



Conscious Life presents

Life After Loss | Grief

In Therapy with Paul

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[00:00:00] Alex Howard

Before the episode starts, I just wanted to say that what you're about to watch is real therapy. Sessions have been edited down, but everything you are seeing is raw and unscripted. Please be aware that at times there is strong language and there are themes of trauma and suicide throughout.

What if the unthinkable happened? What if someone you love took their own life?

What would you do?

Would you give up hope? Or would you find the strength to keep on living?

When you wake up in the morning, how do you feel?

Paul

That I don't want to be here.

Alex Howard

What I hear is that you don't want to be here in this emotional place.

Paul

Yeah, I know I have to, but I don't want to feel it.

She caused me no end of grief for 10 years, and I'm angry because...

Alex Howard

I think part of what's difficult is that your love for her is also tied up with a lot of other feelings.

[00:01:34] Paul

Amongst all these thorns, it's like a metaphor of my life.

How much more can I fucking take?

Fucking leave me alone.

Fuck off.

Alex Howard

This is where we're going.

Paul

Oh, fucking hell.

Alex Howard

Our experiences fundamentally shape us.

Trauma can trap us, prevent us from moving forward.

The only way to break free is to confront trauma head-on. Only by healing the impact of our past can we awaken our true potential for the future.

I don't think he's the problem. I think you're the problem.

Paul

Fuck off. Why did you do it?

Alex Howard

My name is Alex Howard, and this is *In Therapy*.

I've been a therapist for over 20 years, and it's possible with this job to become desensitized. But every so often, I meet someone who reminds me why I do this work.

This is Paul. Paul has applied to be part of this series. Six months ago, Paul's daughter Zoey tragically took her own life. She was 29.

This catastrophic event has also unearthed deeply buried trauma from when Paul's mother died when he was a child, leaving him in a state of complete emotional overwhelm.

[00:03:39] Paul

I didn't realize until this event happened with Zoey, I'd never grieved for my mother. I'd never understood what went on as a child. I never understood the abuse, the disloyalty, and all that. And that's collided with Zoey's passing and created this, what I could describe as a monster that's just holding me back now.

I want to deal with that. I don't want it... Now it's in the open. Now it's out of the box. The box is open. I can't put it back in now, and I don't know how to do it.

Normally, I could do a few NLP techniques and change the way I felt, and I can't do it with this. I don't actually want to do it. I actually want to go through this process and come out the other side whole, because I feel at the moment, I'm in bits, I'm broken. It's like my life's on hold, and I know I have to deal with it. I haven't dealt with it for 57 years. I was 3 when Mom died.

And I never used to think anything could ever be worse than that. My own kid.

And this to deal with at the same time, it's fucking hard. It's hard dealing with just one fucking thing. I want my life to be whole. I want to be able to walk and hold my head up high, knowing full well I'm not going to press the 'Fuck It' button because I can't handle it anymore.

This is probably a lot of bollocks. I'm sorry. Listen, if there's anything else you need, just reach out. I got nothing else to say, mate. Sorry.

Alex Howard

I think I'll put him through psych assessments, but I'd love to work with him and move forwards.

When you wake up in the morning, how do you feel?

Paul

That I don't want to be here. So what's the fucking point?

But I know I can't think that way because I've got people that depend on me, I've got people that love me, and I don't want to be in a position where they feel like I do.

But at the same time, I want it to stop, if that makes sense. It's like, I don't want to feel like this. Because it feels, to me, debilitating. It's stopping me from being whole. It's not...

Alex Howard

Well, it sounds like historically, your relationship with your emotions has been to shut them down, or to defend against them.

[00:07:46] Paul

They were in a box, mate. They were in a fucking box. They were in a box. I kept them there. No one got near them. No one. And then Zoey went, and the lid came off. I can't put them back in there.

Alex Howard

See, how I think about it is you have a physical body, but you also have an emotional body.

Paul

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And your emotional body is also intelligent. And it was intelligent in the way that it put all that stuff in the box when you were a child because you didn't know how to feel it. You didn't have the support, and you didn't have the safety and the holding that you needed to be able to feel it.

So that wasn't something wrong in the response. It was intelligent. It wasn't the optimum choice, but it was the best choice that you had at the time. The challenge you've got now is that strategy is making your life unbearable because you have all of these emotions that are now partly more recent emotions, but also they're triggering historical emotions.

That's the intelligence of your emotional body, is that emotion is trying to move, but it's triggering an instinctive response of repression and shutting it down.

And so you're between, you're fucked if you do and you're fucked if you don't. Because if you let yourself feel it, that is what you learned not to do. In fact, your instinct is the opposite.

But also there's a place in you that recognizes you just can't hold this down anymore. And so the feeling of waking up in the morning, "I don't want to be here", what I hear is that you don't want to be here in this emotional place.

Paul

Yeah, that's it. I don't want to feel this way. I know I have to, but I don't want to feel it.

Alex Howard

Paul and I go on to talk about how he reacted after learning of Zoey's death.

Paul

This is going to sound a bit bizarre. When Zoey went, I didn't expect to feel the way I feel. But I shouldn't have been surprised because 10 years ago, or 11 years ago now, she attempted to take her life. Then I found myself at Green Park Station, and the train was coming in the station, and I thought, Oh, what am I doing? What am I doing? And then I realized that at that moment, I never

wanted to feel the same way as I felt as a child. The closest anyone could come to it would be one of my kids going.

[00:10:30] Alex Howard

Yeah, right.

Paul

So I was thinking to myself, when she went that I would be rational and logical and I would be able to deal with it, and I'd probably cry. No, that wasn't the case. I didn't understand what it was. It was just unbearable pain.

Alex Howard

Paul then tells me about how not being able to grieve as a child has impacted his life.

I know you lost your mom when you were 3. Tell me what else is important about what happens.

Paul

They fucking erased her. Fuckers. All the photographs, everything was destroyed. The whole lot, it was just... She never existed. So she's gone. We got this new mom, and we're not allowed to refer to her as 'Mom' anymore, we have to call her Pam. I don't know if people understand the disloyalty in that.

Alex Howard

What was your relationship like with your dad?

Paul

He lost his dad at 8 and lost his wife at 23. He had three kids, but he disappeared when she died because he couldn't hack it.

Zoey left me a letter, six pages long. I'm more than happy if you want to read it. But my actions to her and the way she describes that relationship is... I was always there for her. She said, I couldn't have asked for a better dad, friend, or mentor. I mean, if your kids write that about you, it's...

Alex Howard

It sounds like part of your way of healing and processing your own childhood was to be the kind of father that you didn't have.

Paul

Yeah. Without a shadow of a doubt

[00:12:30] Alex Howard

I want to make a distinction, which I think is important for the work we're going to do together. Which is the distinction between you as a grown man sitting here with a lot of capabilities and skills and capacities that you've shaped in your life, and the little boy that lives inside of you, which has been impacted and bruised and hurt by the things that have happened.

Part of what I think has been challenging for you in recent times is that little boy's got loud, and that little boy has been demanding your attention. Your attention is really important to that little boy because what he really wanted when he was a child, he wanted your mom and he wanted your dad, and he couldn't have either of them. He's put up with that for a long time.

And then you lost Zoey. And his feelings about losing Mom and Dad were reawakened. But also there are your feelings as a father, and your feelings as the man that's sat here, of your deep loss and your deep grief.

And both of you need to be given a voice. And both of you have healing that needs to happen.

Paul

I suppose there's a fear that if I let myself feel them, whether someone's going to get it in the neck, and that's not who I am.

Alex Howard

I think what's important here, because I think you've touched on something that I think is really at the heart of this, which is that you have a fear, I think a somewhat justifiable fear, that if you let him out of the box, you let those feelings come out, that you will lose control of yourself. As an act of self-care, and as an act of care of other people, you're trying to protect everyone. But here's the thing, the difference between your resources as the little boy, and your resources now as the man is enormous.

The little boy was dependent upon his mom and his dad to hold him in how he felt, and they weren't there to do it. But you can learn how to hold him in those feelings. That allows him then to do the healing that he needs to do. Because here's the thing, you became the father that you needed. So you learned how to do this. What you haven't yet done is done for him.

Paul

Maybe. It makes sense.

Alex Howard

Also, I don't think he's the problem.

Paul

Go on.

[00:15:40] Alex Howard

I think you're the problem. What I mean by that, is he's the boy and you're the man.

Paul

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And he's fucking angry.

Paul

I'm not giving him a say. Yeah.

Alex Howard

He's got every right to be angry.

Paul

I saw that as soon as you said that. I thought, yeah, you're right. I've not heard him.

Alex Howard

That's it.

Paul

Yeah, you're right, I suppress him. At the same time, I don't allow him to feel. At the same time, I don't allow him to process things.

Alex Howard

You see, a skillful, strong boundary as a parent says, "I love you enough to hold this boundary". My point here is not that we're going to put him in charge of your life. You're the man. You're the one that's got the lived experience of the world. You need to be in charge of your life. And he needs to have the time, the space, and the holding and the support to heal.

How you're trying to deal with that at the moment, and the way you've dealt with this historically, is just to have a harder boundary. But what you found is he's too big right now for you just to shut him back down again. And shutting him back down again is not what you need. But it's not let him run the show, and it's not shut him down. It's something else. And that something else is a big part of what I think is going to be our work together.

Paul

I get that. But even if I don't take anything else from today, the fact that I realize that I'm in charge, I'm causing the problem, not the little boy, it's quite fundamental. That was a shock.

[00:17:26] Alex Howard

Yeah, but here's the thing as well, and I think you probably already realized this. It's also a message of hope. Because if you're the problem...

Paul

Yeah, I can deal with that.

Alex Howard

You can change.

Paul

I can deal with that.

Alex Howard

If he's the problem, you're a bit fucked. That's the message of hope, that he is having an entirely appropriate response...

Paul

To me, slapping him down, yeah.

Alex Howard

Well, to the whole fucking world slapping him down, actually. And then you've just carried on in the vein that everyone else did. So he was ignored by... Well, your mom was lost. He was then ignored by your dad, by your dad's new partner. What did you learn to do? You just did what everyone else did, and you ignored him.

Paul

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense.

Alex Howard

I've asked you a lot of questions. Do you have any questions for me before we finish today?

Paul

Not really, no. I think I was a little bit, "Where's this going to go?" before we got here. I can see now where the work needs to be done. I thank you for that because it all makes sense.

Alex Howard

Good. All right, well, I think I've pushed you enough for today. I'll let you take some time just to be with it. Then I look forward to seeing you next time.

[00:18:55] Paul

Thank you.

Alex Howard

Thank you.

Music - Melissa Helser singing "Sound Mind"

In the chaos, you are the peace. In my suffering, you're here with me. In the darkness, you never leave. God of mercy, you're walking with me. I surrender anxiety, all the striving has to cease. At this moment, you're still the King. This is the gift you are giving to me.

Alex Howard

I'm just reflecting on my first session with Paul, and I think it went well. There's obviously some tough work that we need to do. But how he showed up is what gives me a level of confidence that we're going to be able to do that work. The overwhelming tendency when we experience overwhelming pain is we want to do anything we can to escape that pain. We can spend our whole life running from those most difficult and most painful places. What Paul did today was he had the courage to stand in front of his pain and to make a different choice.

Also, the realization that those younger traumatized places in us, they aren't the problem. It's how we are in relationship to those places, which is the problem. But that's also the message of hope, because we can change. If we change, those places can change.

I also just read Zoey's letter which Paul sent to me. I really felt Zoey's presence. If she was here, what she'd be saying was, "Help my dad". I want to read you a short excerpt from the letter because I think it really captures the heart of the work that Paul is doing.

"While I'm walking towards death with relief in my mind. There's no escaping the guilt that I feel knowing the chaos I'm leaving behind, and knowing how much I'm about to hurt you. I know you will never be the same again after this. But I know that one day you will recover from this. Like every hardship you've ever been through, if there's anyone who can take a shit situation and turn it into something worth fighting for, it's my dad."

What do you believe about that little boy?

Paul

He's a pain in the fucking ass.

Alex Howard

Yeah, right. Okay, thank you. Appreciate the honesty.

[00:22:22] Paul

Effectively downtrodden that inner child in me for a long time, bullied him in a way.

I think it could be one of those days where your life changes.

She caused me no end of grief for 10 years. And I'm angry at her for that.

I'm a bit concerned about today.

Alex Howard

Wondering why I brought you to a beautiful location?

Paul

Yeah. I don't know what you want from me.

Fucking leave me alone.

Alex Howard

For me, there's still a piece that I would like us to explore, which is Zoey.

All right, you want to do it?

Paul

Yeah.