

## Curatio Connects podcast with Emma Payne

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[00:00:00] (Robert) Hi and welcome to Curatio Connects a podcast about health, wellness and staying connected. On this episode, we'll talk with Emma Payne about grief and the unique challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

[00:00:20] (Emma) Grief is lonely anyway. And now it's an awful lot lonelier. And unfortunately, especially for a grieving person who's on their own, it kind of now puts the onus on them to look for ways to have any kind of connection and conversation. There are people doing online therapy, but mostly I think we rely on our friends and family even more than before.

[00:00:45] (Robert) More on grief and how to support a grieving friend or a loved one in these challenging times coming up. This podcast is brought to you by Curatio, the private social network for health used in over 85 countries. Find out more about our app called Stronger Together, designed to help you cope and thrive during Covid-19. You can download it for free from iTunes or Google Play. And for more about Curatio, visit us online at Curatio.me. Now, more from Emma Payne on the subject of grief, and I should mention just for transparency, that Emma and I have worked together in the past as well as on her current company. I spoke to Emma from her office in Seattle, Washington.

[00:01:26] (Emma) So I am running a company called Grief Coach and we provide text-based grief support to people who've lost somebody. We send personalized text based on things like cause of death, age, the relationship to the deceased. And we've been getting a really lovely response from people since we launched a year ago. I think people really enjoy getting personal private support right to their phone. One of the cool things is that the grieving person can also add in friends and family who want to help but might not be sure how. So that means supporters are also getting texts with tips and suggestions about how can I help my friend.

[00:02:03] (Robert) You came to the grief support world because of a personal tragedy. Did you want to talk about that?

[00:02:10] (Emma) Yeah, so about five years ago now, a friend died and I was very much a part of his final year and was with him when he died. And he had asked me to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. And of course, in the moment I said, of course, Gordon, anything you want and agreed to do that. But after he died, I realized that what I had committed to was going to be very challenging because this friend was the best friend of my husband who had died 10 years prior. So, what I agreed to do was fly across the country, stand in front of hundreds of people who I often had not heard from when my husband died by suicide 10 years before. And I was nervous about it, very nervous about it. But I promised to do it, so I did. So, I flew across country, wrote my eulogy, entered the church, was seated in the pew towards the front because I was going to be speaking. The woman to my right said, "What's your name?", I said, "my name's Emma.", and her face fell instantly. "Oh, my goodness, are you Barry's widow?", I said, "Yes, I am.", and she was so upset. She said "here's who I am, I was the aunt", and I said, "Yes, I know who you are", and then she's introducing the other people in the row and I knew who they were. And she was mortified, really, that she hadn't reached out, she felt badly. "How have you been? I'm so sorry. I didn't reach out back then. I just couldn't think what to say. I've always wondered if you remarried", and there began 72 hours of the same conversation again and again. So all

the way through the pub night, I essentially talked to friends and relatives of my husband and of me, who felt bad that they hadn't known what to say back then, that this terrible thing had happened and they hadn't reached out. They felt guilty about it. They were embarrassed actually, ashamed about it. But when I got on my plane ride home, I mean, at that point, I already spent 20 something years developing mobile and online communities often for young people trying to build supports. So, on my plane ride home, I just thought, this is, this is crazy. I spent 10 years not hearing from people and that hurt. But a hundred people, spent that same 10 years feeling ashamed and they didn't need to because no one teaches us how to help each other. We've just become so uncomfortable with death and grief and we're not taught anymore how to behave and support each other. And I just realized that had to be solvable. And for me, text is the most accessible, the most affordable way to communicate with people. So, it was all about creating support for the grieving person, but for the friends and family around them, too, who want to help and just don't know how. They just need a little bit more comfort and support and tips about how to be there.

[00:05:07] (Robert) So what you're explaining is the fact that grief at the best of times is still awkward for people. We don't necessarily know how to deal with it. In your case, 10 years went by where people didn't say anything to you and then felt horrible about it when they did see you. So now we find ourselves in this global pandemic situation where we have all these physical restrictions and just a lot of restrictions around what we can and can't do. What does that do to our world of trying to grieve when something like that happens?

[00:05:39] (Emma) Yeah, this is an incredible time. I mean, if you had told me six months ago that I would be plunged into a world where traditional grief supports were not available at all globally, you can never imagine that there couldn't be support groups and funerals and in-person therapy and visits from friends. You can't even get a hug. It's an unthinkable situation that people would be grieving without all of those things that we do rely on after someone dies.

[00:06:08] (Robert) So that that description you had of going to your friend's funeral, you can't even do that now. You can't get together in a room full of people and have a conversation and talk about stuff.

[00:06:18] (Emma) No. So, there's new things springing up. I mean, people are doing the Zoom funerals and so on. And the human condition is such that we seek out support. So, things like Grief Coach that are delivering support via text are of course useful now because those things aren't there. But I'm also having sort of the opposite experience at the same time, which is that I'll be in meetings with one hundred bereavements managers that work in different hospices and so on, and they're saying, "Wow, it's like I'm suddenly the prom queen. I mean no one has ever been interested in my work before. But now people want to talk about grief." They're naming the experience that they're having is grief, not just when someone dies, that the loss of freedoms, that teenagers can't go have their senior year of high school, all of these things. It's like we're having this global grief experience and I'm sort of weirdly hopeful that by naming it, talking about it, all of a sudden Rolling Stone is doing articles on grief, that this is good. And it's long overdue because we've been too awkward about it for too long. So that's my attempt at a silver lining.

[00:07:33] (Robert) What are the emotions and what are the realities that people face around grief? And particularly right now with a pandemic? What are they feeling? What are they experiencing?

[00:07:45] (Emma) Well, let's begin by talking about Covid losses, specifically because this is a brand-new area. I mean, when I created Grief Coach, the one thing I never imagined doing was adding an entirely new cause of death to the system. We customize the messages so that if you've lost someone to a suicide or a stillbirth or an accident or cancer, the messages come to you accordingly. So, having to consider a whole new cause of death has led to this really quite lovely exploration. We've been working with Virginia Mason, with their grief services team, on Covid loss particularly. So, for example, if you lose someone to Covid, you probably weren't with them at the end. So, there was no sitting by the bedside, there was no chance to say the final things, you were relying on a nurse to face time you with your parents often. So not having that closure and the chance to say goodbye is a huge issue when it comes to grief and loss. It is traumatic and lots of different losses, suicides, of course, and others. So, for Covid losses, this is a big one that we're having an experience of many people losing people without being able to say goodbye. survivor's guilt, again, with kind of more, what we call out of order deaths like suicides, accidents, there's often survivor's guilt. I'm here and they're not, I should have said this, done that, and so on. So Covid losses, we're seeing a lot of survivor's guilt already. Perhaps you worry that you carry the virus to your parents' house when you dropped off the groceries or who knows? Again, with out of order losses, we see anger often, sometimes justifiably if it was a homicide loss, for example. Sometimes just all the anger that we swirl around in our minds after someone dies, even in a quote unquote, more common type of loss. But with a Covid loss, there's a lot of anger. You're angry that testing wasn't available, you're angry that you didn't get the support that you needed, you're angry because you see a swarm of people standing outside and hanging out without masks on. So, some of the most complicated grief feelings like anger, guilt, sadness about not being together at the end are very much happening with Covid losses and creating an opportunity for us to talk about those things. Those are those are hard feelings.

[00:10:19] (Robert) And I guess that's extended to I mean, you're talking about Covid specific deaths, but that's extended really to almost anybody who dies during this time, because all of the normal things that we would do, we can't do or we're doing in a very odd restricted way.

[00:10:34] (Emma) Yeah. So, a lot of the things that we would normally be suggesting are just not possible. I just wrote a piece a couple weeks ago about hugs, doing some research around the actual benefits of hugging, including helping us to fight infection by keeping our bodies healthy. I mean, the fact that you cannot hug people, and you're possibly living by yourself in an apartment while your partner has just died, is just, it's very difficult. And we're also seeing a thing where people who have lost someone to a non-Covid death are feeling almost overlooked. My mom died of cancer, and that's what's happening for me right now in this space, but all anyone's talking about is other Covid realities. So that's been kind of interesting, too. And I think there's an emerging trend about people feeling that losses are sort of overlooked or less important. And again, that's not unheard of, we hear that in the regular bereavement world as well. So, if someone's grandparent dies and your response is, "Oh, how old was he?", what you're basically saying is, oh, well, you know, he was eighty five and so this death is less traumatic or less deserving of my sympathy than another one. You know we compare losses. We think that we're not doing it, but we do and that can be hurtful and let people feel that their loss is somehow lesser to somebody else's.

[00:12:09] (Robert) Can we talk a little bit about what people are doing then? What are people able to do or how are people able to adjust their grieving process given the circumstance?

[00:12:18] (Emma) So there are some interesting, very practical solutions that existed before and are becoming more useful. There are online memorial providers, for example, one is called GatheringUs and another one is called LifeWeb 360. They're kind of beautiful ways to submit photos and stories and create an online memorial and still do that sharing of stories and feelings that is really important after someone dies. One of the things that we talk about all the time at Grief Coach is how important it is to use the name of the person who's gone, use their name, use their name, use their name. Talk about them just as you would in as seamless a way as you would if they were still there. We have this kind of fear, particularly in North America I think, that if we mention the person who's died, it's going to make the grieving person sad. Well, no, they're sad because somebody died and you talking about them is actually a relief. It's a joy because it means that you remember them too, and the person was still there. So, you can share stories, you can send a photograph just on your phone, say, "Oh, my gosh, I just found this photo of your dad last summer when we were out by the lake! Remember how funny it was when...?", this is so healing and so lovely for a grieving person and can be done, that can be an email, it can be a phone call, it can be a text message. Sharing the name, sharing the stories, keeping that person alive in your mind, writing down when their birthday was and the day that they died, putting it in your calendar, recurring appointments so that it comes to you each year. All of these things we can do. We've always wanted to support people from a distance. We live in such a way now that we're often not in the same town that the person is who we want to support. So, I think a lot of those pieces of advice and strategies still hold. People still want the connection and they still want to know that the person who's died was important and that that person is remembered.

[00:14:23] (Robert) So I might not be able to drive by and drop off a casserole and ring the bell and leave. But there's still things I can do as a person who is trying to be supportive of you, if you're going through a death right now. So really what you're saying is continue to communicate, open different channels of communication, and don't talk about it as if it's a secret.

[00:14:51] (Emma) Yeah, just talk about it. And, you know, if the person starts crying, consider that a compliment. It means that they trust you enough to share a little bit about what they're really, really feeling. If they don't want to talk and don't return your call, it doesn't matter, your feelings don't need to be hurt. Doesn't mean you don't try again the following week. Just keep trying, talk about the person, and stay present. Let them know that you're willing to listen to whatever they might need to say, whether that's now on a Zoom call or a phone call, that's okay. People say there's too many casseroles anyway. I talk to people all the time, people who, you know, have a loss and then their living room is filled with twenty seven bouquets of flowers and 15 casseroles but no one rang the bell to actually come and eat dinner with them. Well, now you can't do that anyway, so just a human connection and a willingness to listen is what's best.

[00:15:51] (Robert) That connection doesn't have to be complex. I don't have to offer a complicated solution. Basically, what you're saying is I can call and say, "Hey, I'm here. If you need anything, just give me a call."

[00:15:58] (Emma) Well, better yet, give them a really specific thing that you think that you can do. I love, there's this book I read, it's called, "There's No Good Card for This", and it

says, think about what you are already good at and offer that. Because when you say, "Is there anything you need?", the grieving person can't even remember how to tie their shoes or read a book, so they don't even know what they need. They're all like, "I don't know". So, they all say, "Okay, thank you.", and you won't know what to do and they won't have known what to ask for. But I love the idea of thinking about what you're good at and what you could freely and joyfully give. So, if you love gardening, offer to go and pull the weeds out of the garden. Just say, "You know, you don't even have to come out and you don't need to come out to say hi. But I'd just love to come by and pull the weeds.", or if you do live nearby, say, "Hey, just so you know, for the next couple of months, I'm going to make sure your bins are out on Wednesday morning.". Something specific that you can easily and freely do, I think is really often appreciated. And lots of those things can be from a distance.

[00:17:01] (Robert) So the specificity does two things. One, it provides me as the giver, you know, a practical thing that I can do, and I know I can deliver on. But for the griever, what you're saying is they're just so overwhelmed that they don't even know what they need. So, by giving them an option or giving them a solution, it makes it a little bit easier for them to say, yes, that would be helpful or yes, that's something that would be good to have.

[00:17:24] (Emma) Mm hmm. I was talking to a woman last week and she was saying, you know, she has like, what did she say? She's like, "I passed the New York bar exam, but I couldn't even read People magazine when my husband died.". I mean, you cannot assume that the person is going to do the thinking, so just do it for them. Just think to yourself, Okay, well, I'm 3000 miles away, so what can I do that's easy and fun for me to do? Maybe it is that, maybe you really like music and you remember that the person's son was really into grunge back in the 90s and you're like, "Hey, remember this song?", or think what you can easily do and do it.

[00:18:01] (Robert) So we've been talking about, I mean largely we've been talking about people helping out when someone is in grief. But what about the griever themselves now that they find, if they find themselves in this situation now? So, you know, I'm going about my day and somebody that I'm close to dies and I'm now in this weird Covid world, which is hard enough to deal with at the best of times. What about them? What should they do or how should they be thinking about what to do next?

[00:18:27] (Emma) This is the people that my heart has been breaking for these last few months, it's awful. So, I was chatting with, we had a new subscriber last week who was a woman who had lost her son to suicide and he was young, you know, 19 years old. And she can't do any of the things that she would do. She lives by herself, she can't visit with people, she can't. My heart is just it's very, very, very, very painful and difficult time to be grieving. We always talk about how lonely grief is even when everything's normal. It's an isolating experience. There was another woman whose baby was stillborn. She was sad that her baby had died, of course, but she was also fundamentally feeling alone. Her husband wouldn't talk to her about it. Her best friend had flown across the country but flew back, this was pre-Covid, flew back saying, "I don't know how to be with you when you're like this.". Grief is lonely anyway and now it's an awful lot lonelier. So, and unfortunately, especially for a grieving person who's on their own, it kind of now puts the onus on them to look for ways to have any kind of connection and conversation. There are people doing online therapy, but mostly I think we rely on our friends and family even more than before to do the reaching out, to do the thinking, to offer to be, "Hey, let's hop on to a call every morning at 10 o'clock and have coffee together.", not really together. It's a very difficult

time to be grieving, just lonelier than ever. And the outreach means more than it ever did. So, there's things like Grief Coach, people doing text-based support, people are doing Zoom therapy. But I think it's up to, it's up to friends and family, it's up to us to really understand that this person is going through something very difficult and that they can't do the things they would normally do.

[00:20:28] (Robert) Yeah. So the onus is even more so on friends and family to step up and push, push past that discomfort that I might have in trying to reach out to someone who, I don't know how they're going to react. But what you're saying is, anything I can do to help, anything I can do to offer to be of assistance is probably going to be welcome because they're just so overwhelmed with the loneliness and the isolation, particularly now.

[00:20:54] (Emma) People talk at those, I love the idea that all of the decisions that we make in life are driven either by fear or love. And I think in grief, this is especially true. It's very easy to be afraid, "Oh, I don't want to reach out. What if I upset them or I don't know what to say or what if I put my foot in my mouth?", this is the time, if ever there was one, to put all that fear aside, just shove it into a drawer and use the love part instead and just call, listen, be there. It's a tough time to be grieving.

[00:21:24] (Robert) And I guess maybe something to remember would be you may not get a response right away, but that doesn't mean that you weren't heard.

[00:21:32] (Emma) Yea and keep offering as well. This morning I was chatting with a woman from Widow 411, she calls her business. She provides incredible amounts of support to widows. And she's saying, just keep asking. Just because the person didn't respond or didn't join the Zoom call that you said, or if your girlfriends were going to try and get together for a virtual cocktail and she didn't come that first time. Don't take it personally, it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't mean she doesn't want to socialize, it just means right then at that moment she couldn't get there. So just keep offering and know that at least the offer was appreciated and heard. It's tough. I think the fact that grieving people now are in this situation of having to do even more leg work on their own behalf to build the support they want is really, really tough. So, I think yea, friends and family matter a lot, even more than usual.

[00:22:30] (Robert) And do you think that, I mean, it doesn't feel like this is going to suddenly go back to the way things were and, you know, everything will be back the way it was. Like, it seems like there's, whatever the changes are that are occurring because of the pandemic and the societal changes that are being imposed on us now temporarily will have some kind of lasting effect. So, are you thinking about how maybe grief and grief support can be amplified or it can be extended in this world where it becomes even more important because there's so many things going on affecting us?

[00:23:02] (Emma) Absolutely. This is the part, as I was saying at the beginning the sort of silver lining comes out for me, because I've always believed that friends and family are the only scalable way to provide grief support. There will never be enough therapists that every single person who wants support can receive therapy. And even if there were enough therapists, if there was like an unlimited pool of therapists, lots of people can't afford it. It's one hundred and fifty dollars an hour or you live in a place that it's not available or you don't want to do therapy, it's uncomfortable for you. So even if there were enough therapists, that's not right for everybody. There will never be enough support groups even in the world where we could have support groups, there could never possibly

be enough of them. I'm endlessly in meetings with people that can't find a support group that's right for their clients and so on. Because if you're in a small rural community, there might not be a support group that's specific to parents who lost a child or whatever it might be. And even if there were enough support groups, not everybody wants to sit with a group of strangers and talk about their loss. But I have not once since launching Grief Coach, not once have I heard someone say, "Oh, I don't want my friends and family checking in on me.". So, to me, the only scalable way for everyone to be supported when someone dies is for friends and family to build that comfort and the skill set to lean in and to be there. I get super aggravated when I see top ten things not to say after someone dies. This, I think, just frightens people away, "Uh-oh, oh my gosh! What if I say the wrong thing?", okay, I won't do anything. The only wrong thing to do is nothing. So, one answer is, this was always the case that we need friends and family to build that skill set, to build the comfort and confidence that they need in order to be part of the grieving process and now that other things are less available and that it's being talked about more, I think maybe we are going to actually build that skill set. If all of a sudden you can flip open Rolling Stone and they're talking about grief and it's the cover of NPR and The Atlantic and whoever, then maybe we're now going to actually elevate a discussion about grief to where it should have been all along. Thereby we become more comfortable talking about it. Therefore, we can help our friends when someone dies and that actually makes me very hopeful. Grief is, there's no shortage of data about all the negative health outcomes that come as a result of unsupported grief, right? It leads to lost wages and anxiety and depression. It's not just about how to help someone after someone dies. It's how we are healthier as a society and as communities and as individuals. Grief is just one of the moments in time when we have an opportunity to treat each other well and to come out stronger and supported and loved.

[00:26:06] (Robert) Emma Payne, you can find out more about her grief support text messaging service called Grief Coach. You'll find it online at [www.Grief.coach](http://www.Grief.coach). This podcast and the Stronger Together app is brought to you by Curatio, the private social network for health used in over eighty five countries. The Stronger Together app is designed to help you cope and thrive during Covid-19. You can download it for free from iTunes or Google Play. And for more information about Curatio, including links and show notes to this episode. Visit us online at [Curatio.me](http://Curatio.me). For the team at Curatio and the Stronger Together app, I'm Robert Ouimet, thanks for listening.