

Review

Dorota Suwalska-Barancewicz¹

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Faculty of Psychology

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6495-9796>

Kessler, D. (2023). *The sixth stage of grief. In search of meaning*. Laurum, 400 pp.

At the end of 2022, Laurum Publishing House released a book by David Kessler, a world-renowned expert in the field of loss and grief, entitled *The sixth stage of grief: In search of meaning*. Combining autobiographical elements, practical advice and stories of people struggling with grief, the book helps readers understand that although grief never completely disappears, it is possible to find meaning in it that helps in further life. The author of this publication accompanies people in the process of mourning and loss. On a daily basis, he conducts workshops, training sessions and consultations for people experiencing loss and for specialists: doctors, nurses, police officers, as well as therapists and hospice workers. For many years, he collaborated with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a psychiatrist known for her groundbreaking book *On death and dying*, in which she presented a psychological theory of a patient's reaction to the news of an incurable illness and the imminent prospect of death. The stages identified by the author represent a general cycle, a description of a specific reality, and are: denial (shock and disbelief), anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (acknowledgement of the loss). Years after this model was established, David Kessler concluded that the process of returning to balance includes one more very important stage – finding meaning without a loved one in the reality in which we live, while emphasising that these stages are not strictly defined phases, but a framework that helps to understand the complexity of emotions accompanying loss.

This moving and deeply reflective book consists of an introduction, fifteen chapters organised into three parts, and a conclusion – it has 400 pages.

In the introduction, the author familiarises the reader with the subject matter of the book and, referring to his collaboration with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross,

¹ Correspondence address: dsbarancewicz@ukw.edu.pl.

discusses the five stages of grief, presenting their dynamics and flexibility. He emphasises that grief does not follow a linear path and that the healing process has no specific time limit. He points to his innovative concept of supplementing the well-known theory with another stage – finding meaning – while explaining what that meaning is. David Kessler argues that: “[...] the meaning we are talking about here really boils down to finding a way to sustain love for a loved one after their death and at the same time to continue one’s own life” (p. 18).

The first part of the book, entitled *There is meaning in every loss*, consists of five chapters and focuses on the search for meaning in the face of the loss of a loved one. In it, the author shares his personal story of losing his son, which became the impetus for expanding the classic model and defining ways of making sense of death, and points out that finding meaning in difficult circumstances is possible for everyone. Kessler emphasises that this meaning does not mean trying to “fix” the pain, but finding a way to integrate grief into one’s future life. The author then discusses the individual nature of each person’s grief and the appropriate way to express it, emphasising the importance of funeral ceremonies, which he believes are one way of showing love. The author also draws attention to the dynamics and duration of grief and the range of emotions that accompany it, pointing to the invaluable role of social support in this process. In this part of the book, Kessler explains the difference between accepting loss and finding meaning. He shows that acceptance is an important stage, but that finding meaning enables further emotional and spiritual growth. He also points to important truths that can help in the search for meaning, namely that death is the end of life but not the end of relationships, love or hope, and that pain is unavoidable in human life, but suffering is optional.

The second part of the book is entitled *Challenges related to grief* and consists of six chapters focusing on the stories of people who have experienced various types of loss (e.g., death by suicide, death of a child or loved one with whom they had a complicated relationship, miscarriage and infant death, or death as a result of mental illness) and found meaning in them, enabling them to rebuild their lives. The author points to the need to experience a variety of human experiences in the grieving process. He also emphasises the role of forgiveness and symbolically resolving unfinished business with loved ones who have passed away. In this part of the book, David Kessler describes the difficulties parents face in the face of miscarriage – an invisible loss, when they have to find a way to say goodbye to someone they never had a chance to meet and experience the loss of what could have been after birth. There is also room for reflection on the stigmatisation of mental illness by society, its perception as a sign of moral weakness or lack of willpower, and its association with social stigma. The author points out that people whose loved ones suffer from mental illness often experience a process of mourning long before their death, associated with a sense of loss of the future they “saw” with that person. At the same time, the author leaves the reader with the hope that meaning can be found even in the most difficult experiences.

In the third part of the book, entitled *Sense*, consisting of four chapters, David Kessler begins his reflections by stating that the essence of grief is pain.

However, he adds that this pain also has another side, which is love, and that in order to feel it, one must accept the pain rather than ignore or reject it. The author draws attention to an important issue, namely the balance between the human experience of loss and its spiritual dimension, pointing out that spiritual comfort can often only be helpful after the loss has been acknowledged on a human level. The author devotes a lot of space to reflections on perceiving the natural course of mourning as a process in which existing bonds with the deceased do not disappear, but change in character, continuing and enriching present life, because it goes on, even after a painful loss. It is still possible to live life to the fullest and find new goals and values in it. David Kessler also discusses the importance of rebuilding one's life in a new reality where everything has changed. The author writes: "[...] It is possible to regain balance when the memory of the deceased fills us with love rather than pain, and when we are able to find a way to give meaning to our lives and commemorate those who have passed away [...]; finding meaning is not unusual at all" (p. 384). Kessler ends the book with a message of hope that mourning, despite the pain and hardship, can give a person a chance to grow and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the reality around them.

David Kessler's book explores the complex process of coping with loss. Expanding on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's concept and integrating Victor Frankl's theory, the author emphasises the role of the search for meaning in coping with difficult experiences. Thanks to its combination of authenticity, empathy, personal experience and practical tips, including methods and techniques to help cope with loss, as well as its universal nature, the book is of great therapeutic value, helping the reader find a path to personal growth despite negative or traumatic experiences.

The sixth stage of grief is a significant contribution to the psychology of loss and grief, which changes the way we think about and deal with it. The author gives it the status of a transformative experience that can be a catalyst for change leading to a deeper meaning in life. He also helps the reader understand that although grief does not disappear completely, it can be the beginning of making life more meaningful. The reviewed book is especially recommended for people going through difficult moments in their lives, experiencing loss, regardless of its nature, as well as for specialists – psychologists, therapists, doctors, counsellors supporting others in the face of difficulties. It is a valuable read for anyone who would like to understand the psychological processes accompanying difficult experiences and find a path to healing and personal growth by deepening their knowledge of themselves and the world around them.