

Startup Leaders – What To Do With Accumulated Losses & Grief “Debt”



Updated: Jan 28, 2021

My coach Ed wrote about [The Legitimacy of Loss](#) in Jan 2021 and it resonated deeply for me both as a human experiencing what he was describing and also as a coach who recognizes these same trends in my clients: *skipping past or not fully feeling “losses” because they seem “lesser” in some way*. The pandemic has exacerbated this phenomenon, but I sense that many startup leaders have a tendency towards accumulating grief “debt.” When you lead a startup for many years, you will undoubtedly experience losses (or even traumas) and if you don’t grieve or mourn those effectively you can “get stuck” in that unresolved grief. If you sense you might be grappling with the negative effects of accumulated and ungrieved losses---here are some things to try:

1 – Start by taking an inventory of your losses. Write down a list of the losses you’ve experienced (during the pandemic and/or since founding your startup). Make sure to include any and all losses, *especially* those you deem as “lesser” in some way. You don’t have to show the list to anyone (unless you want to). No one will judge you for what you put on your list (and you’re not allowed to judge yourself either!) Losses can be people and relationships, but also losses of identity, dreams, companies, money, opportunities, freedom, traditions, experiences, etc. The act of writing out this list is a way to validate your own losses to yourself. As Ed notes [in his post](#), it’s okay and sometimes even helpful to keep a loss in perspective (i.e., “no one died”) but it’s not okay to dismiss a loss as irrelevant just because it wasn’t the worst possible outcome you can imagine.

2 – Allow yourself to have feelings / express them. The act of reflecting and writing down your list of losses will evoke some feelings. Allow yourself to have those feelings. (This might be the first time you’ve let yourself have those feelings.) Sadness, anger, heartbreak, rage, loneliness, disappointment, betrayal etc. If you’re having trouble finding more specific words beyond just “this feels bad” -- consult a [feelings chart](#) and find the words that give you a small sense of relief to say out loud (or to yourself.)

3 – Don’t run away from pain & sadness. One thing I’ve noticed for me personally in grief is that sometimes it’s when I am experiencing joy that I (unintentionally) open myself up to deep sadness and grief. And as hard as it is to not shut down the tears or change the channel in my head to run away from that pain, I have learned to let myself pause and stay with those feelings too.

Pandemic example – I was the quintessential tomboy soccer girl growing up, so it sometimes catches me off-guard how much I love watching my older daughter dance ballet in her recitals.

Her ballet studio now does “Zoomcitals” and when I watch her perform in our living room I feel intense joy and then immediately start crying that we’re not in a theater. When I glimpse all the grandparents on Zoom cheering on their little dancers, I think about how my girls won’t get to see their grandparents in-person for over a year. I am heart-broken.

Startup example - I once lost a relationship with a co-founder and sometimes when I am reminded of something he and I built together (by something as innocuous as an email from a former customer) I experience a surge in happiness followed by a sharp and painful wave of sadness. Strangely, I don’t experience the pain in the same way when I talk explicitly about our decision to part ways as business leaders---the sadness almost sneak-attacks me more strongly in moments of joy.

4 - Reflect for a bit on this question: how do you mourn? When I ask clients: *How do you mourn? How do you grieve?* I usually receive a blank stare. But when they stop and reflect, they start to spot behaviors and patterns they recognize. Which behaviors are adaptive? (i.e., actually help you feel better) And which ones are more analgesic? (i.e., simply numb or suppress the pain) What has worked and what hasn’t worked in the past for you? What might you try now to mourn these losses you are identifying?

5 - Set aside a space to do some intentional grieving and a space to recover. Don’t overthink or get too intimidated by this one. While there isn’t a predictable timeline for mourning and grief, these spaces I am suggesting don’t have to be massive. You could set aside one hour on a Friday afternoon and then plan to sleep in (if you find you need to) the following Saturday morning. Grieving can be energy-depleting so don’t be alarmed if you initially feel quite drained. Allow yourself to rest and recover--it’s part of the process.

6 - Try a personal and private ritual as a way to move through the losses and the emotions. [This article](#) describes the research on private grief rituals if you want to learn more about the psychology behind them. Sometimes clients ask me what they should do or what type of ritual would be best. I believe that the “best” rituals are the ones that you create for yourself based on your specific situation and the specific loss you are mourning. They can be as simple or as elaborate as you want them to be. If you’re completely drawing a blank on what type of ritual you might try, consider these potential design elements:

- Reminiscing - remembering the person, relationship, ideal or experience you lost
- Storytelling - telling stories about the person, relationship, ideal or experience you lost
- Crying - tears are complicated in that they don’t just manifest from sadness (we can cry when we’re angry, joyful, etc.) but any uninhibited cry can help your body to physiologically complete a pent-up stress cycle
- Appreciation & Gratitude - contemplating the beauty of what you lost and reflecting on your deep appreciation or gratitude for it
- Physical Movement - the kind that gets your breathing and heart rate elevated (a hike; a run; a spontaneous dance party for one; drumming; etc.)

- Writing - journaling; writing the story of the loss; writing (or re-writing) the “story you are walking with” about the loss; writing a poem; writing a song; writing stream of consciousness; writing an eulogy; writing a letter you never send; etc.
- Replaying or Revisiting - Anything you do to purposefully evoke memory of what you lost (listening to a song; physically visiting a significant place; etc.)
- Evoking Symbols - You can incorporate symbols into your ritual. These could be more direct symbols of what you lost (branded swag from company you shut down; a photo of a person when you were still in relationship with them; something you used to wear when you were a previous version of yourself; etc.) or broader symbols of things that are significant to you (candles, fire, water, dirt, paint, crystals, rocks, leaves, etc.)

Do I really need to do it by myself? Sometimes we feel better when our grief is witnessed (this is why many of our cultural or religious grief rituals involve family or community gatherings) and other times we might benefit from having a single witness whom we trust to bear witness live or hear our story about it afterwards --- it’s entirely up to you.

For how long should I do my ritual? Do it for as long as it serves you. That might be one time. Or it might be weekly or monthly or annually. And when the ritual is no longer serving you, you simply stop. Don’t commit to a timeline in advance or you might rush yourself through grief prematurely or drag on your pain longer than you need.

7- Avoid comparing your losses or your grieving process with others. Loss and grief are both universally human and uniquely individual experiences. There is no “hierarchy of loss” and any attempt to create one only serves to invalidate (ourselves or others) and gets us stuck in unresolved grief.

I say this because I’ve studied these behavior patterns in psychology but also, more poignantly, because I know this intimately from my experience. In college, whenever I met someone new and they asked about my family and where I was from, I would eventually tell them that my dad had died when I was 11. I remember how people would immediately grow sad, somber or tell me they were sorry for my loss. Instead of letting those feelings in, I quickly responded with “Well, my parents were divorced so it actually wasn’t as much of a loss as it could have been.” I even remember telling a few people that I had written down a rank order hierarchy of losses and mine wasn’t the top so they didn’t need to be so sad for me. Those repeated ways in which I invalidated my own loss accumulated inside of me. A decade later, I had a bit of a breakdown (or perhaps it was a breakthrough) in graduate school. I started therapy for the first time ever, and finally resolved over two decades of what psychologists officially call “complicated grief.”

Perspective-taking is a useful tool for resilient-thinking. In most circumstances I am all for the power of re-framing, but not when it is used too quickly or too prematurely as a way to suppress and invalidate the human experience and emotions of loss. I see this tendency in friends, family and clients as this pandemic stretches into year two. At times, it seems we’re

so focused on drawing out silver linings that we forget to fully sketch out the clouds first. You can't feel what you won't allow yourself to see.

And just as we suffer when trying to compare losses, we can also amplify our suffering when we try to compare our grieving processes. Even two people who experience the "same" loss may grieve that loss very differently. And we have to find ways to not judge ourselves or others for the ways we mourn and grieve. (For more on this, check out [the podcast excerpt transcript](#) at the end of this doc -- why a grief expert suspects that losing a child isn't what causes higher rates of divorce. but rather the judgment spouses place on each other when they are grieving that loss differently.)

8 - Expect more of a tidal process rather than a linear one. Someone once told me (or perhaps I read it somewhere?) that grief comes in waves. And that metaphor has resonated deeply for me. When I let go of the notion that my grief is linear or sequential or follows any semblance of a timeline, I suffer less. Yes, I still get surprised when high tide comes in and my grief feels much closer and more intense --- but there's also a relief in the recognition. I can even tell people close to me -- "this is a high tide moment/hour/day/week." I know how to care for myself when the tide is high. I take comfort in knowing the tide will recede (eventually) which makes it more bearable. And I also know the tide may rise again--so I don't get as blindsided when it does.

References

[The Legitimacy of Loss](#) - blog post by Ed Batista

[David Kessler Podcast Interview With Brene Brown](#) - (46 min - listen) Interview from March 2020 with a leading grief expert. [Finding Meaning](#) is Kessler's latest book on the dynamic, non-linear stages of grief.

[In Grief, Try Personal Rituals](#) - One researcher's findings re: how people who use private, personal rituals are able to overcome their grief and experience less suffering after losses.

Brown, B. (Host). (2020, March 31). David Kessler and Brené on Grief and Finding Meaning. [Audio podcast episode]. In Unlocking Us with Brené Brown. Cadence13.

<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/david-kessler-and-brene-on-grief-and-finding-meaning/>

BB: Okay, I'm going to ask you a question, I don't have the data on it, so I'm just going to wing it, and then you can tell me whether this is mythology or real, and whether it's not the right analogy. So, my understanding is, for bereaved parents, marriage can become very complex when you both lose a child, when there's a loss. And I know the statistics for divorce are very high after bereavement of a child. Is that true still? Is that recent research as well?

DK: I don't know if it's recent, but I'll tell you what isn't being asked in the research, because I do not believe a child loss is what causes divorce. **I believe judgment of each other's grief causes divorce.**

BB: Okay, hold the phone. Okay, say that again.

DK: I believe that a child loss does not necessarily cause a divorce. Our judgment, two parents' judgement of how each other's grieving is what causes the divorce. What happens is we all grieve differently. And this isn't just about child loss, this is like when mom dies, or dad dies. We all believe if we love our child, we're going to grieve exactly alike. If we all love dad, we're going to grieve exactly alike. If we love mom, we'll grieve exactly alike. Then if we don't grieve exactly alike, we look at each other and we begin to make up, confabulation, stories that aren't true. We go, "Oh! I guess sis didn't love mom as much as I did. I guess my wife, my husband didn't love our child the way I... Or they're moving on too quick." And we become isolated in our grief, we try to make each other our grief counselors. When I work with parents, one of the first things I try to do is set up separate communities to support them, that they cannot, when a child dies, two people with an empty tank cannot fill each other up. And yet, that's what we try to do.

BB: Do we see that right now around... we're in this collective grief. We've got so many losses, and we're so judgmental toward each other right now. The judgement and the shame.

DK: The thing I always say is, judgment demands punishment.

BB: Oh my God! I know I'm going to make y'all crazy with this podcast, but I just gotta ask you to say it again.

DK: Judgment demands punishment.

BB: So, tell me what that means.

DK: We will punish ourselves or punish someone else. When we judge, it hurts us or hurts someone else.

BB: I gotta get my head around this for a second, judgment deserves punishment.

DK: Demands, demands.

BB: *Oh God! Stop. See, I knew this was happening. So, I'm like, "Brené Brown, heal thyself." Okay, judgement demands...*

DK: *All of us, heal thyself.*

BB: *Okay, judgment demands punishment. So, when I feel super judgy towards someone, then...*

DK: *You are going to punish them psychologically or punish yourself. You are going to feel bad in your judgment.*

BB: *Oh my God, y'all! This is going to be a takeaway quote, you can just... Yeah. I'm just... That's too damn bad. I'm going to say that right there, because that is true, and that is painful and that is shame-inducing, and that is what's happening in the world right now.*

DK: *Yeah.*