



Conscious Life presents

SLEEP SUPER CONFERENCE

Grief, loss and sleep

Guest: Paul Denniston

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Paul Denniston. We're going to be talking about grief and the impact that it can have on sleep.

We'll be talking about grief in the broadest term. It can be, of course, the loss of a particular person, but it can also be the anticipation of that. It can also be the loss of something else in our life that feels important to us. And this is going to be a very practical interview so though we will talk about how grief can impact us, Paul is also going to offer a number of practical exercises to really help bring this to life as well.

To give you a bit of Paul's background, Paul Denniston is the founder of Grief Yoga and the author of *Healing Through Yoga: Transforming Loss into Empowerment*. The mission of Grief Yoga is to use movement, breath and sound to release pain and suffering and to connect to empowerment and love. Grief Yoga combines many forms of yoga in order to channel and release anger, to allow unresolved grief a compassionate space to breathe and move.

His gentle work creates a safe space for movement, transformation, and healing to connect the resilient, loving warrior within. Paul has taught and trained this practice to thousands of therapists, counselors, and healthcare professionals around the world. So, Paul, welcome. It's a real pleasure to have you here at the conference.

Paul Denniston

Thank you. It's a pleasure being here.

Alex Howard

So I think a good place to start would be just to explore how grief, and particularly grief that perhaps might not have been fully allowed or processed or so on, can impact upon our sleep.

Paul Denniston

Yes. Well, for me, what I consider grief and loss to be is a sense of disconnection from someone or something that we loved. And it has a deep impact on the body. Sometimes it can affect our mind. We perhaps sometimes go into anticipatory grief, worried about the outcome of the future. Sometimes we can get focused on the regrets of the past. I think it's very normal for us to be very hard on ourselves when we've experienced grief and loss, or maybe just even hard to focus.

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Grief brain is a very normal thing. I think it affects our body in many different ways. It affects it even within the throat space too. Sometimes people have a hard time articulating what they want, what they need, or even just talking about the fear and the vulnerability of the loss. And so a lot of the time, what can happen then too, once the throat becomes blocked, it's normal for us to maybe tense up our jaw or grind our teeth at night. It lives within the body, within the chest. It's certainly within the chest space. It's where we can feel love, but it's also where unresolved grief can live.

Within our stomach, sometimes that feeling of powerlessness and churning within the stomach, it can create digestive issues. And a lot of the times when we've experienced loss, there's a sense of we've lost our power. And also even just the breath, sometimes when working with many people within grief, they even say, I'm having a hard time breathing. And oxygen is literally life force energy. And so the importance of breathing deeply allows us to feel deeply too.

Alex Howard

I guess also one of the ways that grief and sleep can be a particularly tricky dynamic is if we're really impacted by a loss, during the day it may be that we can be distracted and we have things that pull our attention, but it's often when things become quiet at night, it's harder to disconnect or to avoid those feelings.

Paul Denniston

Can I tell you a personal experience? So I had last week, okay, I literally could not believe this. I could not sleep for an entire night. And I'll share with you what was going on. I have elderly parents and me and my brother are concentrating on helping them to move. So in some ways there is a lot of anticipatory grief of what is to come, this big move to help them to go to a senior center. I'm physically watching them deteriorate. I'm watching early set Alzheimer's from my mother.

So the night before the big move, I could not sleep at all. And I was using all of my techniques that were possible, but I could also just note my mind is racing about what is to come. And so I think that it was a very revealing experience for me too, because it gave me some techniques and tools which I'm happy to share with you about how to support me moving forward in the day when I'm feeling sleep deprived.

But there are definitely techniques that I am applying that will support that even while in bed. But I'm just awful saying as much as I have all of these tools in my toolbox, sometimes life will throw curveballs at you where it's just like you just got to be compassionate with yourself as you're going through what you're going through.

Alex Howard

It's funny you say that, because before you said the word compassion, that was going to be my next question for you. I noticed that the way that you're talking about it is from a place of softness towards yourself. There's not a sense of judgment about it. You don't seem particularly frustrated about it, although I imagine it was maybe frustrating that night

But there's a sense of softness in your attitude and it strikes me that that's also important, because when we get angry and harsh towards ourselves, it's the opposite of what we need.

[00:06:36] Paul Denniston

Well, here's what I know, that the reason that I'm leaning towards compassion is because what I know is that deep down underneath it, that's causing the sleepless nights is really about fear. And so if someone that I care about is afraid, then what I would like to do is, I would like to make sure that they're, to take care of them, especially if it's someone that I care about.

And for me in that space too, it's like I recognize my fear and I have so much responsibility, but how can I be gentle with myself here? And it's not always easy. I'm not always perfect. And sometimes that's why this is a constant practice because especially when we haven't had a good night's sleep, how normal it is for us to get irritated and angry and to dump our anger either onto the people we care about or just even onto strangers. Or a lot of the times, it turns inward and we become very cruel and hard on ourselves.

So how can we soften? And that's why I do believe compassion is an important aspect of this. Because literally I also think that grief is pain. And when we've had these sleepless nights, that's pain and that is grief.

Alex Howard

I also want to open up this idea of grief. And I really appreciate the fact that we're not just talking about the act of losing someone or something, we're talking about the anticipation of that and the impact after that. But it strikes me that sometimes what happens is someone goes through a deep loss and how they are with themselves in that experience, I think has a big impact on how that plays out.

And so if we're someone that hasn't been giving space to our emotions for many, many years, this becomes another way in our life that we're not giving space to our emotions, for example. I guess I'm curious as to with your deep experience working with grief, in a sense, I suppose the opportunity to see those things about ourselves, but also the challenge of exposing those places that perhaps do need some work.

Paul Denniston

I've worked with many people who some of their grief right now is a little bit like, this is not the life that I thought I was going to have. Grieving a part of ourselves that might have died. Maybe it's a thing that they used to love to do and it's no longer a part of their life. My sister, who passed away from cancer, as I would sit with her and be with her and maybe even help her to move some of these challenging things through, she had grief that showed up in the form of anger.

And her anger literally almost felt like she was a betrayal by God, that God that she had been praying for all of these years for healing and here it wasn't where it wasn't showing up for her, but it was also a place too where she was taught good girls aren't supposed to be angry. And so the anger would literally turn on her. And it could have also been what fed the cancer too, creating a place of disease.

And I would remember sitting with her at her hospital bed and saying, can we take a moment and just focus on this anger and even be, you know, let's be angry at God? Which was a little taken aback by her, but it was definitely what she was experiencing. I have a technique that I do and it's called releasing the why. And I invited her to take a moment and place her hands up, palms facing her. And I literally invited her to just say the words, why?

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And I kept having her do it. And as she would just continually go why, sometimes then I would invite her to lift the hands up and with anger to even express that why. And as she would continue to go, it facilitated the space for the disappointment and anger to move through. But really what it was allowing her to tap into was that sadness, that sadness and disconnection that she was feeling, that disappointment that she didn't understand and know how to move through.

Alex Howard

What I think you're particularly elegantly speaking to, Paul, is that there's often places in us, or words in us that we don't give voice to, that we have stories or ideas about what is okay and what isn't okay. But then when we don't give voice to those things, they become trapped and they become held in our bodies.

Paul Denniston

They do, absolutely. And so part of what I am inviting people within this space and sometimes my practice, which is called Grief Yoga, is really more about using movement, breath and sound to release pain and struggle to connect to more empowerment and love. That's the intention within it.

Now, when I invite people to use sound, what I just did right there was one of the ways and it was focusing on a word, which was why. But sometimes that sound can literally be a sigh. I'm going to just inhale, I'm going to exhale and sigh it out. This could be a technique that you might do near the end of the day. Actually, you can do this anytime during the day, but it is literally what we're looking for is a way to take what is suppressed and move it through.

The body remembers the pain, the grief and the trauma. We hold the issues within our tissues. And so what we're looking for within this space is a way to take what is suppressed and move it through. Sometimes that sigh could literally be uhh, sometimes that sigh can be I'm feeling irritable and it could be even just almost like a growl.

Whatever that sigh is, maybe it's just an exhaustion of a surrender and I give up. Having using that space of the vibration of the voice allowing within to deepen the breath is really what's helping to move suppressed emotions through.

Alex Howard

And just to track this back for folks, what's the price of not letting those emotions move? Just particularly thinking in the context of sleep, if there's all of this that's being held in the body, how that can impact us.

Paul Denniston

What it can lead to is depression. I can choose to not feel grief in this lifetime. And in doing so, then I lose my ability to love. And so I recognize that grief and love are a package deal. What happens if I don't feel the anger? That can also lead to sleepless nights. That can lead to bitterness and disease.

So I am a believer in how you can channel the anger and the pain through in empowering ways. Part of what the work is that I do within this space, the first I want to just acknowledge is to create a sense

of safety and awareness of the breath and gentle ways to move the body. But the second component of what this practice is is about expression.

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Taking the pain, the struggle, and instead of denying it, channeling and moving that pain through almost as if it were fuel. And psychologist Edith Eger, who went through the Holocaust. One of the quotes that she says that I really believe deeply in is that she talks about how expression is the opposite of depression. And so what we don't express during the day will keep us up at night.

Alex Howard

I love that. That's a really great phrase. Because, in a sense, I think people often think about depression as being a state of deficiency and a state of emptiness. And what I'm reflecting on is often the opposite, isn't it? It's a state of too much going on that's not being allowed to flow that then creates that state of almost being depressed by something, not actually a state of deficiency.

Paul Denniston

Yes, I feel in ways depression can also be a symbol of what happens within trauma. We're feeling helpless and hopeless and out of control, so they complement one another. And so within the work that I do, since my work is really about empowering the person to flow these challenging emotions through, it is really a sense of let's take whatever the pain is.

And so for people as I work with them that are dealing with depression, a lot of the times what I'll tend to move them towards, because there's a numbness that's happening, is to have them to tap into the anger and the fear and start to channel it almost like a sense of fire. Take, for instance, can I show you another technique here?

Alex Howard

Please do.

Paul Denniston

I'm rolling up my sleeves. So take, for instance, a part of a technique that I do is I invite people to bring their hands to their chest and as if they were holding that tightness, maybe what they're holding in their palms is a place of despair, hopelessness, giving up, I'm overwhelmed. Or just even a heaviness of what their body is feeling. So what I'll invite them to do is begin to punch out with equal inhalation and exhalation through the mouth, giving a lot of oxygen to the body.

So it can be very slow or it could even be a little bit faster. Shh, shh, shh, shh, shh. So we're creating a little bit of a spark here. And then after a little bit of time where they're starting to punch things out, I invite them to bring it to the chest and take a deep inhale, and then with one hand, just push it out and release it with the hands. Using the sound almost as if they were channeling the pain, the struggle, even if they don't have the words for it, using it as fuel to begin to move through.

And then once it starts to happen, whatever is suppressed is going to start to come up to the surface, start to become aware of it and to breathe it. But we're really just giving that space of mind body connection and to move what is suppressed through.

[00:17:58] Alex Howard

One of the defensive strategies that people can have around feeling their emotions, there's a number of them, but one of them is that it's not safe to feel this. And one of the ways I think that plays out is if I feel this, it will annihilate me or it's too big. I'm curious as to how you help people work that edge and build the safety that allows them to release.

Paul Denniston

I'm going to speak personally. I was afraid of going into the grief. First off, just knowing that what I was taught, boys aren't supposed to be sad. Move on, do something about it. And so in that space, I was also afraid that if I really went into that grief and loss, I wouldn't be able to come out of it. So what happened? I spent a lot of the time running and doing to avoid that place of being with the discomfort.

And then I also tended to find ways to numb the pain. Sex, drugs and alcohol were my go to things. And so what would happen is that then there would be a numbness that would start to happen. Definitely a place of depression, definitely a place of addiction. But it was almost like what was beneath the surface, the grief, the shame, the guilt, it just started to grow and grow and grow.

And so it wasn't until I started to do this work and to teach this work, that I had to become clean and sober to be with the challenging emotions. Now, here's the thing some people are afraid of. I'm afraid if I go into my grief and sadness, I'm never going to come out of it. But, in truth, the only way out of it is through it. And so when people give them the space to sit with the sadness, to channel that anger, what actually happens is they move through towards the other side.

There was a thing that I included in my book how buffaloes, when they sense that a storm is coming, they don't run away from the storm. They actually run through the storm to minimize their time in the storm. And I get that we want to run away from the pain, but in actuality, if we move through it, especially in a compassionate way, it minimizes the time. And what could be on the other side of it is hope.

Alex Howard

I think it's often also, certainly in my personal experience and I think it's true for others, that when we're in places that are very painful, even though they hurt, firstly it feels true. And there's something in that which I think impacts us in a positive way. But also there's the release of all the holding on in the defensiveness, which is often also exhausting.

Paul Denniston

Exhausting. Exhausting. Absolutely. I have another technique I can show you with what you're talking about right here. Can I show it to you? This actually, by the way, is actually a really great technique that you can use towards the end of the day that could help you to sleep better too. And I'm actually going to stand up doing this. So here we go.

So this is called the windmill. And literally this is to take whatever is suppressed and to move it through using movement, breath and sound. And the way that I invite you to do this is where your feet are hip width distance apart and your knees are just slightly bent. Your hands are at your sides. You inhale and lift the arms up and then exhale, bringing your hands forward down and back behind you. I have my knees slightly bent here. Now I'm going to just demo this. Inhale, up. Exhale.

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Now what's happening here is I'm allowing whatever is suppressed to move through here. And let's say it's the end of my day and I've had a lot going on today and I'm wanting to sleep. This can be a way of just releasing what happened today to help me to have a good sleep at night. Inhale, up. Exhale. And the thing is I don't even know what I'm releasing or exhaling. I'm just allowing the wisdom of the breath and the body to just move through so I can just start to find a way of letting go.

Alex Howard

What I noticed in that technique is part of it is that we try to think our way out of places where we have stuckness. We try to think our way to our feelings. And what I'm getting, Paul, from part of what's at the heart of your way of working is that we can't necessarily think our way there. We need to move our way there.

Paul Denniston

We, of course, get stuck in our mind. Our mind races. We have a monkey in our mind that jumps from branch to branch and thought to thought. The importance is to know that the mind and body are connected. And I think that sometimes what can happen is that when we've experienced, let's say, a loss and trauma, our mind can start to catastrophize and start to worry about things which will then tense up the body.

And then when the body becomes tense, it can start where the mind goes, uh oh, what's going on? What's wrong? So it's really, it's a place of understanding that place of connection. The mind and body are connected within the space. And literally what the meaning of yoga means is yoga means union. And that is the place of that mind body connection to lift the spirit.

So I'll even go further within that space too. There are times with my sleepless nights where I'm like, you know what, I don't know what to do. I'm worried about such and such and it's keeping me up at night. Sometimes I'll even have a sense of spiritual connection, a prayer to just also even say, help me with this.

Whatever your faith and your belief is, whether it's praying to God, praying to the universe, a power greater than yourself. It is interesting for me in those sleepless nights where if I even just say to myself I can't handle this, I need to rest the night, and having that spiritual connection to almost say, I'm going to leave this here. Please help me. Help me take care of this so I can rest. There's something that softens within me in that space, too.

Alex Howard

It's almost like part of the anxiety and pressure that we can feel is that we feel that we have to be in control. Or we have to know the answer or know what to do, or we have to make sense of something. And releasing that, I guess, is also the releasing of a big pressure.

Paul Denniston

All about surrender, isn't it? And isn't that what we want to do at night? We want to surrender to a peaceful sleep. And so I think in some ways, surrender really is a place of trusting that there is something greater than ourselves that can support us here. Here's the thing, tapping into, whether it's

through sleepless nights or even just through trauma, what we're seeking in some ways are resources to help us to feel safe.

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And so those help, whether that's a power greater than ourselves or maybe that's even just the simplicity of the resource of this bed here to support me. And also, I must tell you, what I also do is the resource of the breath. The breath is our life force energy. And I think we all recognize the importance of meditation. And so the importance, when we have that racing mind at night, here's the connection here, the body follows the mind.

Within meditation, allow the mind to follow the breath. And the importance of deepening the breath to help to quiet the mind. So really focusing on that deepening the breath. Now, here's a technique that I did. I did this last night while I went to sleep. There's a technique that is called alternate nostril breathing. And it's a way that you can breathe in and out through different nostrils.

But breathing in and out through the left nostrils, there's lots of studies that have been made through this, what breathing in and out through the left nostril helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, to allow the body to rest and to digest. And so what I will do is I will literally close off the right nostril, and I will spend a minute just breathing in and out through the left nostril.

What that's allowing me to do, first off, is it's helping me to deepen the breath and to focus on the breath, quieting the mind. It's also helping the body to rest and digest. So focusing on that within the space of even if it's focusing on eight inhales and exhales through the left nostril, or just a minute of it, is a very helpful technique to begin to quiet the mind.

Alex Howard

I think also it's another example of not trying to think our way to a different place, that there's impact by following a relatively straightforward exercise.

Paul Denniston

Yes. I mean, in that space, there's nothing to fix, there's nothing to do. All there is is a sense of being and observing the breath in that space. It's a place of calming and how important that is when we're trying to sleep.

Alex Howard

And you mentioned, Paul, a little bit earlier about things that one can do in bed at night if they're struggling to sleep, in terms of movements or practices, and I guess this is one of those things. I'm curious as to what else that folks can use in a more reactive way if they find themselves in those tricky situations.

Paul Denniston

Absolutely. I love this technique that Peter Levine, author of *Waking The Tiger*, he deals with trauma, this is a really great technique that he embraces that I love. And it's called the voo. And again, this is a sound here that helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system to help to rest and digest. You can do this technique in bed, or you can do it at any point, and it's literally you inhale through the nose.

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And then as you exhale, you just say the sound of voo, V-O-O. I'm going to demonstrate. Inhale, exhale, voo. I'm going to do it again. And if those who are watching would like to just try it, go ahead and inhale and then exhale to a sound of voo. And then if you do it a few times, I literally feel my body starting to relax.

Peter would talk about how during COVID, there was a nurse who was dealing with such trauma of people in the hospital that it was keeping her up at night. And so she found that by doing this technique at any point throughout the day or at night, what it allowed her to do is it allowed her to calm herself and maybe get some of those scary images that are showing up in her head ways to quiet that down.

Alex Howard

You also mentioned earlier around how we can often hold grief or we can hold tension in our jaw and it can play out in teeth grinding at night. I'm just curious as to the particular techniques that would help out with that.

Paul Denniston

I call this the jaw release. The way you do it is you grasp your hands together, I'm just bringing my palms together like that. Relax my shoulders. You can also, you can have your palms interlaced or you can interlace your fingers, whichever you choose. And you inhale, and then you just begin to shake the palms. And as if the shaking was moving all the way up to the hands, up to the jaw, and then just softening the jaw here.

I'm actually gonna, as I do this, I'm going to use a little sound to relax the jaw here. It's literally a sense of just gently beginning to shake the jaw. I'm using a little sound to open up the throat, but it's just relaxing that sense of the jaw. There's a shaking that happens. There's a way that it's a great way of releasing. I certainly witnessed my dog do it after she's freaked out and scared about something.

She doesn't hold onto it in her body. She just shakes it off afterwards and she moves on. And I think it's just so normal for us to hold on to it because we're afraid of expressing it. So these are just little techniques here that just start to gently begin to move things through.

Alex Howard

And then I'm also wondering about somebody watching this who has gone through a significant bereavement and maybe they feel at this point they should be at the other side. They should be through it somehow, that they're, you know, why are they still feeling the way that they're feeling?

And I think that sometimes people can have a lot of ideas of what should and shouldn't be happening. I'm just curious in your work with people, how you help them make space for and find peace with their process and where they are.

Paul Denniston

I'm a believer of not to should on yourself, so I try to prevent myself from shoulding. And so, here's the thing. Some people will say, well, how long am I going to grieve? And David Kessler, grief expert,

would share about how, well how long will you love that person? And the truth of the matter is you're going to love them for your whole life.

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And even if it were a complicated relationship where you might still hold resentment or shame or anger, the love is there if you are experiencing grief. And so the thing is, it's more of an invitation to allow grief to come up and sit with it and be with it. And the thing is that the grief is not here to hurt you. The grief is really just a reflection of your love. And I recognize that the grief can also be guilt and all of these other things, but in essence, it's really love.

And so all it needs is dedicated time and space. And let's say that, here's a technique that I offer, too. Sometimes this is called a hands at heart dedication. So, obviously, if there's somebody that is missing, whether they are alive or dead, or maybe even it's just a part of yourself. Many times what I'll invite people to do, too, is to just take a moment and even just place your hands on your chest, right on your heart.

It's a place where you can even just take a moment and close your eyes and in your mind's eye to picture whomever it is that your heart is missing and to see that person healthy and happy and smiling at you with love and to even just say their name out loud, Ella, and breathe. So grief is just looking for a space. They say that grief is love with nowhere to go. So in this space, we're just letting the grief and the love be. And sometimes within the practice that I do, also creating movements to help us to feel more deeply connected to yourself, to others, and to spirit.

Alex Howard

You know, what I find myself thinking as you're talking is that often people will say, I don't know how to do this. What I think is very inherent in a lot of what you're saying is that we don't need to do it. We need to get out of the way and let a process happen.

Paul Denniston

And a lot of the times when I don't know how to do something, I ask for help. And that help can be from another person who knows something more than I do, that help could even be, you know, I mean, I got to tell you, when I was dealing with my parents move this past week, I was deeply sad that my sister wasn't there to help support me within this.

But in some ways, I would do moments of that where I would invite her to come into that space and maybe have her spiritual compassion and forgiveness help me to move through it and stuff, too. So I think there is something profound in just the simple two words of saying help me, whether it's to a power greater than yourself or even just to someone else. And to not be afraid of asking for that help.

Alex Howard

So, Paul, talking of asking for help, for someone that's watching this that would like to find out more about how they can work with you or access your resources, where's the best place to go and what is some of what they can find?

[00:36:52] Paul Denniston

griefyoga.com. That's my location. That's my website. In that space, you can check out my book, which is called *Healing Through Yoga: Transform Loss Into Empowerment*. You can also, I have a monthly membership that I offer these classes. It's called Spark, and they're welcome to access that. There's lots of free resources and that is at griefyoga.com.

Alex Howard

Paul, I really appreciate your time and it's been great to also have so many practical ways that people can work as well. So, thank you.

Paul Denniston

You bet. It was lovely to talk with you. Thank you, Alex.