



Conscious Life presents

How to Overcome Inner Shame

Guest: David Kessler

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with my friend David Kessler. We're going to be talking about the role of grief and how we really get free from the shame that can go with grief, but also those places of stuckness and hopelessness and helplessness that can come in as well.

To give a little bit of David's background, David Kessler is one of the world's foremost experts on loss and traumatic grief. His experience with thousands of people on the edge of life and death has taught him the secrets to living a happy and fulfilled life, even after life's challenging traumas. He is the author of six books, including his latest book, *Finding Meaning: The 6th Stage of Grief*.

He co-authored two books with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *Life Lessons* and *On Grief and Grieving*, updating her five stages for grief. He also co-wrote *You Can Heal your Heart* with Louise Hay. He also wrote *Visions, Trips and Crowded Rooms*. His first book, *The Needs of the Dying*, received praise from Mother Teresa. So firstly, David, welcome and thank you for joining me again.

David Kessler

Always great to be with you. Thank you for having me here and having this discussion.

Alex Howard

I'm excited for where we're going to go and I think before we come to some of the key focuses of the conversation, let's just give some contextual pieces. So I think particularly when we're talking about grief, one of the things that I found very helpful about your work is this, in a way, just like we broaden the definition of trauma within the conferences, you also broaden the definition of grief. So do you want to say a few words around how you would define grief and then also how that relates to trauma?

David Kessler

Yeah, grief is a small word for so much stuff. It's a big umbrella word that of course we think of grief as the death of a loved one, but it's also everything from a job loss to a pet loss, to a divorce,

to a breakup, estrangement. I think of grief as a change we didn't want. Something in our life has happened and it's a change that we didn't want. And so as we deal with that change, we have to, in some cases, the grief is part of the love, in some cases, grief is all the pain. There's so many different ways.

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And I think looking at it broadly is so important to realize there's not one grief bigger than another grief. I always say when people say which loss is the worst, I always say yours, yours is the worst loss. And when we talk about all those different things, there's also so many secondary losses. If someone was assaulted, raped, there's the loss of innocence, the loss of trust in the world. So it's interesting to think about all grief does not have trauma, but all trauma has grief. And so to really learn to deal with both of those.

Alex Howard

I think a lot of us have a lot of stories and narratives about grief, like when we should or shouldn't feel it, how long it should last for, what it means. And I wonder how much of the suffering or, in a way, the fighting of the suffering we experience is driven by those narratives?

David Kessler

It's really an important point because I often say we shouldn't should on ourself, and many times we have lots of shoulds around grief. It's interesting, I often talk about judgment. Judgment whether it's in grief, trauma or both. Judgment demands punishment. We're going to punish ourselves or punish others. And so many times I'll say to someone, sounds like you might be judging yourself in grief. And they're like, no, I'm not judging myself. And I said, but you're saying you should be over it by now. You shouldn't be going back to the beginning, you should be in a different place. And they're going, yeah, but that's not judgment.

And I'll go, well, yes, it is, because you're really saying where I am in my grief is not the right place to be. I'm in the wrong place in my grief. I should have progressed more or be further along. And grief is an organic experience. And so many of us these days think about television grief. We see a series that's got ten episodes and well, someone dies in episode one, they deal with the grief for half of episode two, and then they're done. And we think, well, that's what it's going to be like in our life. And grief has a much longer shadow, just like trauma does.

Alex Howard

I think, in a way, a lot of the narrative we can also have around grief when other people experience it is, in a way, I guess, a protecting that for many of us, some of our greatest fears in life are losing people or things or experiences that we deeply love. And so it feels like there's a lot of lids on the conversations or protective mechanisms that can also then inform the experience that we have.

David Kessler

Because it might be contagious.

[00:06:19] Alex Howard

Right.

David Kessler

I remember when I was younger and I would talk about the death of my parents and my peer group had not had the death of their parents and they could only tolerate the conversation so long. And then they brought it to themselves and their parents dying and sort of left me. And in the same way, six years ago, my younger son David died and the same thing, oh my gosh, parents did not want to be around me. I was their worst nightmare. But it's never been shown that grief is contagious. You're not going to catch it. Talking to me doesn't mean you're going to have a loss.

I mean, everyone's going to have a loss in their life. I always say the death rate is 100%. But we're not going to have a loss by being around people in grief. And here's the thing about that, and I think this is just as true for trauma. People will often say, oh, people in grief and trauma isolate. When you talk to people in trauma and grief, they say they're isolated because other people won't talk to them about it. They're sort of done hearing about it.

Alex Howard

That's really interesting. It also, I'm slightly slipping down a rabbit hole here and I want to go somewhere else in a minute, but it also strikes me that often in that immediate aftermath, people will rally around someone. And I often think it's the point after the funeral or the memorial or so on, that often that's the point of the greatest loneliness, because people think, right, that's done. We now have to move on.

David Kessler

We're done. We showed up. And I often talk about the rule of threes. You can reach out to the person at three days, three weeks, three months, you can even mention the loss at three years. We have this fear, oh my gosh, time has passed. I mean, they forgot about it. They're over it. No, they haven't. We remember our parents for the rest of our lives. We remember our siblings, our children, our pets. We remember them. And the truth is we actually like talking about them.

It's interesting. People often ask me, how long will I grieve? Or how long will my loved one grieve? And I'll say, well, how long are they going to be dead? Because if they're going to be dead for a long time, you're going to grieve for a long time, but not always with pain. I think the goal of grief work is to eventually remember with more love than pain. That's when it's a death. Other losses are obviously different feelings.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Yeah. David, before we started recording, you were sharing a little bit about this idea of postvention. I thought this was super interesting. So do you want to explain what it is? And then we can sort of open this piece up a little bit.

David Kessler

So we're all very good at having conversations on prevention. Don't go out late at night, don't go to the ATM late at night, you could be assaulted. Don't try drugs, don't use drugs, you could form an

addiction. Make sure you go to every twelve step meeting you can. Keep your mental health in check. Check on people who might be challenged. Check on everyone. We can prevent suicides, we can prevent addiction. Just say all that. We've got prevention covered.

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After the event happens, someone is assaulted, someone is raped, someone dies by suicide, dies of addiction, we don't understand we have left the world of prevention and moved into the world of postvention. And psychologically, I think this is a time for clinicians and people who are supporting people to realize in postvention, the prevention wording is not true anymore. It's not helpful anymore. Saying to someone, why did you go to the ATM at 10:00 p.m., no wonder you were raped does not help anyone. In fact, it makes the trauma worse and it also becomes victim blaming.

I work with many people who've had murders and all that, and people will say, oh, your loved one was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I say, no, no, no, the killer was in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the wrong thing. So we don't realize when we talk prevention after an event, when we say, oh, here's things that you can prevent suicide. Well, my loved one died by suicide, I can't prevent it, it's done. Saying those things is not helpful.

So it's a new concept for us to learn that we, after the event, should talk in the language of postvention. And here's the thing. We know that a lot of people with cancer can be saved. We know that there's good treatments and I had skin cancer, it was taken care of, I'm fine. We also know there are stage four aggressive cancers that despite our best efforts, people aren't going to make it, they're not going to survive. In the future, my hope is that we're going to know, oh, this person has stage four advanced mental illness, stage four advanced addiction, you couldn't have done anything.

But we can't tell yet where that range is of who has it. So in prevention, we're like, let's try to save everyone. Let's try to keep everyone off drugs. Postvention, we realize you can't save everyone. You can't cure everyone of cancer, you can't save everyone with mental illness, you can't save everyone with addiction. And we get afraid to have the postvention conversation because we think, oh, are we saying we shouldn't try to save everyone? Of course try to save everyone, but let's use a different language of postvention after the event has happened to not increase guilt, shame, trauma.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that when something that's horrible happens, of course we try to find meaning. And as you're pointing to here, therefore we're also, in a way, trying to assign blame, like, whose fault? Why did this happen? And in a way, I suppose, when the narrative becomes that it's our fault, or with the wonderful benefit of hindsight, we might have done something different, in a way we haven't then just got our grief, we've now got our grief and a shame and a blame and an additional layer around it. And I wonder what helps one to recognize when that's happening? Like, what are some of the signs that that shame and blame is coming in? And then also, how does one start to get some distance from it?

David Kessler

Yeah, it's important. You talk a lot, I talk a lot about trauma in the body and watching the body to really see when we're talking to someone is what we just said helpful? Because many times we

may say things that don't help. It's public, I talked about it on my Spotify podcast, I was talking to Ashley Judd after her mother had died by suicide, and she was talking about being at an outdoor fair where they were having fireworks. And I said, oh, did that trigger you?

[00:15:02]

And I saw her face change, and I didn't know if the fireworks had activated her, triggered her, but I knew what I said just did. And then I realized, oh, her mom died of a trigger. Why would I be using that word with her? So I think it's beginning to understand how some things we've always said doesn't help. When I think about addiction, mental illness, death by suicide, I always talk to people about the three C's and to remember that because we always think, just if I would have gotten them to one more meeting, I would have gotten them to a different psychiatrist, I would have monitored their meds more closely.

You know, we think we could have saved them. And I remind people, you did not cause it. You could not control it. And you could not cure it. And despite your best efforts and your loved one's best efforts, they still died. And sometimes the outside world isn't going to understand that, and they are going to victim blame. And we have to be very clear to not do it ourselves, to blame the caretaker, to blame the person who died. We have to be really careful to understand that in all kinds of losses.

We do that in a breakup, we do that in divorce. Like you said, we want to find meaning, but we also want to find out why. And why is an important question but it's not always the easiest person to blame, which often is ourselves.

Alex Howard

I was just thinking, David, as you were talking, how one of the dynamics that can happen in childhood when we go through trauma is that we don't want to blame the perpetrators of that because in a way that can be too threatening and frightening to believe that they're not safe. And so we make it our fault. And it struck me that, in a way, sometimes it's easier when we experience great pain or loss in our life, in a way, it's easier to blame ourselves than it is to, for want of a better phrase, blame God or to make it something that's out of our control because in a way that's even more scary because that means that, well, maybe something else could happen which is so awful.

Whereas if I blame myself and it's my fault, then I can try and do better in the future. And I just wonder about this place of, in a way, part of where we often have to, I think, I'm asking you the question, but where I think we have to go on part of our grief, healing journey is that place of powerlessness. And that can, I think, be a really hard place to go to.

David Kessler

We would always rather be guilty than helpless.

Alex Howard

Very well put. Yeah.

[00:18:10] David Kessler

I want to blame myself. I want to blame you. I want to blame someone because I don't want to live in a world where people I love can just randomly die. That's too scary a place. And here's the thing I always say freedom is found in reality. We have to realize what we don't have control over as hard as that is. We don't have control over life and death and it doesn't mean in prevention we shouldn't do everything we can to prevent trauma, to prevent child abuse, to prevent anything traumatic, death, of course, and recognize the reality in postvention.

We can't do it. We can't do it all the time. And when you talk about children I think about someone has to take responsibility for the abuse, for the trauma, and if those who inflict it in our childhood don't take it, someone's gotta take it. And it's often us. We take responsibility for things that aren't ours.

Alex Howard

What helps us go to that place of helplessness and powerlessness? Because in a way also my kind of reflection is that that's often part of the place of surrender and that's part of the place of the letting go but we can be very guarded and defensive against going there. What helps people go to those places?

David Kessler

I think what helps us is that idea of reparenting and sometimes a little hack that I help people with, reparenting is this vague thing, there's a child inside of me. I often say to people you were five when your dad died. You were five when the trauma happened, when the abuse happened. Look around you. Pick out a five year old girl. Pick out a five year old boy. Like, all of a sudden, you'll see a little five year old boy just innocently playing. Or a five year old girl carelessly on a swing. And to realize that's who you were before the trauma. That's who you were before the event. And that's who you have to take care of inside of you now.

Alex Howard

And if we can recognize that, of course that relationship, if we've been rejecting, blaming, shaming that part of ourselves, as we start to look at them in that new way, part of the challenge of doing that work is often those places in us are not entirely happy to see us at that point because we spent a long time giving them a pretty rough ride. So as we start to soften it in our perception towards that younger place in us, what can help us start to heal that relationship?

David Kessler

Well, to realize that how vulnerable we were and how much we had to protect ourselves. And we often know how to put the armor on. There's something brilliant about childhood. We know how to figure out ways to protect ourselves and get that armor on us. There's never a moment that we were told it's safe to take the armor off. You now can let go of those protections. You now can be safe. And that's part of that work we have to do for that child and for us to realize, oh, it's safe now to love, it's safe now to be intimate. It's safe again to trust the world. It's safe again to realize, I want to connect with people even though someday we're all going to die. It's that sense of safety we have to find.

[00:22:37] Alex Howard

What do you find helps us build that safety? For example, in terms of practices, in terms of things that can support us in doing that.

David Kessler

We've got to talk about it. We got to find safe people and safe places to talk about it. And the challenge is, as I mentioned many times, our friends and family are, like, done talking about it. They had their quota for how much they could take, and they're saturated and maybe at no fault of their own. It's such a grief illiterate world, it's such a trauma illiterate world, that we just have to find those places.

And sometimes your best friend, your spouse, the person you talk to about everything that gets you, doesn't get your trauma, doesn't get your grief. It didn't happen to them. Grief and trauma are a time when family and friends can feel like strangers and strangers can feel like family and friends if they have the same trauma happen to them. So we do need to talk to therapists, coaches, groups, peer to peer support. We do have to be around other people to give that the space maybe it didn't get in your childhood.

Alex Howard

Well, I guess in a way, when we're dealing with, if a loss, for example, happens in our adult life, when it comes to working with that, we're not just addressing that loss. I was filming recently, at the time this will come out, it'll be out on YouTube, with a guy whose daughter in her late 20s took her life and part of his healing process with that was also the healing of his mother dying when he was three. And actually those two things were deeply connected. And so it strikes me that sometimes what can be difficult for people is that they're not just dealing with the current loss, they're also dealing with that history.

David Kessler

Yeah, there is what I call the pure grief. The pure grief is the sadness, the anger, the love, the pain. That's the pure grief. Then we add all our stories. Maybe it was my fault. I should have done this. They should have done this. We have all those stories on it. Then we put all our unattended grief and unattended trauma on top of it. So grief work can become really complicated when you have to, oh, I've got the grief of that parent I didn't deal with. I've got the grief of this trauma.

And I've talked about this openly. I had a lot of trauma in my childhood. We lost our home. I was physically abused, sexually abused, and my mother died. I mean, I dealt with it all, and still it comes up, and that's what we project. I mean, I make jokes about now, and I can joke about it because I'm so far from it, that years ago, when I was dating, if someone said they didn't want a relationship, I was like, let's go out.

And if I ever met anyone healthy, if I ended up accidentally, and it almost was accidentally, in a healthy relationship years ago, my abandonment made me blow it up. I had to destroy that relationship. I had to sabotage it. So these old abandonments, all these things that come up, boy, they just layer right on our current grief and our current trauma.

[00:26:42] Alex Howard

So when there's that level of complexity that's going on, of course part of the issue is we can go into overwhelm, and it can feel just too much and feel overwhelming. How do we unpick that? I'm not sure that's quite the right word, but how do we unpack? That's a better word. And navigate through that? Put the question in slightly different words. If someone feels overwhelmed, where can they start? What's a good place to begin that journey?

David Kessler

I think you often have to unpack the oldest. I think you have to start back there. I think, of course, we are experiencing the current grief of the current loss. But here's what happens. I'll give you an example. In my online group, someone was talking about the death of their loved one. And as they kept talking, they were talking about blaming themselves. But then as they continued on, I almost heard perpetrator and victim.

And I'm like, it was something like their loved one had a heart attack. I don't know that there's a perpetrator and a victim in that story. And I finally said to them, am I just completely off here? But I don't know why the way you're telling your story, it feels like there's a perpetrator, you, and there's a victim, your loved one who died. And I said, a lot of times, we don't have perpetrator and victims in grief stories. Were you ever abused?

And of course, the person just welled up in tears and talked about the sexual abuse they had felt and had been through and survived as a child. And you're like, oh, and that gets projected onto this current loss, and we gotta go there and recognize that before we can go to the current loss, because otherwise they've made themselves the perpetrator in their current grief.

Alex Howard

Yes. And so then the way that they're relating to that grief is where they're at fault and they're wrong. Right. Interesting.

David Kessler

And in this particular story, the person felt like their husband had died of a heart attack, and the problem was, they did not tell the emergency personnel to check his heart. And of course, we couldn't go right to oh, don't be silly. The hospital, by the way, doctors and everyone are kind of trained to check the heart. You can't go right there because that's minimizing, that's dismissing, that is a real belief they have that's rooted in someone did something wrong. There was a perpetrator, and now it's projecting. They're now the perpetrator. So we got to go back and help them release that.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Well, it's a really interesting reflection, isn't it? Because I'm sort of mapping it back a little bit to childhood trauma, where there's the place where one has to feel and own and digest the rage and the hatred and anger that one may feel towards caregivers that didn't meet their needs in the way that they needed. And that, I think, often can be important to go through that. But it's not a good destination. It's not a good place to end up. And where is that place of balance between holding people accountable and responsible, but not placing ourselves in the victim with that?

[00:30:37] David Kessler

Yeah. And sometimes the work I have to do with people, because it is really confusing, like, how do you grieve the father that also was the abuser? And so part of what we have to do is many times when I work with people, we'll have to grieve that father as he was, and maybe grieve the mother as she was, and then grieve the ideal parents that they deserve to have and didn't get this lifetime.

And it's interesting. It's important work to do with someone else, because a lot of times when people hear, oh, ideal parent, I'm going to go do that work and think about, I'm going to try to grieve the ideal parent, I'll say to them, I'll try to role play it with them, and it's very helpful to do that but many times, if they try to do it alone, they'll say, oh, the ideal parent, my ideal mother stopped my father. And I'll go, oh, my gosh, I'm sorry, you're still in that realm.

The ideal mother and father, no one abuses you. You are cherished, you are loved, you are welcomed, you are safe. No one's even stopping abuse because it's not happening, because you're so special, no one would ever harm you. And people are like, oh, my gosh, to begin that healing process.

Alex Howard

Well, in a way, part of what you're touching on is we see the world through the lens of our trauma experience, right? In a way, it can be hard to have a sense of how it could be different when we've never had that taste. And I think sometimes when we're doing our healing work and us as clinicians, for example, we're trying to invite people to places that then we sometimes realize they've never been there before, so there isn't that reference point.

David Kessler

Right. And what we talk about many times is in trauma and in grief, we pick people to recreate it because we're desperately trying to come out with a different outcome. And hopefully at a certain point, we choose people who can have corrective behavior, have the behavior that we deserved. And whether it's the clinician who finally gives a safe place to talk about this or you finally are in relationship with people who can hold this in a safe way and won't recreate the trauma again.

Alex Howard

I think part of what's also challenging in the territory of what we're talking about as well is that it's hard for people to know what's really possible for them in their healing work when their history may be one of trauma and then perhaps their adult life has been one of grief. And so I guess, we have a little bit of time left, but what's the message of hope of what's really possible for people on their grief healing journey? And I think particularly in this context of this kind of key theme that's run through today's conversation around shame and blame and so on, what's really possible for us?

David Kessler

I think that's one of the most heartbreaking things for me, looking at mine and other people's social media, so many times I'll post something that maybe I'm doing a free talk or maybe it's a course or maybe it's the online group and someone goes, I had this traumatic death or I've had this trauma or

my child died or this happened and healing is not possible. And they want to convince me nothing I do or anyone can do will ever heal this.

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And that is part of that learned helplessness that in their mind they actually don't, I mean, that's true for them, they really don't believe healing is possible. And part of what, that's what I love about group work, is you then get in a group and other people who are like you that have had trauma that's like you and a death like you, all of a sudden you see healing in them and they become evidence. I say to people, whether it's the sexual abuse I went through or physical abuse or parent dying, younger son dying, all those things are brutal, they were horrible in my life.

And I hope on some level I'm evidence that healing is possible. Oh my gosh, I'm always going to miss my son. I'm always going to miss my younger son. That's never changing. And I have still found joy and happiness again after all those traumas and all those losses. It's possible. And I think what I hope we do is for people who can't see it yet, I often say to them, I know you can't see it, the death of your loved one, just horrible and their physical death is permanent and your loss of hope is temporary and I'm going to hold hope for you until you can find it for yourself. But it is there. So I think it's important for people to hear and know that.

Alex Howard

Yeah, that's very beautiful. It always makes me, in a way, smile inside when someone comes to something and is almost there to try and convince you that it's not possible to change, I'm like, but you don't really believe that because you wouldn't be here. There's so many other places you could have gone to spend your time, right? And so in a way, it's like there's a desperate, there's a hope, but there's just a deep, deep fear of disappointment, I guess.

David Kessler

And I've seen people, it's fascinating. I mean, I'll see someone where we talk about healing and they're like, I'm never healing, like I just said a bad word, like don't even say. Can't believe my loved one... You're going to talk healing. As if healing dishonors them. Healing is disloyal. And I'm like, oh my gosh. Healing makes me more in touch with the love of my son. Healing makes me more in touch with the pleasure of sex now after abuse. Healing makes me more in touch with the safety that people can get angry around me and I still feel safe and it doesn't hurt me anymore. I mean, all that stuff, really, healing becomes like an amazing word if you just let it in.

Alex Howard

Yeah, that's very beautiful. David, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, where's the best place to go? And walk us through some of what people can find.

David Kessler

So if they go to grief.com. Grief.com, they can find a lot of things there. There's, first of all, so many free videos to help in many different situations. There's also my online group that people can join if they need support after the death of a loved one and people from all over the world join it. We end up discussing trauma people have had, how to unlink that trauma from the grief. That comes up all the time in the online grief group.

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I also have a grief educator certificate program. And in that program that's where many times therapists, first responders, a lot of police, social workers, coaches, also people who have gone through enormous loss and want to turn their pain into purpose and help each other get certified as a grief educator to learn to help one another and to help others.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. David, thank you so much. I really appreciate you and your time today. Thank you.

David Kessler

Thank you, Alex. Always good to be with you and everyone here.