

 Conscious Life presents
**SLEEP
SUPER CONFERENCE**

Sleep loss and grief

Guest: David Kessler

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Sleep Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with David Kessler, one of the world's foremost experts on grief and loss. He's the author of six books, including his latest bestselling book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

He co-authored two books with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and co-wrote, *You Can Heal Your Heart* with Louise Hay. David has taught physicians, nurses, counselors, police, and first responders about end of life, trauma and grief. He's the founder of grief.com.

David Kessler, thank you so much for being with us today.

David Kessler

Meagen, thank you for having me. I'm so glad to be joining everyone.

Meagen Gibson

So, David, I think anybody who has experienced loss and grief knows why we would talk about grief at a conference about sleep, but I would love it if you could make the connection for those people that are fortunate enough to never have experienced loss and grief in ways that have impacted their sleep.

David Kessler

It's interesting. First of all, we all intellectually know we're going to deal with grief and death someday. We don't often think of all the other griefs we deal with. We kind of have an idea, oh, I guess a divorce, a breakup would be grief. But we forget that a job loss is grief, an empty nest is grief. So there's many types of losses, and one of the things they all have in common is the capacity to keep us awake.

Meagen Gibson

That was perfectly executed. Thank you so much. I was like, I just want to make that connection right away.

David Kessler

Right away for folks, yes.

[00:01:48] Meagen Gibson

Because it's a sleep conference, we're like, why are we talking about grief? I'm like, well, if you know, you know.

David Kessler

And if you talk to anyone, we often will think about in grief, you really go to the extremes no matter what that grief is that you're either sleeping too much, hypersomnia. You're not sleeping at all, insomnia. And it's interesting, I put up a graphic, a little meme on my Facebook and Instagram page, and it was a diagram of my daily routine. And in my daily routine, it said, trying to fall asleep. Trying to stay awake. That's the routine.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. I just had a conversation this morning with a coworker after a long 90 minute meeting and said, you know, how are you doing? I didn't ask how she was till the end, there were lots of people in the meeting. But she said, you know, I'm tired. And my husband reflected to me today that that's what I always say when people ask me how I am. And I was like, all right, let's peel that apart.

So with grief and sleep, you're exactly right. Or sleeping a lot often doesn't equate restfulness or feeling rested. So, that's part of grief, too.

David Kessler

Absolutely. And we also just talk about the getting up that happens. I mean, grief is something that keeps you awake and, you know, it's not unusual that maybe we wake up during the night, but we talk about middle insomnia, that it really is that difficulty going back to sleep. Once you're up, that grief has been activated, your thoughts are off and running.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah. And I will admit that I did not know until I started researching sleep for the sleep conference that middle waking is totally normal. It's what we turn it into with our anxious thoughts or worries or ruminating on grief or loss that that's what turns it into a wakefulness event and disrupts our sleep. It's totally normal to wake up in the middle of the night.

David Kessler

Yeah. And what I'm going to say is so much easier said than done. Sometimes I can wake up in the middle of the night and go, oh, I'm up. I'm going to have some water, I'm going to read, I'm going to watch a little TV, and I'm really calm about it. And then I decide, 30 minutes, all right, back to sleep. There's other times I have enormous anxiety around it, oh, no, I gotta get up, and now I'm in trouble and I'm never getting back to sleep. And you can just feel the anxiety building.

That's in our regular world, that's not even with a loss happening. When you really wake up to the pain, to the anxiety, to the upset. You know, one of the things I share with people that I think is surprising, let's just talk about death for a moment, I tell people the death rate is 100%. Someday it's going to happen to all of us, unfortunately, and none of us want it to come 1 second too soon. But I want you to think about this. When a loved one dies, you often have 540 hours of logistics.

[00:05:32] Meagen Gibson

That is enormous.

David Kessler

Doesn't just that number want to keep you awake? 540 hours between estates and income tax and notifying people. It's mind boggling.

Meagen Gibson

That is enormous, so just the stress load of tasks alone is enough to contribute to sleep loss in the grief and loss process. Even if it's not a person, we recently experienced a hurricane here, and there are entire communities where people have lost their homes and all their belongings.

And that's a kind of grief, I'm sure, and loss that you would attest to as well. So waking in the middle of the night, thinking about the 540 things that you have to do in order to try to reclaim some sort of semblance of your life has got to be completely overwhelming.

David Kessler

And there's also what we call secondary losses, let's say someone did lose their home, you also may have the secondary loss, that's your sense of security. That's your kid's security. That's the place you recharge. That's everything. I mean, the losses go on and on. And how do we deal with those enormous losses is the question. During daylight hours is kind of my work. And then the truth is, the more we can learn how to deal with them effectively in the day, the more we can sleep easier.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. All right. I want to back up a minute because we're off to the races.

David Kessler

Off to the races.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I want to circle back for a second and just talk about how you became a grief expert.

David Kessler

Well, this is not a profession that when you're in third grade and everyone's saying, I want to be a police officer, I want to be an engineer, I want to be a death and grief specialist. Not that sort of thing. I had a mother who was sick, in and out of hospitals my whole childhood, I thought that's what others did. And when I was 13, she got really sick and had to go to the big hospital in the big city, which was hours away.

And I didn't realize, people had taught me, my friends not people, but my friends had taught me, when the time comes and you're trying to get a drink, lie and say you're 18. But no one ever taught

me to say I was 14 when I got asked in a hospital how old you are. So when I walked into the hospital to see my mom, they said, how old are you? I said, 13. And they're like, sorry, you got to be 14.

[00:08:17]

So here's my mother in this hospital and not able to see her, they're not the people that knew me in the other hospital. And my mother is in the intensive care unit. She's dying. I don't quite realize it or understand it. At the hotel across the street, we're in the lobby one day, and someone starts yelling, fire. All of us rushed out of the hotel. On the 18th floor, huge flames are coming out. The fire trucks pull up. They begin to extend their ladder, and shooting begins.

And they realize, this isn't just a fire. We've got an active shooter. It went on for 13 hours. It was one of the first shootings, mass shootings in the US. And my father was desperately trying to get us back to the hospital. Eventually did, but I had seen first responders being killed, police officers being killed. We get back to the hospital, still not able to see her. A couple of days later, she dies alone. All this could be out of our headlines today. And that really changed the trajectory of my life. And there was no one to give any advice or any information. I did hear be strong, which...

Meagen Gibson

I was just going to say, I'm sure there was plenty of advice that wasn't helpful, plenty of well intentioned, well meaning people saying things, but none of it that was helpful.

David Kessler

Right. Because be strong for me just made me feel like, oh, I think I'm bad at this, because I'm not feeling strong. So I just thought I was bad at being strong. And I just went on this path to find my own healing and eventually was really honored to turn this into a career that not only helps me but helps other people and was fortunate to meet and work with the incredible Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who gave us the five stages of dying. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

And I was able to work with her on two books, and one of them is when we adapted those stages of dying for stages of grief and explained how they work in grief. And we always said to people up front, they are not linear. There's no one right way to do grief. Any way you do it is fine. In fact, there's no wrong way to do grief. So I think many times we think we're doing it wrong.

And we don't have models of grief anymore. I think about if you want to see what grief looks like, it's going to be like an episode of your favorite show and then everyone is fine by the next show. And studies show us grief lasts so much longer than we think, and I want to be sure as anyone hears that and their stress level begins to rise, that grief lasts longer than we think, but it doesn't always have to be pain. For me, the work is about eventually remembering our loved ones with more love than pain in our own way, in our own time.

Meagen Gibson

I love how you said that. That's so well put. What's the relationship that you've seen between people's acceptance of the feelings of grief and the duration of grief? Is it, not that we're trying to give people the five steps to speed up grief, that's not my point of the question, but what's the relationship between your willingness to feel your feelings and the pain that you're going to endure or could possibly avoid with your grief?

[00:12:21] David Kessler

It comes down to this one sentence. What we run from pursues us and what we face transforms us. And there are so many of us that live the rest of our lives with grief four feet behind us unattended that is interfering with our sleep and interfering with our awake time and interfering with our whole lives. I mean, we all know someone that, they just weren't the same after that job loss. They just weren't the same after that divorce. They just weren't the same after their loved one died.

And it's not that they were damaged. They didn't have the tools. We don't teach people how to do this. And actually, I always want to preface that with grief is an organic experience. We actually inherently know how to do this. It's our modern world that tells us, you should be done with this in a week, you should be over that in a month. You shouldn't be feeling what you're feeling. And the problem is we can't heal what we don't feel.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And especially in the last three years with all the rituals that we've been stripped of as well, including togetherness, not only ceremony, togetherness, all the rituals that help us grieve that we were barely hanging onto in modern society before.

David Kessler

Right.

Meagen Gibson

Can really make feeling your feelings a lot more difficult, can't it?

David Kessler

Absolutely. And self help has challenged our feelings, too, because in so many ways, self help has been wonderful, but self help has also, we're the first generation that has feelings about feelings. Oh, I'm so sad, but I should be stronger. I'm so angry. But anger is bad. And you have this whole room behind you of half felt feelings that you judged as wrong.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely.

David Kessler

And you're just spending the night pushing them away, not sleeping and not helping with the feelings.

Meagen Gibson

I was just talking to a friend about this yesterday about the roller coaster of a day that you can have when you decide that you're going to feel your feelings when you can. And I was like, I got to be honest, I felt like a toddler all day long today. I was like, I felt my feelings when I could, compartmentalized them when I couldn't, because I literally had to do an interview that day, and then I was back to feeling them that night. I was like, and it's exhausting. I was exhausted by the end of the day.

[00:15:11] David Kessler

Right. And we have this fear that if we open the door, especially at night, there is a gang of feelings, they're going to overwhelm us. If that anger gets a hold of us, oh, it's not going to be good. If we start crying, I bet we'll never stop crying. And the truth is, we feel one feeling, and if we allow ourselves to feel it fully, we're done with it and we move to the next feeling, and then we move to the next feeling, and we feel them and keep moving.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. If we can for a minute, I would love it if you could touch on the concept of holding space and being with people in their grief, because I know that in a lot of situations, people just miss each other. Like, I'm going to talk about my grief and you're going to want me to feel better. I'm not saying that's what you would do and it's that simple.

You want me to stop experiencing so much pain. So you say things or you try to fix things or try to get me to move through it. When I think what we know is that just being with someone in their feelings, regardless of whether it's grief or anything else, is actually the secret sauce. Right?

David Kessler

Right. So first of all, just as a person, I am a fixer by nature. I would love you to hand me any problem and I'm going to give you three possible solutions. I mean, my son is like, please, dad, stop. Now, when we get to grief and those feelings, all of a sudden, it is an unfixable situation. I can't get you your old job back. I probably can't fix that divorce. I certainly can't raise the debt. And yet what we then try to do is we go one step a little lower, all right, I can't bring anyone back or fix things, but I'm going to try to cheer you up.

So then I do what's called bright siding or toxic positivity. I'm going to tell you the at least, at least they died quickly. At least they're not suffering. At least you don't have to live with one another if it was a divorce. At least you're never going to have that boss again. And part of the problem is, with those at least sentences, we're minimizing things. We don't feel seen. And here's the thing about grief. Grief must be witnessed. We're not meant to be islands of grief.

We need one other person to see our grief. And so, ultimately, what we want from one another is for someone to go, oh, my gosh, your sibling died. Oh, God, how brutal that must be. Tell me more about it. Your spouse died. Oh, no. Your mom, your dad. I know how much you loved them. Tell me, what's that like for you? I'm here. I don't know what I can do. But I just want you to know I'm here. It really is, how do we sit with someone without fixing them?

And that's the work, is to just sit with him. And we also do that to ourselves, how do we fix ourselves? You know, I can remember doing a book signing and a woman came up to me, and I think it was a Barnes and Noble, and she comes running up and she has this really nervous energy and she says, oh, my gosh, I had no idea that, like, there was a signing going on. And I saw you and I realized your books are about grief and I didn't know who you are. And I tried this and I tried that and I tried this, and maybe your book will be the thing that helps me.

And I talked to her about how I think you've been trying a lot of things to fight your grief. What if you were just with your grief? So many times, we're trying to get rid of it. Nothing wrong with that. Who wants grief? But it doesn't go away that way. We actually have to feel it.

[00:19:47] Meagen Gibson

Yes. And the witnessing. And especially because I'm super aware that not everybody's grief looks the same. It might be complicated, it might be loss and relief.

David Kessler

Right. Oh, my goodness. If you're looking at someone whose loved one has died from Alzheimer's, a long chronic illness, even a long mental illness, maybe struggled with addiction, relief is very common and normal, but they'll often feel like something's wrong with me. I shouldn't feel relieved. And no one wants our loved one to suffer.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Yeah. And being able to be a true witness to that, and whatever your judgments about that might be, to hold them to yourself and really just ask them about that and to be with it.

David Kessler

And I'll tell you, I do online grief groups, and it's translated so well online, I'm surprised. It was interesting when the pandemic first happened, and I would do everything in person, groups and retreats and all that, and I was like, I don't know if it will translate online, if feelings will translate. And someone said to me, have you ever seen a movie? And I'm like, oh, yeah, I guess feelings do translate.

But I can tell you, I talk to people all the time. And one of the shocking things for people in grief is we think our best friend is going to be the one to get our grief. We think our spouse, our family members are going to get our grief, and they are often the ones that don't. And that's why people have been gathering in grief groups since the beginning of time, because you get this discovery that your family is like a stranger to you, and strangers become like family because other people in grief know what it feels like. And when you're not in grief, it's hard to understand how bad it is.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I'm glad that you run those grief groups because it's really important to have the witnesses that do understand and don't have to do any work to get there.

David Kessler

Yeah and they can just say it. No one's trying to fix them. And it's interesting, it's called Tender Hearts, and it's called a community of courageous grievers, because almost back to my childhood, they're always like, we're not courageous. And I'm like, yes, you are. Just facing losses. Being courageous. Back to me, being told as a child, be strong, to realize, oh, no one said, if you just keep breathing every day, you're being strong, you don't have to do anything. Just keep breathing. That's what strength will look like.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Tears are strength, a show of strength, absolutely. Or whatever grief looks like for you at each stage, for that matter. And, you know, back to that fantastic work that you did with Elisabeth

Kübler-Ross, I always think of it more as like a spirograph, like a squiggle, and then somebody comes along and bumps your hand, and then it's just like you're back to the beginning.

[00:23:00] David Kessler

Oh you can feel all those stages in an hour.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

David Kessler

Grief is very messy. It's so strange. Once in a while, someone will come on social media and they'll go, you and Kübler-Ross are just trying to neaten up our grief and make us follow your rules. And I'm like, first of all, I or Elisabeth Kübler-Ross should never be called neat. That just isn't the truth. And there's no rules in grief. There's no right way to deal with grief, you know?

But I think for people who haven't experienced grief, hearing that, oh that feeling of I can't believe they're not here, oh that's denial? Oh, it's okay to be angry. Oh, all the what ifs, if only. Oh, that's bargaining? Oh, yeah, it's okay to be sad and depressed. Someone I love is dying, and it is really going to be hard to accept it. I think knowing that there's this scaffolding out there I think actually helps people.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely.

David Kessler

The stage isn't in your model? Choose another one. And you don't even need a model. You just need your feelings. They're going to guide you.

Meagen Gibson

Right. And more than anything, I think it's just a validation of oh, everything I'm feeling is typical and normal, and people for millennia have been experiencing this, and it will change. It may not go away, but it will change, and it won't always feel as hard. And I do want to go back to what you said earlier about you can't avoid the grief, and I might misquote you, so please correct me, but you can't avoid the grief, but you don't have to always be in pain. I want to peel that apart a little bit.

David Kessler

Yeah. And let me just start real quick where you said about the feeling will change. Here's what we do, especially in the middle of the night. It's just a horrific thought. And as human beings in grief, we do it. We wake up in the middle of the night, we are in enormous pain. Loved ones divorced us, died, whatever it may be, you're in enormous pain. Certainly death is just hideous. You're in enormous pain.

And we feel the pain we're feeling now, and we project that for the next 40 years, I am going to be in this pain forever. And I remind people, say to yourself, especially in the middle of the night at 03:00 A.M., no feeling is final. No feeling is final. This is just a feeling I'm having tonight, Thursday, 03:00 A.M.

I'll have a different feeling another time. This pain is going to change. This pain is going to change. I think that's just so important to realize that.

[00:25:50]

And, you know, we run from these feelings. They're so deep, they're so hard, and we do have to sit with them and be with them. And there was a particular part of that I know you wanted me to get to, remind me of that just in your last question?

Meagen Gibson

No, I think you got it about the difference between experiencing grief and being in pain. And are the two entangled. No, I think you completely contextualized that...

David Kessler

That pain is going to change and transform. And stuck is a judgment we have about ourselves. I'm stuck. And it's like I rarely meet people who are stuck, but we judge ourselves as stuck.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I'm wondering too, because I do a lot of work in the trauma field and we do a lot of interviews about trauma. And obviously grief can happen through traumatic experiences or the grief in and of itself, if not supported, can feel traumatic. And so I've completely forgotten where I was going with that...

David Kessler

Just as well I have something to say about that.

Meagen Gibson

Help me out.

David Kessler

All grief does not have trauma, but all trauma has grief. It's interesting. I do a grief educator program where I train therapists and coaches to want to know more about grief or even people who have been through so much and want to turn their pain into purpose. I designed the program ten years ago. Ten years ago, I would not have thought of putting trauma in a grief training for therapists and people. Now I couldn't do one without including trauma.

They're so connected. And some things for folks to know is trauma is your individual experience of an event, maybe enduring conditions, it's an ongoing situation, and your maybe parent died and all your siblings are fine but you're traumatized from it. And that happens all the time. And we look and go, well, why am I the only one? It's your individual experience. So we all have different experiences of trauma.

And some deaths are not traumatic to folks and others are. And there's people who were traumatized by their 99 year old mother who died in their sleep and there's other people who aren't that

traumatized about a sudden death that happens. So there's no rhyme or reason to what traumatizes us. But death is certainly a huge event that often does.

[00:28:47] Meagen Gibson

And it doesn't necessarily make sense. I remember where I was going with that now. Thank you so much.

So one of the things that I've come to the conclusion of in all this trauma research is the acceptance of what the response of my nervous system is, my body, all of my body systems, the purpose of them. And most of the time it's protective in intention. It's trying to protect me. Things like control and fear and things like that, that you can wake up in the middle of the night with.

And I'm making an assumption that that can also probably be very true for grief. That in trying to withhold or deny or just outright reject those feelings and feeling the feelings, it's about maintaining that control and not being able to accept what the grief is trying to teach you or trying to show you.

David Kessler

Yeah, I have a whole little video called Who's Next? And it's that fear that people hold after someone has died. Because here's the thing. When you've had a catastrophe, you become a catastrophizer.

Meagen Gibson

It seems like a pretty rational response, honestly, at first.

David Kessler

And a control, you know, someone I don't even want to call a control freak because I don't want to shame people. Like you said, these are protective mechanisms. We use them to survive. And there was no clear memo given to us probably when those horrific things happened, it's okay, we got this. I know this is scary. It's hard. You're going to get through this. I'm going to really help. No, we didn't get that. We learned to control or watch out. And it's a caveman, cave woman thing that our primitive mind wants to protect us. So it's not bad. But I will tell you, most of us make those parts of us our enemies, and they're not. They're there to really help us.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. So if you were in your grief groups or as you work with people one on one, how are you moving, what are the tools and techniques that you use to help people move, not through grief because we're not forcing you to move through grief, but away from pain and toward what grief is trying to teach them?

David Kessler

So one of the things that I try to help people do is to move in time from the why to the how. First of all, when your loved one dies or anything, you get fired, there's a divorce, we want to go, why? This shouldn't have happened. Why? And what do our family and friends often say? It's not going to bring them back. Quit asking. And I remind people, the person you love dearly can't disappear from this planet, and you not go, excuse me, can I just ask why? My brain is trying to understand this.

[00:32:04]

So, first of all, I give people permission to put their detective hats on. And relating to sleep, if you are shutting down that detective all day long, guess when the detective is coming out? At night. At night. So you want to have permission to ask those questions. And, you know, there are some people who will get an answer. They'll talk to the doctors. They'll get the autopsy report. They'll talk to their ex. They'll talk to their ex's friends. You might find the answer.

It's not going to be a satisfying answer. No one's ever said, oh, boy, I got so many satisfying answers in death. Many times, not even in the divorce either. So some of us are going to get answers that aren't satisfying, and others of us are going to have to live with the unanswered questions. And to really get to that moment where you go, I think I've exhausted the question portion of this loss, I now have to learn to live with it, and how can I move from asking why to now asking how can I move forward?

It's about remembering and restoring. So we have to sort of figure out how to do both. I often tell people our work is to grieve fully. And live fully. A lot of us have the grieving fully down and don't know how to live again, and a lot of us have the living fully down and we're in denial and just stuffing the grief. And how can we hold both of these things together? So important to sort of think of that as a different mindset.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. David, I am so lucky to have met your acquaintance. I really enjoyed this conversation. If people want to find out more about you, your work, your grief groups, how can they do that?

David Kessler

Sure, most of the things I do are on grief.com. Pretty easy to remember, grief.com. Can also find me on social media. The handle is iamdavidkessler. David Kessler was already taken, so I had to be I am David Kessler, and you can find me there.

I also have different videos people can get, they could go to aboutgrief.com and just get a free video on how all this stuff works and how you can find a peaceful rest whether you're sleeping or you're awake.

Meagen Gibson

Yes. I love just the tip of allow yourself to be a detective, otherwise it's going to creep up. They're going to put that hat, the Sherlock hat, and the glasses on and the pipe in your mouth at 02:00 A.M.. We don't want that, do we?

David Kessler

And to realize, look, we all come from a long line of dead people. There's a part of us that knows how to do this. We just have to allow ourselves to go through it. And sometimes what our friends and family think of how we're doing grief is none of our business.

[00:35:24] Meagen Gibson

I just love that you've in your own way now, because of the shift we've all had to make, created a community anybody can access, where they can get the rituals and the support in some sort of fashion that we've all been missing so much in the last three years.

David Kessler

Absolutely. I'm so glad to have been with you here today.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks again, David.

David Kessler

Thank you.