

Invisible Loss

Recognizing and Healing the
Unacknowledged Heartbreak
of Everyday Grief

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Chapter 1

The Waiting Room

We begin our journey in the middle, where we consciously or unconsciously may be stuck between two worlds. This place, as I mentioned earlier, is a psychological space that you entered to protect yourself from an Invisible Loss. It is a gap that can both heal and hinder you, depending on how long you stay when you get there. This holding pattern can feel comfortable, but it inhibits you from living a life of your choosing. Because it feels safe, it can be challenging to find your way out. Most of the time, you don't even know you are an occupant of the Waiting Room. However, as long as you feel threatened by the events of your past, your brain will not be able to devote its attention to future planning. Instead, it will insist on ruminating on what you are weighted down by and what may occur as a result in the future. While in this space, your brain's focus has absolutely nothing to do with what you wish to do or have. In many ways, you are being held captive within it, in a prison that you stepped into voluntarily to survive a Moment of Impact, seemingly unimportant at the time.

What is not rational about this choice up to now is that you didn't think you were surviving anything tragic; you thought this was just another day. These events appeared as run-of-the-mill experiences, but they adjusted your view of self and your perception of how others viewed you. Even though it's hard to imagine, this still put you in a state of survival.

Suppose you discover that your best friend has kept something from you. From then on, whenever you ask her how she is doing, and she appears quiet or tired, you immediately think she is keeping something from you. You don't feel grief; instead, you feel doubt where doubt was not present before. That doubt also creates a loss of certainty about how well you know your friend and leads to a loss of self-trust in your own perception of someone you thought you knew well. Even though you are not directly feeling grief, you are just feeling frustrated about the situation, and you are confused about the kind of relationship you have, this is a loss. Loss is not experienced at the Moment of Impact but rather in its aftermath. And during this longer-term aftermath, you make decisions based on what you believe is happening as opposed to *what really is*. You may leave the friendship thinking that she is not a good friend to you, believing that she abandoned you. You lose that friendship, not because she wasn't a good friend to you but because of your Invisible Loss. I know this partial responsibility for the friendship loss can be hard to accept. Of course, it is not always the case, as many other factors can contribute to the end of a friendship, but when we doubt our relationships, it is important to consider how our Invisible Losses influence our perspective on them.

There is, of course, a neurological explanation for the origin and diligent maintenance of these behaviors. The longer we remain in this safe space, the more we convince ourselves that the comforts of the Waiting Room outweigh any possible benefits we might receive by leaving. We ultimately start to self-identify with this place, incorporating this Waiting Room into our personality and lifestyle, thinking, *This is just life*. But these habits do not reflect your priorities or goals for the future. The Waiting Room is a chronic condition deeply rooted in our brains' evolutionary survival techniques. It can cause long-term cognitive and perceptual changes. It can be challenging to disable, as it is connected to our survival mode. We automatically go inside a safe place while we perceive emotional danger. During COVID-19, for example, as the stress of a pandemic transitioned to a longer-term phase, we grew accustomed to consistently devoting significant mental energy to coping, neglecting important secondary tasks.

To simplify the concept further, let's look briefly at two additional examples of both outward expression and cognitive manifestation of Waiting Rooms.

- **Outward Expression of the Waiting Room:** Not getting dressed or showered as we used to do every day or ending up with an empty fridge, unpaid bills, unwashed dishes. These new habits start to feel like normal aspects of life. We adapt to not caring for ourselves, not getting adequate nutrition, and it's here that we graduate to the Waiting Room mindset.
- **Cognitive Manifestation of the Waiting Room:** We start by letting our feelings go unexpressed as we become more focused on maintaining the facade of being "fine" than on addressing our Invisible Loss due to its not being an acceptable loss to grieve. This coping mechanism stems from a prior Moment of Impact and the surviving of its Invisible Loss. Without realizing it, we reintroduce some of our coping habits and self-soothing mechanisms to get us through this period of our life. We then, once again, transition to a longer-term Waiting Room life. A similar aftermath can happen when you stop enjoying a job you once loved. This is the Waiting Room mindset in which you convince yourself that you must stay longer, as you have no other options.
- **Outward Expression of the Waiting Room:** You start to use food as a self-soothing mechanism. When you get home, you are too exhausted to work out or cook for yourself. You may have stopped going to your book club or calling your best friend on your way home from work. If you are working from home, you barely leave the house, as you use delivery service for groceries and dinner.
- **Cognitive Manifestation of the Waiting Room:** Your Original Self gets depleted further when you convince yourself to stay at the job because you are really good at it. But you start to drop the ball

on certain tasks, and you may begin to experience self-judgment and even hatred. By the time you start to feel that hatred of self, you have already been in the Waiting Room for a while.

Let's now meet Peter and get to know about his discovery of a significant Invisible Loss and how he ended up in the Waiting Room much earlier than he thought he did. As we move forward, we will delve deeper into how the Waiting Room manifests in our lives so that we are better able to recognize it for ourselves.

Peter's Invisible Loss

Peter is a fifty-seven-year-old avid cyclist who rides his bike religiously every Sunday. Seven years ago, he survived cancer, both emotionally and physically, and since then he has been attending a weekly support group. There, he is regarded as someone who defied the odds—as someone whose story of survival inspires. People have come to rely on him as the person who welcomes all the newbies into the group. He is proud to recount the story of his battle with cancer and how he “nearly died on the operating table.”

Peter has worked for the same company since 2011, prior to his cancer journey. He lives in a beautiful four-bedroom house that overlooks the lake where, growing up, he spent every summer with his grandfather. After going into remission in 2015, he purchased his home to celebrate the beginning of a new life.

His wife is a high school math teacher who frequently tutors students during after-school hours. Peter volunteers at the local food bank and makes sure he donates to it monthly. He joined my Life Reentry class after a coworker resigned to pursue a career in graphic design full-time.

Peter was curious as to how his colleague had made that decision. After all, his coworker had a family of four to support and had always expressed concern about losing his job. This change was quite surprising to Peter, to say the least.

Call it curiosity, call it destiny. Peter registered for the class. The first class is always on the discovery of our Invisible Losses, as we spend a

whole week discussing the nature of what Invisible Losses are and how to track them down. Peter movingly described his experience with cancer and its profound effect on him. How he narrowly escaped death, how he now lives his life with gusto, and how he heard about this class from a dear friend. He thought he would give it a go so that he could recommend it to others.

I asked Peter, “How about you? Is there an Invisible Loss that comes to mind?”

He quickly responded, “No, not really. I am sure others will have plenty to share. You see, going through cancer kind of eradicates all other losses.”

“Well, Peter,” I responded, “you just take your time with this. When you have a moment to spare, try to recall a time when you were unexpectedly shaken by an event.” The class went on, and people shared their uncharted losses. As usual, our online group was filled with hundreds of shares.

Peter stayed quiet. His extroverted support group persona completely vanished. I later received an email stating that he felt that he was not suited for this class and that others needed it more than he did. He thanked me for doing this work and said he would be sure to let others know about it.

I wrote back, sharing with him that the intangible nature of his possible Invisible Loss makes it hard to see at first. I advised him to give it a little more time. If he later decided to move on, I would issue him a refund.

He said he would think about it. Next week arrived, and there he was, his camera off from the Zoom interface but listening to all the other participants sharing their newly discovered losses.

Not a peep from Peter.

Another week went by. Again, he emailed to inform me that his father traveled a lot when he was younger. He never really spent much time with him, but his grandfather was always there to hang out, so he really didn't miss having a father figure in his life. And other people, he added, had it much worse than he did. “Like your kids, their dad passed. At least my father was available on weekends and occasionally during the week. He never beat me. He never yelled at me even. So I am not sure what you are looking for.”

I said to him, “I am not looking for anything: you are. And if it’s OK, I would like to ask you another question. How did it feel that your dad wasn’t around much? For a minute, let’s not think about the kids who have no dads and all the unfair things in the world that have happened to other people. I am interested in your experience.”

Peter didn’t respond to my email for a couple of days. But when he did, he said his dad only paid attention to him when he picked up after himself. He remembered how his dad would always praise him when Peter wiped his mouth and folded the napkin on his lap, or when he cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. He said it was the only time he felt seen by his dad. He added in the email that, as he was writing this to me, he realized he still did this. Even though his dad was no longer alive, he still did this with his family, especially his wife. He always made sure he did things perfectly when she was around, how she mentioned to Peter that only he knew how to stack their dishwasher. And he always brought her a cup of tea when she needed it, without her even having to tell him. In the email, he expressed his pride in being of service to his wife. He didn’t understand why that should be a negative, but in many ways, he did understand how he perceived his worth based on how he served others.

He added that he could also see this same kind of relationship at work with his team and his boss. He was the one cleaning up other people’s mistakes, as his boss said that he was the only one he could trust to do it. He always prided himself on that, but he wished he were also being asked to lead a new project rather than clean up an old one.

At the end of the email, he said that he felt he was never valued for anything except for making sure all practical matters were taken care of. That was why being part of the support group had been such a refreshing change for him. People there saw Peter as an inspiration and not as someone who picked up after them.

We went back and forth with a couple more emails, and Peter realized that his Invisible Loss was that he was only seen for his ability to take care of others, not for his ability to inspire. He had lost the sense of self that told him how inspiring he was.

It was the Invisible Loss of an identity of inspiration. He said that he could only see himself as someone of service and nothing else. His Invisible Loss was no longer knowing what else he was good at. His Invisible Loss was not remembering his inspiring (Thrivers) part of his Original Self. And that also meant that nobody else knew him, either. In many ways, that self no longer existed. The only part of him that existed was that little boy, picking up after himself, waiting to be rewarded by his father. He said that was his Survivor Self, who made sure he used this part of himself to get ahead in life, as this was the part that was missing from others around him. Nobody was there to clean up, pick up loose ends, and care for others in the way that he did.

Peter came back on camera the next week and shared his revelations with the group. He added that he had suddenly started to see more Invisible Losses. They seemed to have all been hiding under the main one.

His first Plug-In (this is an action that is a small step out of the Waiting Room; I'll elaborate on that in chapter 5) was to not load the dishwasher that evening and to use that time to write his first journal exercise for class, as he had become curious about the guy (Original Self) whom he hadn't been able to visit with for the last fifty or so years of his life.

The life Peter had created was based on what was of value to him as a little boy. It was based on what his father deemed worthy of attention. It was why Peter couldn't see the value in being anyone else or figuring out what else he liked to do or create. It was as if the other parts of him were never born. They were forever lost—never uttered, shared, or shown. They never became real. He remained in a state of potentiality.

Justification of the Life in the Waiting Room

Peter rationalized the means by which he made his living and the manner in which he gave himself value in relationships. Because he had elevated his coping mechanism to a star quality, he didn't realize he was stuck in the Waiting Room. We frequently view our ways of coping as a positive. Certainly not as our demise. There are many lives and many stories that we have not had the chance to live and experience because of many Invisible Losses, especially since new ones are created through Moments of Impact.

Rejection of Life Reentry

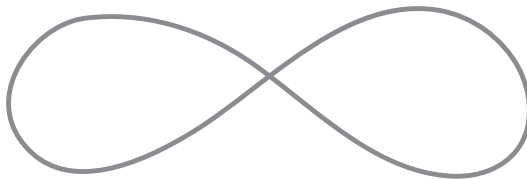
Peter tried to deny his need for Life Reentry and at first resisted acknowledging his own hardship. It is difficult to find the words for what was never born or never seen, as there was nothing to mourn or talk about. It doesn't exist in our memory as a grief event. It's not a part of our grief process. It is merely a profound, hidden knowledge waiting to be discovered and given a voice.

I will share more about Peter as we move through this journey together. But this part of his story is a great example of how a seemingly perfect life can shadow the surviving element of your life and hide your lack of thriving. The highest praise from your wife or boss can be your greatest detriment. It appears as a contradiction, as a moment of duality, when we seem to have a good life but what we really have is a shelter protecting us from more pain. That is a central theme of Invisible Loss.

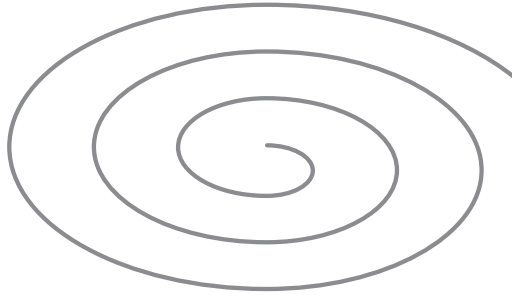
Imagine a life beyond what you have known as “good enough,” a life where your Original Self once resided. This is our intended destination, and we are already heading toward it.

How Do We Get Stuck in the Waiting Room?

The majority of people live in a very restricted space, and the best way to illustrate that is with an infinity loop that never ends. Although we are moving, we remain in the same area, almost like being on a treadmill. Survival mode is a loop of thinking that keeps us “busy” but still in one place. In life mode, on the other hand, we change and grow within an expanding spiral.



Survival Mode



Life Mode

Your survival mode thoughts are created by the way your brain processes certain memories associated with specific events. It can produce responses of fear and joy, as well as influence your future willingness to engage in similar situations. The fight-or-flight response is a well-known behavior. For example, consider someone who appears to have a good marriage, and by outward appearances, she does. But her spouse talks about a specific coworker all the time, while she has been stuck at home with a nine-month-old baby. She tries to shake the thought *My partner is mesmerized with another woman while all I do is take care of our child*. When she tries to talk to her husband about how she feels, he dismisses her feelings and laughs at her for even thinking he's interested in anyone else. This is what that experience might look like through the lens of the Waiting Room:

- Cognitive Manifestation of the Waiting Room: Her Survivor-based narrative loop begins here: *You're overweight. You're unattractive. Your brain no longer functions as it once did. He's going to leave you. You're not worthy of him. Or anyone*. She steps into the Waiting Room in an effort to shield herself from his rejection. She becomes agitated when he asks her a simple question or when he is ten minutes late driving home from work. This agitation does not originate from her Original Self but rather from her Survivor Self, which is trying to shelter her from surviving the effects of seeing her partner's smile while he is speaking about someone else.

- **Outward Expression of the Waiting Room:** While still expressing frustration and agitation, she starts to neglect her own needs as her fear and worry grow. She realizes now that they argue more frequently and blames herself for this change in their relationship: *If only I could remind you of how fun and easy things used to be*, she is thinking. She may try to please him by totally skirting the issue, or she may make his favorite dinner even though she's sleep-deprived. This Waiting Room she created for herself allows her to deny the truth she is witnessing about her husband's attention to his colleague and to step into the role of caring spouse. She stays there, neglecting her need for connection by denying her intuition for as long as she can, wondering what she's done wrong, and blaming herself for not being interesting enough anymore.
- **Cognitive Manifestation of the Waiting Room:** Her mind shifts from logical thinking to obsessive worry over abandonment and rejection. While she thinks she's experiencing this for the first time, she is very likely to have had an early experience in her childhood of feeling abandoned.

Reminders of that previous event may activate certain emotions. The brain will try to dumb down the possibility of more loss and ignore the fact that the association between the past and present event is strong. This is how the Waiting Room mindset is created. When an emotion is overwhelming, we tend to justify it or mistake it for a component of our identity. We blame ourselves for the way we feel or fault ourselves for what has taken place in our lives to put us in this situation. We respond to that fear as if it's true.

The Long-Term Lease

The Waiting Room was built with a spectrum of modifications and adjustments in order for you to survive an experience of Invisible Loss. It could be as simple as keeping your hair long to hide your face because you grew up believing you didn't look good since you had acne as a teenager.