

Podcast 342 O'Connor Transcript

Karen Wyatt: Hello and welcome to End of Life University podcast where we share real talk about life and death. I'm your host, Dr Karen Wyatt and thank you once again for joining me here. This is episode number 342. In a moment, I'll be sharing with you an interview I did with Dr. Mary-Frances O'Connor who is a psychologist who studies the science of grief and I talked to her about her book *The Grieving Brain*, which was very, very helpful to me when I read it. And I really enjoyed my conversation with Mary-Frances and I think you will too. So stay tuned in just a moment for that.

First, a quick announcement that I will be doing a question and answer session with William Peters about his book *at Heaven's Door* on March 24, starting at 1pm Pacific on that day. There will be a link to register. There's no charge, but you can sign up and register if you'd like to get the zoom link so you can join us, and you'll be able to ask William questions about shared death experiences. So, again, that's on March 24th, come to the show notes eolupodcast.com. Look for episode #342 and then you can just register, so you'll get the zoom link to attend with us.

I also want to thank two new supporters on my Patreon page, Christina Alleva and Teresa Putnam. Thank you so much for signing up and joining the team. And I want to let all of you know that because of the new supporters I've gotten, I'm now able to offer transcripts for every episode going forward. So if you prefer to read about these podcasts or you'd rather read than listen, or read and listen at the same time, again, you can go to the show notes, eolupodcast.com and there will be a link there to download and read the transcript for each episode. And also I've been creating a Youtube channel for a while now and just over the last few weeks, I've started recording videos when I do my interviews. So those will be posted on the Youtube channel. There have been just audios of previous episodes posted on there. But I'm now adding videos and again, it's because of the extra support I've received through Patreon. So to find the Youtube channel, you can go there and just search for End of Life University. You can type in www.youtube.com/c/eoluniversity and you'll find it that way as well. Once you get to that Youtube channel, I've divided up all of the interviews into various topics under playlists. So you can go on playlists and find a specific topic if you'd like to, if there's one subject you're interested in hearing about, say grief or advanced care planning. You can look up those topics and find them that way. Or you can just go to the general list and see everything that's laid out there. So I'm really excited about the Youtube channel. For those of you who like viewing videos, expect more videos going forward in the future. And again, I want to thank all of my Patreon supporters who have stepped up over the past few years to make monthly contributions to keep this podcast on the air. And if you're interested in joining the team, you can go to my page at Patreon, patreon.com/eolu, and learn about how to make a small donation and get some bonuses in return. So now we'll move on with my interview with Mary-Frances O'Connor. As always stay tuned afterwards. I'll be back with a few takeaways and to say goodbye.

Karen Wyatt: Today I'm so happy to welcome my guest Dr. Mary-Frances O'Connor. Dr. O'Connor is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, where she directs the Grief, Loss, and Social Stress Lab which investigates the effects of grief on the brain and the body. Her work has been published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, Biological Psychiatry and Psychological Science, and featured in Newsweek, The New York Times and the Washington Post. She is the author of the book, *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*. And for more information, you can go to her website <https://www.maryfrancesoconnor.com>. So Dr. O'Connor, thank you so much for joining me today.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Oh, it's so great to be here, Karen and please call me Mary-Frances.

Karen Wyatt: Alright, I will. Well, ever since I read your book, *The Grieving Brain*, I've been really excited to talk to you about it. For me personally, it was such a helpful book and I really believe it could be very helpful to many people listening in who might also be processing their own grief and wondering about it. But before we dive into talking about the book, I just wondered if you tell us your own story a little bit and what drew you to do research on grief?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, it's not necessarily what you would think about first, when you think about grief, is the neuroscience of it. And you know, I've just been fascinated for a long time, from even when I was an undergraduate, with how the world sort of gets transformed and then registers in our brain, how does the brain do that? It seems just marvelous to me. And of course I sort of was going to school during the era when neuroimaging became possible, where it was possible to look inside the brain while it was functioning. So that's, you know, one side of why I've been so curious about grief and relationships and how the brain encodes them. But on the other hand, I also experienced the death of my mom when I was in my mid-twenties. And I think in many ways because I felt very comfortable with talking to people about their grief. You know, I don't mind if you cry uncontrollably. It meant that I was able to do clinical interviews and maybe get a little deeper into the phenomena that people were experiencing. And so just feeling comfortable with it meant I was able to delve into it more, I think, and hopefully come up with some perspectives that can be helpful now for other people.

Karen Wyatt: Mm that's so interesting. And I really think it's important that you are inspired by your own grief experience. Because I think it's a unique experience for those out there who maybe have not gone through grief. It's a little bit hard to understand it. And maybe it's even hard for them to recognize, well why would we want to study grief? Who cares about that? But you yourself recognize and value the importance of it, of the work.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: And I think there's a way in which you know, I really trust people to report on what's happening to them, even when it doesn't make a lot of logical or rational sense. I think well, if that's true and they're also, you know, reporting what's

happening to them, then there's probably a reason that the brain is doing it that way that we can figure out.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, very interesting. Well, as I mentioned, your book was very helpful to me when I read it and like you, I lost my father when I was in my early 30's to suicide. And I had a long process of grief over the years. I'm sure it's still going on, still processing and changing. But the book helped me answer a lot of questions that were in the back of my mind about myself and about the things that I was going through. And so, that's why I'm really excited to share some of the things that I learned from the book. And one of the experiences that I had, which I'm sure this is really common, but I just remember so clearly for at least a month or so every morning, that the moment I would wake up there would be like just a few seconds of thinking that my dad was still here and then it would hit me all over again. It was as if that moment of hearing that he had died happened again full impact right after that. And I was really curious about what's happening there, that we have that experience of having to learn over again, and receive the message again that our loved one has died.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: It's such a difficult experience and I'm so sorry that you had to live through that. Um, my way of thinking about it is that the brain really is a prediction machine. So it kind of works by taking a lot of experiences we've had and understanding the world, and then being able to predict what will happen next, hopefully, is a way to kind of help us cope with whatever, you know, the day brings. And the trouble is that thank goodness, death of a loved one is actually a very rare experience for any one individual. It is very likely to happen at some point, but in the course of the number of days of your life it's very very unlikely. And so, if you've woken up for thousands of days and your dad was there, then the morning that you wake up and he's not there, it's actually not a very good prediction that he has died, right? And so I think your brain is sort of taking a long time to make sure that this is an update to the prediction. That makes sense, right? And so it sort of has to learn that slowly over time as you gain experiences day after day after day of that being true.

Karen Wyatt: That's so interesting. And that perspective was so helpful to me, the idea that the brain is learning. And you talked about, it's as if we're walking through two worlds at the same time because one is the brain's virtual reality where our loved one is still here because the brain is still predicting that, but the other one is the actual world, and how interesting that is. It makes sense why we feel sometimes so disoriented and confused and as if we don't even fit in this world we're trying to walk through.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right. It's not, you know, in some ways it's a better description, not so much that they're gone, but that their absence is with us, right? Like, and that's very hard to describe to someone else. I think especially as you just said earlier, someone who hasn't experienced it. But I think the brain, because we're able to sort of use lots of different pieces of information at the same time, what that can lead to is feeling very disoriented and very confused. Makes it hard to concentrate because your brain is

really processing a whole lot of things that are happening. And the virtual world, like you say, just doesn't map onto the real world for quite some time.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And I remember in my experience, I was remembering back to the first Father's Day after my dad died. And at that point I was no longer waking up with that moment of thinking that he was still here. But I was in a store shopping and they had a big Father's Day display and I saw something on the display, like dad would love that. And I was actually looking at it and thinking I would buy it for my dad and it shocked me that I went all the way back to that place of thinking he's still here. And I was confused about why did that happen?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, and you feel like you're a little bit crazy, right? Like you know, you're not delusional, you're fully able to say my dad has died. But those, you know those habits just play out because the brain is just on autopilot and autopilot includes your dad, right? So you don't want to be without a gift on Father's Day, is sort of the process your brain is rolling out for you. And it takes a while for it to consult the information. Oh, but I have a memory of the fact that he's gone, right? So those habits are just so deeply ingrained in us. And I think even beyond that there's something very specific about attachment neurobiology, along with bonding. When we go through bonding with someone, along with it comes this belief that they will always be there for you and you will always be there for them. And that deep belief is a different kind of information than memory and so on. And so I think it takes just, as you say, time for the brain to kind of put those pieces all together and remember.

Karen Wyatt: Mhm. Yeah, that's very interesting. And so each new experience that we have, like Father's Day only happens once a year. So it's a brand new experience of grief when it does happen. And I guess every other holiday as well. So that's why we feel like we're going back to the very beginning, working through this whole process from square one again.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: It's interesting. I sometimes hear people say that the second year is harder for them than the first year. It depends on the person. People have very different individual experiences of grief. But what I think is interesting about that, in that second year, you have the first memory of them being absent on a holiday or on Father's Day, right? And so it's a different quality to it than the first time you go through it. And so I just think that's an interesting sort of perspective and hopefully gives us a little compassion for ourselves that you know, you do only get queued on the Father's Day habit once a year. So this really is only the second or third time you've been through it. It takes the brain time to learn. And so maybe that gives us a little more empathy for ourselves.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, definitely. It's it's really helpful to think of it that way and to and to understand specifically why it can take a long time for us to learn about grief and that so many of the things that we've been taught about grief are not that helpful and really wrong. Like for me as a medical doctor, to be told if someone is grieving more than

six months, there's something pathological going on. Well, that doesn't make sense at all, that kind of time frame.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah. And I think it depends on what's happening at six months in some ways, because I do feel each person suffering is profound, right? It is their own experience of suffering. And people often will say, this is the worst I've ever felt. And that is true for them as a sort of caregiving professional. We also are able to see the range of experiences that people have. And we can say, I do, I hear you. This is the worst suffering you've had. And it's also really typical, right? Like both are true at the same time, but by actually sort of studying folks who really are not adapting very well or having trouble functioning in their life, we're also able to ask questions that do help us to identify, you know. There is this very small group of people, maybe 1 in 10 bereaved people or even less, who would really benefit from some really targeted intervention that helps them, not because their grief is wrong, but maybe they've gotten derailed. And it may help through learning some new skills and ways of coping to get back on the grieving trajectory. Not that the grief is going to go away, but that they may actually learn new ways to create a meaningful life for themselves.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. That's very interesting. And I wanted to ask, in light of this idea that the brain is learning, that the loved one isn't here in the physical forum anymore. Do you feel it's really helpful or important for grief to have a funeral or memorial service?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I think people really adopt such a range of ways of responding. I sometimes think it's helpful to remember that the experience of grief is different from the expression of grief. So two people can be experiencing the same things, and what we might see from the outside can look completely different from two different people. People have dealt with grief as a culture, as a society, in very different ways across periods of history, across different countries of the world. And even different subcultures within a country. Um, many of our cultures, though, adopt some form of ritual that really marks the difference between this person lives and this person has died. And marking that time I think can come with a lot of support, which we know is helpful for people who are grieving. But from the perspective of the brain, it also creates more memories. Right? So it creates a memory now of all of my friends and family came together, they put on special clothes and said the special prayers and we went to the special place and the brain really encodes, ah now I know that this is another piece of evidence that this person is gone. Whether it is required or not, I think is really up to a person. We've seen even with the pandemic, how much funerals have changed. And so I think what's more important is, how are you reflecting on it? Are you getting the support that you need? Is there some way you've made that transition in your mind between what was and what is? And ritual is often a way that we do that.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. Yeah, because I guess I would say, looking back for myself, I think that that having the funeral was very important because there was something about, I guess partly because of the fact my dad died by suicide, and there's shame and stigma associated with it. And yet to see that hundreds of people came to be there at his funeral

helped a bit with that. I think to see, regardless of how my dad died or those details, all of these people love and care about my dad and they're there to show that and that helped override, I think, some of that shame that was there.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: It makes a lot of sense. I think we, in the midst of having just lost someone, having someone who has just died, we're very focused on that very, very tiny last chapter of their life when they were sick or when they died by suicide or whatever the situation was. And in some ways funerals or memorials are able to remind us of all the chapters of their life, right? And sort of put in perspective, yes, this did happen. But it was one little piece of the whole life.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. Yeah, that's a really good way to put it. And that while I'm grieving in my way, as a daughter whose father died, all these other people are here sharing their grief and they knew him in a totally different way and had totally different experiences with him. And yet we're all grieving together at the same time.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right. And even if you can't, I mean, I think a lot of people can't even remember the funeral, right? I have very sort of jagged moments that I can remember from my mother's funeral. But you have still experienced it, right? It is still, it's still been encoded at some level. Even if you're not able to bring it back to your conscious memory, I still think it impacts us. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. That's interesting because that just made me remember when I was 29, um, my best friend from high school died when we were 29. And her parents chose, they had a memorial service, but her body wasn't there, and none of us went to the gravesite. And that in my mind, I had this little story in my mind that, what if she didn't really die? She always wanted to live in France because she studied French in high school and I always had this dream in my mind, I had this fantasy for a while that, what if she faked her death and she's actually in Paris right now and she's really happy? And I got so much comfort from that. But I partly realized it's because, maybe if I had seen the coffin or seen her, I would have had an easier time saying, she's not in Paris right now.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I'm very fascinated by some work where people observe primate troops. Um, so these are chimps who are living in the wild, but scientists are observing them without interfering. And when an infant dies, the mother will actually carry the infant's body often for a long time, days and even weeks. And one of the thoughts is, it's sort of this ability to verify that it is true when you can't believe it, you know? And for a host of reasons that I won't go into, where they've sort of looked at and tested different hypotheses, you know, historically we were more engaged with the physical body after it had died. People died at home. People prepared the body for the funeral. And maybe there is a way that grief gives us some connection to the reality of it.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, yeah. That really makes sense. I came to realize that, I think it would have made a difference for me had I had that reality. We lived in different states. I hadn't seen her for quite some time. So it was easy to create a little fantasy in my mind that, and

I guess sometimes that is a survival mechanism in a way, to create a fantasy that just helps us bear the pain.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right. The mind really is trying to do anything it can to tolerate such incredible emotional pain that people are experiencing. And certainly that's one of them. And you know, if it's not interfering, if the story isn't sort of interfering with your day to day life, that's very different than if you are sort of enacting a life where they are still alive. Do you know what I mean?

Karen Wyatt: Yeah.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: And so I think, you know, even in neonatal wards now in hospitals, it is the case that the standard of care is that, if an infant dies, that the parents are able to hold them. And I think it's probably for a similar reason that they've, you know, really just discovered over time, they need that time to really process what's happening.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, that makes so much sense. And, I probably should have asked you this before. But you differentiate in the book between grief and grieving and I think that's also helpful as well to understand.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I found it very helpful, and in describing it to other people, they've told me also that it seems helpful. Grief then is sort of the, it's just that momentary feeling. It's the feeling that just washes over you. People often describe it as a wave and just ferocious, intense feelings. Grieving, on the other hand, is the way that grief changes over time without actually going away. Right? So if you think about the first 100 times that wave of grief takes you over, you may think, I'm not going to get through this. This is just unbearable. And the 101st time it may feel equally awful, but you may also have the thought, and it's familiar, right? And that is in and of itself a different experience. You may come to find ways of giving yourself comfort for example, so that it may feel sort of the same and yet we're able to cope with it differently. It doesn't necessarily go away, but we're able to bear it.

Karen Wyatt: Hmm that's interesting because another thing I remember really clearly, I had a dawning realization one day that I had, I've been wishing every day that I would feel like I felt before my dad died. All I wanted, I just wanted to go back to the moment before he died and that's what I was expecting to happen or believing would perhaps happen. Like, all this will just go away and I feel like I felt before and then one day I recognized, wait a minute, grief, this is meant to change me. This is actually changing me. And I'm meant to change, not to go backwards and be who I was before. The moment I had that realization, it shifted everything because I suddenly began to allow what was happening and not resist it and not wish that it would go away, but to allow it to be here. And even to have a little curiosity like, well, it's changing me. Something's happening within me and all I can do is let that happen.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right. And come to know who you are now, right? Like I think that description of, "it happens to you," is we're used to believing that we have all this control over our emotions and our responses, and it's not really like that. It happens automatically. We have some level of control of them, how we cope with what has happened to us. But the actual feelings, I think part of why they're often so unexpected is just they're so true in the moment and they're often not what we expect. And so I think it's hard for people to wrap their head around, this is really a change. And I used this silly example maybe, but I would say like, you know, when did you get over your wedding day, right? That's not really a question, that makes sense, right? And it's similar with grief, there's no getting over it. It is a change in who you are and how you function in the world and that doesn't go back.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So true. That for me was such a big realization. I don't know. I imagine that other people probably already know, I'm just slow at figuring that out, for that coming to me.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I think each person has to discover it for themselves and there will probably be other people who are listening who didn't have that intensity of experience. And I think people often feel like, what's wrong with me if I didn't have this overwhelming emotional pain? Or what if I didn't have anger and blame and panic? And you know, that people describe what's wrong with me and there's nothing wrong with that either. It really comes in so many different forms, you can think about how different you feel about a number of people that you love very much, but that love for each person is quite different. And so maybe it shouldn't surprise us that our grief over a relationship would be very different as well. And so if it was something that you were able to understand and incorporate into your life in a more, you know, resilient kind of way, that's alright too, that's how it works for this relationship.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's such a good point and I think that's really important for people to recognize. That they may or probably will grieve differently for every loss they experience and that's okay too. That's normal for all of us.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah. So when my mom died, my experience after that was very different than after my dad died for lots of different reasons. But I mean the grief felt very different. So I think that is true.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And one thing that you wrote about that was particularly helpful to me was writing about guilt. Because my dad having died by suicide, I dealt with a huge amount of guilt. Also just being a doctor who had studied behavioral science, and I'd worked with patients with depression and who themselves had suicidal thoughts, and the idea that I couldn't help my dad gave me just overwhelming guilt to deal with. And I know that that's not just in this type of death, but many people feel guilt after a death.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right. I think inherent in most very close relationships is the idea that, you know, I will be there for you, I will care for you. And somehow death is

kind of proof that that didn't happen. Of course that's not true, but I think that's where our mind goes. And here is a case where I think our mind can really trip us up in the sense that we sometimes call those the “would have could have should have,” you know. You can come up with an infinite number of stories. If only I had called him that day. If only I had gotten to the hospital sooner. If only the doctor would have run this test or you know, there is an infinite number of them. But here is where I think it trips us up. If you think about it, each of those virtual realities, you're playing out in your mind ends in, and then my loved one didn't die. But of course they did die. And so the reality in the present moment, you're sort of stepping out of it. If you're spending a lot of time in the “would have could have should have” and not really learning how to experience what life is like in the present reality, where you're carrying the absence of this person. I'm not suggesting that people can just cut it off. But I think it can be useful if you recognize that, this is maybe not the most useful way to spend your mental energy. Then even simple things like when you get into the cycle of what it could have, should have, being able to recognize that in and of itself. I think it's a big thing, and then doing things like just shifting your environment even right? So I know when I get into this state, if I can go for a walk or literally get into a different place, even that can help sort of jog me out of that mental state.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. That's such a good point that it does become kind of just a feedback loop in a way that we're stuck in going around and around. That doesn't lead us anywhere. And I think I reached a point where I just realized I will never have answers to all the questions that I have. And it doesn't help me to keep asking all these questions. I just have to be where I am and live with this.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I know a man whose son also died by suicide. And he described it to me as you know, there is no way through those questions. There's only finding a way around them. It's like a wall, right? There's no way through. You only can find a way around.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. Yeah, that's a really good point. And I guess it necessarily takes a long time to actually cope with all of that and deal with it. Well, I was also interested that you studied, I guess what you call complicated grief. And so I wanted you to discuss your definition of that. What is complicated grief and what do we need to do for it?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I like the term complicated grief. But I have to be honest, for your listeners, that it is now called prolonged grief disorder, sort of officially by psychologists and psychiatrists and doctors. The reason that I like the term complicated grief is that, for me, it focuses me on the complications that can get in the way, that can sort of derail us and then also potentially gives us opportunities to intervene and help with those complications. So the metaphor would be, if you break your leg, you're not actually doing anything to knit your leg back together right? Like that's just happening automatically. Your body knows what to do. You may support it, right? Like you might put it in a cast. Um, but if there are complications, like you get an infection or there's a secondary break, right? If something like that happens, then intervention becomes

important and can really get you back on that healing trajectory. That is the body's natural response. So, I think of complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder in a similar way. It's not that the grief is necessarily so different, but rather that it is preventing this person from functioning in their life, right? So, um, I had a woman tell me, you know, why would I give my children bar mitzvahs if their grandmother isn't here to see it, right? So, it doesn't even just affect you, it can affect the people around you as well. Her life felt so meaningless that there was just no point in engaging in, you know, what was a very big part of her family. And another man who told me he'd been sort of a pillar in his community. People really turned to him when they were having problems and he was able to counsel them. And after his son died, he said it's like, I just don't care about people anymore. Like I just don't care when they bring me their problems. And so you can see that these things, it's not even just the grief, it's the way the grief is impacting them. So the advantage to having criteria that clinicians can use is that we can identify people who will benefit from targeted psychotherapy that we've studied in randomized clinical trials.

Karen Wyatt: That's interesting because along the way, in this long journey I've had with my grief, I always, I thought to myself, don't tell anyone that you're still working on grief because they'll think there's something pathological going on. And I never wanted anyone to judge that or label that. But as I look at it from your definition, I mean, I was still functioning as a wife and a mother and a doctor and in fact, I started working in hospice and I felt passionate about it and I felt like I had so much to offer to people who were facing grief themselves because I was still working on it myself. And I had insights that helped them and they had insights that helped me, and it was this powerful growing experience. So I understand, that is functioning. I was still functioning, though I was still grieving.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Exactly. That's such a beautiful example of, you know, you were not ignoring the fact that you had grief, right? But you were instead finding a way to incorporate the fact that you are a person who has grief into your life and making something meaningful. Not everyone will do it in the way that you did. But even just using the word passionate. Many people who are really struggling don't feel strongly about anything, right? Like everything just feels like they're going through the motions and that's sort of the difference. Both of you may experience grief, but in one case it is a part of what motivates you and a part of how you empathize with the people around you and in the other case it cuts you off from the people around you and it prevents you from having positive experiences as well as avoiding sort of the negative experiences.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, Well, I think I have, I've come to realize like this is a really a lifelong process at this point, that there isn't going to be a day when suddenly there's no more grief. I don't feel anything now though, it's not at the top of mind all the time and always there. But a few years ago, my brother and I ended up selling our family cabin in the mountains that my dad actually built. And you know I have, I've been doing fine with my grief for a long time. But selling that cabin devastated me. And then I realized, I don't know, I guess if a physical location can be a place where I somehow identified my dad as

still being there or something. And so to sell it and to remove that from my life, that was really devastating. And then I suddenly realized, oh okay, this will just keep happening. This will happen when other things occur as well.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yes, because that loss and that person is not less important to you just because time has passed. And so being aware of the loss of something so important is what causes this natural reaction of grief. Well you can become aware of having lost something important at any time for decades and decades and forever. So I think if we understand a little bit better that that experience of loss is just how it is when we are aware of something that is gone, that was so important, then maybe it doesn't surprise us quite so much when that overtakes us much much later.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. So we could even predict that there will be other circumstances that arise. Maybe the particular circumstance I wouldn't have thought of before as something that would trigger it, but it will still happen and it's still, like you describe, those feelings of grief when it washes over you.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, I have these feelings at Christmas. My father who's now deceased came to visit me for about three weeks during Christmas usually. And you know, during those three weeks, we planned for it and we did all these things. And every Christmas I'm really just flooded with memories and sadness about that. And that is very typical for people at the holidays to be particularly acutely aware of what they've lost and thus have that grief. And every year I still say to myself, oh maybe I won't feel that this year and every year I do, you know. I'm not sure why it hasn't registered. That's just how it is. But there can be all sorts of things that can really cue that awareness and then there it is again.

Karen Wyatt: And you've written about two words that I hadn't associated with my own grief before until I read them in your book. But one was "rumination" and how we ruminate in our thoughts about our loved one. And then also "yearning," which I really love that word, it really describes very well, that particular pain inside. And so I don't know if you wanted to talk a little bit about those two, rumination and yearning.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yearning I think is a little bit like thirst, right? So yearning I think is that motivation that you just want things to be back the way they were. You just want your loved one to be back. And the reason that that happens and happens so intensely is because our loved ones are as important to us as food and water, right? We cannot survive without being bonded to the people around us. And that's not just true in infancy. That is true our whole lives. And so because the brain knows this, it's using all of the neurochemicals at its disposal to really create this motivation to seek them out and spend time with them and so forth. In the same way that it keeps track of how much water you've had and really motivates you to seek out water when you need it, right? That is just how we are able to function in this world as human beings. And so I think when we think of yearning as being like thirst and hunger, it helps both to describe that quality of motivation about it And the intensity of it helps us to give a reason for why it feels so

important, because it is so important. Hopefully for many of us we find there are other living loved ones who also we can be attached to and we can care for and can care for us. So that when we have that yearning we are also able to connect with other people who can give us love and we can give them love. Not because it's the same. But because as human beings, we have that need for social connection.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. And you do write about that. That social connection is actually one of the things that helps us greatly in our grief. But it seems that for some of us we feel isolated. We feel alone when we're grieving because it seems like no one else could possibly understand this.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, I think this is one of the real tragedies about grief is that, and to some degree is a little bit unique to our culture. So, cultural manifestations of grief, social manifestations of grief are very common in a lot of places where engaging in rituals or in, you know, even sort of being together and whaling or other sort of outpourings of grief can be more common. I'm not necessarily suggesting that that would help us because we are a part of our own culture. But I think what is unique is that grief feels so intense to us and so unexpected often that we think there can be no one else who must feel this way. And as soon as grief separates you, you have a harder time bearing it because you are now also alone, right? So not only do you not have the person that you love but you also are alone from the other people around you. If instead there is a way to think, it's not so much about my grief. It is that there is grief that is a part of the human condition then. Although you're going to have to describe what that's like for you and that may be very different from what it's like for another person. The fact that you can sort of take that lens and shift it. We are both dealing with grief, means that you are together in something right? Not in a comparing kind of way, just in that very simple reflection of, ah I know something about your experience that you too have pain. And for most of us, when we recognize someone else also has pain, it just evokes compassion. That's just sort of the natural thing. It's probably part of why we cry when we are grieving because it evokes that caring from other people at a moment when we really need support.

Karen Wyatt: That's such a good reminder for those of us who are trying to support someone else who's grieving, to remember that that person really does need social connection but may not know how to create it for themselves. They may not be good at asking for that or making that happen. So one of the best things we could do is just facilitate it, make sure we show up or text them or call them or somehow create a connection.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: That's right and often I find my experience has been that when people, you know, you're at some event and someone gets really angry and you think, oh gosh, they lost their mom like four months ago, right? Like maybe this intensity of emotion isn't actually about this situation we're in right now, but because their emotion has just been dialed up. And that sometimes can be an opportunity to reach out and say, hey, I really feel that a lot is going on for you. I want you to know that we can talk about this if you want. And the key here is that you're not trying to make them feel better, right?

In that moment of recognizing each other's pain. It isn't about cheering them up, it's about being there and witnessing it with them. Yes, I see what you're feeling. Yes, I hear what you're saying. And that is a very different motivation from, oh, you know, feel better and oh, don't dwell on it. And, it's been a long time. It's none of those things. It's just, tell me what it's like for you, what has this been and what does it mean now for you? And you can do it in lots of ways because there is a need for many people to also grieve alone. And so it's not about being intrusive. It's about being available, right? And so giving them the opportunity by keep showing up and then leaving when they want you to, right? So both are true.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, those are such good reminders because I think it may come, you know, instinctually to some of us to want to fix things when we see someone's hurting, something happened. What can I do to make this better? And that's it. That's not a bad motivation at all. It's just that it isn't particularly what's needed in a time of grief. And so we have to have enough experience or learning about grief to not just react without thinking. We need to be able to think about the situation and choose our words and our actions carefully.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: And flexibility is really important. So I would say, if you're feeling like no one can possibly understand me and then you say to a friend, this is how I feel. And they say, oh, you shouldn't feel that way right now, you just feel even more alone. So that's why that's not very useful. But on the flip side, I will also say that, we also have to have experiences in our new life, right? And with who we are now. And so there's also nothing wrong with being like, come on, we're getting out of the house, we're gonna go to the mall, you know, whatever. We're gonna go to the movie and we don't have to talk about anything, we don't have to think about anything. We're just gonna get out, right? So having a lot of different ways of responding to people and coping with that grief experience is really a sign of mental health, is the flexibility.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. You write about that, having a large tool kit with which to cope with grief. Is that toolkit something that we can develop all along even when we're not acutely dealing with grief? So could we be working on it now? And what are some of the tools that would be helpful?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: While I think grief is a pretty unique emotion and set of emotions that we can't always anticipate, I think that trying not to shy away from maybe smaller griefs that we experience and allowing ourselves to be sad about, you know, the season that is ending or the change in, you know, a job. By not sort of shying away from that experience, I think it builds sort of a tolerance for strong emotions. And in general, I think we can try to tolerate other types of strong emotions as well and learn that a strong emotion doesn't mean we have to react in a particular way. So, for example, if I have the strong emotion of anger, I may have the belief, oh, and now I need to write an email to this person and you know, tell them what's wrong. And that's one option as a way to deal with anger and can be a good option, right? But there may be other ways to deal with it as well. And so sort of developing, hmm, I could also, you know, go for a run, right? That

could be another really great way to handle anger. And so having again this flexibility of a certain emotional feeling in you doesn't mean you have to react in the same way.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. So that's something we could be working on just in general, our emotional intelligence and our ability to manage our own emotions which will serve us well when we need that kind of coping skill, I guess at some point in the future.

Something else that you wrote that I really liked was, time doesn't heal. Experience heals over time. And so because, I think often we often hear that and we say that to people, oh well time heals everything. But that it isn't just time passing where healing happens.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, it's really being willing to engage in new experiences. And so if you're sort of keeping your life the way it was before, you're maybe not having the opportunity to learn more about what your life is right now and what actually feels good or not. So I use sort of the example of planning, right? Even planning for the weekend. What am I going to do this weekend? And giving yourself the permission to do something new. Maybe I'm going to take a road trip, you know, paint the bathroom, you know, and then to be really present during those moments. What does it feel like to paint the bathroom as a grieving person, right? What does it feel like to take a road trip as a grieving person? Because really being present in those moments then teaches you what is meaningful to me. How do I feel better and worse? And that enables us to then learn and potentially recreate that again. Oh, turns out a road trip for me is not very restorative. I actually find it really stressful and that's not really something I'm going to do again. But I might try going to a concert because it was too long, right? It was so good to get out of the house. It was too long. So I'm going to try going to a concert, right? So these are the ways, by being really present with your experience when you try new things, to really find out what works for you now.

Karen Wyatt: And I really like that you emphasize in the book, the ability to be in the present, of returning from your thoughts of the past and from imagining the future to just being present. And I think that's so important, really in all of life. In the present moment is where we're really truly living and experiencing love and joy and grief, and so do you recommend any tools for being more present?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I think people can do this in a lot of different ways. I certainly think that meditation can be one way, where if you have a good teacher, you can really learn to focus your attention and then return your attention over and over and over again because no one's attention stays at the present moment. So meditation can be a way to strengthen that. I will say that for people who are really actively grieving, concentration is often a problem for them. So it may not be so much that you would take up meditation while you are acutely grieving. But it can be something I think that for some people can give us a practice of how to return our attention to the present moment. But there are lots of other ways as well. Simply savoring, right? Focusing on what it is in the moment that tastes good or smells good or looks beautiful by really, again, returning your attention to

those senses. For many people, it can return them to feeling like, oh yes, I'm here in my body and in this room and in this moment in time.

Karen Wyatt: And I like that you mentioned earlier just going out for a walk, maybe just going out and being in nature and feeling connected to nature.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I think the grandness, the huge timescale as well as physical scale of nature can often give some perspective, especially when you're dealing with something like mortality.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And another thing that I really loved in your book, you talked about a poem called A River of People. And this really touches me because all throughout the past few years, as we've been dealing with the pandemic, I've been thinking about the fact that, while it feels as if all around the world we're becoming more polarized and people are so different from us and we don't think alike. We don't do the same things. We don't care about the same things. We're focusing on all those differences between us. But I really have believed all along if we could just acknowledge that we're all carrying grief right now, everyone is carrying grief, that that is something huge that we all have in common actually, that overrides all the things that are different about us. The fact that all of us grieve in our lifetimes. And so anyway, I wanted to thank you for writing about that. But also to ask you to talk about that a little bit more, The River of People.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I love this image in this poem. He's specifically dealing with insomnia, which is of course, something that a lot of grieving people deal with. Um and so he's awake in the night and writes this poem and says essentially, if everyone who had insomnia right now came out of their homes and walked in the streets, there would be a river of people, right? So even though I'm in my house alone, it's dark, I wish I was sleeping. That is probably true of many other people right now and I can reach out and feel connected to the humanity of that. I think that's a very powerful way to overcome fear and grief, is to really recognize the connectedness that that can provide with the people who have gone before us, right?

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. We live in an impermanent world where everything ultimately dies. And it seems to me, if grief were visible somehow, if you could see it, first of all, we would see it everywhere. We would probably be shocked at all of the people that we encounter every single day who are dealing with grief and we had no idea that was happening for them. But suddenly we would feel so connected and so not alone, but so much a part of this humanity that we've been born into.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I think so, and it's interesting, isn't it? Because of course, people who were bereaved would wear black clothing. And while I think the rigid sort of prescriptive nature of that is probably not very helpful for a lot of people, the reality is that you could become aware of how many people are experiencing grief and to some degree, even who is experiencing grief. In some of the Native American traditions, people will cut off their braids. And so I love this in the sense that you can tell how long

it's been by how long their hair is. So just that awareness without having to explain I think has a really valuable aspect to it.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm definitely. Oh I love that. The thought of cutting the hair. Because that symbolizes that I am different now. I am changed. Everything has changed right now. It's acknowledging it and being able to wear that visibly for other people to see that.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: And then just the growth of your hair is so slow, right? So I love the sort of metaphorical, you know, communication of that. Now I'm at this point and now my hair is just really only an inch longer, you know.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And to remind us like, you can't rush, you can't make your hair grow faster and so you can't make the grief process go any faster. We have to simply be with it. And maybe even appreciate that at each little phase, in each little change how interesting it is, how different things can look as we continue to move through it. Well, Mary-Frances, I just want to say again that your book is amazing. I found it so helpful and I wanted to mention for listeners that it's very accessible. You don't have to understand neuroscience to be able to read it, though you talk a lot about research that's been done. But you explain it in such a way that anyone can understand it. For me, it was so illuminating and so helpful and it made me feel less crazy for one thing. So I think it could be helpful, whether you're processing grief right now in the moment, or you've experienced it, you know, and want to think about it, or you're preparing yourself for the future. It's a helpful book. So I'll say the title again, *The Grieving Brain, The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*. It's a fantastic book. And where can people get a hold of a copy?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: You know, anywhere books are sold online or in bookstores, it's available everywhere.

Karen Wyatt: Is it available as an audiobook?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: So it's print, ebook, and audiobook.

Karen Wyatt: That's fantastic. Did you record the audio?

Mary-Frances O'Connor: I did not. Someone who is, who, that is their profession.

Karen Wyatt: Well, I know it's only been out about a month or so, and I highly recommend it. So I hope listeners will take advantage of now having learned about the book and make sure they get a copy of it because it's really something to have on your bookshelf, I think, as well because it's such a great tool. If you don't need it right now, you might need it in the future or maybe you'll want to loan it to someone else.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Yeah, yeah. I think I have sometimes used books in that way. Maybe I don't know you well enough. I don't know how to bring it up, but I'm giving you this book and I want you to know that we could talk about what's in it, right? I think it's sort of a bridging kind of a conversation somehow.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, definitely. Well, I'm so impressed with everything that you've done, the research you've done and that you're such a great writer because I imagine not all researchers write as well as you do. So I appreciate all of that. And I look forward to seeing whatever you end up creating next.

Mary-Frances O'Connor: Great thank you so much for having me, Karen, this was a really great conversation.

Karen Wyatt: You're so welcome. Yeah, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Karen Wyatt: I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Mary-Frances O'Connor. Once again, I do highly recommend her book, *The Grieving Brain*. I found it really fascinating, but also helpful to me personally, even 33 years after my father's death, to understand a little bit better what's happening inside the brain while we're going through this process of deep grieving. It completed the picture for me of this process that I've been experiencing for all these years, and I hope it's helpful to you as well. I loved it when Mary-Frances said that learning about the grieving brain helps us have more compassion and empathy for ourselves and for all of the things that we're experiencing during this process. And I think that's really true. So check out the book. Remember you can go to Youtube if you'd like to watch the video of this interview. Look for End of Life University there. Also remember to share this information with other people. If you know someone else who might like tuning into this podcast, let them know about it and show them how to use the podcast app on their phone and listen. And also be sure to subscribe or follow this podcast wherever you happen to listen, and leave a rating and a review too, if you feel so inclined. And one more time our Patreon page is [patreon.com/eolu](https://www.patreon.com/eolu). So thank you again for listening in and for following me on this journey and being part of this community. We're building to improve the end of life for everyone. And until next week when we're together again, remember that we're here for love. So face your fear, be ready for whatever life brings you next, and love each and every moment of your very precious life. Bye bye.