

The Road to Recovery: Finding a Safe Space to Grieve for Your Pet

A Special Interview With Cole James

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Becker. And joining me today for Grief Awareness Week is a very special guest. He's the president of the Grief Recovery Institute. And Cole James is here with us to talk a little bit more about the very important work that he does, helping people address their grief. And Cole, thank you so much for taking time today to join me. And I really appreciate the fact that you have included animals as such a big part of helping people recover from their emotional trauma that they that they are currently undergoing or that they have undergone. I'm so appreciative that animals have been included in your platform. So, thank you for all that you do. And welcome.

Cole James:

Thank you so much for having me, Dr. Becker, I'm really excited to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So Cole, back up and let's just tell our listeners and readers a little bit about how you got into this line of work, because there's probably a story behind that.

Cole James:

Sure, sure. So briefly, because we could go on, but essentially, my father, John W. James founded the Grief Recovery Institute, oh, gosh, over 40 years ago now, following a painful loss of a 3-day old son. And him and his wife at the time, found virtually no assistance or support in the late '70s, around that loss, right. And, unfortunately, a really well-intentioned, loving family, their best plan was to kind of paint the nursery back to a neutral color and, "let's just pretend it didn't happen." And he had friends and family say, "Let's be grateful you two are young, you can have other children." And obviously, there was just nothing helpful or supportive by these well-intentioned, loving people. But there just wasn't anything out there for grief at the time that he found.

Cole James:

And he went on a long kind of search over several years to find little things that helped him and he pieced stuff together. And he found some other stuff, intuitively. And basically, he created

this method called The Grief Recovery method, self-published a book called “The Grief Recovery” handbook. And you know, 40 years later, we're here, the book's in 22 languages. We have specialists that help grievers all across the world. And that's just a little brief story of how it got started.

Cole James:

How I came to it, I grew up in the household with him, helping grieving people on the couch in my living room. So I was surrounded by this work my whole life. But I wasn't really interested in it in terms of a career for me. And about 12 years ago, I had a really hurtful loss, I lost my cousin to suicide, I lost a best friend to a drunk-driving accident. And all of a sudden grief was a part of my life on a really profound way. So I just kind of went to do this work to heal my own heart. And at the end of this four-day workshop that I did, I was putting in my two weeks at a large media company that I had been with for seven years because it was that powerful for me. And I saw so many transformations in that room with other people. And I also saw that grief was, again, still in society something that people minimized, they judged and analyzed folks who are struggling with grief.

Cole James:

There were crazy timelines put on people in terms of expectations, or coming back to work a week later, and just being the perfect employee again. And I just saw what a challenging thing grief was for all of us, and how society really still wasn't given us the tools to help with that. So, you know, again, at the end of my four days, I was asking my dad for a full-time job wanting to come on board, wanting to get this out there to more people. So yeah, so I've been doing this now 12 years, I've traveled all across the world, studying under him and other experts in the field. And I'm so grateful that every day I get to wake up and kind of help people with this topic.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it's so critically important. It's probably no more important job when it comes to emotional recovery or addressing our emotional needs, than addressing pain and that that's exactly what your foundation does. So that when did you incorporate, when you were talking about how people kind of marginalize it, minimalize it and just kind of want to, you know, put grief in a box.

Dr. Karen Becker:

As a veterinarian, I believe I have just seen that compounded because understanding the loss of a human is one thing, trying to explain to your boss or family members that what's your feeling for any animal, not just dog or cat or horse, any animal – I think it could be much, much worse. And

I've seen it be much [inaudible 00:04:32] – people just absolutely say, “it's a hamster, get over it,” or you know, “we can go and get another dog.” When did you incorporate – when did you realize that writing and talking about and putting together a program specifically pertaining to animals was vitally important?

Cole James:

Yeah, great, great question. So initially way back in in the '70s, when my dad developed this, it really was around death and pretty much death of people. And then through the years, we realized that there were really over 40 life events that are grief, right. And we don't need to get into those today. But there are all different circumstances and experiences we have in life that are grief. And so we started adding other losses to the method and started really having success with people doing really important work for themselves around that pain that you touched on.

Cole James:

And we started working with people in the same group. So if I had a group of 12 people, and I was helping everyone through the method, you're going to have a widow working right next to someone who is working on a divorce working right next to someone who's grieving their partner being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. And by creating a non-judgmental, non-comparative environment for all of those people to understand, we're all grieving at 100% of us of what our loss is, we can have everyone rooting for each other. And it doesn't have to be the exact same type of loss, there doesn't have to be a hierarchy of, “My loss is more painful than your loss,” or “I know exactly how you feel.”

Cole James:

So we developed this way to really feel everyone feel comfortable doing whatever work they needed to do. And what we found, though, is we would get calls, pretty often around people grieving the loss of an animal, of their pet. And we would tell them about all of this work, and we would ensure that they would be in a safe place to work among other people. But society, like you touched on, was always so judgmental of them, and always minimized their loss in very brutal ways, very often. Very hurtful ways.

Cole James:

And so those folks, even though we were supportive on the phones with them, and they were always the ones that were not willing to show up to a group, because their loss was so minimized, right? And so I guess it's, gosh, it's been probably about seven years ago, myself, John James, Russell Friedman, one of the kind of, co-creators of this work, we set out to write a book, specifically speaking to those grieving people because we knew we were – the world was

underserving them, we were not getting an opportunity to help them even though we know we had a method that's proven, evidence-based, all of that good stuff. But we weren't, you know, they were, they were still very tentative to come to our work.

Cole James:

So what we did is we wrote this book. And then we also train people we call Grief Recovery methods, specialists, they're all over the world and they help clients with grief. And so we created a specific pet loss group format, so that they could lead groups with people and everyone going there felt safe, that everyone in that group was going to be working on the loss of an animal. And we were all going to be safe to do that very important work. And like he touched on, I can very much relate like, it's if anyone reads that book, you'll see that some of my most significant, most traumatic losses have been the losses of dogs.

Cole James:

I'm an animal lover across the board. I'm specifically a dog lover. And some of my most impactful, hurtful losses were dogs. And as we all know, with animals, that can be one of the most unconditional loving relationships that we get to experience in this world. And so there's really no surprise that when that relationship ends, we're absolutely devastated. The problem is, though, again, a society wants to just kind of shut that down and say, "You just get a new dog. It was just that it was just a cat. Come on." And it's very, very hurtful to us, right?

Cole James:

Because from that one loss, now we have a loss of trust in a close friend or a lost trust in in mom or dad or our spouse. So we want to be really careful for as you know, we want to be really careful when people are grieving any type of a loss. They are grieving at 100% of what that loss was for them. I don't get a vote in it. You don't get a vote in it. Their heart is broken. And that's all that matters. And we want to help them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep. And gosh, it just is so refreshing – when I lost Gemini. Here, she's-

Cole James:

Oh, I can see her right there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, when I lost Gemini, it was within a month of me opening my animal hospital and I was incapacitated. And when I called to try and find a grief counselor, I had to work through three of – fire them because I had one-on-one session with three professionally trained counselors. And they said to me, “You’re a veterinarian, right?” and I said, “Yes.” And I said, “She’s my soulmate. She’s everything.” and they said, “But you go through this all the time, you of all people need to be able to recognize that you’ve got to get over this to keep going,” and I thought you know, it was so hurtful that because I was a professional and because I euthanize things for a living, that I should somehow be able to get over this. I should be an expert at getting over this.

Cole James:

Wow. Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It was just – even the counselor I ended up with, I was in professional counseling weekly for 16 months just to be able to show up at my brand-new animal hospital and try and be a functional vet while I was grieving.

Cole James:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It was incredibly difficult. And the counselor that I was with for 16 months was not highly effective, but at least allowed me to go to work and show up. And so the fact that we’ve come so far is so important, because if people are in a situation I was where I literally couldn’t function, being told, “Oh, for crying out loud. This is long enough, Karen, it’s been a year, let’s get a new dog. It’s going to be okay.” That was not the right thing to say to me, and probably most people grieving. So Cole, let’s walk through some of those misconceptions. Obviously, we’ve touched on some of them. But let’s talk through how we could let ourselves off the hook when we’re grieving. And then maybe some tools for some emotional steps that we can take to move from where we’re at in grief.

Cole James:

Sure, sure. And let me just say one thing, I'm, I'm sorry, but I went out of the moment a quick second. One of my dogs growing up, a beautiful Doberman, was named Gemini. And so when you said Gemini, I couldn't believe it. But my heart goes out to you. And I'm sorry that unfortunately, I've heard that story often. And so I'm sorry that that was your experience. And real quick, I just want to touch on one other point. And this is not to demean at all what therapists and counselors do. I work with them every day, and they're amazing.

Cole James:

But believe it or not, what you'll find is a lot of them seek out our training because they're looking at specific tools around grief. And at two days into our training, they will freely admit, "You know, Cole, I spent like a half a semester on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief. And that's all I got around the topic of grief." Right?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Cole James:

And so again, we get to work with specialists, like I said, all the time. And we get the really good ones who understand "I don't have enough tools around this topic." And I know it sounds crazy. And I have no idea why this is not covered in mental health professionals' schools-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes, yes.

Cole James:

-but there is almost none. So I just want your listeners to know that, like, if they are seeking out a grief counselor, just know that, like you talked about Dr. Becker, that really doesn't mean a lot. It's very, very, it's very – in terms of what tools they're going to use. So if you're looking at a grief counselor, obviously I'm biased, I would look into a grief recovery methods specialists. They will never say anything that was told to you, Dr. Becker, I promise. But if you're talking to a grief counselor that is not using our method, ask them what tools they are using, ask them what their framework is.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Excellent.

Cole James:

That's really important, because a lot of the time they didn't have a lot of education on it. And we don't want you-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that makes total sense.

Cole James:

I mean, I've had so many people say, "I spent years and years and years in therapy, I should have just started with this. I should have just come to this eight-week program."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Exactly.

Cole James:

Because it's all we look at, is grief. And a lot of the time these, again, well-intentioned mental health professionals, they just don't have a framework around grief specifically. So I just want to touch on that really briefly, and sorry for that kind of little sidebar. But your question was, essentially, "What can we do to let ourselves out off the hook and what can we do to kind of-"

Dr. Karen Becker:

Take a step.

Cole James:

Okay, gotcha. Yeah. So, number one, I think the most important thing is we have to protect ourselves from these hurtful comments that we have in society. And so number one, we need to find safe people that we can express our feelings with. One thing that happens with grief is we tend to isolate with our grief. The reason being, again, is three days after a loss, whether it's a

kid, child going back to school, or us going back to work, the standard answer is how are you doing? We have to say, "I'm fine."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Cole James:

We may be bleeding to death emotionally.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Cole James:

We may be out of the moment 90% of the time. We may have a complete lack of energy, and kind of question the whole point of stuff. But they want you to say, "I'm fine." And so number one, we call it Academy Award-winning recovery. Which is basically just cover all feelings. Don't tell anyone how you feel. And that's a bad plan because pretty soon we feel very alone with our grief.

Cole James:

And so what we want to do is we want to be able to, what we call tell the truth about how you feel. Now you have to find safe people to do that. And so if Dr. Becker and I were having coffee and we're, you know, three months out from the loss of Gemini, I'm going to ask her how she's doing. And hopefully I'm going to be, from our past conversations, a safe enough person for her to tell the truth. "I'm having a rough day" or "I'm having a really rough moment," or "I just passed the dog park we just always go to and it just absolutely was hurtful." And I'll offer a hug.

Cole James:

And I'll just kind of let her talk. I'm going to be, what we call, a heart with ears. She doesn't need my analysis. She doesn't need my keen opinions on what she should do. So when I'm working with Grievors, in the back of my mind, I'm saying, "What are they trying to get me to hear?" That's really my role.

Cole James:

Now, at some point, I'm going to help them navigate through the method if that's where we're at. But most of the time, I'm a heart with ears, I don't even need a mouth. Because there's not there's not a line that I'm going to say that's going to help someone with their grief, we got to help give them the tools to do that work. So, but anyway, practically speaking, find people that are safe and avoid the people that are not safe, or at least avoid this conversation with them.

Cole James:

So if you know someone is going to be really critical, or comparative or minimizing of your grief around your animal, I just would not open that door to them because we want to protect our hearts. And then with other folks, you may just say, "Hey, would you mind just being a heart with ears?" could set up the framework a little bit. Because the fact of the matter is, there was a study way back in the day and it was like, "out of 141 comments said to a Griever, How many were helpful?"

Cole James:

And the grieving people said "19." There were 19 comments out of 141 that were actually helpful. You really have to be careful when you're listening to a grieving person. Because we have antennas. Grievors have these antennas and every time something is said to us, we're filtering that through, "Was that insensitive?" And a lot of the time it can be. And so it's up to us to protect our hearts and kind of set the ground rules on really what I'm looking to do in this interaction with a trusted friend. And what I'm looking to do most of the time is share my feelings and just have them offer me a hug and say, "I heard that. I can't imagine what you're going through right now." Because the fact of the matter is, you can't.

Cole James:

Dr. Becker and I both had beautiful dogs. They were both named Gemini. But our two relationships with those two dogs was different. Completely different. And so the work that I'm going to do around my loss, the work that she's going to do around her loss is completely different. And so I can't tell, or I shouldn't tell Dr. Becker, "Gosh, I know exactly how you feel. I had a dog, too. Her name was Gemini too." I know exactly how you feel that would come across for her as completely untruthful. Even though I'm trying to relate to her, and I'm well-intentioned, there's going to be a sting or a big sting of hurt for her because it's not accurate. It's not, "I don't know how she feels."

Cole James:

Now if I want to kind of lend my support, I may say, “Gosh, I don't know how you feel. But I know when I lost my Gemini, I went to the kitchen, I forgot why I went in there. Every dog I saw it was hurtful. I couldn't even think of getting another dog for a couple of years. But what's going on with you?” So I'm going to give her a little bit about how I felt. But really, I want to hurt her oh, I want to open the door for her to just tell me how she feels. And when she starts going, I'm going to do this.

At that point, she just needs me to be her heart with ears. Okay, so that's one thing. I hope that's helpful for your listeners is we got to just protect ourselves because it's really hard. Because what happens is if you just kind of are open with everyone, and you get minimized and judged and compared, pretty soon you're going to not trust anyone to open up with. So early on, we got to find who's safe.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's really good, really good advice. And I think it's okay, when if you have to be in relationship, whether it's a coworker or a family member, that you know is not going to understand it, I think it's okay to also have some boundaries and say, “You know, I'm not ready to talk about what's going on.” Especially if they're trying to be helpful, but it's actually every word they're saying is just making you bleed more, I think it's okay to just say, “We're not going to talk about this.” And that can be very protective to your heart as well.

Cole James:

Yeah, I love it. I know, I totally agree with you, 100%. And what I found in my own experience, is again, if I can pre-frame it with just asking them, “Hey, you know, I'm going to tell you a little bit about how I feel. But, you know, we're not looking for solutions or problem-solving or anything like that. Would you mind just hearing me? You know, and then that way they kind of know what the ground rules are. But like you said, if it goes to them offering their opinion and stuff, then I think it's absolutely right to just be like, “You know, I don't really want to talk about it. Thank you for hearing me.” Right? And just and just cut off the conversation here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Exactly. Stop there.

Cole James:

One of the biggest things that we do when we're in our groups, you'll be seven weeks into a group and all the group has gelled. They all love each other. They all understand grief on a

whole, another level. They're doing incredible work. But even that far into it, society has given us some so many bad pieces of information and things to say even that far in if you let the other person, the part after the one person shares their work, if you let the other person just kind of open-ended start talking, they can put their foot in their mouth that long into it.

Cole James:

And so the kind of the crosstalk around grief is, I find, is almost always not helpful unless you really know what you're doing and stuff. So again, with friends and family who are grieving, just be there for them, offer them a hug. Listen to them at the end of what they say, let them know that you heard them. Be in the moment there. That's the other thing, right?

Cole James:

I mean, I can't tell you how many times I've opened up my heart. And I am telling my story to someone and someone has gone out of the moment, I can see them go out of the moment. They're planning their rebuttal to me. And so I've already lost them in the moment. So I know they're not hearing me. And then their rebuttal is probably not going to be that helpful. And so let's just skip all that and just be in the moment for someone, hear them and offer them a hug at the end. And that's it. And you're going to be one of the safest people to have in their life just by doing that I and I know it sounds weird, but it's really what we find.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And, and so talk to me a little bit, Cole, about when you talk about the group like the eight weeks. Now are you doing online? Let's say that we have readers or listeners that are hearing this and say, "You know what, this is a program, I think, that can be very beneficial to me." There's a book you can read, of course, are there groups that you can join virtually? Or how does it work now?

Dr. Karen Becker:

I have found that talking to other people specifically about the loss of when I lost Gemini, I wanted to talk to people who were familiar with the death of a dog, not a human, not a kitty. The kitties? You know, I've done that as well. But just as a specific I wanted to be around people that understood, maybe, a little bit of what I was feeling.

Cole James:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so are these groups put together in a way that if people were to join us or go to a seminar that they would be with other grieving dog owner? Or let's just say animal loss group? Or how do you assemble those groups? And for people that say, "I don't want to be in a group setting whatsoever." What are some other alternatives to be able to work with a professional but not necessarily in a group dynamic?

Cole James:

Sure, sure. So the first thing is, the timing is just a little bit off, we're actually launching – we have online groups, and we have on online one-on-one programs for grieving people. This specific online pet loss group is about to be launched, I'd say in a month or two. So it's coming soon. And so that's really exciting. And we're very, very excited about that. For the last several years, it's been an in-person thing. And with COVID and everything, we've moved all of our work online, and we're seeing amazing results and helping people really, really on a on a profound level online.

Cole James:

So that pet loss group is coming shortly. And also, if people aren't comfortable working in a group, you can all absolutely work with one of our team, one-on-one as well, online. So if you feel more comfortable doing online, and one-on-one work, that's available as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Great.

Cole James:

And then to answer your question, so obviously, there's many periods of your grief. And at one point, you may just want to be connecting. With just feeling a sense of "Gosh, there's other people going through this. And so you may really want to identify with another person who's lost a dog. And that's absolutely great. And so there's a very good chance other people will be working on that loss in the group. There's other people who will be working on other animals.

Cole James:

But what I can say, for our work, at least, we can really create enough safety, again, just by really, I mean, when people hear that it's like every griever is unique because every relationship is unique. And we all have our own work to do on the specific relationships. So what do I mean by that? At the very start of our work, is a bunch of education because our parents don't sit us down and say, "Okay, here's the birds and the bees talk." And then, "Here's this grief talk we need to have because you're going to have 15, 20, 30 losses in your life, they're going to be devastating. And here's some tools to help you with that."

Cole James:

Unfortunately, we don't get that talk. So just the lack of knowledge around grief is an issue. And so we help educate people just on the definitions of grief, what grief is, how many different things you know, grief can be, those sorts of things. And then we do a thing called the loss history graph where once you know now, "Here's all things that can be grief, we're going to chart our whole life and identify all the painful grief in our life." And then we're going to come to the loss we want to work on in this program.

Cole James:

And so someone working on there – and I guess that's where it doesn't matter in the group in terms of who lost what animal by the time we get to the relationship we're focused on, we're all supporting each other, and then you're going to dive very specifically on all of the hopes, dreams and expectations that you had that were lost because that animal died, we're going to look at all the things that we wish would have been different, better or more, in the relationship.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Cole James:

You know, "Gosh, I wish I would have gotten home from work earlier to walk you. I'm so sorry that when my kids came into the picture, I felt like you were a little bit on the backburner." There's a whole tank for my last dog, George, that I had to euthanize in a really rushed way. And it was really painful for me. Well, here's my first dog as an adult, for my wife and I, he was really our first kid, he was there for the birth of all of our children, he was great with my kids, he was like that one of the once of a lifetime dog. Well, when he dies, I have a tremendous amount of energy around the loss and saying goodbye to him in that veterinarian office and all of that,

but I also have 10 years' worth of, again, feelings. Happy, sad, neutral, and so I want to look at that entire thing.

Cole James:

So if someone is working next to me, and she lost a cat, and then I'm over here in the group, and I'm working on a dog at that point, we're so focused on our total relationship and saying goodbye to the total, you know, friendship we had with that animal. At that point, it really doesn't matter who's working on what loss. Because although we can have a sense of camaraderie and connectedness, when we talk about both losing a dog, a lot of that's intellectual, and we want to help people move 14 inches down to their heart. And once we get into the emotional work, then it's like we can all be supportive, and it doesn't matter if you're working on a dog, and I am, or you're working on a horse and I'm working on a cat.

Cole James:

At that point, we're so focused on our own personal work and what we need to say goodbye to in that relationship. That again, it doesn't matter what we're working on. The problem is, is so much of society, they don't have any tools past us feeling connected around, we have the same type of loss. And so the problem is, we got to keep just talking about the same type of loss, and then we kind of start focusing on maybe the cause of death. Because we can both intellectually identify with the cause of death. But the problem is we're, we're missing that 10, 15, 20 years of really, the work is where we find the work needs to be done, which is saying goodbye to all of those things.

Cole James:

Like for George, my expectation was he was going to live to 14. Why? Well, that type of breed, I just figured I was going to have 14 years with them. And so when he dies at 10, I have a hurt around that expectation. "I wanted four more years with you."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep.

Cole James:

You know, or things I wish could have been different. Like I said, when the kids came, I didn't spend as much time with them. Or, you know, so anyway, there's, believe it or not we can find in a 10-year relationship with an animal, we can find so much of that pain of that hurt of that unfinished emotional business. And we want to process that and complete that. I'm not looking to say goodbye to George, I'm looking to say goodbye to the pain associated with that loss. I check in with George from time to time. I just saw a photo of him yesterday. And I said, "I love you, buddy, I miss you."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup. Exactly.

Cole James:

"And I know you're good now. I miss you. I love you. Goodbye." So I do a little quick check-ins with-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Cole James:

And that's more, you know, kind of a specifics of the work. But anyway, I'm sorry, I'm kind of rambling here. No, I apologize.

Dr. Karen Becker:

No, no, it's really good. It's really good that I think that's a really important point to make, that when you work through grief, you're working through grief to overcome it. To move past it. You're not moving past, you're not saying goodbye to the relationship, you're saying goodbye to the pain. And that relationship goes on forever.

Dr. Karen Becker:

The pain, we have the ability to work through that. It's hard work. But it's incredibly important work for you to be able to have that relationship with the animal that is not physically any longer and not have a pain response when you think about it. And that's why grief recovery is so

important. It's that we're able to shift our perspective into a way that allows us to not have recurrent pain for the rest of our lives. And I think that so many people because we aren't given tools and because it's not a conversation that we are regularly in because we're not trained professionals, we live with so much pain that's unnecessary.

Cole James:

Yeah, thank you, thank you for saying that. This is going to sound weird as well but there are leaders out there in the grief community with a certain type of loss and they have a platform and they're certainly not connected with us, but they will say, "This loss is a life sentence of misery for you."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Ugh.

Cole James:

And that is the healthy advice that they offer people, right? And we attract people that go to a meeting like that. They look around, people are talking about a loss. It sounds like the loss happened a week ago. Later they find out that the loss happened 10 years ago and they go, "This is this isn't for us, right?" We're seeking — in spite of these tragic, devastating, I'm not trying to minimize at all what we go through. It's, you know, again, this is some of the hardest stuff we deal with on this planet is losing these relationships we love.

Cole James:

But to say, "This is a life sentence of misery and that's all I got for you," is just unacceptable to us. And so, you know, like what you touched on, there are actions that we can take within time to help. Time alone just passes. Time does not heal, I promise you, I see people who are unfinished as the day that they lost that person 10 years later, 20 years later. And so time alone just passes.

Cole James:

If I have a flat tire, and I pull over to the side of the road, right? And the energy has left, the air has left that tire — I can't — my get up is going, is gone. I'm just sitting there, I cannot just sit there and wait for time to heal, I must take some actions. Either I'm going to fix that tire myself, I'm going to seek AAA (American Automobile Association), you know, help on assisting me with that. But there's going to be actions in that timeframe. And it's no different with grief.

Cole James:

Just for a quick example, and this isn't an animal but this story will apply. I was working with a lady who is grieving the death of her husband, they've been married 50 years. The last year of his life, he had cancer and she was his primary caregiver in their home. And it was really hurtful for her. And he, you know, his mind kind of went and he said really hurtful things to her. And she was so stuck in the pain of that last year that that unresolved grief was robbing her of 49 years of a beautiful marriage, and through grief recovery and through identifying pain from that year and pain from the other parts of relationship too. But by saying goodbye to the pain, she got access back to all of this wonderful stuff with her husband, right?

Cole James:

And then I could ask her, "When was the first time you guys met?" And her face, just her eyes, would light up and she was there. And that's what we're looking to do with grief recoveries. We want you to get access to the whole relationship, we want you to be able to have fun memories. The problem is unresolved grief. And if we have all this unfinished emotional business from the past with that relationship, well, then we have trouble accessing any memory. Every memory turns painful, or we veer off to the stuff that's unfinished.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Exactly.

Cole James:

And so if I do grief recovery work with you, in a year, on the anniversary of your animal's death, you say, "Gosh, I'm really sad." I'm going to just offer you a hug, I'm not going to say, "Well, gosh, I guess grief recovery didn't work." Sadness is normal and natural.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Cole James:

I try and teach my kids all the time. Just like, we can have a laughing fit in the home, we can we can cry. And that's just as normal as laughter. And so I'm going to let that be okay. And the

problem is, you see this all the time, I'm sure in your practice, the minute my emotions come, it's like, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes. I was just going to say that the guilt that – I bet you're touching on that. People want to apologize for how they feel for their grief. And so thank you for bringing that up. Can you touch on your thoughts about that?

Cole James:

Sure.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Because so many people say they start crying. And then of course, the first eight minutes, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." But also, they have guilt when they think about their animal. And the funny things they used to do, or the magic of the relationship. They have guilt remembering the good times. And I think that that's an aspect of unresolved grief, that they can't look back and give themselves permission to smile and talk positively or recite a really hilarious story because their animal has passed. And grief prevents them from acknowledging the amazing joy that the relationship held.

Cole James:

Right. Yes. And that's 100% what we don't want for folks. We want them to be able to have that spiritual connection with their animal forever, have that emotional connection with their animal forever. Obviously, the physical relationship ended. But we don't want to lose access to those other aspects of our relationship, and we shouldn't. So we help people all the time with the feelings you're talking about.

Cole James:

You know, there's grief. And then what we also say, what we also see, is regret. And so, if I look back, and I'm thinking about that amazing backpacking trip that I did with George and it was just me and him. And it was it was our first one ever. And it's like me and him in the tent. And if I'm unfinished with all of the relationship with George, I can't go there. Two minutes in, you know, a minute into that memory. That hurts. Because I had that hope, that dream and that expectation that that we would have more of those trips. And so I need to know, I need to know what to do in real time as those feelings come up.

Cole James:

And so that's where, again, going back to different, better or more. That's just a case of, "I wanted more of that." And so if that feeling is there, a lot of the time, the sadness and the pain is just, "I can't do that, again, we can't have that experience again." And so I may just again, do a quick check in with George, either formally in the form of a journal writing, or even just kind of just saying it to myself, but it's like, "Gosh, I wish we would – I was reviewing our relationship, George, and I discovered something I wanted to tell you. Do you remember that backpacking trip we had? I had so much fun on that trip. It was so cool waking up to you in the morning, and you had like my old sleeping bag I draped over you. Like, I miss that. I wish we could have more of that. But I got to say goodbye to the pain of that. So I can be free of that."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Cole James:

Okay, so I'm trying to communicate, I'm not saying goodbye to you. But I need to say goodbye to that. We're kind of we're kind of jumping way ahead in the method. I would have had to have gone and done the bulk of the work saying goodbye to George before those things happen. But the point is, after the death, we have stimulus all around us, right? Everything in our home reminds us of that animal, the bowl, the leash, the collar, driving past the dog park, you know, seeing our friend's dog, and they played all the time together. And all of those things are stimulus and right. And those all can hurt us-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Cole James:

-all can hurt us if we have a bunch of energy around that stuff because we haven't said goodbye to that relationship. To the pain around it. And so it's hard to address the stimulus if we're unfinished with kind of the iceberg underneath the water. Okay, so I'm, I'm kind of talking out of turn in terms of like, when I do something that we call a PS letter, like I said, just a quick, brief communication around this moment, this feeling I had, because I have two options in that moment, when that memory comes up.

Cole James:

I can either stuff it, and it doesn't go anywhere and it does really bad stuff in the body, I'd love to talk to you, as a doctor-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes. Yes.

Cole James:

-at some point down the road, just in terms of what this energy does in our body. It creates really rough environments for things to thrive. You know, as I know, you know what I'm talking about, but that's, you know, a different thing. So, anyway, so I can stuff it forever, not a good plan. Or I can process that. And I can share that and I can get that out. Okay, so I don't need to hang on to that hurt, that energy, and that kind of stuff. So that's kind of regret, a lot of the time, when memories come up. And the regret is, "I wish we could do that more."

Cole James:

Now there may be regret where it's like, "No, I handled that a way I shouldn't have," or, "I wish I would have done that differently." Or, "I wish I wouldn't have been so stern on you that one time." So regret can do that too. But a lot of the time regret is just us getting punched in the gut, emotionally, because we can't go do that experience again.

Cole James:

Guilt is another one and I want to touch on this for your listeners because hopefully we can let them off the hook. Excuse me. If you define guilt, most definitions, there would be an implication that it's a deliberate intention to harm right. So if we're on trial, and we're found guilty, there's a deliberate intention of harming.

Cole James:

Ninety-nine percent of the time with grievors, when we have feelings of guilt, it's not really accurate because we didn't have a deliberate intention of harming, okay? And so really, the feeling is more, "I wish that could have been differently." So I'll give you an example. Let's say that you come home from work every day at lunch to help your cat go to the bathroom because they're old and they can't move and you make sure they're comfortable. Okay, and you've done that for the whole last seven months.

Cole James:

And what happens the one day you can't leave work and go help your kitty out. What happens, right? That cat dies.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep.

Cole James:

And what will happen for that grieving person is they will say, "I feel so guilty. I was not there that day, when she died. I feel so guilty." And we'll use that word. It's a very trapping word. And it's a very hard word to recover from, okay? And so what we help people do is we help them define it.

Cole James:

Okay. So, if you define the word grief, that's a deliberate intent to harm. "Now, I know you would have done anything for, you know, Taz. You went home every day, okay?" So maybe instead of saying, "I feel guilty," which is a deliberate intention of harming, maybe let's change that to "I wish that day could have happened differently." Because we can do something with that.

Cole James:

We can help them process, "I wish that would have happened differently," versus "I feel so guilty," because it's just not the right word. Now, sometimes I work with people in prisons and guilt is the right word-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Cole James:

-and there was a deliberate intention to harm and that's a whole different, you know, podcast, but, but for folks, 99% of the griever, when we feel guilt, it's just, "We wish that would have

happened differently. We wish we could have handled that differently,” but there wasn't a deliberate intent to harm so let's just try and put that word away because it's very trapping.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. Do you, Cole, do you cover this in your book, “The Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss,” do you cover – if we have listeners or readers absorbing this information now and think, “I need more of that.” Is this in your book in your handbook?

Cole James:

Yeah, most all the concepts that I'm covering are in “The Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss.” And the whole action plan, the whole method to work through your loss is in that book as well. And there's instructions on how to find a friend or a listener. And so you can absolutely, if you're heartbroken over the loss of an animal, you can get right into action, get really good information, knowledge around the topic, also look, and we will help identify and help you find all the places you aren't finishing.

Cole James:

You can work through that book with a friend, again, it can just be a heart with ears, not big instructions for the partner. But they can also work through their own loss as well and you can work together. So that's a great start point. For other people, they want to work with, you know, again, go to one of our groups or see somebody one-on-one who's been trained to at a very high level in this work. And so that's an option too. But we love the book, we have people that go through the book with a friend all the time. And it can be very, very helpful. And it also will give you and equip you with tools, because as you know, unfortunately, with pets and the lifespan of pets, this is not going to be our only loss, most likely. And so to have some tools and some tips and some ways to go to heal your heart from all different losses is really important.

Cole James:

So it's like, it's just a great toolkit to have just in terms of your life experience. We also have a book called, “When Children Grieve.” And that's a great book for parents and grandparents to help give helpful information to the kids in their care around these grief events. Very often, children, the loss of a pet is going to be one of their first major grieving experiences. And so to have some tools and know how to communicate with them and know how to go first, as the leader of your family, is really important to set that tone of how we're going to be.

Cole James:

So often we're told as parents, "Hey, you have to be strong for your kids, or you have to be strong for your wife or you got to be strong for your husband. And what that equates to, unfortunately, is being robotic and not showing outward emotions. And these little people are looking to us at how to do this. And so if I'm just stoic and being strong for my kids, that's very confusing to these little, intuitive children. Right?"

Cole James:

"That was George. That was Daddy's favorite dog. That was my dog. Why is he acting so aloof around this?" That can be a loss of trust in the parent, too.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Absolutely.

Cole James:

And so all of a sudden, we have the loss of a dog. And then our kids have this other loss of trust, in mom or dad too. And so we don't want that. And so anyway, we have several books that can be helpful. But obviously, "The Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss," would be a great start point, if you're grieving the loss of an animal.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay, this is a time for you to help us know where we would go to find these tools, Cole. If people wanted to learn more, you know, think about maybe joining a group, buying the book, getting involved or seeking maybe one-on-one counseling, where do people go to find this information?

Cole James:

Yeah, so if you just visit www.GriefRecoveryMethod.com. We try and lay it all out there. There's an area where you can order the book, there's an area where you can book a call with us, we talk to people every day, just kind of let them know what different options they have with us. And so, yeah, spend some time. We have hundreds of articles on our blog, too. And so you we got eBooks on pet loss. So we have a lot of resources and materials for you to just kind of take a look and see if we can help you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I am so incredibly thankful for your dad's work, for addressing this before when there's nothing out there. He stepped up and put together information that wasn't available. And look how incredibly impactful what he did has been, not just to you, but to so many people that desperately need this, I'm so thankful that you've included animals in your platform.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm also so thankful that you recognize that the death of an animal can be as monumental or more monumental than that of a human and that by us talking about it and feeling safe to be able to talk about it, it's the beginning of us making steps to heal our pain. And then it's possible to do that with support and professionals that are trained to help you. Help is available and all we have to do is be brave enough to take a first step.

Cole James:

Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure being with you and I love all the work that you do and I love that you're providing these resources for your community. So thanks for having me on and, and I hope we can help.