



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Why all trauma involves grief

Guest: David Kessler

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with David Kessler.

And we're going to be exploring grief and the relationship between trauma and grief. And grief can be different things, of course, as we'll get into early in the interview. It can be obviously the loss of a person, but it can also be many more things than that as well.

To give you a bit of David's background, David Kessler is one of the world's foremost experts on grief and loss. He's the author of six books, including the latest bestselling book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

He co-authored two books with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and co-wrote *You Can Heal Your Heart* with Louise Hay. His first book, *The Needs of the Dying*, received praise from Mother Teresa.

For most of his life, David has taught physicians, nurses, counselors, police and first responders about the end of life trauma and grief. He's also the founder of Grief.com. So welcome, David. I'm really pleased to have some time together.

David Kessler

I'm really glad to be with you and everyone today. Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

Well, thank you for being here. So I think an interesting place to start would be often I think, people think of grief as being something quite specific. And of course, there are many different ways that we can be impacted and experience grief. So I'd love to hear you speak a bit about how you define grief and also a little bit of how you came to do this work.

David Kessler

Sure, there isn't one grief definition, but I'll give you a few that we can sort of put together. The first one, I think most of us think about grief as a change we didn't want. It's a change we did not want.

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The other thing, when it comes to the death of a loved one, I always think of grief as love. If you love them intensely, you will grieve them intensely. The other piece about this is we often think about grief as always relating to death. But the truth is, grief is always the death of something, but it might be the death of a relationship.

We call that a breakup. It might be the death of a marriage, we call that a divorce. It might be a job loss, we call that the death of that paycheck, with those people in that place.

So it's always an ending, usually an ending we didn't want. And it comes in all forms. So that's just a broad definition, a few that I use.

You also mentioned, how did I get into this? Because no one in the third grade says, oh, I want to be a grief and death and trauma expert.

Alex Howard

Or if they do, the teacher probably takes them aside and has a word.

David Kessler

There's a problem there. This isn't a profession I chose. It chose me.

When I was growing up, I had a mom who was in and out of the hospital when I was 13. She went to a hospital a few hours away in a big city. She was in the ICU, very sick. I was one year too young to visit her. I spent all my time in the lobby of the hospital.

While we were there, across the street at the hotel where we were, a fire broke out one day. Everyone evacuated, looked up on the 18th floor, fire trucks pulled up, flames coming out and a shooting began.

They realized this wasn't just a fire, it was an active shooter. It went on for 13 hours. One of our first mass shootings here in the US. I saw police, first responders, hotel guests being killed. My father eventually got us back to the hospital, and a couple of days later, my mother died. I wasn't able to be with her.

And after that, there just weren't people around to help. My father didn't want to talk about grief. The only advice I got was to be strong. And so my life became really this searching for my own healing around that grief and trauma, as well as really looking at how we find healing after life's - sorry, I just bumbled through that. How do we find healing after life's worst events?

And I do tell people, healing is possible. I also in my life, after 30, 40 years of doing this work, had that challenged again. I come to this, obviously I was trained academically, but I also tell people I have gone through all of this myself. After all this work six years ago, I was so challenged when my own younger son, David, died unexpectedly.

So when we talk about the horrible things that happen in life, shootings, loved ones dying, parents dying, spouses dying, I've been through a lot of them.

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And so I really stand as evidence that no matter what you've been through, you can find life again. And not a life that forgets our loved one, but a life that moves forward with them and honors them. So that's how I got to all this and what I try to help others do.

Alex Howard

Can you say a bit, David, about the relationship between grief and trauma? Because of course, there's a lot of overlap, but I'd be interested to hear how you kind of articulate that relationship.

David Kessler

All grief does not have trauma, but all trauma has grief. And so many times I'm juggling when I'm working with someone. I have an online group called Tender Hearts, and this comes up all the time that we are trying to figure out, does our attention need to be on the grief in this moment, or is there trauma that's clouding the grief?

And so both of those are often at play. None of us get through life without something being somewhat traumatic. And some of us are really blessed to have peaceful deaths of our loved ones, peaceful amicable divorces. And others of us have traumatic ones.

And this might be just a moment for me to define how I actually look at trauma. So to me, psychological trauma is the unique person's experience of an event, a series of events or a set of enduring conditions that interferes with our ability to integrate the emotional experience, and it becomes overwhelmed.

So just to really untangle that for a moment. It's our experience, our sibling who was literally with us when our parent died, perhaps they're not traumatized and we are. So it's our individual experience of something that happened on a day, something that happened over time, enduring conditions. And our emotional experience is overwhelmed.

And being overwhelmed with those emotions interferes with our ability to stay present. And so a lot of this work is really helping people untangle the grief, the trauma and finding a way to work through it.

Alex Howard

I think that's a very powerful statement that you started with there that not all grief has trauma, but all trauma has grief. And so the question really comes to my mind is, when we experience grief and we do have trauma or we experience grief and we don't have trauma, what's that difference?

David Kessler

So the easy example would be to think of someone who, and this is where it gets a little complicated, someone whose 98-year-old father died. Family gathered. It was a lovely moment that they were there. They had good relationships with him, and he passed away peacefully. Ideally, that relationship, that death, we would look at as not traumatic.

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On the other hand, their 95-year-old father getting hit by a car on the way to the doctor's office would be traumatic, but we can't stop there. Going back to the first example, he dies peacefully with his family around him. Perhaps you didn't have a good relationship. All these things can be factors.

That's why we could literally be in the same room, have the same experience, and one of us is just experiencing grief and the loss, and the other is feeling it all traumatically.

Alex Howard

And of course, how we're impacted then becomes part of the pathway to, what do we need to do with this, right? Because in a sense, one of the things that can happen, particularly in the trauma element, is that we're impacted and it becomes an overload and we don't perhaps have the tools or the framework or the understanding. So there's a numbing or there's a shutting down.

And I think, particularly people doing trauma work, they will find griefs going back perhaps decades that have just been sort of numbed and shut in their system.

David Kessler

And then it comes out when we least expect it. I obviously dealt with a lot of trauma. I'll tell you something, even I was surprised about what happened a couple of years ago. A bunch of friends over, hadn't seen them in a long time. They start discussing, wouldn't it be fun to take an RV trip? They are all bouncing ideas, where would we go on this RV trip?

I literally felt myself becoming anxious, feeling myself becoming upset. And I was also noticing, wow, they're getting excited, I'm getting worried. What's that about?

What was fascinating is I have a group of friends, they're used to me and the questions I ask. I thought, wow, is this trauma? Is this trauma I'm feeling?

Here's the thing. Trauma robs us of our curiosity. I noticed they got excited. I couldn't get curious. I was going danger, danger, danger. Where are you going to park? How do you know there's going to be a place? Crazy stuff.

I happened to, after they were done with the RV discussion, I talked to them about the ACEs. I said, by the way, there's this thing like I said, they're used to me having these kinds of questions.

I said, there's this thing called the ACEs, and those are adverse childhood experiences. It can be things like physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, mental illness in your family, divorce, substance abuse, violence, mental illness, a relative who was in jail or prison.

And I said to the group, I said, I'm just curious how many ACEs were in your childhood? Zero, one, two, zero, zero, one, one. And I'm sitting there with like six ACEs that happened in my childhood.

And I realized, no wonder why I hear about a new experience and can't go to curiosity, but go to danger. Boom. Out of the blue, I realize there's trauma to attend there. So those things come up many, many times.

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And when I sit and work with people around grief and trauma, you just hear things. Someone goes, gosh, I'm so going to miss dad. That's grief.

Someone else is going, I'm never going to get over him. I'm not going to be able to survive. Okay, there might be some trauma there. There's no way I can live past this. And that continues.

That's often a clue for me. Oh, there's something going on there that they're not into the sadness or anger or missing, all the hallmarks of grief.

They've decided this is not helpable. They are stuck. And to your question, we often get stuck there. We get frozen there. We get numb there. Life is over. And here's the thing. We need other people to heal grief and to heal trauma.

And grief must be witnessed. Trauma happens because of things we experience. And people are actually the way out of it. I love doing group work because we find each other in our stories. I hear your story and I'm like, oh, I had something a little similar. And then as I see someone else healing, I begin to heal. We need this connection.

I do a certificate program where I train therapists in grief and trauma and old wounds. And I bring in an amazing psychiatrist, Dr. Frank Anderson. And he puts this so simply in his training.

He talks about love being blocked by trauma. Trauma blocks love and love heals trauma and so we need that connection with others. We need to hear each other's stuck-ness. It's interesting, I can't spot my numbness or stuckness or frozenness without the help of another, but I can see it in other people.

Alex Howard

I thought it was really interesting what you said a minute ago, David, around grief needs witnessing and I want you to say more about that, but I was also thinking about those that lost people during COVID. And certainly in the UK, I know it's different in different countries, but there was a point where you couldn't have funerals, then a point you could only have funerals, I think it was for five people and then it gradually increased. But that meant that people's grief couldn't be witnessed. So, yeah, I'm curious to explore why that witnessing is so important and what it does for us.

David Kessler

That get-together, that funeral, that memorial is the last time we ever gather together in that person's honor. When that's missing, that's such an important ritual, bookend of our lives.

But I also want to tell people, we like to think that witnessing is, oh, it happens in the first week when there's the funeral. No, it goes on and on, and here's where we get off track with each other. We think our job is to cheer the other person up, make them smile again. What we don't realize we do is we end up brightsiding them. It becomes toxic positivity.

The reality is we want someone not to tell us ten things to cheer us up, but rather to say, 'I see your pain, I see how much you miss them, I see how hard this is for you'.

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And getting back to the trauma piece, the interesting thing about the trauma is the trauma also robs us of hope. If I said to someone in grief, this pain is going to change, you will eventually, in your own time, in your own way, find life again. They may be like, it's hard to see right now, and I go, well, I get that, I get that. And they'll go, well, I'll trust you on that.

On the other hand, when it's trauma and I'll say there's going to be - 'no there's no life after this, no can't go on'. And I have to maybe say to them, we're going to have to talk about some old wounds and trauma because you actually can't see any hope for your future. And until you can see that hope, I'm going to hold that hope for you.

The death of your loved one, I'm so sorry. That physical death was absolutely permanent. The loss of your hope, that's shadowed by this trauma and grief, is temporary.

And I can hold hope for you until you can find it again. Just to introduce those seeds that there are possibilities that they can't see at this moment.

Alex Howard

That's beautiful. Also find myself thinking about, in a sense, the relationship between experiences of grief that may happen in our lives and the kind of inner landscape where they land, of course, is often one of unresolved trauma.

And so let's say there's a trauma that we've experienced that hasn't been healed, and then there's an event that happens that either triggers that or further kind of numbs that. I'm curious to hear you speak a bit about not just the events that happen, but the place they meet inside of us.

David Kessler

It often plays out in personalization. I can just take my life, for example. My mother died when I was young. Tragic. It was the event that happened. My mind will make up stories about the event. Same thing. My son dying six years ago. Brutal. Brutal then, brutal now.

And these were the most personal experiences I've had in my life. But they weren't personally done to me. My mother wasn't singled out. My son wasn't singled out. There isn't a universe that's out to get me.

But our mind in trauma will often personalize it. We'll often personalize it. And we think this is because of us, it's because of them. And part of the work is to, of course, help people feel all the feelings deeply, but to also recognize that death happens and it's such a tragedy, but it's not because of you. It wasn't done by you.

Your loved one that died by suicide isn't doing anything to you. The universe isn't doing anything to you. All those things that our mind works against us, because of that previous trauma. And then we have this feeling of learned helplessness, that I just can't get better.

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So there's so much in there to sort of go in and unpack with people, and we need witnessing and groups and other people to do it. You don't heal grief and trauma in isolation, and yet we want to isolate.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me, David, that in a sense, for some folks, we've experienced various traumas in life and we've set things up a certain way and we're sort of functionally dysfunctional, one better way of putting it.

And then grief may be the final straw that breaks the camel's back. Like the thing that triggers us, becomes so overwhelming that also maybe it becomes the gateway to actually then start to unpack and do that other work that perhaps is really important for us to do.

David Kessler

It's interesting you say that, because I often think that grief becomes a window. It becomes a window into our healing.

And here's the thing, a lot of times. Just to sort of unpack this a little, this idea about the definition I used was about coming into the now. And why is that so important? First of all, we don't want to come into the now because now is painful for us in grief, and we want to not deal with the pain.

Sometimes when people aren't witnessing us, they're like, quit touching the hot stove. Why do you keep thinking about your loved one? Why do you keep thinking about those horrible images? Why do you keep thinking about their death day?

And I remind people that when we're doing that in grief, we're not touching the hot stove. The hot stove has fallen on us. We don't have a lot of choice in this. We're in enormous pain. Naturally, we want to run from the pain.

In the last book that I wrote, *Finding Meaning*, one of the things I researched, I never thought I would be doing this, is buffaloes. Buffaloes. When they sense a storm coming, they run into the storm, thereby minimizing the time they're in pain.

We, on the other hand, when we feel the storm of grief coming, we want to keep it three feet behind us for the rest of our lives. And so I'm asking people to be with pain. It's very counterintuitive. But we can't heal what we don't feel.

Now, when you go into those feelings and allow them, just like you said, there's trauma that comes up. We have what we call traumatic deaths. Many times we experience a death as traumatic, and in those cases, I have to go back and help bring the person out of the past because they are stuck in that moment.

They're still at the coroner's office. They're still at the funeral. They're still at their loved one's deathbed. I have to bring them out of the past and into the present.

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But one of the things I think we often make mistakes is sometimes people do this work. We bring us out of the past into the now. Now is when we can heal, but we leave our loved ones out of the trauma. We leave our loved ones in the trauma of the past. And I always say, no, we have to go back and get them.

And I'll give you a little example of how this works. I might have someone name five things they see right now in the present. I see a patio chair. I see the sun. I see the bushes. I see a bottle of water. They'll say to me, I would have identified a woman who watched her husband get hit by a car.

She tells me every day she sees him get hit by that car over and over. I'll say to her, isn't it horrible that he had to die once, but now he dies every day in your mind. So I might have her name five things in the room. Then I'll say to her, name five things that aren't in this room, okay? I don't see a cat. I don't see a dog. I don't see an ironing board. I don't see skis.

And then I'll talk to her about, I'll name five things too I don't see. And I'll go, you know what else I don't see in this room right now, in the present moment? I don't see your husband getting hit by a car. That's in the past. We have to leave that moment and come into the now.

By the way, where's your husband now? I don't want to leave him in that horrible moment. Where's your husband? Do you believe in an afterlife? Oh, yes. He's safely in heaven. Let's breathe into that.

Maybe they don't believe in an afterlife. Where is your husband physically? What happened to his body? Oh, he's buried in the cemetery. Oh, my goodness. Your husband is safe in the cemetery where he can never get hit by a car again. Your husband was cremated. He's safe on your bookshelf where he can never get hit by a car again.

So a lot of this work when we are in the past, we are in our post-traumatic stress, we are re-feeling yesterday's feelings. I help people come into the now to release that. In that moment is where they can begin to find healing.

Alex Howard

Sometimes one of the challenges with trauma is being in the now. Because when one comes into the now, that's what's there in the body. Which makes me wonder about what comes first, or how do you sequence what you're doing with folks around working with the grief or the trauma? How do you unravel that piece?

David Kessler

And that's an important piece, Alex, because the thing is, you know what, if you and I had a disagreement yesterday and gosh, I could have done that better with Alex. Next time I talk to him, I'm going to say it differently. I have a lot of choice in that, you know, I can show up better with Alex.

When it's trauma, it came out of my mouth. I feel like I didn't have a choice. It was so automatic. I just went to danger. I relived it. I protected myself. I acted out.

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Here's the thing. We often make those things from our childhood, our enemies. Why do I do that? You know, I just say the bad, wrong things. They just come out of my mouth and I do this. I run out. I have this experience. Instead, to realize those things aren't our enemies. Those are that child in us that had to protect itself.

And to not look at it as I got to get rid of this, but to acknowledge this protective piece in us. That was so wise. That knew to shut down. That knew to duck for cover. That knew it's got to do something. And to befriend it.

You know, I say those old wounds when they come up, so many times we'll go, no, what's wrong with me? Oh, my gosh. No, it's like an old friend asking to be healed. It's time. It's okay, you can do this.

And one of the things I'll help people look at is the event, the conclusion you made and your belief, because this is what gets projected on the current grief. I'll give you a quick example of this. A woman, while I was working with her in grief, shared how there was just no getting over this. Everyone leaves her. Everyone hates her. She's unlovable.

Like I said, when I hear no one, everyone, those kinds of words, I know I'm dealing with some old stuff. I said to her, can you tell me about the first time you had that feeling? Do you feel safe enough to go back and talk about that?

And she got quiet. She said, you know, I was five. My parents were getting divorced. I loved my dad so much, and he was moving out. I wished it was my mom that was moving out, and my dad was packing up everything, and I followed him from room to room, and then he put all his stuff in the back of our station wagon.

And she said, I stood there in the driveway as he was about to get in the car. He got in the car, and she goes, do you know in that moment in the movies or in the stories, the dad turns around to his little five-year-old daughter and goes, 'don't you worry, honey. Daddy loves you. Daddy's coming back to you'. She said he didn't do that. He just drove away. That's the event. Dad drove away. No look back, no love, no reassurance, no telling her this divorce wasn't about her.

And there were no adults around to do that either. Her mom was in a state of mind that she couldn't parent her well. That event happened. What conclusions did that little girl make? I'm unlovable. Everybody leaves me. No one will stay with me.

Those conclusions become her beliefs, and in her life, she has these beliefs. And when the divorce happens, when the death happens, her mind doesn't go, what a tragedy, a divorce. What a tragedy, a death. Her mind goes, of course they leave me. No one stays. People even die to get away from me. That's how it comes up. So it's so much of this we have to work with, we have to untangle and we have to talk about.

Alex Howard

What strikes me in that example is the power of that awareness to unpack that sequence of events and what's happened. And I noticed the word curiosity is something that you've mentioned a few

times, and I guess I'm curious as to how curiosity plays a role in this, to really understand these pieces?

[00:32:28] David Kessler

And I think that's the biggest thing I do with people is, I'm curious. I'm so curious. Where did that feeling of no one's there for you start at? I'm curious how that little girl formed those beliefs? I'm curious now, are there other ways to see the story? I'm curious, can you see the events that are happening now and try to re-parent that little girl who didn't get parenting in the moment? What would re-parenting look like? What would taking care of her look like?

And a lot of times when we talk about we're frozen. We're frozen, is the five-year-old child. What if we were to say, oh my gosh, that little five-year-old girl is appearing saying, no wonder everyone leaves us. There wasn't a parent around to help her. But you're an adult now, you're an adult.

You can say, honey, of course you're going there, but I got this, I got this. I'm an adult now. We can get through this divorce. We can get through this grief. It's going to be really painful, but together we can do this. And I got you. And to soothe the girl rather than letting the five-year-old's voice take over, as we all do in trauma.

Alex Howard

In a sense, what I'm really hearing is that we've got to learn to show up for ourselves, right? And that particularly can be challenging, if you take some of the examples that you've given, like the example of the little five-year-old girl being left like that and feeling like no one's showing up for her.

And I guess that's sometimes a tricky transition, where part of the trauma is people not being there for us and showing up for us. And now we've got to learn to do that for ourselves as part of our healing path.

David Kessler

And not to negate that. For me to go, I think that little girl was wrong. No. But instead to go, oh my goodness, what a scary feeling that little girl had that no one was there for her.

No one's there for me either. Is that true? By the way, I'm here for you in this moment. Can we just look at this moment? I am here for you. Can you take that in, different from what that little girl experienced?

Alex Howard

So I'm mindful that we're starting to get low on time and I'd love a few starting points for folks that are watching this. We can come to it in a minute, a bit about your kind of work that you have to offer people, but someone that's watching this, that's recognizing that grief is alive in them, or needs to be alive in them because it's perhaps shut down in some way. What are some of the fundamentals for someone to start with?

[00:35:54] David Kessler

First, the awareness. Oh, I'm never going to be healed. I'm always going to be in pain. I'll never be able to get over this. The always, the nevers, the everything's. Have awareness, they might be a sign of old trauma that's coming up in your grief.

Now, grief needs to be witnessed. Allow people around you, join groups, talk to others. And half the awareness is, are those extremes, the everything, the no one, the never coming up? Those might point to some old wounds, to some old trauma.

When you realize that, your mind's going to want to make conclusions again. I'm damaged. I'm broken. Instead, can you see that those feelings are an old friend knocking at your door for healing? Oh, my goodness. There's places in me that need to be healed that are coming up in this grief.

Let me talk to someone about that. Let me give them some time. Let me not make them my enemy. So important we realize those fears helped us survive. Don't make them your enemy. And so that's often the beginning of the work, is just to begin talking about this.

The other thing in grief, what other people think of your grief is none of your business. People are telling you to get over it, quit talking about them, move on. It's okay for you to have boundaries and say, 'thanks for your advice, but I still need more time with my grief. And I'm going to take that time. My loved one deserves time'.

People ask me sometimes, 'how long will I grieve?' I always say, how long is a person going to be dead? If they're going to be dead for a long time, you're going to grieve for a long time. Now, that does not mean we will always grieve with pain. The work is to begin grieving in time, in our own way, with more love than pain. That takes time, that takes support, but we can get there.

Alex Howard

That's very beautiful. People that want to find out more about you and your work, David, what's the best place for them to go? And what's some of what they can find?

David Kessler

[Grief.com](https://www.grief.com) is the best place they can go to. There's lots of free resources there. There's videos there on death of a child, death of a parent, a loved one dying by suicide. [AboutGrief.com](https://www.aboutgrief.com) is another place, just for a video on trying to understand grief a little more.

I also have an online group called [Tender Hearts](https://www.tenderhearts.com) that is worldwide. There's people there, it's actually hundreds of people who are gathering. You get to see me work with people, volunteering to work with me. We gather in groups on one day, we have a Friday focus. We take on a different topic and you can be in the front row asking questions, or you can be in the back with your camera off and no one knows you're there. So [Tender Hearts](https://www.tenderhearts.com) is a wonderful online group.

Then, I also do different trainings throughout the year. Sometimes on trauma, sometimes on writing through grief and trauma. We have a [grief certificate program](https://www.griefcertificateprogram.com) for therapists, helpers, nurses who want to learn to really help a grief-illiterate world, to become more grief-informed and trauma-informed because we didn't often get that education in our work. And a lot of people who

have experienced grief also coaches peers, do that program to learn how to turn their pain into purpose and help others. So those are a few things they'll find there.

[00:40:10] Alex Howard

Fantastic. David, it's been a really enjoyable interview. I really appreciate your time. Thank you.

David Kessler

Thank you so much.