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### The Positive Power of Grief

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# The Positive Power of Grief

by Jessica Caldwell Carter

**“Grief is itself a medicine.”<sup>1</sup>**  
– William Cowper

This line from an English poet was once a mystery to me. Two years ago, I did not fully understand what Cowper was trying to say. However, I came to realize what he meant as I went through a difficult experience. I learned that grief can truly be a medicine for the soul.

When I was 22 years old, I started dating a man who soon became my entire world. Our relationship quickly progressed; we got engaged a month after we started dating, and we were married two months after that. Unfortunately, things did not end “happily ever after.”

About a month after we were married, he left me. In his mind, our marriage was a big mistake. He wanted a quick divorce to put all of it behind him. I was crushed. My

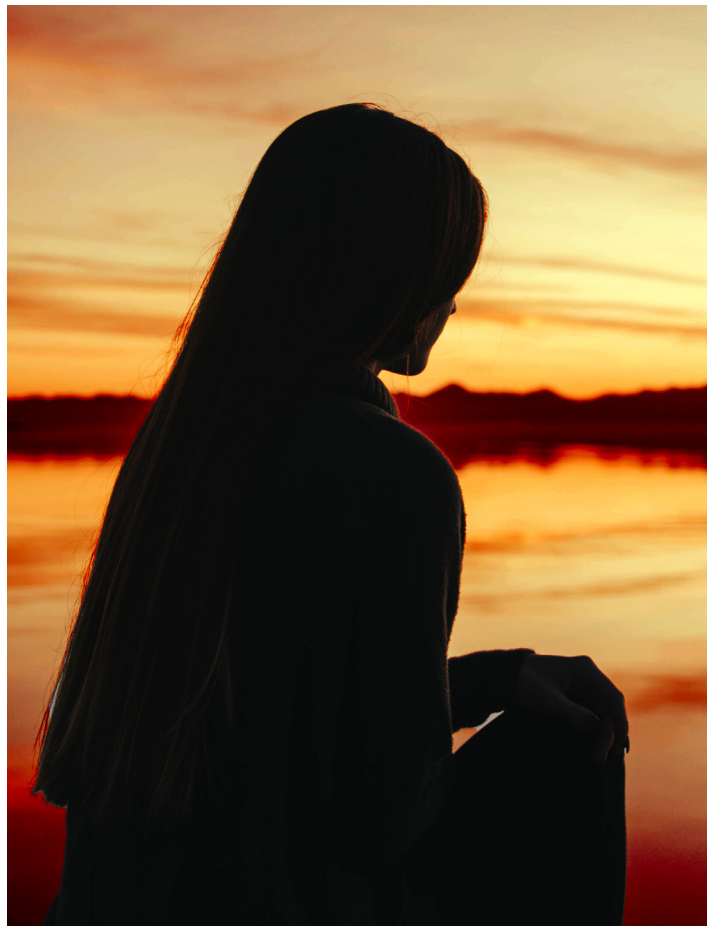


Photo by Camilla Rees ©BYU SFL

entire world, my future, my hopes and dreams had all come crashing down around me as the man I had loved more than anyone ever before told me he was not in love with me and no longer wanted to be with me. The man that I had come to rely on was suddenly no longer there. Suddenly and unexpectedly, I became very well acquainted with grief.

During the start of my healing journey, I tried as hard as I could to avoid anything that made me think of what happened. I went so far as to stop wearing certain clothes, listening to certain music, or eating certain foods. I didn't want to hurt. I wanted to move on, so I bottled up all the pain and pretended it wasn't there; and I did this all subconsciously. A therapist helped me realize that these were signs I was avoiding my grief.

Research shows that the desire to avoid any type of pain is instinctual.<sup>2</sup> We naturally want to get away from anything that is uncomfortable or intolerable. Facing grief caused by broken relationships may seem counterintuitive, but doing so may help us heal, find forgiveness, and move on. I decided to continue the slow process of working through my pain with the hope that facing my grief would help me start to heal.

**“While emotionally painful, the natural grieving process helps us heal. If you got stuck along the way . . . help yourself to complete the process.”<sup>3</sup>**  
– Robert Taibbi

Getting stuck in the grief process (also known as incomplete grief) happens when the “normal process [of grief] gets stalled or sidetracked or pushed underground.”<sup>4</sup> I experienced incomplete grief as I struggled to forgive my ex-husband and ignored the anger I felt towards him, even a year after everything happened. However, as I faced the anger and hurt I felt as a result of my experience, these emotions became weaker and weaker over time until I was able to truly let go and move past what had happened.

Joslin Batty, a licensed clinical social worker, gave a visual representation of grief when she told me about two diverging paths of statues found in Oslo, Norway. Both paths start with a statue of a girl with a dragon on her shoulder. In one path, the dragon grows progressively until

it overshadows the girl, while the other path ends with the dragon becoming small enough for the girl to hold in the palm of her hand. What caused the dragon to shrink on one path but grow on the other? The girl faced the dragon that grew smaller while ignoring the one that grew larger.

This is the essence of facing our grief.<sup>5</sup>

Batty explained that if we ignore our grief, it can grow until it cripples us. In fact, researchers found that avoidance of grief, along with repetitive negative thinking, is associated with distress in college students following a break-up.<sup>6</sup> Facing our grief instead of avoiding it can provide great healing. In my experience, feeling the anger and hurt I had bottled up inside was painful, but as I faced these emotions it became easier to continue facing them. Just like the statue of the girl who faced her dragon, my grief and pain became less intense and more manageable.<sup>4</sup>

**“Allow yourself to recover by truly feeling the pain, anger, and sadness inside you.”<sup>6</sup>  
– Berit Brogaard**

This quote from Dr. Brogaard rang true for me. Now that I have let myself experience and process all the hurtful emotions and pain my ex-husband caused me, I no longer feel defined by what happened to me. I no longer feel as though I am stuck in that moment where he left me. I am free to move past that experience, taking with me the valuable lessons I learned, and live a full, happy life. Currently, I still experience moments of grief that continue to help me process and heal. However, I’m also able to fully enjoy the life I live now and the new relationships I have formed.

Grief can be a wonderful gift and a pathway towards healing. It may take longer than what you expect, but if you decide to take this journey, you will find yourself all the better for having traveled it. The “dragon” on your shoulder may seem terrifying, but just like facing your grief, you may come to see that it is not as scary as it once seemed. You may find that it even allows you to heal, grow, and experience life to a fuller extent. I learned to face my dragon—and in the end, I gained a life greater than I ever imagined possible.

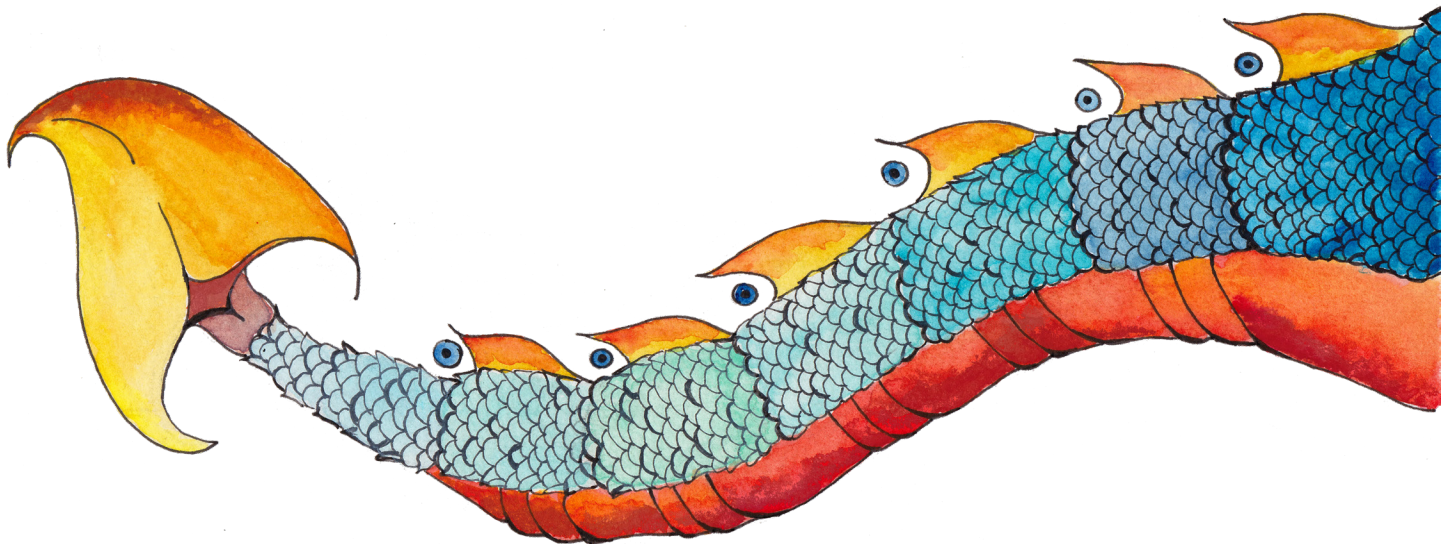


Illustration by Lis Malmgren ©visualanarchy

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Quotes. (n.d.). *My Grief Assist*. Retrieved from <https://www.mygriefassist.com.au/inspiration-resources/quotes/>

<sup>2</sup> Maccallum, F., & Bryant, R. A. (2019). An investigation of approach behaviour in prolonged grief. *Behaviour Research & Therapy*, 119. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2019.05.002

<sup>3</sup> Taibbi, R. (2017, June 7). Six signs of incomplete grief. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fixing-families/201706/six-signs-incomplete-grief>

<sup>4</sup> Batty, J. (2017). [Personal interview with Jessica Caldwell].

<sup>5</sup> Wrape, E. R., Jenkins, S. R., Callahan, J. L., & Nowlin, R. B. (2016). Emotional and cognitive coping in relationship dissolution. *Journal of College Counseling*, 19(2), 110-123. doi:10.1002/jocc.12035

<sup>6</sup> Brogaard, B. (2017, September 2). Grieving the end of a relationship. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-love/201709/grieving-the-end-relationship>