

*Grief is hard. This guide gives you the confidence to support someone after loss. With practical tools and real-world insight, you'll learn how to show up with compassion, take meaningful action, and make sure no one grieves alone.*

**I Wish There Was Something I Could Do:  
A Practical Guide to Supporting Grievers  
By Julie Martella**

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I WISH THERE  
WAS SOMETHING  
*I Could Do*



A PRACTICAL  
GUIDE TO  
SUPPORTING  
GRIEVERS

JULIE MARTELLA

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## What People Have to Say

“You no longer need to be afraid of being uneducated or saying the wrong thing to someone who is grieving. It’s not your fault. We live in a grief-illiterate culture. This book is your new primer on how to support your loved one in the universal (and uniquely individual) experience of grief and grieving. Julie takes you through what you need to know about the landscape of grief with both examples and simplicity. Grief is so hard. Supporting a loved one shouldn’t be. This book will help.”

—*Linda Shanti McCabe, PsyD, Certified Grief Counselor*

“About four months after our daughter was killed, I decided I wanted to have joy in my life again. Where to go? How do I do this? I formed a group for bereaved parents. We met and struggled to understand the grief that was all-consuming. Friends and family did not know how to help. We were on our own. The bereaved, their families, and friends will find *I Wish There Was Something I Could Do* to be a textbook for that journey. It’s simple, easy to understand, and has many tips and tools for individuals and groups. I highly recommend Julie’s book. Thank you for the light you shine on what feels like a very dark road.”

—*Pat Birkle, Founder, Fresno Chapter Compassionate Friends*

“In these pages, Julie has given us the remarkable gift of knowing how to support friends and loved ones through loss. Throughout my

pastoral ministry, I have seen firsthand how grief illiteracy turns well-intentioned friends into miserable comforters. Thankfully, Julie has found the words for which we are often at a loss. Far from being just another book, it is refreshingly practical and well-organized, suitable as both a slow read and a quick reference. It moves seamlessly between scientific evidence, real-life stories, actionable advice, and verbatim do's and don'ts that replace hurtful tropes with hopeful truths. Mindful of the wide spectrum of grief, Julie empowers readers to confidently approach their hurting friends with tender care and meaningful help. Every bookshelf has been waiting for this."

—*Rev. David Dack, Pastor*

"*I Wish There Was Something I Could Do*" is the kind of book you don't know you need until you do. When two of my friends lost their spouses in the same year, I wanted to help, but I wasn't sure what that actually looked like. Julie lays it out plain and simple. She gave me real advice for real situations. She told me what to say (and not to say) and how to say it. Her guidance gave me the confidence to show up in ways that actually mattered instead of just guessing. This book takes the uncertainty out of supporting the people we care about."

— *Dusty Ference, Executive Director, Kings County Farm Bureau*

## **Disclaimer**

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## Your Journey with This Book

Have you ever heard the phrase, *“Grief is the great equalizer?”* It’s true.

No one gets a pass. Whether it’s the loss of a spouse, a child, a parent, a friend, or another cherished person, grief leaves a mark. Its impact stretches far beyond the people directly mourning; it touches families, friends, workplaces, and entire communities. And in those circles of impact, there are people like you: people who care, want to help, and aren’t always sure how.

That’s why I wrote this book for you, the supporter: you play an essential role in helping others carry what they cannot carry alone.

You may feel uncertain about what to say, fearful of making the situation worse, or overwhelmed by the weight of someone else’s pain. That’s completely normal. Supporting someone who is grieving is one of the most tender, human, and challenging experiences we can face.

My path into this work began with loss. When my husband, Jason, died, I was left to raise our two daughters and manage the farm on my own. Even though I was surrounded by kind, well-meaning people, I still felt utterly alone.

In the years that followed, I began offering the kind of support I had needed: mentoring, practical tools, and guidance to help people navigate loss both emotionally and logistically. Sometimes, that

meant helping someone take the next brave step. Sometimes, it meant teaching them how to do something they never thought they'd have to do (for me, it had been learning to drive the tractor).

Over time, I became the person people called when someone died. The question was usually the same: "What do we do now?" I helped them understand what to expect, how to show up, and how to support the grieving in meaningful and lasting ways.

The unexpected death of a young man in our community served as a reminder of how often people want to help but feel unsure about what to do. In the following days, I received calls asking, "What can we do for his wife? How can we support her?"

Whether you're supporting a grieving spouse, a parent mourning a child, a friend mourning a parent, or a colleague navigating a life-altering loss, this book was written to help you. You don't need to have the perfect words. You don't need to fix anything. But with care, awareness, and presence, you can make a difference.

Grief is hard. But it's easier when shared. And by picking up this book, you've already taken a meaningful step toward creating a world where no one has to face loss alone. Let's take that journey together.

With hope and compassion,

Julie Martella

Grief Literacy & Resiliency Expert

# Introduction

Grief often arrives like an uninvited guest, shattering the familiar and leaving us to navigate a landscape that feels both foreign and desolate. Our world is turned upside down, and the path forward is filled with emotional pain, confusion, and a deep sense of isolation. It's during these times that we most need the support and understanding of others, yet those around us are often at a loss for how to help.

Regardless of who you support, it's natural to feel unsure about what to do or say. You may wonder:

- How can I help without saying the wrong thing?
- What if I offer the wrong kind of support?
- Am I doing enough?

These questions are common and reflect a deeper issue: We're rarely taught how to support grieving people. As a result, many well-meaning supporters hesitate, retreat, or unintentionally say or do inappropriate things.

Supporting someone who is grieving can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. You don't need all the answers; you need the right tools to show up in a way that genuinely helps. That inspired me to create the Five Pillars of Compassionate Grief Support: a way to take

the guesswork out of helping so you can focus on simply being there. So, what are the five pillars?

### **Reframe Reality**

Loss rarely shows up as expected. It disrupts our assumptions about life, relationships, and loss. Both grievors and their supporters must reconsider and reframe what they believe about grief and its realities. Your first step is to set aside assumptions and actively listen to the unique experience of the person you're assisting.

### **Reimagine Language**

The words we use hold tremendous power. Language can validate emotions, offer comfort, and build connections- or unintentionally create distance and harm. Reimagining how we use language can create spaces where emotional expression feels safe, and healing can begin.

### **Reclaim Control**

Grief brings chaos, often making even simple tasks feel Impossible. This pillar focuses on practical, respectful ways to help grieving people regain control and stability by lightening their burdens and providing tangible support.

## **Rebuild Resilience**

Resilience isn't just about bouncing back; it will never happen. Instead, it's about learning to move forward, step by step, in a new reality. This process of rebuilding resilience emphasizes supporting grieving individuals as they discover small victories, gain confidence, and gradually take strides toward rebuilding their lives.

## **Rediscover Purpose**

Grief often leaves individuals feeling untethered and uncertain about their identity and future. Rediscovering purpose means gently reconnecting them with meaning, joy, and a sense of direction without rushing the process. It's about honoring their timeline while holding space for what's possible.

## **How to Use This Framework**

The Five Pillars are not a checklist or a one-size-fits-all solution. It's a flexible framework that helps you meet grieving people where they are and support them meaningfully.

When you're unsure of what to do, let the pillars guide you.

- **Reframe Reality:** Are you approaching their grief with an open mind, free of assumptions?
- **Reimagine Language:** Are your words offering validation and compassion?

- **Reclaim Control:** Is there a practical way you can help reduce their stress?
- **Rebuild Resilience:** How can you encourage small steps toward healing?
- **Rediscover Purpose:** How can you support their journey toward meaning and joy?

## **Final Thoughts**

Grief touches every life differently. For some, practical support comes first. Others may reconnect with purpose before they feel ready. As you read this book, you'll see how these pillars apply to real-world scenarios, helping you create a compassionate presence for those navigating loss.

Are you ready? Let's begin.

## **13:**

### **When Grief Meets Other Life Challenges**

*Grief rarely exists in isolation. It often collides with life's other challenges, creating unique burdens that require understanding and support.*

Grief doesn't press pause on the rest of life. Responsibilities keep piling up. Bills still need to be paid, work deadlines don't disappear, and health concerns don't wait. These ongoing demands can make grief feel even heavier, leaving little space to process loss.

When grief overlaps with other life challenges, it can reshape how someone experiences loss, adding layers of stress, uncertainty, or even urgency to their grieving process. Understanding these intersections helps us recognize why grief looks different for everyone and why there's no single path through it. In this chapter, we'll explore how grief intertwines with real-life struggles and how acknowledging these challenges can lead to more thoughtful, compassionate support.

#### **When Grief and Financial Hardship Collide**

Finances can unravel quickly after a loss, adding another layer of stress to an already overwhelming experience. The death of a spouse can mean the sudden loss of income, leaving the surviving partner scrambling to cover bills or make decisions about their home and future. A parent's passing can bring unexpected caregiving costs, estate complications, or financial strain from unpaid medical bills.



Even the loss of a sibling or close family member can lead to shared financial burdens, such as funeral expenses or legal fees.

For many, grief takes a backseat when financial survival is at stake. There's no space to process emotions when rent is due, accounts are frozen, or insurance claims feel impossible to navigate. The pressure to "figure it all out" while grieving can feel paralyzing, forcing people to make major financial decisions at a time when even simple tasks feel impossible.

This financial stress isn't just about numbers; it can carry deep emotional weight. Many grievors struggle with fear, uncertainty, or shame about money, especially if they didn't manage finances before the loss. Some are forced back to work before they're emotionally ready, while others face unexpected debt that keeps them stuck in survival mode.

Understanding the financial challenges of grief is essential because money worries don't just *add* stress; they *shape* the grieving process itself. Recognizing this reality allows us to offer support in ways that address both the emotional and practical burdens of loss.

### **Why Financial Hardships Happen**

- **Loss of Income:** When the deceased was a primary earner, their death can create an immediate void in household finances, making it difficult to cover essential expenses like housing, food, and healthcare.

- **Funeral and End-of-Life Costs:** Funeral and burial expenses become unexpected burdens, forcing families to dip into savings or incur debt to cover them.
- **Lost Benefits:** Employer-sponsored benefits like health insurance or retirement plans typically cease upon the covered individual's death, resulting in new and significant expenses for their families.
- **Medical Debt:** In cases of prolonged illness or end-of-life care, unpaid medical bills may linger, adding to the financial strain for survivors. Medical debt is one of the leading causes of bankruptcy.
- **Reduced Work Capacity:** Grief can impact the ability to work, reduce income, and create further financial instability.
- **New Responsibilities:** Surviving family members often take on unfamiliar roles, such as maintaining vehicles, caring for a house, or looking after dependents, which can raise expenses or necessitate career sacrifices.

When you recognize that financial strain is a significant part of grief, you're better equipped to offer meaningful support. This might mean helping them organize the bills, set up autopay, or sort through financial paperwork; all practical steps that can ease a burden without requiring financial contributions.

## **Nicola's Financial Challenges**

Nicola, a mother of two, faced mounting financial challenges after her husband died. She struggled to manage household expenses while caring for her young children. Her friend Carolyn stepped in to help. Together, they organized financial documents, uncovered her husband's life insurance policy through his employer, and connected Nicola with a pro bono financial advisor. These small yet meaningful actions helped Nicola feel less overwhelmed, allowing her to focus on her emotional healing and her family.

## **Health Concerns and Grief**

Grief doesn't just weigh on the heart; it also takes a toll on the body. The stress of loss can intensify pre-existing health issues or trigger new physical challenges, making it harder for someone to manage daily life. These responses aren't signs of weakness; they're the body's way of coping with extraordinary stress.

## **Why Health Concerns Arise**

- **Stress on the Body:** Grief activates the body's stress response system, releasing hormones like cortisol, which can weaken the immune system, disrupt sleep, and cause fatigue.
- **Exacerbated Chronic Illness:** Chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis often worsen under the physical and emotional strain of grief, making management more challenging.

- **Neglected Self-Care:** Simple health routines, such as eating balanced meals, staying hydrated, or exercising, often go unnoticed, leaving grievors more vulnerable to illness or exhaustion.
- **New Health Issues:** Physical manifestations of grief, such as headaches, digestive problems, or increased susceptibility to illness, can arise unexpectedly, adding to the burden.
- **Caregiver Fatigue:** For those who cared for their loved one before their death, lingering physical and emotional exhaustion can leave them vulnerable to illness.

## **Grief in the Workplace**

Work and grief often intersect in ways that can feel deeply isolating and overwhelming. Many grieving individuals return to work long before they feel ready, driven by financial necessity, limited bereavement leave, or workplace expectations. For some, this transition can offer a sense of routine or normalcy, but for others, it feels like an impossible balancing act.

Returning to work requires grievors to manage both their professional responsibilities and the emotional toll of their loss. Many feel they must mask their pain, pretend everything is fine, or suppress their emotions to meet workplace expectations. Unfortunately, this can lead to further emotional strain, with some individuals even facing penalties, like being dismissed or reprimanded, for outward expressions of grief.

## **Why It's So Difficult**

- **Limited Time to Heal:** Many workplaces offer minimal bereavement leave, leaving grievors no choice but to return before they've had time to process their loss or attend to practical matters.
- **Pressure to Perform:** Grievors often feel they must meet pre-loss productivity standards, even when their mental and emotional capacities are diminished.
- **The Need to Mask Emotions:** Workplace culture often prioritizes professionalism over emotional authenticity, leaving grievors to suppress tears or hide their pain to avoid judgment.
- **Fear of Stigma:** Many grievors worry about being seen as "weak" or "unreliable" if they take too much time off, request accommodations, or openly display their emotions.
- **Risk of Penalties:** Some employees have shared stories of being reprimanded—or even fired—for crying too much or for perceived lapses in productivity, compounding their grief with financial stress and feelings of rejection.
- **Lack of Support:** Coworkers and supervisors may not know how to offer support, leading to awkward interactions, avoidance, or unintentional insensitivity.

## **Ari's Return to Work**

Ari, a marketing executive, returned to work just days after his father's unexpected death because his company only offered five days of bereavement leave. Struggling to meet deadlines, he often found himself overwhelmed and distracted. His colleague Maria stepped in to help. She offered to cover some of his tasks temporarily, advocated for a flexible schedule with their supervisor, and checked in with Ari regularly to remind him he wasn't alone. Maria's consistent support helped Ari feel less pressured to "hold it together" and allowed him to find his footing in his own time.

### **Points To Ponder**

- *How can you better recognize the unique challenges grief creates for those you support?*
- *In what ways can you offer practical assistance without overstepping?*
- *How can you advocate for grieving individuals in workplaces or other structured environments?*
- *What resources or tools can you provide to help grievors reclaim control?*
- *How has understanding these stories shifted your perspective on supporting someone through compounded challenges?*

## Final Thoughts

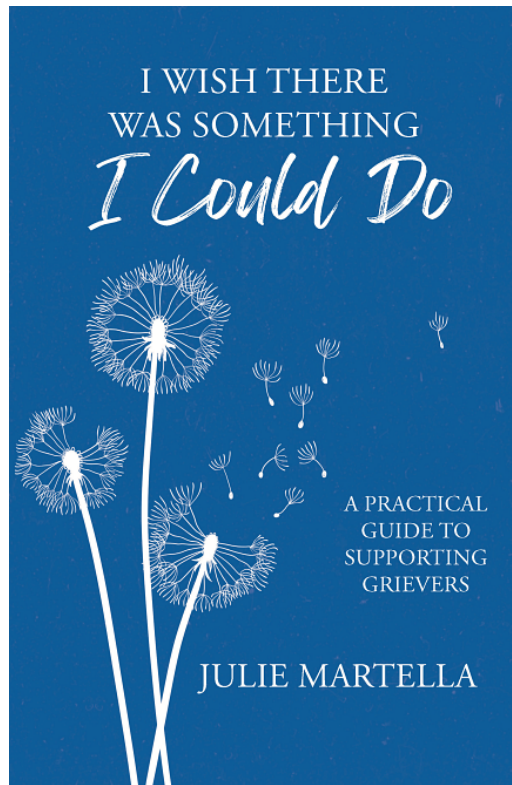
When grief intersects with life's other challenges, the resulting weight can feel overwhelming, even insurmountable. Financial strain, health concerns, and workplace pressures create layers of stress that intensify the emotional burden, leaving individuals feeling untethered and vulnerable.

## Core Lessons

- **Grief Touches Every Corner of Life:** Recognize that grief often overlaps with financial, health, and workplace challenges, intensifying stress and emotional overwhelm.
- **Address the Mind-Body Connection:** Grief impacts physical and mental health, so it is essential to support basic needs like rest, nourishment, and medical care to build resilience and healing.
- **Empower Grievors to Reclaim Stability:** Practical actions, such as organizing bills, simplifying daily tasks, or helping navigate workplace accommodations, create a foundation for regaining control during chaotic times.
- **Build Trust Through Empathy and Action:** Listening without judgment, asking thoughtful questions, and showing up with meaningful support deepen the connection and help grievors feel understood and supported.

- **Embrace the Power of Small Steps:** Stability doesn't happen overnight. Helping grievors take manageable, consistent actions reminds them that progress is possible, even in the midst of loss.





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