

Is Grief Intellectual or Emotional?

Approaching the disparity between intellectually understanding and emotionally processing loss.

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2026. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
www.mindstrengthbalance.com

"*Grief is mediated by a distributed neural network that subserves a number of neural processes affecting various parts of the brain and its functions... This neural network may account for the unique, subjective quality of grief.*" — **J. William Worden**

An Indirect Approach

I have a hard time engaging with most grief either because I don't get it, or I don't accept it to begin with. The only seriously grievous experiences I've had were the premature loss of two ex-wives and two dogs. The dogs were devoted; the ex-wives were not. These losses were "premature." The loss of other relationships that might be called "mature" or foreseeable have bothered me much less.

I have a natural inclination to avoid grief. I prefer to look into the future. I have no attraction to tear-jerker movies and don't like stewing in emotion. I'm careful about whom I attach to—more careful

now than I was—and it's separation from deep connection that grieves me. Despite my careful navigation, as a grief counselor, I'm obliged to engage with grief wherever it appears, and while sadness is straightforward, grief is complex.

I can control my feelings if I can manage my boundaries. I can accept and resolve a death that I prepare for. Neither my mother or father worked at maintaining their health, and they did little to avoid their encroaching infirmity and eventual death. Neither of them did anything in the way of physical exercise or paid serious attention to nutrition. I don't think either bothered to take vitamins. I didn't know when their deaths would arrive, but you could pretty much see them "aging out."

Now that I'm old myself, I take an active approach. I monitor both my mental and physical health, and I can see them change, day by day. I pursue different forms of daily exercise, and monitor my diet and mood. I push myself. It can be a bumpy ride, but I manage to stay in the center of the lane.

The Spirits in the Air

World politics moved right across the globe. Now it's moving leftward, toward the center. Why should this be happening so pervasively at almost every level? It's not a coincidence, and it's not a conspiracy. It's because people everywhere think what they see and believe what they're told. Our thoughts move as a bizarre kind of group mind.

We are influenced by our social environment more than we think, and we create physical environments that reflect our collective states of mind. We believe what we hear, project what we believe, and react to our projections. We are less selective than we admit and more creative than we recognize. Our whole reality begins with a mental creation.

We allow ourselves to be controlled by key attributes of scarcity and comfort. We indulge comfort as a sedative of peaceful apathy and forgetfulness. Trapped in the narcotic land of the lotus eaters, the men of Homer's Odyssey lose all sense of obligation or desire to return to duty.

> *"The more comfortable our lives become, the pickier we get about comfort. The temperature must be just right. The chair must be right. I must not ever be offended. We need the right food… the right amount of stimulation, no disagreement. Comfort, once an occasional rest, quietly becomes the expected default."* — **The Nudge Group** (2026)

Scarcity underlies fear and generates action, but not necessarily the right action. On the island of Helios, trapped by adverse winds and desperate for food, Odysseus's crew chooses to slaughter the Sun God's sacred cattle despite multiple warnings. As a result the god Helios kills all except Odysseus, who did not partake. The irony is that the gods drove them to it; the reality is we don't have the insight to act.

Many of the problems we see in our physical environment could be assuaged with gratitude and a modicum of insight, but we're rarely satisfied enough to be grateful or confident enough to take independent action. In chasing comfort and fleeing scarcity we are puppeted by anyone venal enough to control us as resources.

And so grief appears, not out of nowhere, but as the loss of what we've become attached to. Do not take your attachments for granted. Understanding grief starts with understanding who you are and the choices you've made.

One of my clients is angry. This client was abused as an infant, bullied as an adolescent, and now they're angry as an adult. They direct their anger at cultures they deem threatening and they are cultivated to feel threatened. They have been shaped into someone who will support violent actions, though their anger is self defeating.



This person is smart but easily triggered, politically exploitable, and easily emotionally misled. Their stress comes from the attachments they've developed, and their griefs will come as the result of who they are.

Reaching For Extremes

I am studying high-risk sports. In normal sports people's main goal is improved performance, but in high-risk sports people try to do harder things, engage in more committing exploits, and court increasing danger. Everyone accepts and encourages this trend toward greater difficulty, focus, skill, and danger. I claim this is deluded.

It's true that as your skill increases, challenge requires greater difficulty, but must satisfaction require greater danger? What these sports are really reaching for is more awareness, more engagement, and a greater appreciation of life. Failing to understand this leads many people to either burn out or die. Why do people fail to see where they're headed and fail to find satisfaction? For one thing, no one is telling them otherwise. More importantly, they can't be satisfied.

> *"The most important skills to have in high-risk environments are courage and humility. The courage to go to wild places and the humility to listen. Listen to self, others, and the environment. By listening we know that we have an invitation to be where we are."*
> — **Ken Wylie** (Smith 2018), Canadian Mountain Guide

The larger social environment seems hopeless as most people are beyond learning and the large problems feel to be beyond solving. On the other hand, one's immediate circle can be cultivated. Good relationships can be planted and nurtured, the problem is finding them to start with. In my case, the

garden of my relationships is a desert rock garden, but that's my choice. I prefer to spend my time with those who are struggling—my clients—as they are the most serious.

That leaves those things I can engage in: diet, exercise, and what I do with my mind: pay attention, make decisions, don't procrastinate, and make an effort. My greatest problems have been those where I made bad investments or didn't see trouble coming. I used to have trouble with picking colleagues for work and study, but that has resolved with experience as I am now a better judge of myself and others.

Major grief has come from marital relationships, and I hope I see more clearly now. Minor grief comes from professional rejection, but I see that as simply a bigger obligation with smaller minded people. It's those places where the tissue is the least healthy that our work is the most needed.

Emotional Investments

One typically has little to no control over your emotional investments. Those are investments that both reflect your acceptance of yourself, and your need for support. These needs preceded your development of reason, judgement, and control. In the realm of needs you will find little place for the skills of profit, achievement, and celebrity.

You need what you need, and you rarely know why. You invest in what supports your emotions in the same way that you'll eat. You don't ask why when you're hungry, you just eat to assuage your hunger.

Western culture supports the unfortunate paradigm of emotional cannibalism. We have accepted the idea that co-dependence is preferred over independence, so we accept relationships in which we feed off each other. This includes both intimate personal and political social relationships.

I believe this has become so natural that it has become invisible. I'm still working to fully see and understand it. Being a therapist has been tremendously helpful because it allows me to both observe other people's relationships, feelings, and their justifications for them.

Coming to terms with what's natural eases the pain of separation. For me, relationships that have died of old age, either the age of life or the age of the relationship, have caused me sadness but not grief. With enough engagement in the process of loss and detachment I can accept the departure.

My friend Toby was killed by rockfall in the Alps as he was finishing a climb at 11am, a time when frozen summits begin to melt and rocks begin to fall. I was a continent away at the time, but a few years later I repeated the route as a kind of tribute. I climbed the route at night, by myself, and was out of the danger zone before sunrise.

He was 22 and had just gotten married. I knew his wife and parents and, while I never saw them again, I think of them. I keep his blood stained rucksack as a reminder of his life and the importance of life in general. He is the only close friend I've lost in the mountains.

I accept sadness as a form of tribute, but I don't focus on grief. Grief reminds me of a ditch. The best approach to being stuck in a ditch is to drag your way out, and avoid ditches in the future.

The Grief of Denial

Accepting the reality of your loss is only settled when you create a new wholeness. In separation this means growing a new connection; in loss it means to regain new meaning; in denial it means finding new opportunity.

The actor Greg Wise has written a piece in *The Guardian* (Wise 2026) on his personal grief. I'm suspicious about the veracity of actors. They traffic in confusing emotions and their skill is to confuse them. Greg's grief centers not on loss, but a lack of opportunity, the opportunity to have a second child that was denied to him and his wife Emma Thompson.

I do not equate loss of opportunity with loss of connection, but he does. I spoke with Pauline Victoria—you can listen to our podcast "Strength in the Struggle"—who tells her story of prevailing despite being born with neither arms nor legs. She expresses no grief. Greg tells the story of his and Emma's deep grief in his book "*Grief Talking,*" scheduled for release in November 2026 (Wise 2026a).

> *"It is absolutely extraordinary that In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) treatment exists. Extraordinary, but also brutal. And oddly, within a process that hopefully results in the creation of a human, it can feel utterly dehumanising… we didn't know that embarking on IVF opens up a potential minefield of grief – a constant swinging between hope and despair within each cycle of the treatment. It was physically grueling for Emma. She was exhausted, in pain, filled with chemicals, her hormones all over the place."*
>
> *"That day in the doctor's office, we decided to stop. The most difficult decision we had yet had to make. No result, nothing tangible, it just stopped. It had failed… we were slipping into complicated grief… The precision of the grief, the focus of the loss, muddies and seeps out and, over time, if not addressed, metamorphoses into major depression. This is where it took us. I had never been a more grief-sodden mess."* — **Greg Wise** (2026).

Grief as Contradiction

While I cannot experience the grief that Wise describes, I can appreciate the process of dealing with it as a problem that needs to be solved. What I find interesting is that he could resolve his grief with the intellectual tools of Cognitive Behavior Therapy, a therapeutic mode that focuses on thoughts rather than feelings.

> *"Working with a Cognitive Analytic therapist I felt, for the first time within a therapeutic setting, that I was using my natural strengths – I had always needed to draw a problem on paper: create a diagram, a flow chart, a design. This was the way my mind worked; that's what led me to study architecture. Here, I was doing the same thing – seeing myself from different angles, where the constructional stresses lay and how the shape of my present form was dictated by the layers of design and building over my lifetime."* — **Greg Wise**

Wise goes on to say that his experience defines therapy, something which he also contradicts when he says other therapies didn't work for him. Cognitive-style therapy is not just an interchangeable cloak

that can be worn by all therapeutic modalities. It is explicitly not experiential, emotional, or probing of the subconscious, all of which I find most fundamental to our personalities.

> *"This is all therapy is – telling our story to somebody who will help us make connections, make us feel we are seen, we are heard, know that we are not alone. A therapist is just somebody who has been told many, many stories and – just as there are only eight notes in a scale but… our melody is unique... Therapists help us to retune, rescore and play our melody to its fullest beautiful potential."* — **Greg Wise**

This last comment gives greater insight because the notes of a scale do not make music any more than the printed word makes poetry. You have to put emotion into the notes, and that involves modulating the tone and rhythm. If therapy was nothing more than listening, then you could achieve the same result by sending the therapist a recording of your voice.

Therapy involves a malleable interaction, a modified reflection, and a reframing of position. One's grief, meaning, and opportunity lie not in the story but the living of it. I think Greg Wise was oblivious of the undercurrents of the process he experienced. Like a person who is taken to the shore by the current, it's not his paddling that got him there.

That he emotionally feels that he intellectually navigated his way out of depression almost makes me want to read his book, but I already know what he will say. He will say his new cognitive analysis resolved his problem, just like the paddler who was taken to shore regardless of his paddling.

The Depression Connection

Where sadness is a memory, grief settles like a veil. While we think of grief as detachable, deep grief cannot be reasoned away. Grief is unreasonable. You cannot rationalize your way out of it. It is a form of depression.

> *"Depression and anxiety appear to involve a shift in how a person processes emotionally significant information. Neutral facial expressions take on a more disapproving and critical vibe. Negative memories are recalled more readily than positive ones. Rewards feel muted, while criticism feels overly painful. It is common for people with depression or anxiety to feel stuck in a persistent loop of negativity."* — **Awais Aftab**, MD (2026), psychiatrist

Depression hangs on who you are, not what you think. It is true that we tell our story in words, and new words can revise our story, but you cannot just recite them. Words can draw emotions, but it is the reframing of conflicting emotions that brings a resolution, not the rearrangement of the words.

A racist does not become a non-racist by attesting to non-racism; they become a non-racist by advancing to an understanding that transcends race. Their new non-racist dialog could have been written by someone else, or they could have written it if they deduced what it should say, but until the non-racist monologue reflects the feelings that generate their thoughts, the monologue is just a pretense.

Relieving grief requires releasing the feelings that generate it. I find that reality is the key, and grief guides you to it. The grief is true, but the reality is more subtle than you have assumed. The grieving person is stuck living a false reality.

In the case of lost relationships between living people, the reality is that the relationship was never alive. Life does not expire without the living dying. Relationships that die were never born.

But when the relationship is lost to death or destruction, you cannot grieve reality. You may have guilt-driven grief, but that's an added element, and much grief is of this sort: our guilt for failing to manage risk or responsibility, or our failure to take care of ourselves.

On the path of complexity, sadness precedes grief, and grief precedes depression. Each step in this progression is more complex, requires more tools, and deeper exploration. The intellect is a tool, like paddling. For some people, like Greg Wise, intellect has emotional traction, but is still just one wheel on the 4-wheel drive vehicle of your personality.

As therapists, we're not just playing scales, we're not just listening, and we're not just playing Sherlock Holmes. There is an element of experience, empathy, and sagacity. Many therapists are too young or inexperienced to provide deep therapy. We clap for them as we do for children at elementary school recitals, but even the simplest of people are only moved by deeper music.

> *"You speak words of wisdom. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead."*
> — **J. William Worden**

References

Aftab, A. (20029 Oct 28). "Millions Use Antidepressants. We Still Don't Understand How They Work," *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/10/27/science/how-antidepressants-ssri-work.html

Smith, S. (2018 No 17). "A Life of Adventure Education: An interview with Ken Wylie." *The Mountaineers*. https://www.mountaineers.org/blog/outside-insight-a-life-of-adventure-education-an-interview-with-ken-wylie

The Nudge Group (2026). "Odysseus and the Mortal Danger of Comfort." *Nudge Psychology.* https://nudgepsychology.com.au/odysseus-and-the-mortal-danger-of-comfort/

Wise, G. (2026). "Greg Wise on how he and Emma Thompson coped with failed IVF." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2026/oct/25/greg-wise-on-how-he-and-emma-thompson-coped-with-failed-ivf-we-hit-an-existential-crisis-she-was-not-a-proper-woman-and-i-was-not-a-proper-man

Wise, G. (2026a Nov 3). *Grief Talking: Tales of Loss and Learning*. Bluebird.