

[00:00:01.770] - Melissa Corkum

Is your parenting journey turning out differently than you imagined? It's never too late to begin your family's transformation journey.

[00:00:09.890] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Wise podcast, where you'll rediscover the confident and connected parent you long to be. I'm Lisa C. Qualls.

[00:00:16.550] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry. We get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:27.210] - Melissa Corkum

Hello, friends. Welcome to episode 240 of the Adoption Wise podcast. We talk a lot about grief in the work that we do in *Reclaim Compassion*, our book about blocked care. We specifically talk about this gap between expectations and reality, and how there's almost always a gap between our expectations and reality when we get into this world of fostering and adopting, and how whenever there's a gap, there's something to grieve. And I think that has really stopped some people in their tracks when we say that. And then we go on to say, we need to grieve that gap well in order to not get stuck or to not feel constantly in despair. And then inevitably, what happens is people come back to us and say, well, but what does that exactly look like? And someone recently said, can you point me to a podcast about that? I think expecting that we had one about that. And as it turns out, we don't. We have talked about grief before on the podcast. All the way back on episode 33, we talked about the stages of grief. And so we're not going to do that here. But we really wanted to focus this episode on the tangible things that can be helpful in processing and expressing our feelings of grief. What does it look like to lament or mourn?

[00:01:58.710] - Lisa C. Qualls

And if you're not sure, you're thinking, okay, I don't understand why they're talking about grief. I think a lot of times we might feel some sadness and grief over how our lives have changed when we became foster adoptive families. But I think very often we shove that down because we don't feel like we have a right to feel sad. First of all, we chose this, right? We chose to foster, we chose to adopt. And if our lives have changed a whole lot and there are things we're really sad about, well, maybe it's kind of on us. Or people would expect us, or we think people might expect us to say, well, yeah, but you're doing this really important thing. I mean, it's all worth it, right? Well, it may be worth it, but that doesn't mean that we're not sad for the losses, for the changes in our families. And it also, even if we're grieving these losses and these changes, it doesn't mean we're also not thankful to be fostering or adopting. It doesn't mean we don't love our children that have joined our families. We do, but that doesn't mean that we can't simultaneously experience some sadness at the way our lives have changed.

[00:03:15.110] - Melissa Corkum

Two things can be true, right?

[00:03:16.780] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yes. Two things can be true. Yes. That is the nature of the complexity of our lives, for sure.

[00:03:23.960] - Melissa Corkum

For sure. So let's start with just a quick review of two types of grief that may be new to you. Probably not if you have been hanging out and listening to us for a while. But one is ambiguous loss. And that's the idea when there is a loss that may not have the type of concrete closure that we're necessarily used to. So I think this happens a lot in foster care when we, as a foster family may lose a placement. So they're physically no longer in your home, but they might not be gone forever, and their emotional presence is still very much a big part of your family. I think this happens when our children need out of home care or treatment. There's a physical separation, but they're still very much an emotional part of your family, and there's not this permanence because they haven't died.

[00:04:57.120] - Melissa Corkum

Ambiguous loss can be lots of different things. I think it also covers the loss of more abstract things,

like the loss of our peace, feeling of peace in our family, the loss of our ability to homeschool or eat family dinners. And then there's disenfranchised grief, which is super related, but that's just a grief that's not recognized by the public. So when we lose a person, like when my dad died about two years ago, it was very public in the sense that people knew and knew how to support us. People didn't expect us to work right away or come back to church right away. Like, there were lots of things that were normal in that process. They also showed up to support us with things like meals. But when there's disenfranchised grief, when we're grieving our gap between expectations and reality, no one's bringing us meals for that.

[00:05:32.170] - Lisa C. Qualls

Right. And also, I think, with a loss, when a child who's been in your care through foster care. Let's say you never planned to be an adoptive placement, or you've always said that you wanted the child to be reunified, and then that happens, and people might be like, well, this is what you wanted in the first place, right? You wanted this child to go back to their family, or you wanted this child if they needed to be adopted, to be adopted by someone else. I don't understand what you're so sad about. But what we forget is, even if it went the way it was technically supposed to, that doesn't mean we're not sad that we don't miss that child or just have sorrow, because now that little bed that that child slept in is empty, and they're never probably going to rejoin your family. Maybe. I mean, you know, foster care kids can come and go, but we have to accept the fact that this is a permanent situation, and we're really, really sad. So it doesn't matter if in our thinking, logical brain, we knew this was the plan, because we're feeling this in a deeper part of our brain, in a deeper part of our heart. Let's just say that we're experiencing the sadness and the loss, even if rationally, this is what we expected.

[00:07:02.670] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I mean, I think grief transcends logic, which is frustrating to me. And it doesn't always happen. It for sure doesn't happen the same for every person, and sometimes even for ourselves. It happens in times and spaces that don't make a ton of sense. And it's not like we can be like, oh, this child left. And so I can grieve for 3.5 days or one day or 24 hours. And sometimes we can do one of the practices that we're getting ready to talk about, and that does help us process something. And sometimes I think we falsely assume, like, we have processed our grief, or it's been ten years, shouldn't we be over that by now? Why are we still getting hit by these waves of grief that were unexpected? So I think that's, again, important to kind of hold that grief is outside of our control, like so many things. But we need ways to not drown in it, for lack of a better term. We need ways to give it time and space and move it through our body. How do we kind of ride the wave of grief? Kind of in the surfing analogy, instead of getting knocked over by the wave?

[00:08:18.990] - Lisa C. Qualls

Talking about waves, it just brings to mind, you know, Dan Siegel says feelings come and go. And that's something we're supposed to teach our children when he's talking about the whole brain child. But, wow, has that been helpful for me, you know, in grief and sorrow and just to remember in this moment, no matter how bad I feel, it will ease. I can't predict necessarily when it's going to come back. That's the thing with grief. Grief is its own I always tell people it's like grief is a wild animal. We cannot control it. We can just know that it's not going to last forever, even in that particular moment. I'm not just talking months and years, I'm talking like in 15 minutes, I'll probably feel a lot better than I do right now.

[00:09:08.430] - Melissa Corkum

So there's kind of three processing centers and thinking, feeling and doing. And so I think that has been really helpful as we've helped people develop intentional lamenting and grieving, mourning, or we'll probably use those words interchangeably, practices. How are we engaging our thinking? And that would be like words and logic. How are we leaving room for, or making way for, or unlocking the actual emotional expression? I think we think the most of probably crying, but it could be something. Maybe it's anger. And then if you've been around the podcast or us for any small amount of time, you know that I am a huge, huge fan of body work. So what are we doing to help our bodies release and process these feelings? I think the more we understand about the way the mind and body work together, the more we understand about polyvagal theory and neuroscience is we understand that emotions have a physical component as much as like a heart feeling component.

[00:10:26.090] - Lisa C. Qualls

Well, and if there's anything I've learned is that the doing the physical things really help me process all those feelings that I have. Even the simplest things, like just some simple deep breathing, helps me not be totally knocked over by the feelings of sadness. It just really helps us work through it when we can access all of these different the thinking, feeling, and doing.

[00:10:59.090] - Melissa Corkum

So we're just going to start listing things that both of us have used and or have helped families use. And we'll kind of, as we go, maybe kind of mention or tag them with, know this particular practice is using our thinking and our doing, or whatever. What's your kind of go-to, Lisa?

[00:11:20.910] - Lisa C. Qualls

Well, writing. Well, two things, actually. Definitely writing, which is, I think, a lot of why I wrote my blog way back in the early days. I was trying to work out what on earth had happened to me and how I'd been changed and what was happening in my family. And of course, I was learning a lot, and it helped me to find some purpose and meaning in what we were going through. By thinking, well, I can help other people with what I'm learning. So the public writing helped me process a lot of my grief. Strangely, with all the writing I've done over the years, I'm really not a journaler. I have to have purpose in the writing, and so writing for other people, I think helped me a lot in those early years of trying to make sense of what I was experiencing in terms of the losses and changes in my family. And I think writing continues to be one of my best tools. And another one is just talking with people like people who actually care, people who care about me and or cared about my child, or people that will listen with empathy. Probably those are my two of my biggest ones. How about you?

[00:12:47.190] - Melissa Corkum

Many parents who deal with big behaviors are looking for practical solutions and may also be struggling with blocked care. Private coaching or group programs that require regular Zoom meetings place even more burden on your already busy lives.

[00:13:01.210] - Lisa C. Qualls

We've created a group coaching program that fits your busy schedule, goes where you go, and provides true transformation. Reclaim Compassion is like having experienced coaches and a support group in your back pocket, accessible from a computer or mobile device when you need it and wherever you are. We provide a clear roadmap for transformation for families struggling with challenging behavior and possibly blocked care.

[00:13:27.410] - Melissa Corkum

In our program, you'll reclaim compassion for yourself, your child, and hope for your family. It's never too late to begin your family's transformation journey. For more information or to sign up, go to [reclaimcompassion.com](https://reclaimcompassion.com).

[00:13:43.110] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I was going to say as you were talking about writing, I was like, I think my version of that is verbal processing with somebody else. And obviously writing and talking are both thinking things. And I think there is something. I mean, I love typing and all the things, but I think there was also a powerful connection when we get to write, even if you do curse it. I think there's something in the body practice of writing as well. I think the embodiment of being near a safe person while you're doing this verbal processing, it's co-regulating. It's really important, especially when you are doing it with someone who can reflect back to you and validate your experience. I think that's really big. Outside of those two things, I am really a big fan of body work type things. So taking a walk in nature I think is really helpful. Especially I don't love solitude all of the time. I've come to appreciate it more and more now that we parent so many kids and I'm very rarely alone. So I think that solitude in nature is really helpful. Combining lots of those things, getting a talk in while walking in nature is like super good. And then I have some really specific things too, like Trauma Release Exercise, which we've talked about here on the podcast. I think when I don't know, I can't process. I'm not even sure what's wrong. I just know I don't feel good in my body. I have a couple of body things that I know can just regulate my body. And

a lot of times that helps me get to a point where I can then go back and logically process what was going on. But for a lot of times, it starts with just the obedience of, like, do something that you know is going to regulate your body and deal with the rest later.

[00:15:43.790] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah. Movement, walking in particular, just that movement, it helps me release emotion. It calms my nervous system so much, especially out in nature. Like, if I get on my treadmill in my garage, it does not the same as if I'm walking the trails near my house or the country road behind my house. That is a very different experience. However, if that's all you've got, still, movement, even on a treadmill or something like that, is still helpful for calming the nervous system. But, yeah, for me, getting out and walking, walking and talking with a friend or with Russ is really good. We just went through a loss in our family where my niece lost her husband. And one of the things she did, and this is more in the doing category, is that when he died, one of the nurses at the hospital gave her something, and I don't know exactly what it was, but something kind of lovely, like a card that had his heartbeat on it. And she took that and she had it tattooed on the inside of her wrist because that made her feel close to him.

[00:16:58.470] - Lisa C. Qualls

For those of you who don't know me, haven't known me a long time, we lost our daughter Kalkidan when she was 13 in a car accident. And so I feel like I've been learning about grief for a really long time. It was actually nine years ago, which I cannot even believe at this point. Well, one of my daughters got a tattoo, and what she did was she had a little video clip of Kalkidon the very first time she saw snow. Somehow somebody had recorded it, and she has this hilarious laughter. The video is so funny. And so my daughter Claire took the audio file of her laughter and she had that tattooed on her ribs, kind of near her heart. So I think there's something really symbolic for a lot of people to mark something permanent, to say, this person forever changed me, and I want something on the outside of my body to reflect that I was forever, impermanently changed by my love for this person that I've lost. So to me, that's how I interpret tattoos, to represent someone that we've lost who we've loved. Did your family, did anybody do a tattoo after your dad died?

[00:18:15.780] - Melissa Corkum

No, not that I know of.

[00:18:17.980] - Lisa C. Qualls

Okay.

[00:18:18.660] - Melissa Corkum

I know we lost a really close friend a couple of months ago, and I don't know how they were able to think of this in the moment because it was a little unexpected, but they were able to capture her fingerprints. And so her husband has a dog tag with her ring finger where she wore her wedding band. It's like one of those kind of metal engravings. So her fingerprints kind of like engraved, etched into this metal. She had a son as well, so both her husband and her son had these fingerprint dog tags made. And then her daughter, our friend, really loved hummingbirds. So she was able to get, like, a piece of jewelry that kind of embodied hummingbirds. Mia has done artwork. She does custom pressed flower art. And so she has done the flowers from the memorial service or the funeral, has created wall hangings or jewelry from pressed flowers. The tattoo thing. I have a friend who, we know emotional pain and physical pain are closely related. And so when she. Some of us have a harder time accessing feelings and emotion than others. And so when she was struggling with something that was really big in her life, that was causing a lot of emotional pain or maybe should have, and she recognized that, but didn't know how to really access those feelings, then she had a large tattoo that she was kind of having worked on in sessions. And so she would go get another piece of that tattoo done because she didn't know what to do or how to access the emotional pain. So she would go have the tattoo worked on to be able to access the physical pain.

[00:20:06.690] - Lisa C. Qualls

So when we lost Kalkidan, it happened right after Christmas. It was during Christmas break, and so my girls had to go back to school afterward. And of course, Anna Rose was in high school. And of

course, the kids in school did not know what to say, so most of them did not look at her, did not say anything. And she felt like on the outside, she was having to hold it together, but on the inside, she just felt like she wanted to scream and cry. And she came home from school and she said, mom, I've decided I want to shave my head. And I was like, why do you want to shave your head? And I understood it as a means of lament. I understood that we hear about tearing your clothes, things like that. But when I asked her why, she said, because I need my outsides to match my insides. I need how I'm looking on the outside to match this deep anguish I feel on the inside. Now, in the end, she didn't end up shaving her head. And I have to confess, I kind of discouraged her from doing it. Knowing everything I know now, I would probably have said, do it. If that's what you need to do, do it. But I was trying to be protective of her. But we did really talk about, okay, well, what could you have on your body to represent the loss that you've experienced? So I think this urge to mark yourself, to shave your head, to get a tattoo, even like, to wear a piece of jewelry. I had some jewelry that I wore after we lost Kalkidan. And just putting that on every day was helpful to me.

[00:21:51.250] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. You know, I think the other things we hear from a lot of people, I feel so guilty or so ashamed that I'm feeling x, y, or z around this part of my life that's changed. Like, fill in the blanks. I think part of this process is kind of getting curious with those things and not feeling so guilty or ashamed of them. Like it's okay to feel sad or angry or resentful at some change in your family. I think if we don't recognize that and understand where it's coming from and get a little curious about it, then the more we try to suppress it, the bigger and out of control and more controlling in our lives it becomes. But if we can say, man, I wonder why it was so hard for me to say goodbye to family dinners. Or I wonder why it's been so hard to send kids to school instead of continuing to homeschool them. Or I wonder why it's so hard, this change or that change. Why is this gap between this expectation and reality so hard for me? And give yourself permission to feel and think whatever that thing is, write it down, then burn it up or whatever. But I think exploring those things gives us a way. It is allowing the feeling, but it's also using a little bit of thinking around it to figure out what is there to process what is underneath some of this. I think sometimes we're so guilty about the feeling of resentment or the feeling of anger, we like, oh, don't want to do that, that's not good. And then we don't give ourselves to... So then we get knocked over by the wave. We don't have a chance to actually process it.

[00:23:53.550] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, I think having somebody to ask us the good questions is really helpful. I remember when I wrote on my blog about realizing that I couldn't continue homeschooling all my kids, and I wrote about my sadness about that, and I tried to express it. I thought I expressed it really well, but of course, I was in my own head expressing it. And I got some feedback from some people saying, well, I mean, do you really think you're the only one who can teach your children? Do you really think school is that bad? And that feedback was helpful because that wasn't at all what I was feeling and not at all what I intended to express. So then I was able to write about that and say, no. The thing about the loss of homeschooling for me was it was the way we lived. It was the way we moved through the world as a family.

[00:24:44.700] - Melissa Corkum

It was tied to your identity, almost your family's identity.

[00:24:48.230] - Lisa C. Qualls

It was our family's identity. It was like our lifestyle. And lifestyle sounds so, like, fluffy, but I mean, really, it was the way we lived our life, and we built our life as a family around one of these core things, which was homeschooling. So the sadness, the loss was not about, oh, I don't think my kids are going to get the education I want them to have. That wasn't it. It was, oh, wow, we're no longer the family. This is how it felt. We are no longer the family we were. We are no longer the homeschooling family. We have to become something new. And I think that was a lot of my experience was processing the we're not who we used to be, and can the something new be beautiful, or is it just hard? I had to work it out with God a lot, too. I really did. Still working it out with God sometimes.

[00:25:47.470] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, for sure. So we hope that there are some ideas in here that help you think a little differently

about what is grief? What does it look like to lament and mourn? We have a free Facebook group, and that's a great place to kind of crowdsource some. Like, what are some other ideas that have helped you process the gap, especially if you're struggling with blocked care. So we would encourage you to head over there, [adoptionwise.org/Facebook](https://www.adoptionwise.org/Facebook), because there are endless amounts of ideas. We're out of time for what we can share here, but hopefully it just sparks some conversation. Or maybe you can get together with another parent and think, okay, this is a jumping off place, but based on our experience, our situation, our family culture, what would work for us?

[00:26:47.490] - Lisa C. Qualls

Most of all, we want you to know that if you are experiencing sadness, anger, feelings about the losses and the changes, it's really okay, and it's not a bad thing. The most important thing is to find a way to work through it.

[00:27:02.860] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I'll also say we didn't talk at all about this, but I know the question will come. I think it's already probably come. All of these things that we've talked about can be adapted for kids, our kids, as they're potentially processing the same types of grief and loss, or mourning the loss of a brother or sister who had to move to a different placement or reunify. So again, thinking about what are ways to help their minds process the grief? What are ways to get their bodies involved, to do something meaningful to market, you can just adjust some of those ideas to little people, younger people.

[00:27:47.350] - Melissa Corkum

For links to the other episodes we mentioned in this podcast or to join the Facebook group, check out the show notes at [adoptionwise.org/240](https://www.adoptionwise.org/240). Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our Instagram handle is @adoptionwise. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community at [adoptionwise.org/Facebook](https://www.adoptionwise.org/Facebook).

[00:28:12.740] - Lisa C. Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. Remember you're a good parent doing good work.

[00:28:22.610] - Melissa Corkum

Music for the podcast is composed by Oleksandr Oleksandrov.