

Well

PERSONAL HEALTH | JANE E. BRODY

Coloring Your Way Through Grief

A grief counselor developed an adult coloring book to help people cope with loss.

THERE IS NO disputing the adage that “into each life, a little rain must fall,” and the occasional need for a protective umbrella, but what do you do when the shower becomes a downpour that doesn’t seem to quit?

One shattering loss can be enough to derail a person for years, even for life. But tragedy seems to stalk some people, and it is reasonable to wonder how one goes on in the face of repeated painful losses.

Deborah S. Derman, a professional grief counselor in suburban Philadelphia, has clearly suffered more than her fair share. “The field of grief counseling sort of found me,” she said, “because I had such a long history of loss.”

She weathered her first devastating loss at age 27, when the boyfriend she had broken up with retrieved the vacuum cleaner she had borrowed, attached the vacuum’s hose to the exhaust pipe of his car and killed himself.

Fast-forward a decade: Now happily married and mother of a toddler, she was waiting at the airport for her parents to arrive when the private plane her father was piloting dropped from the sky and crashed in front of her, killing all four passengers aboard.

Four years later, while playing rugby, her husband died of a heart attack, leaving her a widow at age 39 with two young children and a third on the way. Then a few years later, she learned she had a rare form of breast cancer. “That’s when I felt I had a target on my back,” she told me. Her biggest fear, she said, was that if she died, her children would be orphans.

But she didn’t die. Instead, she managed to bring up the three children, marry again “a wonderful man” who adopted them, and earn a Ph.D., writing her dissertation on grief and attachment in young widowhood.

Dr. Derman has since been in private practice as a grief counselor, able to bring far more than professional training to the therapy she provides for those who have suffered losses. She has helped families on

Staten Island who lost loved ones on 9/11, counseled breast cancer survivors, and conducted support groups for people weathering all manner of loss and grief.

She knows firsthand how important it is to say the right thing early on to someone who is hurting and vulnerable. When her former boyfriend committed suicide, “I felt like I was an accessory to his death,” she told me. Her mother helped to assuage her guilt by reassuring her that “this is not your fault.”

But when her husband died, her parents were no longer around with wise words. She recalled, “I was in so much pain, the grief felt physical. I was unable to concentrate on anything — I couldn’t read a book or hold a conversation. The only thing I could read were self-help books on loss and grief, looking for answers to how to get through the anguish I felt. I was so isolated and frustrated. No one knew what to do with me.”

She couldn’t even feel happy when two months after her husband died, she was accepted into a doctoral program in psychoeducational processes at Temple University. Advised to speak to another young widow, she was beaten down even further when the woman said, “Debby, do you know how you feel that your life is over? Well, it is,” which she said prompted her to take to her bed.

But she decided to get up and try a different approach after her sister said: “One day, Debby, this will be your past,” which made her realize that she might indeed have a future. She said she switched her field of study to grief and loss “because I never wanted another widow to feel as isolated as I did. I wanted to know how a person heals, so I can help others heal.”

“Healing is a lifelong process, and elements of grief can occur at any time,” she said. “I’ve been widowed now for 24 years, but when my son got into medical school, I cried because my husband and parents weren’t there to see it. My daughter is about to graduate from college, and we will both cry because she never even knew her father. Her grief is different, but it’s not absent.”

Now Dr. Derman has produced an intriguing new tool — an adult coloring book intended to help others “get through tough times.” Called “Colors of Loss and Healing,”

the book consists of 35 pages of lavish illustrations to color, each relating to a word or phrase, like “one day at a time,” “bitter and sweet” and “resilience,” meant to evoke thoughts and feelings that can help to promote healing.

Opposite each illustration, designed by Lisa Powell Braun, is a blank page with the heading “My palette . . . my words . . . my thoughts,” to prompt people to write down the feelings the words and phrases in the illustration evoke.

Dr. Derman said she had kept a journal after her husband died. “When you have to write something down, it really clarifies your thoughts and helps you know how to proceed,” she said. “In a journal, you can say whatever you want. No one else has to read it — it’s private.”

While art therapy has been used for decades to help people express what they can’t put into words, filling in the spaces of a coloring book has a different kind of benefit: enabling people to relax and be more focused. Marygrace Berberian, a clinical assistant professor in art therapy at New York University, said, “Research has shown that art making can have a profound impact on a person’s physical and psychological well-being. And coloring within an outlined structure can help to contain and organize feelings of distress and helplessness.”

In 2005, Nancy A. Curry and Tim Kasser of Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., reported in *Art Therapy, Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, that coloring a mandala reduced anxiety in undergraduate students, a finding that has since been replicated and expanded. Today, there are adult coloring books to help alleviate stress and anxiety, release anger, induce calm and enhance mindfulness.

Dr. Derman’s idea for her book was prompted by a coloring book she received for her birthday. “I colored one space, then another, and another, and realized this is how I proceeded through my life — one small step at a time. This is a good paradigm for how a person gets through loss, one day at a time. After my husband died, I didn’t think I could make it through a whole day. I looked at my watch — it said 10 a.m. — and made a deal with myself to make it to 11, then 12, then half a day.”



LISA POWELL BRAUN

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GRIEF COUNSELOR

The book is meant to help people with losses of every kind, including illness, divorce, financial ruin, post-addiction — anything that might force people to redefine their identity.

Dr. Derman emphasized, “It’s not a recipe book. It doesn’t dictate how people should feel. We all go through grief and loss in very unique ways. One thing I’ve learned from my life and the hundreds of people I’ve counseled: Don’t try to pretend it didn’t happen and walk away fast.”

RAW DATA | GEORGE JOHNSON

A Carnival of Consciousness

Mysteries of the mind are the topic, with Deepak Chopra and philosophy set to music.

AT THE SCIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS conference last month in Tucson, I was faced with a quandary: Which of eight simultaneous sessions should I attend?

In one room, scientists and philosophers were discussing the physiology of brain cells and how they might generate the thinking mind. In another, the subject was free will — real or an illusion?

Next door was a session on panpsychism, the controversial (to say the least) idea that everything — animal, vegetable and mineral — is imbued at its subatomic roots with mindlike qualities. Running on parallel tracks were sessions titled “Phenomenal Consciousness,” the “Neural Correlates of Consciousness” and the “Extended Mind.”

For much of the 20th century, the science of consciousness was widely dismissed as an impenetrable mystery, a morass of a problem that could be safely pursued only by older professors as they thought deep thoughts in their endowed chairs. Beginning in the 1990s, the field slowly became more respectable.

There is, after all, a gaping hole in science. The human mind has plumbed the universe, concluding that it is precisely 13.8 billion years old. With particle accelerators like the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, scientists have discovered the vanishingly tiny particles, like the Higgs boson, that underpin reality.

But there is no scientific explanation for consciousness — without which none of these discoveries could have been made.

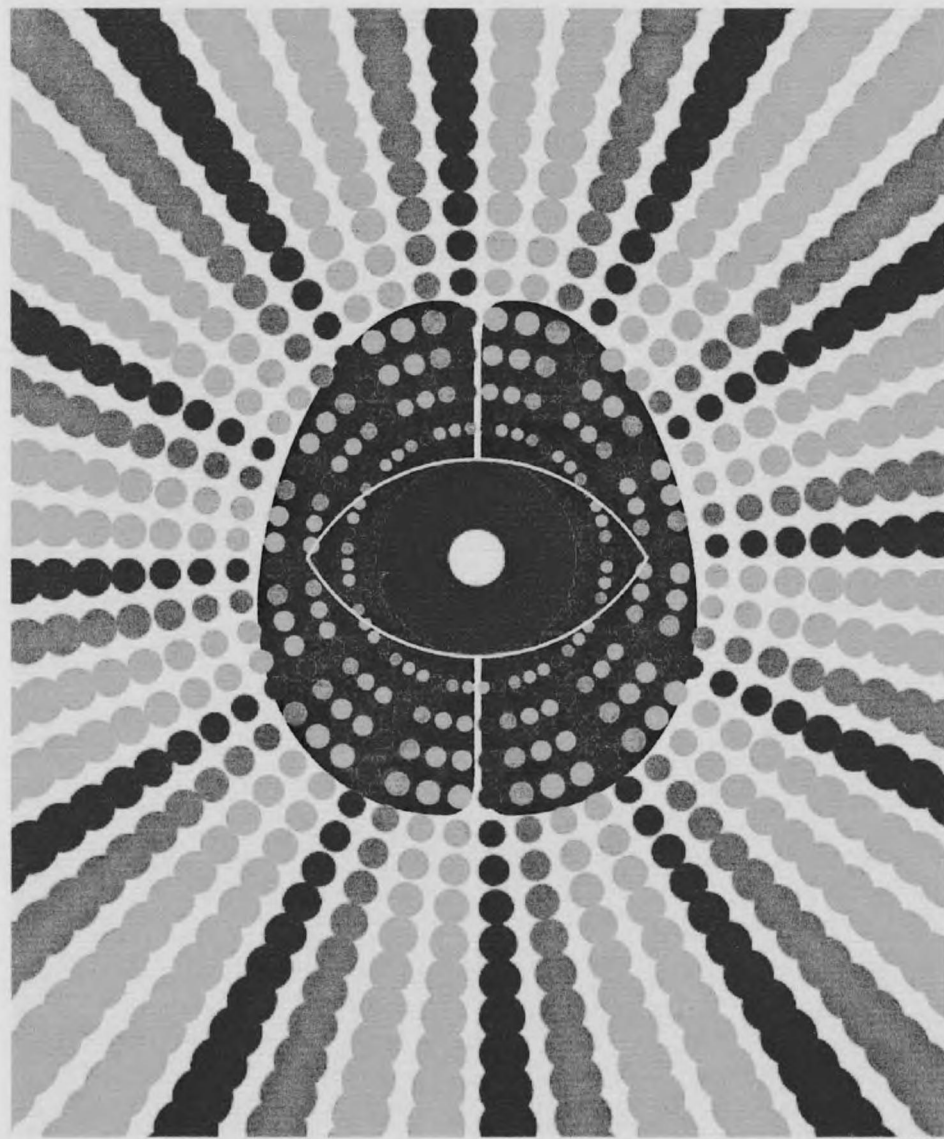
Faced with this vacuum, hundreds of people gathered in Tucson where wild speculations and carnivalesque pseudoscience were juxtaposed with sober sessions like “Agency and Mental Causation” and data-filled talks about probing conscious brain states with PET scans and EEGs.

Because I couldn’t clone my brain, I found myself sitting, late one afternoon, in “Vibrations, Scale, and Topology,” where a musician from Tulsa, Okla., who called himself Timbre Wolf, was strumming a guitar and singing the “Bing” song.

“Bing” is a word that Stuart Hameroff, the University of Arizona professor who organizes these mindfests, uses to describe the moment when the spark of consciousness lights up the brain. Imagine a mad scientist hooking together neurons one by one until suddenly they reach a threshold of complexity and — bing — consciousness emerges.

We all know the feeling, one that science has been powerless to explain. The audience seemed familiar enough with the words, and so they sang along in 4/4 time.

Before launching into the tune, Timbre Wolf played a recording of an eerie composition called “Brain Dance,” derived from vibrations generated by tiny molecular structures called microtubules, which are part of the scaffolding of brain cells. The music, to his ear, was reminiscent of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Cuban rumba, Gustav Holt’s



JOHN HERSEY

“The Planets,” and the visual rhythms of strange mathematical objects called Penrose tiles.

All of this, he suspected, had something to do with quantum mechanics and consciousness, an idea that Dr. Hameroff has long been pursuing.

There even seemed to be undertones of the Devil’s Triad, a discordant combo of notes known since medieval times that forms the opening riff of “Purple Haze.”

That all made for good metaphysical fun. More disconcerting was the starring role given to the New Age entrepreneur Deepak Chopra. Dr. Chopra believes that human consciousness (through epigenetic feed-

A sometimes quixotic search for the spark that science cannot yet explain.

back) directs the unfolding of human evolution.

No one seemed to object as Dr. Chopra, whose Chopra Foundation was one of the sponsors, shared the stage with prominent professors who engaged with his ideas as if he were another esteemed colleague.

But that’s how it is at Tucson. There were talks on psychic phenomena and retrocausality, the hypothesis that the future can affect the past through quantum emanations. Presentations that didn’t make it into prime time were laid out in colorful posters attached to rows of bulletin boards: “What Might Cause a Star’s Consciousness?” “The X-Structure: The Basic Nature

of Life and Existence.”

Also included in the lineup were presentations hypothesizing that dark energy could explain consciousness and that homeopathic medicine might work through nanoparticles and quantum entanglement — as if homeopathy worked at all.

Beyond all of that, there was still plenty of serious theorizing. For a rapid-fire summary, you can hear Baba Brinkman, a rap artist who provided a daily report on the meeting, which he called “half science lab and half Burning Man.”

Late one night at an event called Club Consciousness, Mr. Brinkman joined Dorian Electra and the Electrodes as the band regaled the crowd with songs like “Mind-Body Problem” (a reference to the age-old question of how something as seemingly ethereal as consciousness emerges from the brain) and “Brain in a Vat” (the idea that for all you know, you’re just a brain kept alive in a laboratory flask and what seems like reality is an illusion).

“Chinese Room” was about a thought experiment that the philosopher John Searle claims to be a refutation of the possibility of artificial intelligence. But the big hit of the night, “Sensual,” which has been made into a rock video, was about a famous intellectual conflict that has raged since the 17th century when John Locke went to the mat with René Descartes over the source and nature of human knowledge.

For Locke and the empiricists, the mind begins as a blank slate (a tabula rasa) and truth comes to us through our senses. But Descartes and the rationalists insisted that some knowledge was innate, prefigured into the mind of every newborn child.

Ms. Electra opened the debate.

*There ain’t nothin in the mind which ain’t been in the sensations
Let me take you on a sensation vacation
Through sense experience, the mind is created
As well as rules to process raw sense data.*

Siding with Descartes, Mr. Brinkman offered the rebuttal.

*Hey, rationalism is on top
‘Cause lately empiricism has gone pop.
There ain’t no tabula rasa, John Locke,
Better check your senses against logic nonstop.*

Ultimately they concluded, as many philosophers have, that the truth lies somewhere in between.

In the past, these conferences were called “Toward a Science of Consciousness.” Recently, the organizers dropped the first two words of the title, as if the fog was finally lifting. But as I left the auditorium, I wondered if their confidence was premature.

In even the wildest presentations, one could sense a longing for an answer to the question of consciousness, a fuller accounting of what we are and how we fit into the cosmic machinery. For all of the effort, the goal of providing a compelling explanation — one so clear it would make your head go bing — seemed as remote as ever.

May 17, 2016