



# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 1

Written for those who grieve as well as for caregivers and pastoral ministers, *Habits of Resilience: Learning to Live Fully in the Midst of Loss* offers practices of resilience that can move us beyond grief and toward a full, rich life. The book has been designed for use by the leaders of grief groups and others who are experiencing grief individually and as a community.

This short study guide may be used to introduce such groups to the book. Each section offers a summary of the relevant chapter, a description of the resilient practice, and a series of reflection questions. As you use the book and have questions or discover especially effective ways to use the material, I would love to hear from you. visit my web site at <http://www.habitsofresilience.com>, or comment on my blog at the web site, "Open Every Door."

## I. Introduction (refer to the Prologue, p. vii)

- a. You, or the people who attend the grief group you are facilitating, will not be walking the same road of grief. Everyone's path is different. For those who are dying or mourning a death, there is often no room for anything else. A grief group can help people make sense of grief by creating sacred space in which they can tell their stories. Stories show us the path back to living full and resilient lives in a world of loss. The goal of resilience after loss, according to my friend and colleague Zara Renander, is not to return to our "original shape," but integrating our past and present so we might move forward.

Our goal is to help each person walk their particular grief journey, honoring each person's unique journey while helping share practices of resilience that might help individuals work through their grief.

- b. In the prologue, I share my own stories of grief and loss, and how I've tried to cope. As you help your group form, ask them to introduce themselves. Here are some questions that could be discussed at an initial meeting:
  - i. How have your coping strategies changed?
  - ii. Can you name ways you have developed greater resilience in your life?

## Habits of Resilience

Look through the lens of another's grief journey. Ponder ways others have demonstrated resilience. What can you put into practice in your own life after listening to the stories of others?

Begin the 21-day Gratitude Challenge on p. 119



# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 2

## **Saying our goodbyes** (refer to pages 3-25)

Grieving often starts with the incomprehensible reality of someone actively dying. What do we say? When someone we love risks death, what do we do? Once you've introduced the dilemma of what to say and do, consider doing a responsive reading of "Saying Last Words," the habit which starts on page 6. Introduce and practice the breath prayer explained on page 11. Here are some questions for people as they practice these skills:

- A. Think of the people you love the most in your life. Imagine you are sitting next to them at their deathbed. What would you most want to tell them? If this is something you've never told them, what is holding you back from telling them now?
- B. Think of something you've wanted to share with someone, something you've held back because you didn't want to be hurtful or judgemental. Say it aloud to yourself. Is this something that would bring healing and reconciliation to your relationship? Can you say it in a gentle and loving way? If you can't say it to the person who needs to hear this, could you share it first with a trusted friend?
- C. One of the games we played with our children was to ask "Who loves you?" They would start with the simple and obvious: "mama, daddy." We would ask "who else?" and they added names of people in their lives who loved and affirmed them. If you imagined a circle of loving support around you, who would be in that circle?
- D. Fear has a way of channeling our thoughts towards the black abyss of grim future possibilities. When you find yourself worrying about unlikely and dreadful future scenarios, what has helped you break this cycle of thinking?
- E. We cannot change our family history, but we don't have to repeat it. As you think about how your family approached difficult subjects, what would you want to change?
- F. Children often show very different responses to grief. Adults sometimes believe children are fine simply because their grief response differs so radically from adults. Talking to children can help identify delayed or unexpected grief responses in children. Are children in your life? Who is able to broach the difficult topic of death and loss with them if needed?
- G. If your family dynamics are difficult and laden with painful history, what will you do to seek health and wholeness? If your parents have held together a contentious family, what sort of relationship do you want with your siblings or other family members when your last parent dies?

## **Habits of Resilience**

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# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 3

## **Staying resilient for others** (refer to pages 26-51)

Grief work with accidental deaths is often different than with other death. Often we never had the chance to say goodbye. What started as an ordinary day changed our life forever. This section of the book is about giving and receiving help from others and being intentional about creating a support network.

- A. Remembering your own grief, what were the meaningful gestures that touched your heart?
- B. Have you ever played the “what if” and “if only” game in your head, imagining changing one small thing in the past that would change your current reality too?
- C. Finish this sentence: “I knew I was making progress in my grief journey when\_\_\_\_\_.”
- D. Sometimes we have no words for unspeakable losses. All we can do is sit with someone in silence and pray. Our presence matters, not our words. Could you sit in silence, just be there for someone?
- E. Sometimes events cascade into chaos and trauma quickly. Often no one person or event was the tipping point. The day unraveled with a series of unfortunate events like falling dominoes. When this happens and you know you are not solely or partially responsible, do you stop to consider what you might have done to change the course of the day?
- F. Sometimes others have an easier time noticing what we are good at and can help us name our true gifts. Can you name three of your gifts? Are there people in your life who know you well enough to help you identify your gifts?
- G. When facing tough times, what would your best self ask of you and of others?

## **Habits of Resilience**

Recognizing our deep interconnectedness helps us respond to trauma and to receive compassion.

Some find a sense of connectedness by joining a grief group, returning to a faith community, or finding strong listening support. Where do you feel the deepest sense of connection in your life? Faith community, family, grief support group, nature?

When the day comes that you can do nothing right, when nothing you say is consoling, try to remember this question: What is the best, most noble thing I can do right now?

Asking for help is not easy. But it's not a sign of weakness; it helps us become aware of our own limitations and our profound interconnectedness with others.

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# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 4

## Accepting grief in the new normal (refer to pages 52-77)

Most of us dread the winter times in our lives, the barren days of not knowing. We want to step out of one stage of our lives and immediately into the next, forgetting that new growth can't emerge unless the leaves first fall. We want doors to open for us before we close the door behind us. But liminal space is the chrysalis in our lives: the time we are neither caterpillar nor butterfly. It is difficult to embrace the cocoon times in our lives. The cocoon can be a dark and fearful place, a time of unknowing. Perhaps this is what grief feels like for you now, a space so dark you cannot even see the threshold. It may feel like empty solace to be told that transformation will happen, but it will. Knowing that the sunrise will come, we begin to perceive the outlines of the new place where we will find ourselves on the other side of the threshold.

- A. Do you sometimes ask yourself, "Who am I now?"
- B. Looking back over your grief journey, what helped you recognize that you were moving forward?
- C. Complete the sentence: "I am most embarrassed by my grief when\_\_\_\_\_."
- D. Birthdays, anniversaries and the anniversary of the date of death are often particularly difficult days. You remember, but often the world has moved on and does not remember or mark these days as significant. How have you turned these days into holy days of remembrance?
- E. Does it ever feel disloyal to your loved one to enjoy life again? Have you given yourself permission to enjoy life again, to smile or even laugh?
- F. Grief almost always serves up conflicted feelings. Sadness, guilt and relief are sometimes bundled together. Can you name conflicted feelings you have felt?

## Habits of Resilience

If you are feeling overwhelmed by grief, try this exercise. Imagine your grief is an object. Pick it up and place it in a trunk. Close the trunk lid and padlock the trunk shut. Decide how long you will keep the trunk locked. 20 minutes, an entire day? Practice setting your grief aside briefly each day for a short island of respite.

Talking about our grief helps. Naming our loved one helps.

Grief falls more into the "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" model. We need to find our particular fit. Not too long, not too short, just right. Well intentioned people might encourage us to clean out our closets, sell the house and move to another state. Slow down. Listen to your heart. What feels right for you? We don't grieve on a schedule. There are no right ways to grieve. Go at your own pace. You don't need to explain your choices to your kids, your in-laws, or your next door neighbor.

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# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 5

## **Speaking to grief** (refer to pages 78-101)

In this section, Beryl speaks to special challenges, navigating what she calls the full-body experience of grief. Unsanctioned grief may present a unique conundrum. How do we forgive ourselves?

- A. Are there things people said to you that felt hurtful or insensitive? Realizing that they were doing their best to comfort you, could you forgive them?
- B. When a friend comes to you for help about what to say to a newly bereaved, what is your best advice?
- C. What do you wish you had asked or said to your loved one? Could you write your loved one a letter and tell them now?
- D. What special memories do you have that you most want to keep alive? Could you journal about these memories to capture the details that you most want to savor?
- E. Where do you encounter God? In words and prayer, music and images?
- F. What color is your grief today? If your grief was a food, what would it be? What music best captures your grief?
- G. What do you need to forgive? Who can you tell your story to? Who will hear your truth? Who will hold all the rawness and pain in your sacred story?
- H. Can you fearlessly consider the damage your actions may have caused another? What might you do to repair the damage?
- I. Does your faith tradition have a practice of reconciliation? How will you reconcile with God and your community?

## **Habits of Resilience**

Your presence matters more than your words. A hug is worth more than most sonnets. Just show up.

Writing has a way of clarifying your thinking. It is a safe outlet to say things you aren't sure you are ready to say yet. Writing also gives us a retrospective on our grief. All of us have moments when we feel absolutely stuck, as if we have not moved one inch in our grief journey since the moment we first knew our loved one was dead. But our journals tell us otherwise. When we re-read our journals, we realize we have made progress. Journaling can give us the courage to keep going.

Practice forgiveness.

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# Reader's Guide: Habits of Resilience: Week 6

## **Moving through grief to grace** (refer to pages 102-118)

This chapter covers the special issues related to developing resilience for returning military veterans, and of those at risk for suicide. When we are faced with a tragic loss, we must make a choice. Will we feed the wolf of bitterness and spend our life ranting about how we were grievously wronged, or will we feed the wolf of compassion and healing, allowing God to redeem the tragedy so that it might bear the fruit of great blessing for others?

- A. What rock are you carrying? What is it costing you to continue to carry this rock? What would it take to forgive yourself, and to set the rock down?
- B. Is there anything in your life you feel is truly unforgivable? Who might you talk to about this?
- C. Sometimes early in our grief process we are too overwhelmed to consider what legacy might emerge to honor of our loved one. Legacies can evolve in unexpected ways. We may be surprised to discover our grief work has become a blessing to others. Can you think of other examples where tragedy has been transformed to blessing for others?
- D. When we tap into our best self, we more easily choose to feed the wolf of compassion. But sometimes we react before we reflect. What helps you to stop to be more compassionate and generous when you are tempted to feed the wolf of bitterness?
- E. As you think back on our grief, what are the small things you did or could do that propelled you back into living a fuller life?
- F. Loneliness and aloneness are related but different aspects of grief. Our aloneness may make us feel awkward about going to a movie or out to dinner solo. Has your aloneness kept you from doing something you'd like to do? What small step might you make to move forward?

## **Habits of Resilience**

Become a pilgrim. The chapter describes the experience of walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and the practice of walking labyrinths.

Choose compassion over bitterness. Explore the saying "Get better or get bitter."

Do something to kick start yourself, even if it is small.

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