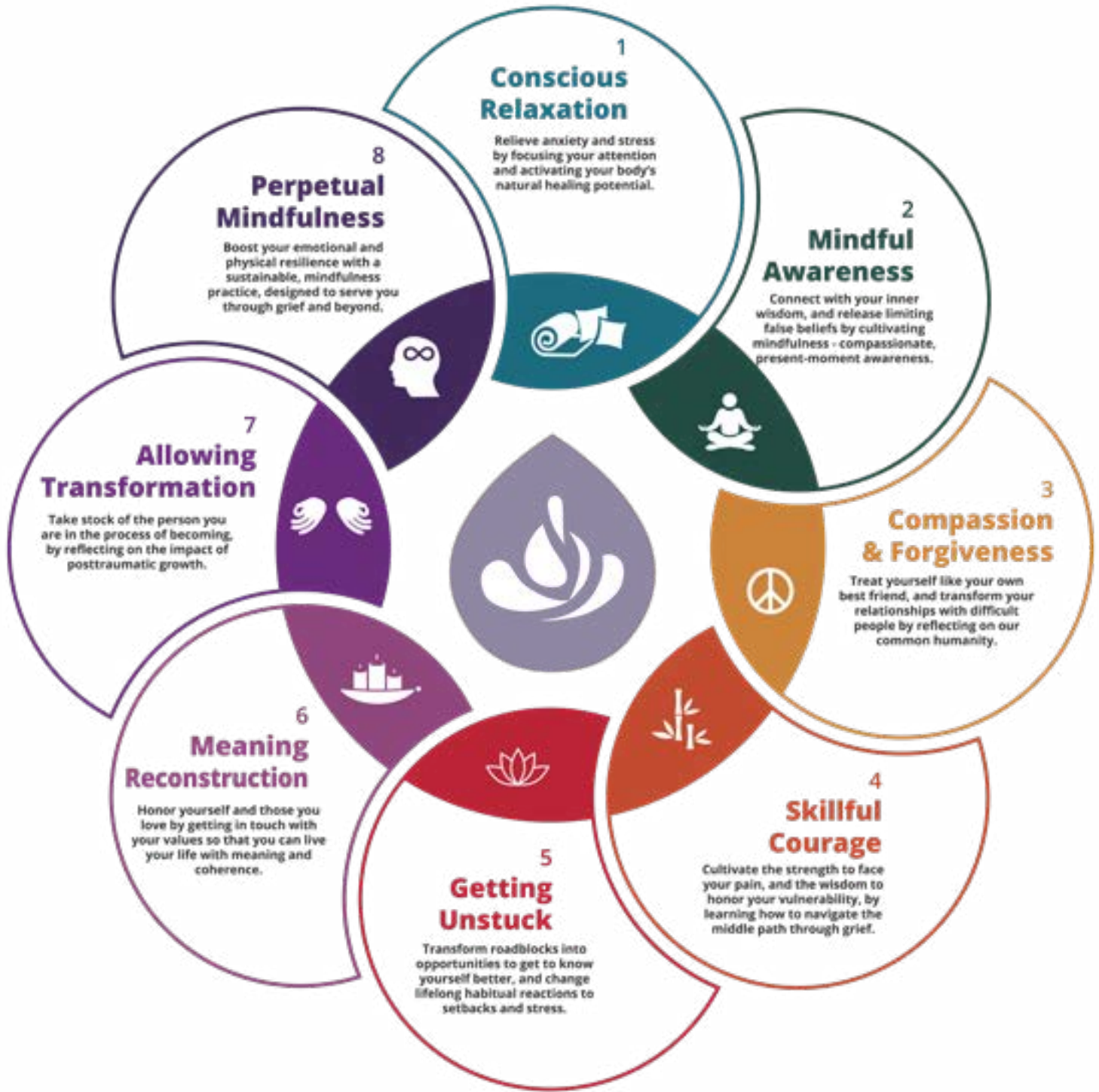
That was 10 years ago, and while I have done a lot of grief work, I can tell you that you never stop missing them. But you can still live a full and meaningful life. It may not feel like that right now, but I am here to offer you hope.

Reading **Navigating Grief** is your next best step. I hope this is the lamp you need to light your way.

With loving kindness,

Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT  
Author, [Mindfulness & Grief](#) & Founder of the Mindfulness & Grief Institute

P.S. If you are looking for more interactive grief support, please visit [MeditationForGrief.com](#) to learn about **AWAKEN**, my very special meditation and journaling for grief online community.



## The Mindfulness & Grief System

There is no precise path through grief, and your journey is as unique as the relationship you have with the person who died. But there are systems that can help you learn to live with your grief will moving forward with your own life. The Mindfulness & Grief System outlined in this guide will teach you coping skills to help you manage the pain of grief, and restorative practices to help rebuild your life so you can live it in a meaningful, intentional way.



# 1

## Conscious Relaxation

You probably have already felt the impact of grief on your body and mind. You may even feel like you are trapped on a hamster wheel of anxiety and worry forever. And while this is a normal part of grief, if left unchecked, an overwhelming amount of stress can lead to a variety of stress-related symptoms that include sleep disturbance, muscle tension, nausea, headaches, irritation, forgetfulness, and so much more.

# 1

## CONSCIOUS RELAXATION

# How To Relax (According To Harvard)

The good news is that there is a simple antidote to stress, and it's called relaxation. I know, I know, how can you possibly relax when you're in the throes of grief? The key is to trick your mind into not thinking so much. We do this by focusing on just one thing, over and over and over again. This has been proven by Harvard cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson, to elicit your body's natural relaxation response, which is the exact opposite of the fight-flight-freeze response that is wearing your body down. In fact, it can boost your immune functioning and even repair damaged cells!

## Meditation for Relaxation

Help yourself get back to sleep, reduce anxiety, muscle tension, and a boatload of other symptoms in just minutes a day! Try this for 3-5 minutes at first, then work your way up to 10 to 20 minutes to really kick start the healing process.

1. Find a comfortable position either seated or lying down. If you wish, you can play relaxing music.
2. Close your eyes or softly focus on a point in front of you. If it feels right in your body, take a few breaths that are deeper and more expanded than usual, without causing strain, then return to a natural breath.
3. Allow your face to be expressionless, softening your jaw and your lips. Imagine you could also soften each part of your body one at a time, including your shoulders, arms, hands, back, stomach muscles, legs, and feet.
4. Let your breath be natural. Each time you inhale, silently say the word "in." Each time you exhale, silently say the word "out."
5. When you get distracted - which will happen often - just begin again with the next breath. This is part of the process, and by starting over rather than giving up, you are helping your brain rewire itself for focus and relaxation.





2

## Mindful Awareness

Now that you have learned to relax by focusing your attention, it's time to learn how to open up your awareness. This can be particularly helpful if you feel like your mind is trapped in a time machine that leaves you longing for (or regretting) the past, or worrying ceaselessly about what might happen in the future.

# 2

## MINDFUL AWARENESS

### Come To Your Senses

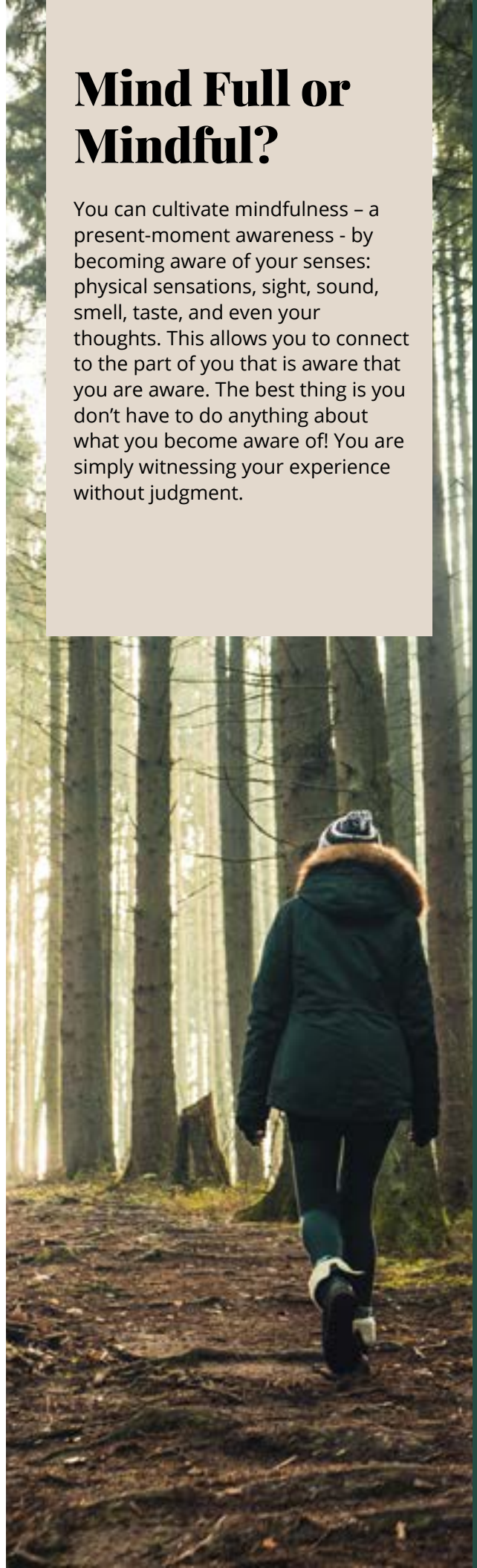
Much like the focusing meditation in step one, this sends a signal to your body that it is safe to turn off the stress response known as fight-flight-freeze. It also cultivates mental flexibility, which is helpful in developing new coping skills, shrinks the part of your brain that experiences fear, and boosts your ability to connect to your innate inner wisdom.

1. Notice the part of you that is aware that you are aware.
2. Notice the variety of sensations in your physical body without attaching to why you feel this way, or even doing anything about it.
3. Without seeking them out, begin to simultaneously notice the sounds that surround you.
4. Little by little, add in awareness of your senses, allowing your experience of them to come and go naturally.
5. When you have a thought, instead of replying or acting on it, just notice that you are thinking, and come back to your senses.
6. The victory in this practice is catching yourself when you are distracted and having the willpower to begin again! Just like in Step 1, this rewires your brain, and is where the real magic happens.



## Mind Full or Mindful?

You can cultivate mindfulness – a present-moment awareness - by becoming aware of your senses: physical sensations, sight, sound, smell, taste, and even your thoughts. This allows you to connect to the part of you that is aware that you are aware. The best thing is you don't have to do anything about what you become aware of! You are simply witnessing your experience without judgment.





Each person reacts differently to grief, which often causes our address book to change. People we thought would be there are not, but we may get surprise advocates along the way. And while you cannot control other people, there is one person over whom you have great power – yourself. This is why it can be helpful to start by offering mercy and care to yourself, first, before offering it to others.

### 3

## Compassion & Forgiveness

Compassion is simply the desire that all beings be free of suffering. Yes, even those difficult people in your life - imagine how much kinder they would be if they didn't suffer so much! Think how much better you would feel if you didn't, either. But it is important to remember that compassion is more of a process than a feeling, and as with many things mindful, it takes practice. It also isn't a requirement that you condone bad behavior in others - compassion for yourself - and safety - always comes first.



# 3

COMPASSION & FORGIVENESS

## Compassion Is Where The Magic Happens

Cultivating compassion is perhaps the most transformative practice of the Mindfulness & Grief system. Without it, our heart can shut down, closing us off from the care we need to both give and receive. With it, our immune system gets a much-needed boost, our emotional intelligence increases, and we feel less alone and afraid, even when no one else is around. This is powerful stuff!

### Become Your Own Best Friend

The next time you feel overwhelmed, self-critical, or lonely, notice your breath and say to yourself one of the following phrases, repeating it two or three times. You can also create one that resonates with you:

*This is hard, and I am doing my best.*

*May I be free of this suffering.*

*We are all in this together.  
May we find the peace we need.*

*I care deeply about this.*





# 4

## **Skillful Courage**

You may already be aware that you are oscillating back and forth between what grief researchers Margaret Strube and Hank Schut call the dual process model of coping with bereavement. Simply put, we naturally move back and forth between loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping, which requires a balance between our vulnerability and courage.

This strength to face your pain, combined with the wisdom to honor your tenderness, is something I like to call skillful courage. This is an important part of your grief journey; one that allows you to tap into your inner power even as you face your greatest challenge. Yes, the unthinkable may have happened, and even though you did not choose to be here, you already have what you need to survive inside of you.

# 4

## SKILLFUL COURAGE

### But What About The Meltdowns?

Mindfulness empowers you to control what you can, let go of what you can't, and give yourself permission to hide under the covers and cry, or mindfully indulge in some comfort-chocolate when you need to!

Whether it's going to the grocery store alone for the first time, handling the paperwork for the estate, asking for help from a friend, or just getting out of bed in the morning, humans have survived the grief experience for a long, long time. The mindfulness-based tools you have at your disposal are your birthright. They let you grieve your way, which never has to be neat and pretty - just real and true.

### Write a Letter To Yourself

Find 20 or 30 minutes where you can be alone and undisturbed. Pour yourself a cup of tea, water or other nourishing drink. Grab your favorite pen and notebook, or a laptop or tablet you can use to record your thoughts.

- Imagine that the vulnerable part of you is a small child in need of care, and write yourself an encouraging letter that you would love to receive.
- Reflect on the many ways you have supported yourself during this challenging time - from taking care of your most basic needs to overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. Write your inner strength a thank you letter, which may also include a request for future support.





5

## Getting Unstuck

The path of grief is not straight and well groomed – it is meandering and full of obstacles. Don't be surprised if one minute you think "I've got this," and the next, you feel like the ground has dropped away beneath you. Even if you feel like you are right back at square one, you are not. You have changed since those early days of loss, and now you have some new mindfulness-based tools to help.

# 5

## GETTING UNSTUCK

### Recognize Your Roadblocks

These are classic mental hurdles that all humans face. They get in the way of our ability to be present, and ultimately lead to great suffering. The Buddha – considered to be the founder of mindfulness as we know it today – classified these as the five mental hindrances, which include:

- Craving and Yearning
- Anger and Aversion
- Physical and Mental Lethargy/Boredom
- Restlessness and Worry
- Doubt and Disbelief

Does one of these stand out as your “go to” reaction to grief and stress? Before you beat yourself up for feeling the way you do – which will only make you feel worse – understand that these feelings are not inherently bad - they are important messengers. They warn us that something is out of balance, and give us the chance to make it right.

### Time To Put Your Tools To Use

Whether you choose to focus your attention and give your mind and body a break; open up your awareness to create some mental space; offer yourself kind words; embrace your vulnerability by curling up under the covers; or call upon your inner strength so you can tend to what hurts; you have mindful-coping tools in your toolkit that can help you face every challenge.

### Befriending The Messenger

The next time you encounter a difficult emotion, view it as a messenger. Instead of reacting habitually, take a breath. Then, instead of pushing it away or grasping on to it for dear life, adopt an attitude of curiosity. Let go of the story about why you feel this way, or who is to blame, and simply listen for any wisdom or guidance. What do you need to do to take care of yourself? Do this while practicing relentless compassion for the one who is having the feeling – you!





## 6

# Meaning Reconstruction

Time does not heal all wounds. In fact, time only accounts for 1% of healing, according to grief researcher Robert A. Neimeyer, whose research proved it is what you do with the time that matters. He explains that grief can be a “wake-up call” – however unwelcome – that forces us to reprioritize the people and projects in our life in a way that helps us make sense of what happened, and which may include a new sense of meaning and purpose.

# 6

## MEANING RECONSTRUCTION

### Instead of Fixing, Try Adapting

Of course, describing grief as a “gift” is a bridge too far for most of us – myself included. We would gladly trade in any amount of personal growth for just one more moment with the person we miss. Yet given the reality of the loss, you may start to notice that you have transformed in unexpected and remarkable ways. Researchers Calhoun and Tedeschi call this change posttraumatic growth, and categorize them into these five domains:

- Increased sense of personal strength
- Awareness of new possibilities
- Improved compassion for one’s self and others
- Appreciation for life in general
- Spiritual change or growth

This does not happen overnight, so be patient and kind to yourself wherever you are on the journey. Know that eventually you will rebuild your shattered worldview and create a meaningful and coherent life that you can live with.



## Reflect On Your New Worldview

1. Find a space that feels comforting and safe, or at the very least, neutral.
2. Close your eyes or find a point upon which to softly gaze.
3. Scan through your body, starting with your face, consciously softening tension wherever possible.
4. Rest in mindful awareness for at least 5 minutes, witnessing the dance of sensations both in and outside of your body, and refocusing your attention whenever necessary.
5. Open your eyes and reflect on the 5 domains of posttraumatic growth listed to the left.
6. Spend at least 5 – 10 minutes writing down your observations, using the following prompts to get you started:
  - Which element of posttraumatic growth resonates with you the most, and why?
  - What steps can you take to cultivate more of this in your life?
  - How will this help you moving forward?



7

## Allowing Transformation

We know that grief is a process with no specific endpoint. While the intensity of your pain will subside, you will be called to ride unexpected waves of grief from time to time.

Allowing transformation means that you make space in your life for the part of you that will always be bereaved, but you also allow yourself to live your life as fully as possible. If you are in the early period of your loss, and feel that allowing transformation is beyond your reach, you are not alone.



# 7

## ALLOWING TRANSFORMATION

### This Too Will Change

I have worked with many people over the years who came to me during their darkest days, and are now leading fulfilling, happy lives. Of course you will always miss your person, but you will rise from the ashes - perhaps in a totally new form. Some of my previous clients were inspired by their experience to volunteer for their local hospice or become an advocate for a cause. Some have found meaning in a new career or hobby - training to be yoga teachers, grief professionals, or business owners. Many have become healthier than in their pre-grief days - thanks to meditation - or even repaired damaged relationships, or ended the toxic ones.

### Mindful Journaling for Self-Discovery

Whether you choose to focus your attention and give your mind and body a break; open up your awareness to create some mental space; offer yourself kind words; embrace your vulnerability by curling up under the covers; or call upon your inner strength so you can tend to what hurts; you have mindful-coping tools in your toolkit that can help you face every challenge.

*If I could talk to myself before this loss, I would say...*

*What surprises me the most about myself now is...*

*One thing that is going well in my life right now is...*





8

## Perpetual Mindfulness

You now have powerful self-care tools to help you ride the waves of grief while re-engaging with your life after loss. But your journey does not have to end here. Choose to make mindfulness a part of your day-to-day life for health, peace and equanimity. You will be more resilient the next time you face a challenge, feel more fully alive during happier times, and be able to still maintain a relationship with the person you lost.

# 8

## PERPETUAL MINDFULNESS

### Keys To Mindful Living

Keep your practice alive by setting an intention every day. Why do you want to do this? To reduce your suffering? To feel more connected? To feel your muscles unwind? To be a point of peace in the world? This will keep you motivated when you feel too busy or tired to practice! It is also helpful to set a regular practice time that you stick to every day.

Join a meditation group or grief support program near your home or online so you can benefit from the company of others who are in the same boat as you.

But most importantly, let go of perfection and just do your best. Compassion, kindness, and gratitude for yourself is most important of all. And remember...

*You already have what it takes to AWAKEN to your precious life.*

### Mindfulness In Just Minutes A Day

Incorporate at least two of the following activities into your life every day, starting today!

- Take 5 minutes of mindful breathing.
- Do 10 to 20 minutes of relaxation meditation.
- Eat a mindful meal, savoring each bite.
- Take a mindful walk without thinking or planning.
- Communicate mindfully by paying attention to what the other person is saying instead of planning a response.
- Scan through your body while standing in line at the grocery store.
- Take a 60-second awareness break and just notice your surroundings.
- Listen to your favorite music as if it were the first time, without anticipating the next lyric or note.

# So.... What's Next?

You now have a roadmap to help you navigate grief and re-engage with your life in a meaningful way. I know from my own experience that you may still feel overwhelmed. Grief work is hard to do all on your own.

## Thankfully, You Are Not Alone

Heather and the online AWAKEN community are here to help support and guide you. Join us in AWAKEN for instant access to the Grief Course Library, based on Heather Stang's book, *Mindfulness & Grief*, and for the weekly Meditation for Grief Group, where you will learn mindfulness-based tools for coping with grief and share with people who "get it."

- Instant Access to Helpful Grief & Mediation Videos
- Weekly Meditation & Journaling for Grief Group
- Private Member's Only Facebook Group
- And so much more to help you on your journey!

[Join us now at MeditationForGrief.com](https://www.MeditationForGrief.com) to make life livable again.



### About the Author

Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT is the author of *Mindfulness & Grief* and the founder of the Mindfulness & Grief Institute. She has a master's degree in Thanatology (death, dying and bereavement) and is a certified yoga therapist and meditation instructor. Her own journey of love, loss and posttraumatic growth fuels her passion for teaching bereaved families and grief professionals how to use mindfulness-based techniques to cope with grief, cultivate resilience, and prevent burnout. Learn more and join the AWAKEN grief community to restore your life after loss and connect with likeminded people at [MeditationForGrief.com](https://www.MeditationForGrief.com).