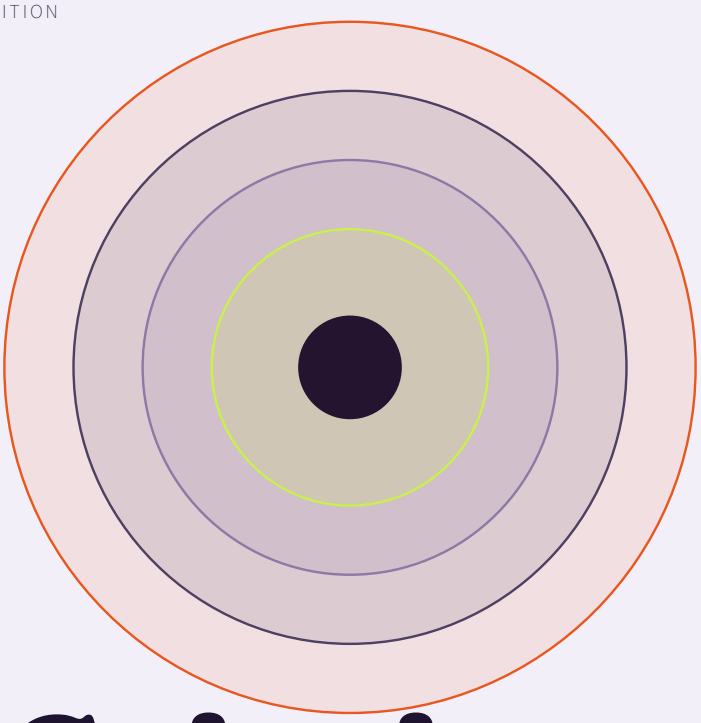


The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss

A reading of the book by Mary-Frances O'Connor (2022)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Mary-Frances O'Connor is a psychologist at the University of Arizona, where she directs the Grief, Loss and Social Stress (GLASS) lab and studies grief with brain imaging and clinical research. In The Grieving Brain she argues that grief is a form of learning. The brain holds the people we love as here, now and close, and after a death it has to relearn a world in which they are gone. She separates grief, the waves of emotion that can return for a lifetime, from grieving, the process that changes over time. She also explains how ordinary grief differs from complicated, or prolonged, grief, and draws on the dual process model of moving back and forth between facing the loss and rebuilding daily life. The book pairs research findings with everyday examples of how grief shows up.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Your brain keeps a map of the people you love, and it marks them as here, now and close.

O'Connor argues that the brain tracks loved ones along three dimensions: where they are, when they are, and how close they are to us. After a death the map still says they can be reached, so part of you keeps expecting them. Grieving is the slow work of updating that map.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Grief takes time because it is learning, not because something in you is broken.

Knowing a fact and having that fact reach the habits and predictions that run your day are two different things. The brain has years of evidence that the person is part of your world, and only a short time of evidence that they are not. Relearning that takes as long as it takes.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Grief and grieving are not the same thing.

In the book's terms, grief is the wave of feeling that arrives, often without warning, and it may come for the rest of your life. Grieving is the process that changes over time as you learn to live with the loss. The waves can keep coming while the grieving moves on.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

You can know they are gone and still expect them to walk through the door.

O'Connor describes two kinds of knowing that run side by side: the clear fact of the death, and an older, deeper belief that the person is still out there somewhere. When they clash, reaching for the phone to call them is a normal result, not a sign you are losing your grip.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Yearning is the bond still asking for the person, not a failure to cope.

In O'Connor's brain-imaging research, reminders of the person who died activated reward-related regions such as the nucleus accumbens in people with complicated grief. Her reading is that the attachment still promises a reward, so the brain keeps wanting the person back. Seen this way, longing is love without anywhere to go.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Moving back and forth between the loss and the new life is how coping works.

The book draws on the dual process model from Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. Loss-oriented time faces the absence directly; restoration-oriented time deals with what is new, such as tasks, roles and relationships. Healthy grieving moves between the two rather than settling in one.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

For most people grief changes over time; for some it stays stuck at full strength.

O'Connor separates ordinary grief, which is painful but shifts, from complicated grief, now called prolonged grief disorder, where intense yearning and a life on hold carry on for a long time without easing. The distinction matters because there is treatment that helps, and only a professional can make that call.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Going over what if and if only can be a way of steering around the loss.

Replaying how things could have gone differently feels like facing the death. The book suggests it often works the other way, keeping attention on an imagined alternative instead of the plain fact that the person is gone. Gentle contact with the real loss tends to help more than another lap of the loop.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The aim is not to forget them, but to live a meaningful life in the present with the bond changed.

The book closes on restoration: building a life that still holds meaning, carrying the relationship in a new form, and being present with the people who are here now. Love does not stop when someone dies. What changes is how you hold it.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Write down what your map still expects
- [ ] List the jobs the loss has left you
- [ ] Choose one person you can be honest with
- [ ] Mark the hard dates a week early
- [ ] Save a professional's number now

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Give the wave a few minutes
- ◯ Do one small thing for the life you have now
- ◯ Name the what-if loop when it starts

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Write down what your map still expects

Write three short lines about the person: where they used to be in your days (here), when you used to share time (now), and what kind of closeness you had (close).

Seeing what your brain has to relearn makes the jolt of each reminder easier to understand.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

List the jobs the loss has left you

Write down the tasks the person used to handle, or that the death has created: bills, cooking, a role in the family.

Pick one to learn or hand to someone else this month.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Choose one person you can be honest with

Pick someone who lets you talk about the person without hurrying you along.

Tell them you may call on a hard day, and ask if that is all right.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Mark the hard dates a week early

Put birthdays, the anniversary and the holidays in your calendar with a reminder a week before.

Decide one small thing you will do on each day, so it does not catch you off guard.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Save a professional's number now

Look up a grief counsellor, a bereavement service or your doctor, and save the number in your phone.

If yearning stays intense for many months and daily life will not restart, that is the time to call.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Give the wave a few minutes

When grief arrives, let it come for a few minutes instead of pushing it away.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Do one small thing for the life you have now

Each day, do one task that belongs to the present: a walk with a friend, a new recipe, a form filled in.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Name the what-if loop when it starts

When you catch yourself replaying how it could have gone, say to yourself that this is the loop.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

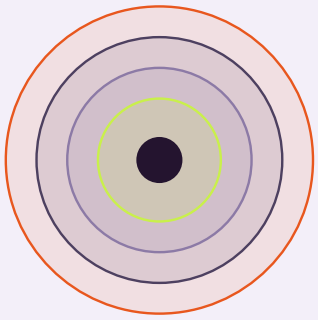
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Love taught your brain they would always be here. Grieving teaches it, slowly, how to carry them now.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER MARY-FRANCES O'CONNOR