

**Audio Title: Gina Moffa - The Link Between Trauma and Grief, and The Importance of Language**

**Audio Duration: 0:28:17**

**Number of Speakers: 3**

### **Transcript**

**Rebekah Borucki:** Hello, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot. I got you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's the stoop.

Amanda, Amanda Lytle, she will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop, that's the name of the spot. We got the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, the best kinds of folks.

Oh, me? I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is our podcast. I am so glad you're here.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

**Amanda Lytle:** Thanks, Bex. Hey friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Gina Moffa. Gina is a licensed clinical social worker in New York. She specializes in grief and trauma work and has recently started her latest endeavor as a published author writing about a modern approach to grief and grieving in the world today.

In this conversation, Gina shares about her transition into grief and trauma therapy and the differences between big T and little T trauma. Gina tells us about how trauma and grief are linked and about how this has been especially apparent since the onset of the global pandemic.

She talks about the importance of using proper language around grief with children and why bringing caregivers, parents and teachers into the conversation is so important. We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question. So what are you reading these days?

**Gina Moffa:** I am reading a book by Mark Wolynn. It's blowing me away. It's on trauma. It's called "It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle". It's really amazing. It talks a lot about epigenetic trauma and really helps people to understand how trauma really does sort of trickle down and, you know, things that you would sort of inherit along the way. It's a really groundbreaking book. I'm loving it.

**Amanda Lytle:** I can imagine just even in my own life, in my own journey here is that the more you deep dive into that stuff, the more compassion you have for self. But I think in your own practice as an LCSW, that would be so cool to share with your clients.

**Gina Moffa:** Absolutely. I've already – I've shared it so many times. I've shared it also in my Instagram stories. As a trauma therapist, I think what I say all the time is the more we understand something, the more we can heal it, the more we can change the patterns and the more we can be more empowered in our own moving forward in progress. This is one of those books honestly that I think could be a really great guide in that journey. So I'm sharing it far and wide.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah, thank you for that. I have a question about your journey into trauma therapy.

**Gina Moffa:** Sure.

**Amanda Lytle:** How did that start?

**Gina Moffa:** It sort of fell into me, which is not me falling into it. But I thought I was going to be an immigration and humanitarian lawyer and wound up sort of doing a lot of work in that realm. I went to East Africa on a volunteer trip thinking I was going to start doing work with again humanitarian law when I came back and found that I was more interested in the human behavior part, the human condition and resilience and shortly after that as I was sort of coming back into New York and all of that, September 11<sup>th</sup> happened, and I realized that it was the first time we really talked about trauma and PTSD.

PTSD wasn't even a known thing. It wasn't part of our vocabulary as Americans. It wasn't part of the West. It was something that was equated with the Vietnam War and post-war syndrome. So now it was something that was becoming so mainstream, and people were having symptoms that they didn't understand. They were reliving. They were ruminating. They were having nightmares. It's affecting people physically and to me, it was the beginning of really understanding what trauma was and how it affected people who had never dealt with work or natural disasters potentially before.

So I went after my master's, got training specifically in trauma studies at NYU. At the time, it was at the school of medicine and started doing my trauma work and that sort of went internationally and worked with Holocaust survivors at an institution here in New York City and just really kept going from there until I became a private practitioner with trauma. So it's a long journey. It has been 17 years and it has changed a little bit along the way from working with international trauma and survivors of torture, survivors of war to really working with the individual and little T traumas, neglect, abuse, and it has really shaped – it has shaped me as a human, and it has shaped me as a clinician along the way. Really humbling.

**Amanda Lytle:** You just said little T trauma, and this is also something that I've been trying to talk out with other people in my life. Can you give us your definition of little T trauma?

**Gina Moffa:** Yeah, absolutely. They're highly upsetting, distressing events in somebody's life that are on a personal level but don't fall into the category of like natural disasters. It could be kind of a non-life-threatening event, whether it's the death of someone you know, it's neglect. It's loss of significant relationships, the break-up, loss of jobs.

It's anything that is highly distressing to you. It could be long term. It could be a one-time thing. Like I was saying, I have somebody that I'm seeing who lost a pet recently who's really, really struggling with it, a long-term pet and that is a trauma.

It's not a big life-threatening trauma but it is a trauma that definitely distresses someone enough to interfere with their daily functioning. Does that make any sense?

**Amanda Lytle:** Definitely. No, thank you for sharing that. I think that it's also a word that even though it seems to be everywhere right now, I love that collectively everyone is starting to understand it at their own pace and then that is a word that is brought into everyday conversations when people are talking about their own experiences or going to therapy, what they were navigating, what they're working through individually, in a partnership or a relationship of any sort.

**Gina Moffa:** Absolutely.

**Amanda Lytle:** Also maybe think of the work that you're doing now in grief. So you work as a grief therapist too. So tell me about how the trauma has really navigated into the grief side of things.

**Gina Moffa:** Sure. It has always been a little bit controversial. I have also felt like more than not, grief and trauma have been linked, really, really deeply linked. Now I know that 100 percent when you go through a trauma, you go through grief because there's a before and there's an after.

Some of the time and now more often than ever before, there is trauma and grief especially surrounding COVID, and this has been really what has changed so much within grief work itself is that you're really doing a lot of trauma work.

This pandemic for example came upon us overnight basically in the Western world. You know, overnight we closed our businesses, took our children out of school. Everything shut down and everybody was living in a state of fear because there was this invisible illness, this invisible killer that we didn't understand, and it wasn't really clear on who it was taking, and I know you and I had a podcast episode around that time where it was really, really a confusing, scary, and traumatic time for so many people. We have seen statistically that 40,000 kids have lost a parent or a caregiver, and we also know now that when people – people that have died during the pandemic, there are nine people grieving that person.

So if you think about it, now there are millions of people grieving right now and there's very few resources for them and it's still stigmatized in the world. But when you lose somebody to something you don't understand, when you lose somebody to something quickly, it just creates

the sense of unfinished business, confusion. There's so much left unsaid, so much left undone with that person and potentially the way it happened could be really traumatizing and not being able to say good-bye and not being able to have memorials or funerals so much the time last year.

I mean you need these rituals, these death rituals in order to even have some semblance of closure but we haven't had that and without that, it continues to feel really traumatizing for so many people, especially the people I'm working with now.

**Amanda Lytle:** Can you lace this into a really beautiful project that you're working on right now, which is a book, and tell me all about what you are working to provide the world with?

**Gina Moffa:** I am working on a book, and it is ever evolving but it is basically a book that is like not your grandmother's grief. You know, like I was just saying, I have this full practice. I have a waiting list. A lot of the people coming to see me are millennial Gen-Zers and most of them if not all are experiencing grief for the very first time and I found myself looking for some sort of book out there that could help supplement the work, right? Because once a week therapy for somebody who is falling apart and really traumatized by their grief, it just doesn't feel like enough.

But I couldn't find a book that wasn't written by like a middle-aged or older man outside of Megan Devine's "It's OK That You're Not OK," but something that would provide a road map for a younger generation to really speak to their modern lifestyle, their modern personality, to look at kind of what are the things that come up in grief when you are a Gen-Zer. How do we date while we're grieving? How do we not gaslight ourselves? How do we not look through rose-colored glasses and like look at the relationship that is potentially unfinished but maybe it wasn't so great? Can we look at grief and the person we've lost with a real lens and also looking at all the other losses that have come?

You know, so many people couldn't go to their prom, couldn't go to their graduation, couldn't even go to college because their college was closed. You know, had all of these milestones over Zoom or couldn't do any of it at all because they have lost their livelihood or a job or their identity has total shifted.

So much out there on grief just wasn't cutting it and so I decided, "Why not just write it?" and I thought to myself kind of like who the hell are you to do this? But then I thought to myself like, "Why not? Why not me?" I do this every day. I'm in the trenches every day with people really struggling with this and who better than somebody who's in the trenches.

Thankfully I got some more of my confidence from working with Rebekah Borucki, our Rebekah Borucki, BexLife, our wonderful, little, beautiful book which I'm sure we will talk about, "Zara's Big Messy Goodbye," and really it gave me the confidence to think, you know, I could have a voice in this field. It means so much to me to help people in the most vulnerable time of their lives and there just is not a lot out there in terms of resources for people for support and I mean the media is not really talking about grief much even though it is the biggest mental

health burden people are carrying right now and will continue to carry for the next decade at the very least.

So why are we not helping the younger generation by giving them a roadmap to healing, to moving forward with their grief, to figuring out who they are now after all of this subsidies and settles?

It just feels so important to me and so I'm really incredibly grateful to have been signed with Folio Literary Management just a few weeks ago to start the process of getting the message out and a book and that hopefully is a real companion for people suffering.

**Amanda Lytle:** Do you have a title for it?

**Gina Moffa:** I do but I think it's going to change.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah.

**Gina Moffa:** Right now it's called "The G Word: A Modern Manual To Help In The Grieving Process". The tagline is not exactly correct. But I had it kind of a play, like the G word, because so many of my clients come in and they're like "No one wants to talk about grief." Grief is like the C word, right?

I remember when my mom was diagnosed with cancer and she was like, "No one wants to talk to me anymore. They're nervous because it's cancer. It's so stigmatized," and as stigmatized as cancer is, in a lot of ways grief is. So it was sort of a play on – we don't talk about this. We don't talk about grief because we are a society of winners and keepers.

When you lose, that just doesn't jive with our society. So it's sort of a play on that. I don't know if that will be actually the name of the book once it comes out, but it was sort of something that felt to me edgy enough and sarcastic enough which is my personality to say like, look guys, this is like what you call it. Now we've got to really talk about it.

**Rebekah Borucki:** Hey friend, we are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

**Amanda Lytle:** And you also made a really great point, something super important about the fact that grief isn't solely related to death. So can you elaborate a bit on like grief is everywhere but a little bit more about how we can make it or bring it more into awareness?

**Gina Moffa:** Yeah. I mean every – if you look at your own life, look at the stages of your life, you've said goodbye to so many things. Things have been hard. Whether or not you wanted to or not, you've grieved different parts of your life. But if we are looking back, it's a breakup, a friendship ending, losing a job, changing careers, challenging transitions that have felt like you haven't had a choice but to go in a different direction. Any kind of ending or loss that is something meaningful to you elicits grief and a sense of grief. And it could be good stuff too,

right? Positive challenges don't just bring positive feelings. You still can feel really bittersweet, and it could be grief.

But COVID was one of the things that really brought into awareness the idea that we could grieve the invisible. We were grieving human affection for a year and a half and grieving real human connection. We were grieving the sense of safety and predictability. We didn't have any of this. And to be honest, we still don't really have it. COVID continues to be something that's on the forefront of my mind every day with all the breakthrough cases and who do we trust and how do we trust them. And there's a lot of grief there in terms of feeling like at some point we had leadership potentially that we could trust whether that's the scientists, whether that's the government or whatever. In a lot of ways, we had struggled with that as a society in many other ways.

Yeah, I think you grieve kind of that sense of like having people look out for you and care about your safety. And this is not a unique feeling for many people in the population anyway. Yeah.

**Amanda Lytle:** I wanted to come back to *Zara's Big Messy Goodbye* and elaborate a bit more on how that book came to be but also about how and why it's so important for a younger generation.

**Gina Moffa:** Sure. *Zara's Big Messy Goodbye* came about when I was in Rebekah's book coaching program, group program. We had talked ad nauseam about my wanting to write a book on grief and I was still sort of in the beginning stages of trying to figure out what that looked like. And she and I were starting to become friends and friendly and she reached out to me and said she wanted to write a book on grief and for the Zara series.

And so, I jumped on that a hundred percent. I couldn't wait to talk more about it because it felt so important to me that we bring children into the conversation and that we would bring caregivers, teachers, and parents into the conversation and how to talk to kids about grief and how to help them through the actual really pragmatic stages of grief whether it's funeral, picking out clothes for a funeral, what your parents or the people around you who are grieving would be like, what happens at funerals, what death is really like, and using the proper language so that kids don't get anxiety from it.

So when we started talking about it, I was like, "Yes, when do we start?" And it was – and I've talked about this on another podcast with you both that it was really such a gift for me. I couldn't wait to do it. I was like – I would wake up in the morning thinking about Zara and how we were going to help her navigate the loss of her Aunt Molly. Yeah. And so it really was a beautiful collaboration with us and kind of drawing in on our own separate experiences of grief. We both lost parents and so, it was how do we bring in that feeling too, which is totally different experiences, but how do we bring those different experiences into Zara's experience too.

So yeah, that's kind of how it started, how it went, and then it sort of worked out that Zara had her own story to tell.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah. It's such a beautiful book. I have it and my nieces now have it too because Bex sent me a bunch of books from the Zara series and some other things that she has done. And I was able to share those with my nieces and it was such a beautiful experience.

**Gina Moffa:** Oh, I love that. And I'm always really curious on what kids think about it because obviously as an adult and a therapist, I'm going to analyze the hell out of it. And the back of the book, the last five pages that I wrote a note and a letter to teachers and caregivers and parents feels like almost more important in some ways because they get to stir the narrative for their child, for the classroom, and really help children to say like – to normalize grief so that we are not just saying like, “Oh, yeah, something happened. They went away.”

**Amanda Lytle:** Right.

**Gina Moffa:** What do you mean they went away? What does it mean? Does a kid know what passed away means? I didn't know what passed away meant when I was a kid. I needed really concrete language. When somebody told me that my Uncle went away, it was really terrifying for me because it was like, “Well, what do you mean he has gone away, and he is not coming back? Can that happen to you? Will you go away and not come back? What do you mean he is up in the sky?”

It was so confusing to me as a kid. And the one thing that I said is like if I ever do this or if I ever have to talk to my children about death and all that, I'm going to be as available as possible because you don't want to stigmatize it. You want to show and model good mental health behavior which is I have feelings because this person was sick and died but I'm OK, right? I'm going to be OK. I'm still here. I'm healthy.

But kids need to know. You need to model what grief looks like for them so that they feel safe enough to express their feelings. If they don't feel safe enough to express their feelings because you are not expressing yours or you are making it really confusing, they never learn then how to express feelings. And part of the problem in the world.

**Amanda Lytle:** Oh, definitely. And that ties right back to what you are providing with the book that's in creation right now. I think that having that modern guide to grief and also self-compassion and just understanding that we are all grieving something at some point.

**Gina Moffa:** Yeah. I say this all the time like to live and move forward and progress is to grieve. That's all there is to it because no matter how we move forward, we are always leaving something behind. And it's just a matter of being conscious of that and honoring that process and taking in what matters and just staying connected. It's really – it is important.

**Amanda Lytle:** Back to your book too because I have one question because I know you and I have spoken about this is that when you jumped into a space of creativity and producing something that is kind of puts you in a vulnerable space, what are some of these limiting beliefs that have been coming up for you and how have you tackled those?

**Gina Moffa:** Oh, yeah. I'm still tackling them. I think when I first got the book idea, there was a part of me that was sort of in a dream land and hopeful, but I had a lot of fears that I wasn't good enough, that I wasn't connected enough, that I wasn't good enough writer, that people weren't going to be interested in the topic of grief because who really wants to look at mortality. And then when I was recently signed with Folio, I started to relive all of that anxiety, which is how do I prove myself, how do I live up now to the belief that they have in me and in this book, how do I continue to just work as hard as I can to be worthy of this beautiful triumph and gift that I'm being given to potentially have my book born into the world for people to have, which is the ultimate dream, right?

And I can't say it's like impostor's syndrome so much but like even therapists really struggle with feeling like enough and feeling worthy enough. And it's such an old story, right? It's so old like it's boring. I'm so bored by this limiting belief because it's not powerful, right? And the message of the book is powerful, which is we can rise up to meet these really painful, difficult feelings that we feel are going to swallow us whole. We can be stronger than the worst thing that ever happens to us. And I say this on a daily basis, and I believe it.

And so for me to say like, "Am I worthy enough to give this message to more people?" It's like, "Shut up, Gina. You are so boring. You are being given this opportunity. Step into the power that is the message of the book. It's not about you. The power is not in just you. The power is in the message of the book and may that be guided."

And so, I'm still working through that kind of right now with you here. But I feel mostly really grateful to be able to be honest about the process because it is not for the faint of heart, putting something out there in the world especially your words and something that you think you know really well. It's scary as hell but it's also the biggest honor and what a ride. And I'm just at the beginning of it so we will see how the package might end. It was much easier to write with Bex.

**Amanda Lytle:** Well, I can't wait to see what comes of this because I know as you've expressed that COVID has brought up a lot of grief in a variety of different ways for the entire world. And as we all navigate grief, this book is going to be such a gift.

**Gina Moffa:** Thank you for saying that. Thank you. Thank you. That is my biggest hope is that just – I work one-on-one with people. I'm working between 35 and 40 people a week, which is a lot. But I only have two hands. And so for me, this book is like giving – it's more hands out in the world just saying like, "You can get through this. You're not alone." It's like sitting across from me in my therapy room. I want to be real. I want the book to be a real experience, not just a book people are reading but that they feel like they're in a room with me being cared for. And however they can grasp that just feels the most important to me.

So that is my ultimate goal with this book is a new experience of healing in this particular realm because grief is really – it's a tricky little monster and it gets every part of you. And so much people don't understand is grief. And I think I said too earlier, if we don't understand something, how do we heal it? How do we move forward with it?

So hopefully, that's what this does. And it's really important to me just that.



**Amanda Lytle:** Well, thank you so much for the work you're doing because it's very special and it's very important.

**Gina Moffa:** Oh, Amanda, thank you so much for saying that. It has been quite a year and a half I'll tell you. COVID definitely opened up a lot of eyes. And I'm really grateful that people – I'm not grateful that people have been forced to get mental health care, but I am grateful that people are not alone in getting that mental health care and that finally people are able to reach out in some capacity to say like, "This is a lot. I'm drowning. Help."

**Amanda Lytle:** Right. Actually, that's a great point too because now I think that because these conversations about how we are navigating our own mental and emotional health and well-being is normalizing the conversation. And in the normalization, people are OK or feeling more equipped to ask for help and to seek it as needed.

**Gina Moffa:** Yeah. Yeah. And even though every therapist I know including myself is underwater and booked for years and years, it still – we still are – I don't want to say like, "No, I'm not taking anyone new," because I can't say no really all the time. But it's like what can I offer? What else can we offer? And I think that so many more people are figuring out ways to give more. There are new clinics opening up all over the place. It's just really wonderful to watch the government is giving grants for mental health care and new mental health facilities. So if we can keep that going, I have hope for us because we all need it.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah, we do. OK. If there was an account, a person, an organization, a disruptor, activist, or change agents that you could give a shout-out to, who would it be?

**Gina Moffa:** I would love to shout out an organization that I feel really close to these days. In fact, I'm doing a workshop with them this coming Friday, and it's called Diversability. Their IG is @diversability. It's founded by my dear friend, Tiffany Yu. And Diversability is an organization whose mission is really to increase intersectional disability representation. It is to bring disability and visible illness to the forefront and really create opportunities, not just opportunities but awareness and community and to show how diverse disability can be.

I'm really honored to be a part of their community myself and just love that they have events all the time. And so if you're somebody who is struggling with an invisible illness or disability of any kind, reach out to them. They're so inclusive, wonderful, easy to talk to, and they are just – Tiffany is amazing, so I want to give her a shout-out, Tiffany Yu.

**Amanda Lytle:** Amazing, Gina. Thank you so much for being on *The Book Stoop* podcast.

**Gina Moffa:** I am so honored to be a part of it. I give so much credit to you, Rebekah, all of Row House, Wheat Penny Press. It is just an honor to be a part of the family and I look forward to seeing all of the success for all of you.

**Amanda Lytle:** Thank you so much for being with us. We hope you loved the conversation, and we will be back again soon. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating

where you're able to do so. Writing a written review helps reach more listeners too. Check out all of the show notes for the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your friends. Talk soon.

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