



# Practical NeuroWisdom

Growing Through Loss

7

Brain-Based  
Strategies to  
Transcend Grief  
& Suffering

by Bernadette Wilson, MBA  
and Mark Waldman

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## 7 Brain-Based Strategies to Transcend Grief & Suffering

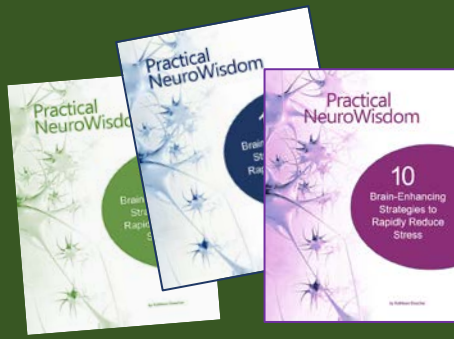
by Bernadette Wilson, MBA  
and Mark Waldman

I would like to impart my sincere gratitude to my co-author, friend, and teacher, Mark Robert Waldman, for his unwavering support to produce this ebook on grief recovery. We approached this ebook with sensitivity and honesty. Mark's expert knowledge in NeuroWisdom strategies and trauma recovery helped to make each exercise more enriched and valuable.

This ebook guide is dedicated to Susan Meffert, MD, MPH, a caring compassionate soul who was by my side for nearly two years right after my son's death. Through her commitment to my wellbeing, she taught me to open up to life and joy once again.

Faith,  
is the bird  
that feels the light  
And sings  
when the dawn  
is still light

*Rabindranath Tagore,  
Nobel Prize Literature, 1913*



This book is part of the Practical NeuroWisdom series by NeuroCoach Press and VanBuren Publishing, designed to bring you evidence-based, neuroscientific approaches to practical issues and help you improve your life through the power of brain science.

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## **Introduction: Embrace Your Loss, Reduce Your Pain and Return to Joy**

Grief is not selective and touches the heart and soul of us all. It is natural to grieve, and essential that you grieve to your fullest. When the grieving process is prematurely severed, you can end up stuck in negative feelings for weeks, months and even years. Although interrupting grief prematurely is harmful, research tells us that the longevity and intensity of grief can be significantly eased through a series of mindfulness exercises, leading to enhanced recovery.

Insights gained from a mindful practice can help you learn to live with more awareness in the present moment. Within a few weeks — or even days — you will begin to transcend your grief and find new meaning and purpose in your life. Mindful practices accelerate this journey.

For me, I stumbled upon the positive effects of mindfulness in 2008. My personal loss was a tsunami, destroying everything that I thought to be true — all of my thoughts of what life is and its meaning and purpose were decimated. I had just completed my treatments for breast cancer and was looking forward to the years ahead as a single mom, excited to be able to raise my two fun and energetic teenagers. But then, one afternoon, I received a phone call at work that changed my life forever.

The person on the other end of the call told me my 16-year old son had taken his own life. I was brought to my knees and was mentally crippled. No worse news could have been conceived; no level of preparation could have eased this shock and grief. I hoped it was a nightmare, but it was real, this was an irreversible loss and I had no solution, no hope, only despair, sadness, and grief. I struggled, I grieved, I was deeply depressed and ultimately I found salvation and enlightenment through a series of mindful practices. I would like to share the teachings that I have learned on my journey of healing, and help you and others to ease your pain and suffering.

In order to move forward, from any great loss, and find purpose to life again, we are challenged to discover some grain of hope that can grow to nurture and feed us, and help us to once again find joy and meaning in life. At that time, hope was absent and any expectation that the future would someday bring anticipation and happiness seemed impossible.

However, our minds are ingenious instruments and are built for survival. Shortly after my son's death, friends and family encouraged me to find comfort in activities that I had previously loved to pursue, such as my morning practice of meditation, salsa dancing with friends, yoga and ballet lessons, and writing poetry to honor the joys of being a mother.

Little did I know at the time, but I was retraining my brain through positive actions and mindful practices that would eventually lessen my depression and sadness, help me find new meaning and purpose in life after my devastating loss.

#### Common examples of loss that lead to grief and bereavement:

- Death of a loved one
- Death of beloved pet
- Ending of relationship (e.g. divorce or romantic break-up)
- Job loss
- Relocation and moving
- Absence or removal of special people in our lives
- Loss of treasured objects
- Loss of health or ability to participate in meaningful activities

Today, through the use of brain-scan studies, researches have documented the effectiveness of mindfulness to help a person rapidly relieve the painful symptoms of grief. In this eBook, you'll learn how to master seven simple strategies that will turn your loss and sadness into compassion and peace. Each exercise will give you a new positive outlook on life.

To decrease the occurrence of disruptive thoughts about your loss through the practice of mindfulness, a brief understanding of the brain's function is

helpful. The reaction to loss is thought to be the brain's attempt to find new and meaningful ways of continuing the relationship with the deceased (or loss). Within the brain's operating system, neurotransmitters send messages to parts of the brain to create emotions, memories, and our physical abilities and health.<sup>1</sup>

You will also learn how to use acceptance strategies that will allow your feelings to gently move through you, much like a gentle breeze blowing through the leaves of a tree. Mindfulness will show you how to bring your attention to the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations associated with grieving and loss, and with practice you'll quickly build resiliency to feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, and other stress-induced emotions.

At first you may experience fear and hesitancy as you implement these mindful strategies, but mindfulness will show you how to observe those feelings without getting caught up in them. According to Pema Chödrön, a highly respected Buddhist teacher:

*"Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth"* that all things change, and that life invites us to meet each and every experience, no matter how painful or terrifying. Mindfulness practices teach us to face life, suffering and grief through each moment without avoiding or stopping the process. Through mindful practices we can face our fears of change, illness, suffering, and even bereavement while also living more fully and in the present.<sup>2</sup>





## **Strategy 1:**

### **Mindfully Observe Your Grief**

Learning to not live in the past where painful memories are stored is essential to overcoming grief symptoms. Mindfulness teaches the habit of living in the present moment, gaining access the intuitive powers of our brain.<sup>3</sup>

Grief is the emotional process we undergo when we have lost someone, something or some beloved aspect of your life. A mindful practice can help you develop the mental muscles of grief transcendence; acceptance, positive decision making, and modifying negative behaviors by staying in the present moment. Being aware in the moment allows you to nonjudgmentally focus your awareness to what emerges. As you develop a position of curiosity and non-judgment rather than one of avoidance and control you become calmer and more focused and begin to dismantle the cognitive traps that contribute to anxiety and depression.<sup>4</sup>

You can practice mindfulness just about anywhere and at any time. To begin, take a slow deep yawn while stretching your arms over your head very, very slowly. Repeat this mindful yawn and stretch three more times, and as you do so notice how you become more relaxed and centered. Now ask your intuition (a unique circuit in your brain that is stimulated by this exercise) to answer this question: “What is my deepest innermost value when it comes to personal loss?”

Write down whatever word comes to mind. For example: love, companionship, gentleness or any word that makes you feel more grounded and peaceful. Once you've selected your value word, write it down, and then savor the positive feelings of your value word.

Now, think of a positive memory of your loss (for example, recalling a pleasant memory with that person) and incorporate the savored value as you continue to allow your feelings of grief to move through you. Take your time and continue to mindfully yawn and stretch.

If fear arises, caress your hands together in a self-nurturing way that gives you a feeling of safety and pleasure. Now savor these new sensations, knowing that you are embedding these positive thoughts and feelings into your memory of loss. As you embrace these positive and supportive memories, the intrusive thoughts of dread will diminish and will be increasingly supplanted by calm, nurturing, and joyous memories.



## **Strategy 2:**

### **Breathe Into Your Grief**

One of the most important elements supporting a sense of well wellbeing is your breath. Due to the stress of grief you might be unknowingly constricting the flow of your breath.

Shallow constricted breathing goes hand in hand with stress, anxiety, fear and periods of sadness. Most of the time we breathe without thinking or paying attention to how deeply or calmly we are inhaling and exhaling. The process of breathing — the inhalation of oxygen and exhalation of carbon dioxide is necessary to maintain life. Depth and pace of breathing patterns can change one's emotional state — awareness of how one thinks, feels, and interacts with others begins with one's breath.

Mindful breathing is observing and feeling your natural breath. By sending your attention to your breath, you may begin to notice that you become more peaceful. With practice, you will develop skills that are key to staying aware and calm in the present moment. Over time, engaging in mindful breathing practice can help to ward off unwanted stress caused from ruminating over your loss or memories of a negative experience.

Gently close your eyes or soften your gaze and begin to bring forward awareness of your body. Spend a minute observing yourself in contact with your chair or wherever you may be sitting. Now, bring your mind's awareness to your breath and your body's physical response to your breath — the expansion and retraction of your chest and your abdominal wall. Try not to control your breath, just let yourself breath naturally. Your mind may begin to wander away from your breath, this is okay. Just observe and accept without judgment any feelings or thoughts that may arise (which they will) and then gently move your attention back to your breath and the breath sensations.

Continue with this practice of mindfully observing your breath. After a few minutes your mind may want to wander again to your thoughts. Each time this occurs, bring a sense of gentleness to yourself and refocus your attention back on your breath and its accompanying physical sensations. Do this practice for 5-10 minutes a day. After a short while, you will find yourself automatically mindfully breathing throughout the day, allowing you to be in the present moment with more awareness and with a sense of calm and joy.

## **Strategy 3:**

### **Embrace Your Tears**

Crying is a natural initial reaction to pain or anger and can be a “mild” or “weak” response to stress. When you cry, you may or may not shed tears. Crying is an indication that you have internalized a peculiar or shocking change in behavior or event. Weeping is a strong behavior with positive effects on health and social interaction. Weeping is a more complex phenomenon: it is a behavior that induces empathy, perhaps with the mediation of the mirror neurons network, and influences the mood through the release of hormones elicited by the massage effect made by the tears on the cheeks, or through the relief of the sobbing rhythm.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that the crying sounds of loss can be frightening to others. As a mother, when I lost my child, my primal sounds of anguish were so powerful that others had a difficult time witnessing my grief. However, don't be afraid of your grief. Crying and weeping is essential to healing. Give yourself permission to cry and if someone else feels uncomfortable with your grief, use this strategy to teach them how to savor and to embrace grief's tears.

Imagine yourself sitting calmly with someone (or yourself) who is crying from loss. Notice any uncomfortable feelings that may arise. Do you want to pull away? Or maybe you have the urge to rush in and “fix” the situation and ease their pain. If so, just notice those feelings and you'll see that they begin to fade away in less than a minute. Continue to observe your mental vision and breathe into any tension you may have. Allow yourself to stay present and observe the tears that fall without judgment. Crying mindfully is to be present and calm even when the strong emotions that cause you to cry arise. And if you are with a person who is grieving, the act of compassionately witnessing their sorrow helps dissipate the pain and helps to further transcend grief.

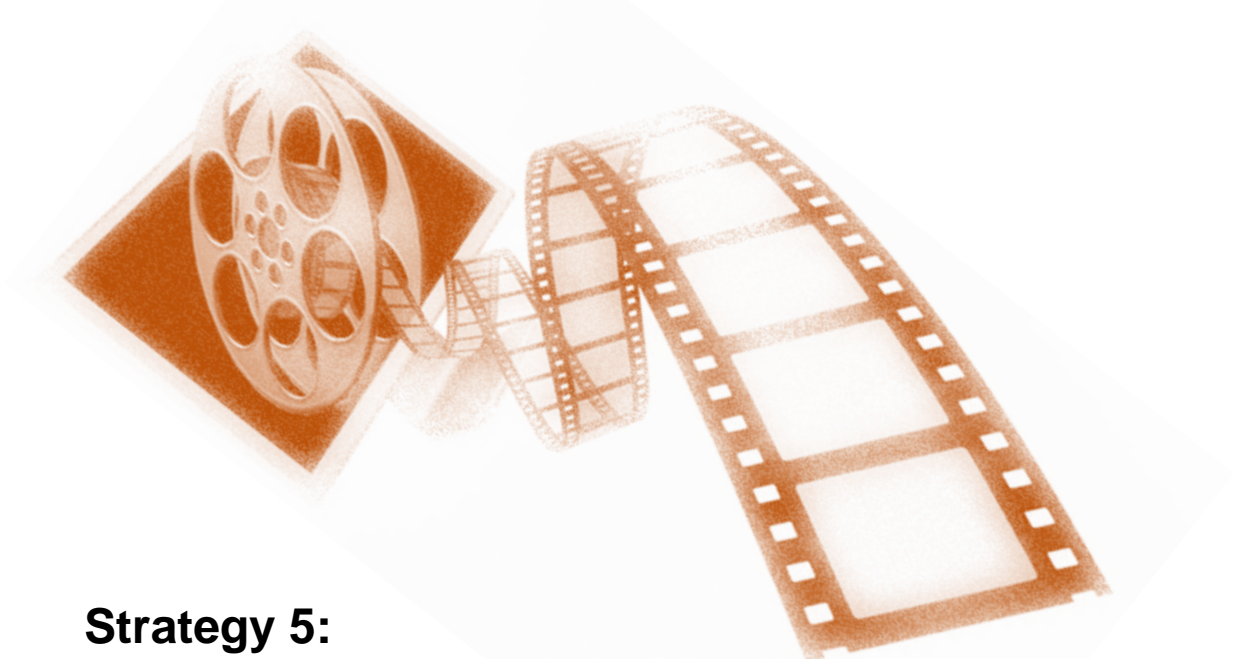
## **Strategy 4:**

### **Get Your Mojo On and Dance or Sing Yourself Through Grief**

Do you love music and dance? Grief can transform into spontaneous movements and when you add music and dance you allow your body and mind to flow and heal. Dancing allows you to be joyful as you express your feelings through movement. Researchers have understood for over 65 years the healing benefits of dance.

Dance was introduced in 1940's to World War II vets who were psychiatric patients at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. As with vets and trauma survivors of today, a loss, or the witnessing a trauma can be difficult to verbalize. Dance allows for a non-verbal method for the connecting the brain, mind, and body and to express yourself with movement. More recent studies have shown that frequent dancing lower risks of dementia and depression as well.<sup>6</sup> The beneficial effects of dancing and other physical activity is multifactorial, working to improve mood and behavior, but also neuroplasticity within the brain, helping to forestall neurocognitive decline.<sup>7</sup> Similar benefits can be achieved through singing<sup>8</sup>, which has been shown to improve a wide range of neuro-cognitive injuries.<sup>9</sup> Have you ever noticed that when people sing and or dance, they are typically happy?

A great place to start to move is to mindfully walk and sway, paying attention to your body's sensations. If you like music, play an upbeat song and begin to sing and/or dance freely in the privacy of your home. There is no right or wrong way to sing or move mindfully — just listen to your body and begin to move or sing. If you have trouble dancing at first, try moving one arm up and out, as slow as possible, then do the same with your other arm. Your feet will soon follow. If you find yourself in a rhythmic pattern, continue with this flow while always bring your attention back to your body. When you end your dance, take time to notice any release of tension or if you feel more rejuvenated. If you are disabled and cannot dance, then sing. Start with songs that brought you joy in your youth, or are fun and uplifting. After you spend some time singing and or dancing, write down some observations about your thoughts and feelings for later reflection.



## **Strategy 5:**

### **Become a Star; Make a Mindful Movie**

This exercise helps you to savor your memory in a more positive, celebratory-like experience as you bring joy into the mental picture playing on your mind's big screen. It also empowers you to hold a state of optimism and peace when things are falling apart. The goal is to mindfully observe your movie while embracing loss — as you give your full conscious attention to the pleasant aspects of your life and memories.

First, spend a few moments practicing mindful breathing to place yourself in a peaceful and relaxed state. From this calm state of mind, intuitively select a memory of your loss and project it on a large movie screen in your mind. Place yourself in the audience observing the scene. Then begin to watch the scene of your loss. As the movie plays notice as the observer, any upsetting moments and all joyful or positive memories. As you do this, it is important to savor each positive scene of your movie.

To “savor” means to give full conscious attention to the pleasant aspect of the memory along with any positive feelings that arise. Research has shown that by embracing and placing your attention on the positive and joyful memories on a daily-bases with mindfulness, will lead to a more positive and happy state. This practice can ultimately reduce grief, depression and their symptoms. Brain scan studies support these psychological findings showing increased activity in the neural circuits involved with emotional resilience.<sup>10</sup> As you stay in a state of calm mindful observation, emotional triggers are reduced, thus allowing you to recall a loss with peace and confidence.



## **Strategy 6:**

### **Turn Your Grief Into a Poem**

Many times when we are feeling grief, people have expressed the desire to pick up a pen and write down aspects of their grief. Writing helps to reorganize the experience and to stimulate the compassion and self-loving circuits in your brain.

However, sometimes writing down a painful experience will deepen the memory circuits, and recording the painful memories can immerse you further into the grief pattern. To avoid this pitfall, some neuroscientists recommend that you only briefly state (no more than one or two sentences) the pain of your loss, then begin to move forward creatively with writing positive thoughts. You do not need to follow a specific poetic construct; rather give yourself permission to write about your loss from love and compassion, this will become your poetry, your style, your remedy.

An excellent way to get started is to use your intuition to guide the flow of words. To do this, stretch and yawn very slowly allowing breath to expand your lungs, and then release. Stretch and yawn a few more times. This slows down the neural circuits associated with fear and pain, and the slow breathing and moving will place you in an enhanced state of mindfulness.

As you begin to write, use brevity of words and be creative. You may want to add a little melody and rhythm to your poem — and possibly, your poem will develop into a harmonic piece such as a limerick, short song or rap! There are no specific requirements; just be creative and spontaneous. Have fun and trust whatever words flow into your intuition. Here's a passage from one of my NeuroCoaching clients that I was guiding through the loss of her son who tragically died in a car accident:

*Oh sadness, how you grab and twist me like a fragile dying leaf.  
Oh sadness, how you remind me of the beauty of my son,  
Of the bitter sweetness of life.  
Release me, dear grief, as these tears dissolve the aching in my heart.*

And here's how some well-known poets, writers, and artists have eloquently described resolution of grief:

*"Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet: If it could weep, it could arise and go."* – Elizabeth Barrett Browning

*"The pain passes, but the beauty remains."* – Pierre Auguste Renoir

*"Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them."* – Leo Tolstoy

*"The darker the night, the brighter the stars, The deeper the grief, the closer is God!"* – Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Now it's your turn; try it right now. Invite your intuition to create a brief poem that captures an element of a past or current loss.





## **Strategy 7:**

### **Play and Laugh Through Grief**

Laughter is the heart of the soul. We all love to play! Playing reduces anxiety and stimulates the pattern of positive feelings and is core key scientific neuro emotion that is essential to human life. The most primitive parts of the brain generate various primary emotions, including physical play and laughing “vocalization” sounds of play. The ancient limbic system of the brain, including two structures involved with emotions — the hippocampus and the amygdala — is involved in laughter, suggesting that it is deep in our animal nature. But our cortex, too, appears to have a role, relating laughter and speech and bringing humor into the equation.<sup>11</sup>

A 2010 study in the Journal of Aging Research looked at humor therapy for easing pain and enhancing happiness. Upon completion of the humor therapy program, there were significant decreases in pain and perception of loneliness, and significant increases in happiness and life satisfaction (for the experimental group, but not for the control group). The use of humor therapy appears to be an effective nonpharmacological intervention. Nurses and other healthcare professionals could incorporate humor in caring for their patients.<sup>12</sup>

You can easily see how your emotions change by play and laughter. Try it now. As before, become mindful and recall yourself as child playing effortlessly with



friends or siblings. Entice your imagination to see the scene in your minds-eye, focusing on your laughter and the smiles. Savor this positive memory and the sounds associated with this playful scene. Notice the positive happy feelings you may feel and recall any sounds of laughter. Note, if you have trouble recalling playful memories from the past, this may be a signal that you have unresolved traumas and negative memories from the past. Consider having a [personal NeuroCoaching session](#) to release these painful events.

You can also transcend grief with more joy by creating a play sanctuary — a safe environment with loved ones, where play can be exploratory. Art or crafts, or playing sports are physical and exploratory play. Even watching a funny movie can change your state and impress positive feelings. My children and I loved to watch comedy shows and movies together. Within the week of my son passing my daughter and I watched the classic Steve Martin film, *The Jerk*, This event not only gave my bereavement process a rest, but my daughter and I were able to smile and laugh once again.

To begin to play mindfully, choose an activity that brings you joy or select a memory of an event that stands out from your loss. While staying relaxed bring your full attention to the activity or memory. Note any sensations or feeling that may arise.

If you are working with a memory, embrace and savor the fun. When I mindfully recall one of my cherished memories with my son, I see him hiding behind the front door to playfully scare me when I would come home from work. This simple child's game brought us together with laughter. Today, my memory of my son is one of joy and immense love. I see with ease his big expression of delight and adorable sense of mischief. When I bring my full attention to this memory it fills me with love and gratitude.

Is it possible for you to recall a positive memory from your loss now? Try this simple technique. Bring your attention to this happy memory. If you feel tension, smile or add laughter. Happy physical actions send messages to the brain that help you to stay present and positive. Embrace and savor all of the positive aspects of this memory. When you have finished, reflect and write down any discoveries or insights that you may have observed.

***Can you come up with other ways to be mindfully playful?***

Maybe you enjoy the company of family and friends. Invite them to interact with you by adding components of compassionate communication, such as speaking

slowly and expressing appreciation. By using this technique, you can significantly improve your ability to empathize with each other, allowing for improved awareness, enhanced cognition and great emotional control.<sup>13</sup> After these sessions, consider playing a game of charades, sports, card games, or an other activity the family enjoys. Use your imagination to develop other strategies for easing your grief through play.

## About the Authors:

**Bernadette Marie Wilson**, MBA, NeuroCoach, and CEO of Cognitive Performance, a consulting and coaching system that uses scientific based neuroenhancement strategies to inspire and heal. Bernadette is a gifted coach, writer, and speaker who specializes in professional and personal empowerment and optimization. She works with individuals and large corporations in need of inspiration and resilience training. Bernadette has particular expertise in trauma and grief recovery. Her company, Cognitive Performance, integrates NeuroCoaching principles, along with her 20+ years in corporate leadership, and personal wisdom gained from transcending loss in her own life.



To learn more go to: <http://BernadetteMariWilson.com/book>

**Mark Robert Waldman** is the neuroscience researcher and creator of NeuroWisdom 101. His national bestseller *How God Changes Your Brain* was chosen by Oprah as one of the “Must Read” books for 2012. A Leading Expert on Spirituality, Communication, and the Brain, Mark is on the Executive MBA faculty at Loyola Marymount University. He has authored 14 books and has been featured in Time Magazine, the Washington Post, the New York Times, Forbes, Entrepreneur, and “O”, The Oprah Magazine.



To learn more go to: [www.MarkRobertWaldman.com](http://www.MarkRobertWaldman.com)

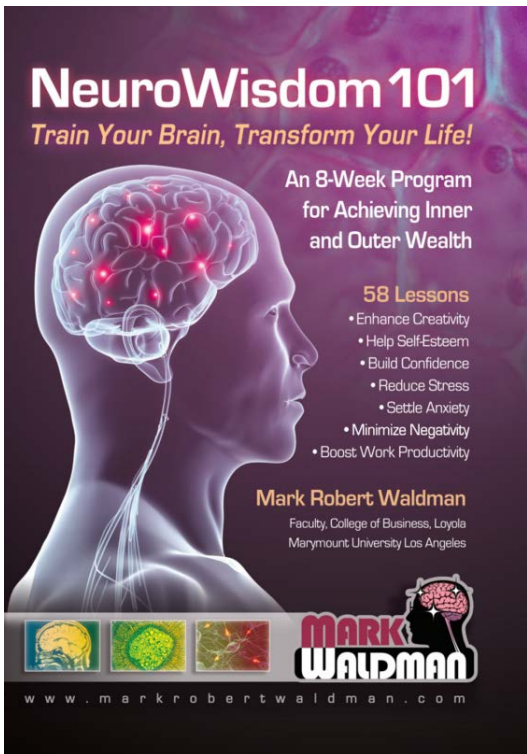
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