



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Rebuilding After Loss – Stories of Resilience, Healing & Hope

Where do you gain the strength to rebuild after losing a loved one, a job or a way of life? Our 10th edition of Life Conversations forum featured stories of resilience in the face of life-altering loss. Through heartfelt testimonies, and reflections, the platform offered a space to appreciate each other's pain and celebrate the courage it takes to rebuild, grow, and thrive beyond adversity.

Powerful stories of grief and recovery unfolded, testimonies that bore witness to human fragility, but also to the resilience of humans. This was more than a gathering; it was a shared space for truth-telling, vulnerability, and collective healing.

Death of a loved one

Wanjiru Mureithi, Director at WINENJIRU Exclusives, who lost her 14-month-old daughter named “Muthoni”, shared her journey through grief. Muthoni's presence was still vivid in her memory as she explains that one day she was active, joyful and dancing to her favourite Sunday school song, “When I get to heaven, I gonna put on my shoes, I gonna walk all over God's heaven.”

“At the time, it was just a lullaby. In hindsight, it felt like a premonition. Muthoni's passing left a huge void deep in my heart,” recalls Wanjiru.

Yet Wanjiru's courage in telling her story, with deep emotions and vulnerability, was in itself a form of resilience against grief and despair.

Dr Beda Olabu, Faculty, AKU Medical College, East Africa recounted his childhood which was marked by the death of his three siblings while he was still in primary school. Later, he became a caregiver to his mother who had been sick for some time, only to lose her just before joining university.

Not long after, he also lost his father during his first year of university. In his journey, he explains that grief followed him through the later stages of his university life, yet so did strength.

“Despite the weight of loss, I pushed through and completed my university studies. The journey was hard, but I held onto compassion and found strength in sharing my story. My resilience wasn't defined by the absence of pain, but by the ability to continue moving forward, day by day,” added Dr Beda.

Drugs and alcohol addiction

For 23 years, media personality Fareed Khimani battled drug and alcohol addiction. “I was deteriorating—missing work, failing responsibilities and my relationship with my wife all began to slip. I was unable to look at myself in the mirror,” he shared during the forum.

Then one day he decided to check into a rehab in South Africa and the doctor looked at Fareed and stubbornly told him that he had only three months left to live unless he changed his lifestyle.

That wake-up call marked a turning point in his life. Through rehab, reflection, and daily commitments, Fareed began to rebuild, not just sobriety, but a new life rooted in purpose and peace. In sharing his scars, he extended a hand to others still deep in the struggle, reminding us all: rock bottom isn't the end, it can be the beginning.

"Previously, I used to chase numbness," he said. "Now I chase wholeness."

Loss of a job

Other stories spoke of different kinds of loss. Isaac spoke of losing his entire business empire. Faced with overwhelming debt and auctioneers on his neck, one day he found himself at home typing "how to die" into a search engine.

"The internet offered me a thousand ways to die, and I explored all of them. I was completely devastated that I had even chosen the exact day that I would finally end my life. The root cause of my pain wasn't just financial, it was the humiliation, the pressure and the sense of having failed in life," narrated Isaac.

But somehow, through conversation, connection, and reflection, he lived to tell the tale. His testimony was a reminder that the pain of losing your business and purpose in life can be just as profound as the pain of losing a person and that it too deserves empathy and support.

But how do you deal with grief?

Normally, grief doesn't operate on a schedule, and it comes without us expecting it. Dr John Weru, Associate Dean, Clinical Services at AKU Medical College, East Africa reminded us that, "Mourning is never linear. It may never be horizontal or vertical. It loops. It returns."

"We often expect healing to follow a timeline, yet it rarely does. Years after a loss, someone may ask to revisit the final moments of a loved one's life, not out of curiosity, but out of an ongoing need for meaning, for closure, for connection," added Dr Weru.

Loss, as Major Maina, a Spoken Word Artist put it, "is not something you simply leave behind, it becomes a part of you, a quiet companion that walks with you through the years, shaping your experiences and resurfacing in unexpected moments, no matter how much time has passed."

Experts noted that one of the most critical lessons from the forum was the importance of support structures during the grieving period.

"Too often, society expects us to "bounce back" from loss. But the truth is, the bounce doesn't come easily. Sometimes, it's not about bouncing but about crawling and standing up, just for today," remarked Dr Catherine Mbaka, Psychologist, AKU Medical College, East Africa.

Conclusion

Prof Lukoye Atwoli, Dean, AKU Medical College, East Africa noted that the purpose of grieving is to reach a point where you can safely remember your loss without being emotionally destroyed by it.

"We need more safe spaces, whether in public forums, therapy rooms or friend groups, where people can speak their pain without fear of judgment."

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