

Heal From Heartbreak With the Grief Recovery Method

Learn how to work through your grief and move forward - remembering the relationship you had with your animal, without deep pain each time you think of them.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today I'm talking with Cole James, executive director of the Grief Recovery Institute
- Cole's father, John James, developed the Grief Recovery Method and founded the institute over 40 years ago; Cole joined the organization in 2010 after two significant losses in his own life
- Several years ago, Cole, his father and colleagues recognized the unique needs of people grieving the loss of a pet, and developed a program and handbook targeted specifically for pet owners grieving the loss of an animal companion
- The Grief Recovery Method is an effective tool to help people heal from life's deepest heartbreaks, which for so many of us involves the loss of a pet

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My guest today is Cole James, executive director of the Grief Recovery Institute. Cole joined the organization in 2010 after deciding to shift his career from the entertainment industry to a field that focused on helping others. As the son of John James, founder of the Institute, this was not a difficult choice!

Below are some of the highlights of our discussion, but I encourage you to watch the full interview above for much more detail and information.

Terrible Loss and Grief Creates Opportunities to Help Others

Unlike the other specialists I've talked with who primarily focus on helping pet owners through their grief, Cole's organization is focused on helping people manage the full spectrum of life losses. I so appreciate that they've incorporated pet loss and grief into their program.

"My father, John W. James, founded the Grief Recovery Institute over 40 years ago following the painful loss of a three-day old son," Cole explains. "It was the late 1970s, and he and his wife at the time found virtually no assistance or support. And unfortunately, well intentioned, loving family members thought the best plan was to paint the nursery back to a neutral color and just pretend it never happened."

Friends and family told them they were young and could have other children. Unfortunately, there was just nothing helpful or supportive coming from these well intentioned, loving people. So, my dad went on a long search over several years to find little things that helped him recover."

Eventually, Cole's father pieced all those little things together and created The Grief Recovery Method, as well as The Grief Recovery Handbook. Now, 40 years later, the book is available in 22 languages and the Grief Recovery Institute has specialists helping people all over the world.

"I grew up watching my dad help grieving people in our living room; I was surrounded by this work my whole life," Cole explains. "But I wasn't really interested in it in terms of a career. Then about 12 years ago, I lost a cousin to suicide and a best friend to a drunk driving accident, and suddenly, grief was a part of my life in a profound way.

So, I took on the work of healing my own heart. And at the end of a four-day workshop I attended, I put in my two weeks' notice at the large media company I had been with for seven years. That's how powerful those four days were for me.

I saw so many transformations in that room with other people. And I realized that grief was still something people minimized. They judged and analyzed those who were struggling with grief. There were crazy timelines and expectations put on people who had lost someone, for example, being expected back at work in a week ready to be the perfect employee again.

I realized what a challenging thing grief is for all of us, and society still wasn't providing the tools to help with that. So, at the end of the four days, I asked my dad for a full-time job in his organization. I've been doing this now for 12 years.

I've traveled 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 help people with their loss and grief."

All Pet Loss Grief Groups Should Be Structured This Way

Cole explains that when his dad originally developed The Grief Recovery Method, it was intended to help people cope with the loss of (human) loved ones. Over time, he realized there are actually over 40 life events that people grieve, so he began to add other kinds of losses to his program, including pet loss and grief.

"We started working with people with a variety of different losses in the same group," Cole says. "For example, if I had a group of 12 people doing the work, I might have a widow working right next to someone going through a divorce who was working next to a person grieving their partner's Alzheimer's diagnosis.

By creating a non-judgmental, non-competitive environment for everyone in the group, they root for each other, no matter their individual circumstance. There isn't a hierarchy in which some losses are considered more painful than others."

Sadly, Cole and others at the institute realized that people grieving the loss of an animal were very reluctant to join a group, because historically, this type of loss had been minimized and judged harshly. So, Cole, his dad and a couple of others at the institute decided to write a book specifically speaking to those people, because they knew they were being underserved and going it alone, even though there was an evidence-based method that would help them.

"So, we wrote the book, created a specific pet loss group format, and trained some of our Grief Recovery Method specialists to lead groups of pet loss survivors in which everyone would feel safe because everyone else in the group would also be working on healing from the loss of an animal," Cole says.

"As I talk about in the book, some of my most significant and traumatic losses have been dogs. I'm a dog lover, and some of my most impactful, hurtful losses involved dogs.

As we all know, animals provide the most unconditional and loving relationships we get to experience in this world. So, it's really no surprise that when those relationships end, we're absolutely devastated.

Unfortunately, often society insists we simply get a new dog or cat. It can be very hurtful, because now our loss is compounded with a loss of trust in the people we looked to for support. We want to be caring and supportive of people who are grieving any type of loss. I don't get a vote in it. You don't get a vote in it. Their hearts are broken, and that's all that matters. We want to help them."

The Grief Recovery Institute groups were only in-person for several years, however, now they offer online groups, including a pet loss group, and online one-on-one support for people who don't want to take part in a group program.

Finding the Tools to Deal With Loss and Grief

"When we work with grieving people, the beginning is really providing the education none of us received when we were young," Cole explains. "Parents don't have 'the grief talk' with their kids. We don't learn that we'll be faced with any number of losses throughout life, some of which will be devastating. We don't get any tools to deal with loss and grief.

Then we introduce a loss history graph, and everyone charts all the losses they've experienced. Ultimately, we arrive at the loss each person wants to work on in the program. Everyone focuses specifically on all the hopes and expectations that were lost when their pet died. We look at all the things we wish we'd done differently, or better, or more of in the relationship.

Once we get into the emotional work, we're all supportive of one another. It doesn't matter if you're working through the loss of a dog, and I'm working through the loss of a horse, and someone else is working through the loss of a cat; we're all supporting each other."

The work is in processing and completing unfinished emotional business, and finally, saying goodbye not to our pets, who live on in our hearts, but to the pain and grief of losing them. It's extremely important to maintain the relationship you had with your animal who is no longer with you, without having a pain response each time you think of them.

That's the point of grief recovery.

The Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss

Most of the concepts we've discussed here today are covered in the Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss. The book lays out action plans and methods to work through your loss, including how to find a friend or sounding board. It will equip you with the tools you need going forward when other life losses occur. And again, for those who want to work with a group, we have that available, as well as one-on-one programs.

*"We also have a book called *When Children Grieve*," says Cole. "It's a great book for parents and grandparents, to help them help the kids in their care during grief events. Very often the loss of a pet is the first major grieving experience for a child. The book provides tools and guidance on how to communicate with them and how to set the tone. These little people are looking to us as examples of how to navigate."*

To learn more about Cole and the Grief Recovery Institute, you can visit the website at **[Grief Recovery Method](#)** where you'll find links to their books and ways to contact them. Or, you can just spend some time checking out the articles on their blog. You can also visit their **[Facebook](#)** and **[Instagram](#)** pages.
