

Normal Broken



THE GRIEF COMPANION FOR WHEN IT'S TIME TO HEAL BUT
YOU'RE NOT SURE YOU WANT TO

None of us make it through life without experiencing loss that leaves us feeling broken.

That's what makes grief so normal.

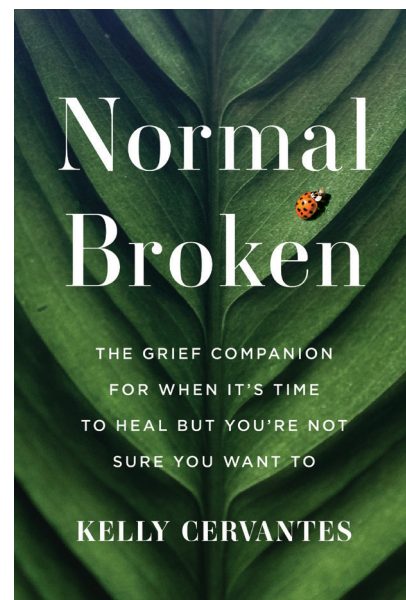
In *Normal Broken*, Kelly Cervantes isn't trying to tell you what to do, how to feel, or the right way to heal. She's also not flinging sunny thoughts, vibes, and prayers at you. After losing her daughter to epilepsy, she knows that grief is many things. It's weird. It sucks. It's all-encompassing. Something everyone will have to deal with. But never linear. Just as what we are grieving varies, so do our journeys to process it.

Normal Broken was born out of this desire to meet people where they are in their grief journeys, to lend a hand, or maybe to just sit in the dark with them. To acknowledge your brokenness and to feel broken together—never pressured to “move on” or “think positive.”

With chapters that can be read in any order, *Normal Broken* is divided into “moments” of grief that will allow you to choose what you need at any given time—such as:

- When you're not sure if you *want* to heal
- When your greatest fear is socializing
- When you're facing anniversaries and other meaningful dates
- When you're ready to be okay

Kelly also shares stories from her ongoing journey, along with advice she wishes someone had given her, and simple exercises to help you reflect on where you are. *Normal Broken* is designed to serve as a companion through your own grief journey, whether you are mourning the loss of a child, a friend, a family member, or anyone special in your life.



BOOK DETAILS

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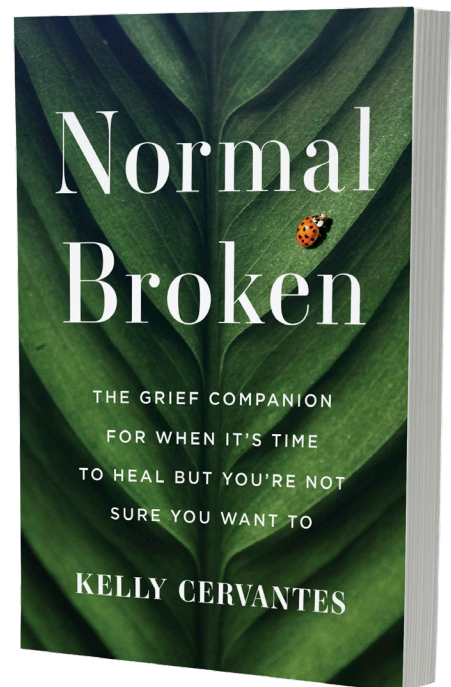
KELLY CERVANTES is an award-winning writer, speaker, and advocate best known for her blog *Inchstones*, where she shared the stress, love, and joy that came with parenting her medically complex daughter, Adelaide. Since Adelaide's passing, Kelly has continued to write candidly about her arduous and, at times, contradictory grief journey.

She has been published in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *Cosmopolitan*, as well as quoted in the *New York Times*, CNN, and *People*. She is the current board chair for the nonprofit CURE Epilepsy and also hosts their biweekly podcast, *Seizing Life*, where she interviews scientists, doctors, and individuals affected by epilepsy. Kelly resides in Maplewood, NJ, with her husband, Miguel Cervantes currently starring in *Hamilton* on Broadway, their children, and their dogs, Tabasco and Sriracha.

CONNECT WITH KELLY



**KELLY HAS
BEEN SEEN ON**



Normal Broken

EXCERPT: INTRODUCTION

Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.
—William Goldman

Grief sucks. It's also weird. Basically, it sucks and it's weird. It also happens to be an unavoidable part of life.

Did you know that there is a Grief Awareness Day? It's August 30th, if you were curious. I remember discovering that and wondering who were the lucky prats that were so untouched by grief that they needed to have a day in order to be aware of it. If you are reading these opening lines, I can only assume that you do not fall into that category. I'm so sorry you're not one of the lucky prats, but I am glad you're here.

I came to write this book a bit begrudgingly. Not because I didn't believe that it needed to be written, but because I knew how difficult it would be to write: let's sit in all my worst emotions and memories, and analyze how they affected me and what I learned from them. Sounds like an anxiety attack waiting to happen, right? Thankfully, I've kept a blog since 2018 chronicling much of the major grief I've experienced, so I was able to reexamine the state of mind I had at the time. What I discovered surprised me.

In so many ways I still feel beleaguered and broken by my losses, but time's persistent trudge forward has dragged me along, too. Returning to my blogs allowed me to see how far I've come. My once-fresh wounds have scabbed over, my endurance in daily life has strengthened, and I am no longer living life from moment to moment. Sure, sometimes I find myself picking at those scabs, gushing grief all over again, or I push myself too far and land back in a fetal position, tapped of physical and emotional energy. But I am healing.

That was a significant discovery, considering that early in my grief journey I wasn't sure that I wanted to heal. My daughter Adelaide passed away in 2019, five days shy of her fourth birthday, but I had been grieving her

long before she left us. In May 2016, the same week my husband landed the lead role of Hamilton in the brand-new Chicago production of the blockbuster musical, our daughter was diagnosed with epilepsy. She was only seven months old at the time and would be wracked by seizures for the rest of her brief life. They were years that my husband, Miguel, would compare to holding on to a rocket in one hand while dragging a parachute behind you with the other.

Several months before she passed, doctors determined that whatever was causing Adelaide's seizures was neurodegenerative and there was nothing else that could be done to help her. By the time she died, I felt like a professional griever. It was a routine part of my day. I had grieved the milestones she missed, the words she never spoke, the smiles she forfeited, and the entire life I had dreamed for her—all before I ever grieved her physical loss. Not that any of this made her death any easier to process, though, admittedly, I had hoped it might (more on that later).

Then, only days after Adelaide died, my grief was compounded when we learned Miguel would take over as Hamilton on Broadway. This meant leaving our beloved Chicago community to return to New York City after three years away. What should have been amazing news (being Hamilton in Hamilton on Broadway!!!), I would instead view as taking us away from our supportive friends, who had known Adelaide better than anyone else. Five months later, in March 2020, just ten performances into Miguel's Broadway run, the world was thrown into collective quarantine. At this point, I was fairly confident that I had been cast in some sort of cosmic shit show.

Not only did my grief become destructive, but I had absolutely zero interest in healing, perhaps because

for much of Adelaide's life my love for her got tangled up in the emotional pain I experienced at the hands of her medical condition. If I tried to heal, that would require me to let go of the pain and, by extension, I thought, my daughter. I hadn't been able to physically keep Adelaide in our lives, so you better believe I had no intention of letting go of her emotionally, ergo the attachment to pain.

Yet everywhere I turned, I felt like healing thoughts, vibes, and prayers were being flung in my direction. It took time, intense reflection, and a heavy dose of anti-depressants for me to understand that healing was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not. Time heals, it just does. Ready or not, here it comes, and in its wake we are left with scars. Scars we are taught to hide away—which is probably why I equated healing with forgetting.

But our scars aren't something to be embarrassed by or insecure about. They are reminders of battles fought—so why not accept and own the lines of the scar? What if instead of burying the scars under clothes and fake smiles, we displayed them with honor and remembrance? What if you could turn your jagged, tough skin into a work of art by designing a beautiful tattoo around it? That, to me, is healing: the reminders of the pain are still there, but the marks they leave behind and the person we become as a result pay homage to a life lived. After all, the only reason loss hurts so much is because we love so hard. There is no loss without love, and there is nothing more beautiful (or complicated) in this world than love. So, it stands to reason that we should be able to find beauty, and even create beauty, out of our losses.

Through writing and sharing my blog, *Inchstones*, I discovered—even during some of my darkest moments—that I was far from alone in my thoughts and experiences. I also discovered that I'm pretty good at putting those

often-irrational feelings into words so that others could relate to and identify with them. I didn't start writing the blog to help others. It was part of my own therapeutic journey, a way to process my life in eight-hundred-word weekly installments. But it did help others, and knowing that in turned help me feel that maybe all this pain didn't need to be in vain. *Normal Broken* was born out of this desire to lend a hand and help others find their own words.

Even if that means simply sitting in the dark together, acknowledging our brokenness, and feeling broken together.

What you can expect from this book are honest pieces of my personal story and the candid realizations I made along the way that helped me survive and, yes, even heal. You probably won't connect with everything here because we all grieve differently—and that's okay! I would never presume to tell anyone how to grieve, but I do hope that you can pull nuggets from my trials and insights that can help make your own grief journey a little less treacherous. Or, at the very least, feel you are not navigating it alone.

Another thing you should know about this book is that, while it is segmented into chapters because that is how books work, that does not mean that I've discovered some magical order to healing. Grief is many things, but linear is not one of them. Just as what we are grieving varies, so does how we process it. Please feel free to take these chapters in whatever order you need as you navigate your grief. Let this book meet you where you are at whatever moment you happen to arrive there.

While I'm dismantling how books are read, let me also confess that selfhelp books have never been my jam. I've never dealt well with people telling me what to do—even as a child I insisted on learning by doing everything myself (“I do it! I do it!”). So, in this book you

will not find boldfaced type with bullet-pointed advice, because I could never write a book that I wouldn't read myself. I should also add that I am not a therapist, counselor, or social worker, and this book is not to be confused with psychiatric guidance. I am a typical woman who has experienced unimaginable loss and is still stumbling through my grief. Which, I hope, makes this book accessible and approachable. So, expect more of this helped me and less of research shows this is what healthy grieving should look like. These pages are not meant to be a guide. Instead, think of them as a companion to support you during a super-shitty time in your life.

However, I do have one kind of self-help-adjacent trick that I suggest trying: writing. By putting words to my most hollowing emotions and confusing thoughts, I have been able to blow away the oppressive grief fog more effectively than a high-powered fan in a Beyoncé music video. Look, I'm not going to tell you to drink less and exercise more because, well, duh. I'm also not about to bore you with statistics about how journaling benefits mood, memory, sleep, and self-confidence.¹ But this writing thing? I'm pretty passionate about it. There is so much power in putting our trials and triumphs into words—in naming what drives our conscious thoughts. Aside from a few dependable humans and one devoted canine, writing is the thing that is most responsible for my progress. But because I am well aware of how daunting a blank page can be, I have included writing prompts after each chapter where you can add your own thoughts, lists, or revelations. The prompts include questions and ideas that have swirled in my head over time and will hopefully jumpstart different trains of thought and streams of consciousness in you as you continue on your own journey. If this makes you cringe or roll your eyes, I feel you. But I really do recommend giving it a try, and if you hate it, no worries. Just pretend like those pages don't even exist in the

book and move on to the next. You're not going to hurt my feelings. You do you.

Oh! One last thing I need you to know: grief should never be a competition. Mark Twain said, "Nothing that grieves us can be called little: by the eternal laws of proportion a child's loss of a doll and a king's loss of a crown are events of the same size." Whether you are showing up today having lost a parent, spouse, friend, or child; whether you are grieving your previous life, a career, a version of yourself, or a future life you had envisioned; whether you are grieving someone who is deeply alive but so very far away—your grief is valid. If you find this concept challenging because you believe that your loss pales in comparison to others', or, conversely, you are growing ever more annoyed with those who you perceive as suffering from less than you are, I recommend flipping ahead to Chapter 11: When Gratitude Is a Struggle, where we take on comparative and competitive grief. Our feelings are justified by our lived experiences and resulting perspective: one person's toy is another person's kingdom, and that principle must be honored without judging others or, perhaps more commonly, judging ourselves. We cannot expect to heal if we are concerned about how our grief fits into a fictitious hierarchy of our own design.

Alright then. With all that out of the way, let's try to start suturing our wounds and creating works of art out of these hard-earned scars.

