

*Life As It Is*

“How to Grieve What We’ve Lost”

Episode #37 with Sameet Kumar

November 20, 2024



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**Sameet Kumar:** I've come to appreciate that catastrophic illness, like any trauma, is an amplifier of relationships, and grief is no different. And I think for so many people, the way I think of it is that grief exposes a wound. It's a relational wound that comes from being unable to connect with somebody or something that formed a core part of ourselves. And the healing of that connection wound, of that relational wound, is also in connection and in relational being, interbeing, as They would say. And what matters the most for people, this kind of recalibration, tends to prioritize that sense of warmth, love, compassion, and what are the kinds of things that get us to that state and help us to maintain that state.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Dr. Sameet Kumar. Sameet is a clinical psychologist at the Memorial Cancer Institute and Moffitt Hematology and Cellular Therapy program. His work focuses on mindfulness-based approaches to grief and loss. In his new book, *How to Grieve What We've Lost: Evidence-Based Skills to Process Grief and Reconnect with What Matters*, which he co-wrote with four other therapists, he lays out concrete strategies for finding meaning and cultivating resilience in the face of loss. In our conversation with Sameet, we talk about how we can work with the embodied experience of grief, what feelings of powerlessness can teach us about equanimity, how distress can motivate us to examine what really matters, and the unique challenges of coping with loss during the holiday season. Plus, Sameet leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Sameet Kumar.

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**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'm here with psychologist Sameet Kumar and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Sameet. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with both of you.

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**Sameet Kumar:** It's great to be here.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Hi.

**James Shaheen:** For the second time, Sameet. Sharon and I don't often have someone the second time.

**Sameet Kumar:** I'm honored.

**James Shaheen:** OK, so we're here to talk about your new book, *How to Grieve What We've Lost: Evidence-Based Skills to Process Grief and Reconnect with What Matters*, which you co-wrote with four other therapists, I should add. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, the book was actually the brainchild of my publisher, New Harbinger, who, all of us having gone through the pandemic and experienced so much loss, both people we know, people we love, the world as we knew it, they looked and saw the need to have something a little bit more concrete and comprehensive for people to kind of hold their grief with. And this is something that, you know, the pandemic is quote unquote over in the mass culture, but, you know, its ripples in new COVID infections, new COVID deaths, and long COVID, just everything, the fabric of our society has changed so much, and the fabric of our lives has changed so much, that they really saw the need to kind of distill the techniques that they we have for managing grief into one volume to help people with.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you write about the importance of embracing the pain of grief rather than running from it. So could you tell us a bit about how to actually practice turning toward the difficult experiences of loss?

**Sameet Kumar:** There's parallels between grief and meditation practices, which is kind of the area I operate in, and the parallels that I see oftentimes when people talk about meditation, the

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word “mindfulness” is very popular. Mindfulness is very popular. And the word itself connotes a mental process, *mindfulness*. And I see the same parallel with grief and loss. People think of it as, you know, this emotional state or mental pain or anguish. And really, the more you practice meditation and the more acutely you experience grief, I’ve really come to appreciate how physical these things are. Meditation is really about dialoguing with the body in so many ways and opening a conversation with the body, of sensations, of impulses, of posture, of pain, of physical pain and discomfort, especially on long retreat. And it's very similar with grief.

My most intimate experience of grief was in 2016. My mother died very suddenly, very unexpectedly, and I've been working in palliative care and end-of-life care for many years, but nobody had taught me how physical grief was, like my body felt like I fell out of bed every morning or got hit by a truck. It was purely physical, and at some point it was like making the, connecting the dots. I had the same assumptions about meditation also. I didn't realize it was really so much about physical practice. So it's really bridging those concepts together and rooting them both in the experience of the body, experiencing pain, experiencing discomfort, holding pain, and holding discomfort.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you describe this as a kind of radical acceptance because it's a completely unconditional allowing of our experience, and you say that it can actually be a courageous act. Can you say some more about radical acceptance and the courage it sometimes takes to bring it to life?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, Tara Brach has written so much and spoken so much about radical acceptance. But really, my understanding of it is that very few of us can do it intentionally. Most of us do it because there's nothing left in the bag. You know, everything else has been emptied out and it's sort of the last resort. You've tried the addictions, you've tried TV, you've tried social media and nothing has blunted the effect of the pain, and the only thing left to do at this point, there's nowhere left to run, is to turn around and embrace it. You know, very few of us can do that intentionally. Most of us find ourselves with no other options left, really, but to



kind of say, OK, uncle, I've got nowhere else to run to, and this is not going away. It feels like it's getting better, but it seems to come back even worse. What am I doing wrong? And the truth is, you're not doing anything wrong. There's no choice left but to accept it.

**James Shaheen:** You know, that question about what am I doing wrong, you talk about the distress about our distress, where we may feel guilty or anxious about whatever emotions we're experiencing, and that makes us feel just so much worse. So can you say more about what you call secondary emotional processes? How do they complicate and magnify our underlying distress, and how can we instead learn to work with them effectively?

**Sameet Kumar:** So one of the potent aspects of this kind of Buddhist psychology that's come out of the meditation out of the centuries and millennia of meditation practice is the sense that feelings are. They exist. They form a chain. They're part of a chain of events, but feelings exist; we can't push them away, as much as we would like to. Really, the best medicine is noticing them, dialoguing with them, and when we do that, if we're identifying a little bit less with them, you know, I am sad, but I'm not sadness. And what winds up happening to so many of us, from childhood experiences with parenting or from caregivers or people who made a big impression on how we connect to ourselves, is that the dialogue we have with ourselves isn't always very validating, especially when we're stressed, or especially when we're in pain. It tends to be very harsh, very judgmental. And so what a lot of these meditation practices seem to do, what the research shows, is that they don't change our feelings; what they do is they change our feelings about our feelings, the script that we're running about, well, are we kind to ourselves when we're sad, or are we sad that we're sad? Are we angry that we're sad? That layer that we put on top of our feelings, that's the secondary emotional process, and that's what makes a hard time even harder, you know? There's suffering, but now I'm suffering from the suffering. And to put it very broadly, I think most of us feel a mix of things in that secondary layer, and it's not very orderly. Sometimes there's a jumble of emotions, a second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth layer, even, and it's hard to kind of disentangle them. And what I feel is a healing practice is to

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develop this sense of dialogue between ourselves, our bodies, and our feelings. This is what I'm feeling right now. You know, there's a very popular saying, you have to name it to tame it, and that almost makes it sound like you can control emotions, which I don't think most of us can do most of the time, but if we can identify, name the feeling, you know, without judgment, with openness, with acceptance: Something really bad has happened in our lives that is causing us to feel this way, something that we couldn't control, something that we didn't want to happen, maybe we didn't know it was going to happen, but it's happened, and accept that this is what's happened, and there's going to be difficult feelings with it. And that secondary layer, although it's automatic, we don't have to believe it all the time.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I think one of the tough things is the question or the thought, “I should be over this already.” That seems to fall into that category, too, of judgment.

**Sameet Kumar:** Absolutely, yes, and this is something I think is culturally and socially driven. Grief tends to be very inconvenient in the working world, and bereavement leave tends to be counted in days, not weeks or months. And even in the DSM, the manual that mental health care providers use in diagnosing conditions, it's not really that long. We can make the argument, I think, that the DSM is more for billing than for anything else, and there's value to that, but I think it also kind of feeds in that, you know, after three months or six months, you should be quote unquote over it. You should be ready to quote unquote move on. And definitely grief does seem to change from time to time, but I find, like with most natural processes, it's very nonlinear. It doesn't move in a straight line. It doesn't get better every day in every way. It tends to be up and down. When I meet somebody who's newly grieving, I tell them there's only two stages of grief to worry about: There's up and there's down, and they're going to go back and forth every day for a long time. And, you know, there are also certain times of year that are very triggering: holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, events that the body seems to remember before the mind does consciously. As is so often the case, people get a headache or stomach ache, or they feel really tired or they're on edge, and mentally they're like, “I don't understand what's going on.” And

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sometimes I'll ask them, “Well, you know, I noticed when we first started talking, your loved one's birthday is coming up. Do you feel like that's an issue?” or this is when they went into hospice care, or this is a particularly relevant holiday for them. And so my busiest times of year tend to be the holidays because people's grief comes roaring back: “I thought I was quote unquote over it by now. How come it feels worse than it did three months ago?” This is the pattern. This is what happens. This is the nonlinear natural process of emotional pain.

**James Shaheen:** So as we're headed into a number of holidays, can you say more about how you work with grief, especially at the end of the year? I mean, when the holidays pile up, it's a really difficult period. Whether you lost the person this during the holidays or earlier in the year, there's something about the big holidays that really brings this up

**Sameet Kumar:** Yes, as I'm sure everybody does, I see Christmas decorations earlier and earlier every year. One of the things that I tell people is to expect it to be whatever it's going to be. It might be more challenging. The general pattern that I educate people on, a very general pattern, but everybody's unique going through this, is that the buildup to these holidays tends to be much worse than the day of. Not always the case, but usually the case. So for instance, the day before Thanksgiving, you might not be able to get any sleep, your stomach might be in knots, but the day of Thanksgiving might be better than you thought it would be, which isn't to say it's going to be great, but it might not live up to the dread coming up to it.

The other thing is that, hopefully I'm meeting somebody for the first time well before the holidays, because these practices, these coping skills, they take time to work. They're not very immediate sometimes. And I really do believe very firmly that one of the most powerful tools of ancient practices that we can find in Buddhist teachings and Hindu teachings and early Christianity, in Judaism, in Islam, in the great religions of the world, and in Indigenous practices is that for thousands of years, we humans have cultivated a daily routine of checking in with ourselves and the world that we're connected to in some way, shape, or form, whether that's prayer or some other sort of ritual, meditation in the morning, some sort of checking in with your

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soul or your spirit or checking in with the world around you in a much bigger way than you will, you know, in the afternoon, in the hustle and bustle of life, and really developing that skill set. I think it's a very grounding practice to use during hard times to already have that skill set there. If it's not there, you know, if you're listening to this and being exposed to these ideas for the first time and the holidays are coming right up and you don't have six to eight weeks to get something in place, start today. Start today. And there's certainly plenty of people who I recommend meditation or exercise or journaling or something like that, and they kind of nod and they smile, and we kind of have a tacit agreement that I'm not going to check their homework, right, and I know they're not doing it and they know they're not doing it. But when things get really tough, they might suddenly find themselves motivated to do it. And I think that is absolutely wonderful, that, yes, it's acknowledging this is tough. There may be an assumption that I should be over it or better or something like that, but I'm having a hard time. So I'm going to do something to hold that hard space, to hold that pain with.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You also touch on how distress can motivate us to examine what really matters. Can you say more about this and how grief can clarify our values or priorities?

**Sameet Kumar:** My predominant work is in palliative care with people who are diagnosed with cancer, and I've come to appreciate that catastrophic illness, like any trauma, is an amplifier of relationships, and grief is no different. It tends to bring out the nature, if there is such a thing, of many of our relationships. What matters the most? Who matters the most? What activities matter the most? You know, in that kind of shock of acute grief, I think most people find that they have to sort of recalibrate what their goals are in life, and I think for so many people, the way I think of it is that grief exposes a wound. It's a relational wound that comes from being unable to connect with somebody or something that formed a core part of ourselves. And the healing of that connection wound, of that relational wound, is also in connection and in relational being, interbeing, as They would say. And what matters the most for people, this kind of recalibration, tends to prioritize that sense of warmth, love, compassion, and what are the kinds of things that

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get us to that state and help us to maintain that state, so maybe not the kinds of stuff you were doing before, but maybe. Yes, loss can change us, and it can change us in difficult ways, and it can change us in very good ways, too, in healthier ways.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you write that loss can be a profound spiritual teacher, and I find myself sitting here listening to you thinking what an incredibly delicate position you are actually in as you work with people: You don't obviously want to diminish in any way that wound or that loss and need to help people honor that and at the same time open the door or help open the door to the possibility of profound change toward the good that might be there. So how can we learn to recognize loss as a teacher?

**Sameet Kumar:** Well, first off, I think it's not always possible to see loss as a teacher. When there's intense emotional pain, that's all there is. You know, that's all there is. And I'm sure there's a narrative that can be said that, you know, intense emotional pain is a profound teacher too. Yes it is, but it also just really hurts, and when it's around, there's not a whole lot of dialoguing going on. It just hurts a lot. You can't breathe, you know, is what it feels like. So it's not so much that there's a teacher-student relationship with grief all the time. It's kind of when things are cooled off a little bit, and this sense of difficult aspects of our lives, difficult periods of our lives, difficult relationships in our lives, they may have something to teach us.

It's hard to talk about this because so many of the people that I work with hear that things happen for a reason, and I really don't like that phrase at all. It's really tempting to kind of stray into, “Oh, well, you were meant to learn this lesson,” and I absolutely do not want to stray into that because there are some very bad things that people live through, and it's hard for me to be comfortable with the fact that this had to happen, or this was supposed to happen, or this was part of a plan. It just feels wrong. So it's very tricky to talk about loss as a teacher and walk that fine line at the same time.



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There's a distinction to be made between this idea that things happen for a reason and our capacity to find meaning in very bad things, and those are two very different things, and I guess that's where I'm coming from with this, is that I don't know if things happen for a reason, but I trust our capacity to find meaning when bad things happen, and sometimes it's a struggle, sometimes it's a struggle, and sometimes the meaning of a very tough day is just that you got through a very tough day, and it's exhausting, and your eyes are swollen and red, and you ate a bag of potato chips and a pint of ice cream, but you know what? You survived.

**Sharon Salzberg:** That's great. You remind me of a story I often tell, which is about I turned into a manuscript I'd written some years ago, and when the publisher wrote back to me, he said, “It's nice, it's great, and the passage I liked the most was when you quote Roshi Joan Halifax saying something like, don't try to force yourself to see the traumas of your life as gifts, they're givens.” But I actually agreed. Sometimes we do see a blessing or a possibility in something really terrible, but that's not because we're forcing ourselves to in any way. So, Sameet, as you write, to deny ourselves the ability to feel grief would be to erode the essence of our wonderful human capacity for deep, intimate love. So how can grief actually orient us—sometimes—toward this capacity for love?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah. It's like getting a tooth pulled, right? That was there. And it feels like that in the heart sometimes, this capacity to love that gets, this relationship gets pulled out of our hearts. And it feels physically like we've had our hearts pulled out of our body, and as difficult as that is, I do think, though, that there's an intensity behind grief that speaks to our capacity for connection, and it's hard to put into words exactly. It's magical, it's sacred, it's blessed. But I think that it's also our natural birthright, and it's something that we're capable of doing. It's pretty miraculous, and I don't know that it's unique to humans. I mean, I certainly feel like I have that relationship with my dog, as crazy as she is. I like to believe she has it with me, but, you know, I can't be sure. I believe she does. But it's that capacity for connection. The Buddhist teachings talk about this precious human life, about how rare it is to have attained a human birth, and I think

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part of what makes it so precious is our ability to experience the interconnectedness that we can experience. The nature of reality itself is in our ability to connect and be connected to, and loss kind of highlights that in a very difficult way, how connected we were to a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, a family member, or an idea.

**James Shaheen:** Sameet, you describe the path of grief as a spiral staircase. Can you walk us through this analogy?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah. You know, very early on in my training, I started to read up on maps of grief that were in existence, and none of them really seemed to resonate with what I was seeing in front of me. And what I was seeing in front of me was very nonlinear and in some ways very circular, but it was kind of like watching a river flowing in a circle. The water was never the same. I could get some sense of patterns around people's grief unfolding, and as I got to work with people for longer and longer periods of time, it became very evident that their grief was turning in a spiral, and each turn of the spiral was around particular times of year—their birthdays, and sometimes in families, dates happen in clusters, so we have a whole cluster of things in my family in December, but other families have events scattered throughout the year. There's somebody that I've been working with whose mother's birthday, diagnosis, death, and funeral all happened within a very short two month span, and it puts her on the doorstep of the holidays every year, so, really, we're talking about, like, a quarter or a third of the year is spent revisiting loss.

And so the spiral tends to turn around each of these dates in a year, and I describe it as a spiral staircase because the spiral kind of captures the calendar movement, the movement through time in the calendar, in our very linear calendar, but the sense of growth that's happening also with the pain, through the pain, in the pain, the sense of maybe upward movement. And maybe that's a little kind of positive psychology kind of spin on it, but I do think that being aware of the grief process in dialogue with the body and holding it with a sense of reverent connection to others and the capacity to have reverent connection to others, that there is an upward movement that

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comes from that. So even though we may be revisiting the pain over and over again and experiencing those very jarring ups and downs on that staircase, going up and down that staircase, I do feel that there is generally an upward movement that people experience, and that doesn't in any way diminish the pain that they're experiencing. It's very important. It doesn't mean it hurts less. It may hurt different.

**James Shaheen:** That reminds me of when I was much younger, and I remember asking somebody, “When does this end?” And she said, “It doesn't end, but it changes.” And that's how I thought of the spiral staircase, and that growth happens regardless. But you also suggest turning to nature as a guide through grief, learning from the natural processes of destruction and restoration. So can you give some examples of what this can look like?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, I mean, not everybody has access to the natural world as much as we would like it to be, but even just watching on TV, you can see these natural cycles, you know, in the seasons. Those are some of the oldest observed natural cycles. Things fall, they decay, darkness sets in, and then colors burst forth, and it seems like a lively world again, and heat and cold and things like that, night and dark, night and dark and daytime and morning. Nature shows us so much, and if you're able to, I think being in nature is very healing also. For one thing, if you have access to these places in nature, hopefully, it's very quiet, and you don't have to kind of put on a front, a fake mask. So many people I talk to, I call it subtle grief. It's the mask that you have to put on to go grocery shopping or to go to work or to engage in conversation with people that, you know, you'd rather just be home under the covers or something like that. I find nature to be very forgiving about that. We don't have to wear masks in nature.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, I found that at times of deep grief that I couldn't bear the sound of the television set or of small talk or of noise on the subway. There were times when I did not have the option to get out into nature, and I really do think of it as a very healing thing and it's not always available to us. And also, I remember in my 20s when experiencing a lot

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of loss I would ask, “Why? Why is this happening?” or “Why did this happen?” So how do you recommend working with what you call the whys of grief?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, I mean, I'll go back to that quote by Roshi Joan that Sharon quoted. I don't know why. I just don't know. I really try hard not to go down that hole because there's no answer that I can find. I mean, so many of the people I've worked with have cancer or catastrophic illness or illnesses, and we may pretend to know that certain activities increase risk, but we ultimately don't really know why, because not everybody engaging in those activities experiences those consequences.

So this is the human condition. This is just the human condition. And this is something that has been talked about for thousands and thousands of years. I mean, the Buddha told the story of the young mother who was grieving and carrying her dead baby to the Buddha to bring him back to life, and the Buddha said, “Find me a mustard seed from a house where death is not visited,” and she went around the town and could not find it, and it brought her to a place of acceptance that this, I wasn't singled out for this. This is just what happens. This is the given. You know, it's not the gift, it's the given. And similarly, the Book of Job in the Bible, you know, not really a good answer. Why is my family gone and my business destroyed? Well, just to see what would happen. I mean, that's not really an answer.

So it's not so much, the whys are not so much, I find they're not as essential to working with grief as much as the hows: How are we going to work with grief? How are we going to hold this pain? And who are you going to be on this journey through pain?

**Sharon Salzberg:** You know, grief can often leave us feeling helpless or powerless, and at the same time you suggest that this helplessness can actually be the seed of equanimity. How so?

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**Sameet Kumar:** Well, there's an overlap with radical acceptance there, right, that there's nothing left, right? There's nothing left. It's done. And there's a seed of equanimity there, because I think at some point it just feels, how should I say this?

Grief has the capacity to feel so overwhelming that it can paralyze us in many different ways. And there's a sort of transformative capacity, I think, working through what I think in psychology we would call it apathy almost, this kind of indifference to what's happening in the world around us because we're so in our pain. There's a capacity there to transform it into equanimity, from indifference into equanimity, that this is coming and going. This is just coming and going. And these sort of pettier emotions that we feel sometimes, we don't have to get lost in them because we're in a basket of so much emotional energy. It's unpleasant. That it helps us to kind of develop a muscle memory of letting some of the other emotions go, you know, and as time goes on, and as the cycles of grief alternate between different levels of intensity, there's something to be said about holding on to that worldview. These emotions are transient. It's not just grief that's a spiral staircase; all our emotions are transient. And I think a lot of people with catastrophic loss, there's a little bit less trust in the stability of the world and therefore a little bit more equanimity.

I found this interesting piece of research that as people age and as we get into our seventies and eighties and nineties, there's much less fear of death and much more equanimity. And part of the reason that's theorized is because there has been so much loss in these people's lives. You know, every year that we live we get to know somebody else who's no longer on the planet with us, and at some point I think that happens naturally with so much loss that we come to the place of equanimity, that just we're all here on borrowed time. What matters is connection, you know, for most of us what matters the most is connection

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, one way of working with helplessness that the book suggests actually is naming our fears. So I wonder if you could talk to us about what this looks like as a practice.



**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, I mean, I don't sit down with people and say, “OK, today we're going to name our fears.” It usually starts with, “I don't feel so good.” “Well, tell me what you're feeling.” And through that process, we're starting to identify and put a name on it: OK, so is it sadness? Is it guilt? Is it anger? Is it shame? And once we have the name on it, we can kind of explore what's behind it. And it's not so much to get rid of it but to understand it better. I had said earlier, “Name it to tame it” is a very popular saying now. And I think there's something to be said about that, that we're not naming it to dismiss it or to control it but to understand it better. And I think that can be very empowering.

Now, I have to say, as soon as I say that, I'm almost getting into the trap again that if we do all this stuff, that the grief is going to be better, we're going to get through it, we're going to be fine. I want to point out again that these are all different techniques to hold the pain. They're not ways to rush through it, dismiss it, or kick it off and say, “You know, we're done with it now. We were able to name it. I'm done.” It doesn't work like that. As you said, James, this becomes part of you. It changes. It becomes part of you, and it will always be part of you. It changes. That's all. And this is one of those ways that we can relate to pain, and there's no cure for it, but it's a different way of relating to it.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, grief can also provoke feelings of guilt and self-blame, and I find both in the fullness of the experience and even if it starts to let up some, and you have moments of happiness or delight in something, and then guilt rushes in. So what are some of the ways we can learn to work with these emotions more productively?

**Sameet Kumar:** Well, I think that one of the central tasks that most of us have in our lives is to be able to give and receive love, and guilt is a real big obstacle to that. What do we do? We don't go to war against guilt, right? We're trying to love better, trying to connect better. So I think part of what happens in the therapeutic relationship is that it is a place of compassionate acceptance, and so there's a relational dialogue that's happening in a therapeutic setting, in a healing relationship. You know, when I say therapeutic setting, I don't only mean psychotherapy—deep

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friendship, romantic connection, intimacy, any relationship that fosters a sense of emotional intimacy embodies love. We experience that. And this can be with a cat or a dog or an animal as well. And what I find is really all of these practices are different ways of weaving a basket made of loving connection to hold tremendous pain in. And, you know, maybe guilt is just going to be part of how we do that. I've worked with so many grieving parents over the years, and I don't know that that guilt ever goes away, even if they had absolutely no role to play in how their child died. And so guilt just becomes one of those things we have to put into the basket and hold it with tenderness and care.

**James Shaheen:** Sameet, sometimes the guilt is linked to a lack of closure, as much as I don't like that word, or a need for forgiveness, and to this end, you cite the work of Dr. Ira Byock, a pioneer in the American hospice movement, especially his notion of the five things. So first, what are the five things?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, you find this in the Kahuna tradition too, the ho‘oponopono, and I've found them to be just such a potent intervention to use for people whose loved ones are dying and often is the case after they've passed away. These five things cover the themes to cover at the end of a relationship. You know, I'll frequently write them down on a Post-it. I still carry pen and paper with me, believe it or not. Or I'll send a text with these five things. So they start with, I'm sorry, asking for forgiveness; I forgive you, giving forgiveness; thank you, conveying gratitude; I love you. It's a stumbling block for a lot of people. Not all relationships are very loving, but I find that oftentimes a healing process can happen after a loved one dies, where you wind up having a better connection with them after they're gone than you were able to have while they were here on earth, and sometimes people regret not being able to say “I love you.” It may take twenty years. But it's very powerful to say that to somebody, even if you don't feel ready sometimes, you know, within reason. And the fifth one is goodbye. Oftentimes people regret, “I never said goodbye.” And I find that my own personal experience working with people at the bedside is that if most people do the first four, the fifth one is OK. They kind of feel like they've

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covered what needed to be covered. And perhaps the funeral or a ritual can encompass the goodbye.

**James Shaheen:** You say that the five things can make the loved one more human again. How so?

**Sameet Kumar:** Well, going from my experience working with people and personally, you know, caring for a loved one who's ill and whose body is failing, there's just so much to do medically and just on a practical level that it's easy to forget everything this person has been in our lives. Caregiving becomes in many ways a running system of checklists that you go to sleep with and you wake up with, and you forget the kind of dimensionality of this person, and it kind of connects back to memories over the years that perhaps have been shuffled away because of caregiving. Or, you know, the opposite happens. Sometimes people kind of romanticize who this person is. They're perfect in every way. It's nice to think, but not many of us are perfect in every way. And so what do you have to forgive from this person? “Oh yeah, they did something really rotten to me. I forgot all about that.” So, you know, we wind up having a connection with the real person and not the quote unquote patient that we were taking care of or the sick one or a parent with dementia who we forgot what their voice sounded like, even though they've been alive for many years or something like that. It brings them back into a sense of dimensionality of personhood, that this is a person that made mistakes that we experienced highs and lows with and that we loved, in some way, hopefully, or that we feel gratitude for, perhaps directly or indirectly.

**James Shaheen:** You know, one reason grief can be disorienting is that it unravels not only our present self but also our future self, and it disrupts plans we may have made or expectations we may have projected onto the future. So how can we mourn and reconstruct this future self following a loss?



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**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, oftentimes, future self–building happens by accident. It's John Lennon who wrote the line in one of his songs that life is what happens when you're busy making other plans, and what my hope is is that this intense pain of grief opens up this sense of loss. This sense of loss opens up awareness of our capacity to connect and love and be connected with each other, this relational capacity that we share as humans, this potential. That becomes part of our future self, this reverence and honoring of that capacity to love and be connected to, in our own way, whatever that may be, and that maybe this is sometimes the pivot that people experience after loss is that they want to do something more meaningful toward making this a more loving world, a more loving society, a place that honors this capacity that we have to be close to one another and risk it all, right, and risk it all for pain.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you write that it can be hard to distinguish between mourning in ways that are meaningful and becoming trapped in cycles of silence, avoidance, and poor mental health. So how can we tell when we're getting stuck?

**Sameet Kumar:** There's different ways to do this. One is I think the basics: Are we taking care of ourselves? Are we grooming ourselves? Are we living in clean surroundings? Are we doing what needs to be done, the basics of paying bills and taking care of people that need to be taken care of or pets that need to be taken care of. You know, sometimes that's the jolt we need to kind of, OK, I'm hurting, but I need to take a shower. I'm hurting, but the dog needs to go for a walk. It's been a while and they're getting stir crazy. Or something like that. I want to kind of emphasize again, in a different way, many people feel pressured to get it right, to get their grief right. And I think there's something to be said that grief just sometimes is. Sometimes it's really really hard. And sometimes it may feel pathological. I think it is helpful to have a resource, whether it's online or a therapist or a teacher or a friend, to have some sort of tether to fresh air, fresh perspectives, loving connection and relationship, to kind of refer back to. If you think of grief as a deep scuba dive, you never dive alone. Always have a buddy with you. And there's not too many people that will want to dive down to grief with you unless they've been there. And

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you know, support groups can help. There's a lot of online support. You don't have to be locked into it. Use it when you need it. But I think it's also just important to kind of draw some distinctions. If you feel that life is not worth living it's important to kind of have those resources available. I think people who are having thoughts about hurting themselves or finding that there's no point to it at all anymore, you know, it's a very scary place to be, and the suicide hotline, 988 in the United States, there's always somebody available there. I think that's a big red flag is that if you feel life is not worth living, it's time to get some serious help. And those thoughts come and go. I mean, there's a very big difference between feeling that you can't go on and I don't want to go on and I'm going to do something about that. So I think that's where I would draw the line.

**James Shaheen:** You know, Sameet, I have one more question. You know, you said this sense of, and I think we've all said it before, when facing loss, I can't go on. And I remember thinking very clearly myself, “I can't go on without this person. I don't think I'm going to be able to bear it.” And of course, I am able to bear it, and I am able to go on without this person. And following that, you can have a sense of betrayal, like you've betrayed this person and their memory, because you are able to go on and you are able to bear it, and you do have a life ahead of you. How do you talk to people about that, that sense that you've betrayed this person or their memory?

**Sameet Kumar:** Yeah, I mean, I think part of this goes into the sense of future self. And one thing that I tell people all the time is one day at a time, one day at a time. You know, holding the immensity of it all is too much all at once, so just one day at a time.

Part of my backstory is that my mother survived partition, the partitioning of the South Asian continent, and she witnessed her parents and her brother being killed during those tumultuous times, and it scarred her, obviously, for life. She didn't talk about those things very much. Once a year we would, me and her would talk about it during the anniversary of the train massacre that she survived with her two younger siblings, but she carried a profound sense of survivor guilt, and the conclusion that she came to later in her life was similar to what I've heard articulated

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from a lot of people who survived concentration camps in World War II, that rather than betraying their loved ones by living, their loved ones live on through them. And that's what we do. We carry our relationships with those who are no longer here, we carry them with us into this future world, and our joy becomes their joy through our capacity for connection. And, you know, she would hold my children sometimes, and I would think to myself like, “Wow, it's like her mom is here with her,” who never was able to live past 1947. And she would say sometimes that, you know, “I wish she was here to see this. She would have been like 110. But it was that sense that she was always kind of like, “Can I experience this joy?” And later in her life, she came to a place that, like I said, I heard so many people who survived concentration camps come to, because, you know, some of these people that I've spoken to in concentration camps had the greatest sense of humor I've ever come across, and it just blew my mind. And, you know, one of them very distinctly told me, “I have to laugh for a thousand people who didn't make it out. I have to laugh for all of them every day.” He told me this getting chemotherapy. So it gives you a sense of our capacity to carry immense pain, but also immense meaning.

**James Shaheen:** Sameet Kumar, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *How to Grieve What We've Lost*, which is available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Sameet.

**Sameet Kumar:** OK, thank you. Well, the first thing that we're going to do is check in with our breath, check in with our posture, which is supporting our breath. We want to make sure that our posture is comfortable and allows us to have slow rhythmic breathing. If you know how to do yogic breathing or diaphragmatic breathing, it's a great time to settle into that pattern of breathing, slow and steady, just being aware of the inhale and being aware of the exhale and spending a few moments breathing slow and steady like this. If your eyes aren't closed, you can gently close your eyes and imagine your body in your mind's eye, sitting in the space that you're in, and above you, imagine the form of your mentor or teacher, of the Buddha, if that image gives you peace, or Jesus, or anybody or anything that gives you a sense of connection with a

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higher meaning and purpose in life, a loving presence. Spend a few moments with your breath visualizing this loving, guiding presence in front of you. And now imagine that to your right, you have one of your parents, one of your guides, somebody who is like a parent to you, and on your left side, you have the other parent, another guide. If you've had a difficult relationship with humans, you can imagine your comfort animals. And in your mind's eye, feel a sense of connection on each side of you to parental figures, and in front of you, inspirational guides. And now feel behind you all the relationships that have meaning for you: family, friends, community, everything that supports you in this place, feeling yourself held in this network, being together with inspirational guides, parental figures, community, in every direction, held, and connected. Spend a few moments just being in this space of connection, feeling the energy from this visualization, filling your heart, filling your body with loving energy, love vast enough to hold pain, and spend a few moments being with yourself in this way. And when you're ready, you can open your eyes and return to the room or wherever you are.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Sameet, and thank you, Sharon.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you.

**Sameet Kumar:** Thank you. You're very welcome.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Sameet Kumar. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!