

A photograph of a person with dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped shirt, sitting in a lush green field. They are leaning against a tree trunk on the right and reading an open book. A straw hat and a blue bag are on the ground next to them. The background shows a rolling green hill under a bright sky.

Reading for Tough Times

By Melanie Salsbury, Walking through Grief Program Coordinator

When I was a kid, I could not wait to go to the library to sign up for the summer reading program as soon as school was out. Even more exciting than the prospect of prizes awaiting me at the end, was the idea of selecting a stack of books to drift away in during what seemed like endless warm and languid days that stretched out before me. I don't remember how I decided which books to add to my stack, but the freedom of choosing was thrilling by itself. I am now far away from childhood and enjoy reading throughout the year, but I still spend time creating a stack of books I plan to read over the summer. Honestly, it's just as thrilling now as it was in my childhood. But reading isn't just about the happiness of childhood and summer. It is also there for us during the tough times.

There is something about reading, be it a book of fiction, poetry, or self-help, that makes us feel good and want to keep adding to our summer stacks. Reading can be a form of entertainment, or a much-needed sanctuary from the noise of life and the pull of social media. Reading can also result in feelings of connection and validation, as we relate to a character, story, or life event. Any of these rewards are worthy of keeping us reading. But it turns out reading offers health benefits as well, including benefits for people who are grieving.

As humans, we will inevitably experience loss and grief, and we all grieve in our own way. The death of a loved one is potentially one of the most stressful events we may endure. Grieving is often both an emotional and physical experience. Emotions felt by grieving people can include sadness, anger,

fear, confusion, anxiety, relief, numbness, gratitude, frustration, or hope. The physical experience of grief can include changes in sleep patterns, energy levels, appetite, and digestion, as well as headaches, body aches, and muscle pain. Though grief is universal, it is also individual. There isn't a right way to grieve, or a particular timeline. Fortunately, reading can have a positive impact on physical and mental health during the process.

Recent studies indicate reading can reduce stress, improve sleep, provide time to recharge our batteries, improve creativity and critical thinking, reduce cognitive decline, encourage empathy, and contribute to a longer lifespan. In addition, reading can be a coping mechanism for those living with grief and loss. For example, reading can help us feel less alone. Reading about someone else's loss when you are experiencing your own may seem counterproductive, but sometimes knowing that another person shares your feelings can be comforting or normalizing.

In his book *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis reflects on the death of his wife and states, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." For some, hearing the grief experience described in this way is not only validating but also shows that the author survived his journey through the difficult emotions that arise out of grief. There are many beautifully written and honest portrayals of loss in the grief memoir genre. A few to note include *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion (about the death of her husband), *Making Toast* by Roger Rosenblatt (about the death of his adult daughter), *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala (about the death of her family), and *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald (about the loss of her father).

Reading can help us cope with grief and loss by providing an escape or distraction from grieving (sometimes our brains need a break) and by helping us tackle insomnia. Reading before bed can reduce the time it takes to go to sleep by half. For those who wake up in the night and cannot return to sleep, getting up and reading can induce drowsiness. Also, sometimes we need a good laugh, which reading can evoke. And reading about how other people cope with grief and loss can offer suggestions for new strategies. In a clinical setting, grief counselors sometimes practice bibliotherapy with grieving individuals, which involves reading a specifically selected book and engaging in guided discussion.

It is common for grieving people to have difficulty focusing on something for an extended period, making reading a challenging activity. Short books, articles, blogs, or books that can be easily picked up at any point in the text can be helpful in this situation. The books *Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief* (Hickman), and *It's OK That You're Not OK* (Devine), as well as the website <https://whatsyourgrief.com/> are popular resources.

If you are looking for a good book, please visit the Grief Library at the Cave Hill Heritage Foundation office at the Broadway entrance to the cemetery. We have a collection of grief memoirs and other books related to grief and loss available free of charge (including the titles mentioned above). Feel free to take a book from the shelf (no check-out process!) and return it when you're finished. Or pass it on to someone who might need a book.

Isn't it amazing how the right book can enter our lives at just the right time? Do you have a favorite book that helped you through challenging times or during a period of grief? If you have a title to recommend, please reach out to me: melanie@cavehillcemetery.com. I would love to hear from you!

<https://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1139&context=adsp>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahjacobs/2012/03/04/12-ways-to-beat-insomnia-and-sleep-better-no-matter-whats-keeping-you-awake/?sh=3667cf2927d3>

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/>

<https://speakinggrief.org/>