



Survivor's Tool Kit

For Your Grief and Healing Journey

Unfinished Conversation: Grieving and Healing after a Loved One's Suicide
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Travel Warning: Always carry a Survivor's Tool Kit and never travel alone...

As you embark on your grief and healing journey it is important that you be well prepared to move through the challenges and changes you will inevitably face. This Tool Kit is a guide to help you make choices that will support you emotionally and help you create more stability and well-being in your life, even as you travel through your grief.

Proceed with compassion and remember to take along...

- 1. Self Awareness**
- 2. Supportive Resources**
- 3. Fellow Travelers and Guides**
- 4. Emotional Weather Barometer**
- 5. Map of the Territory of Grief**
- 6. Inner Compass**

1. Self Awareness

Perhaps the most important tool for navigating your entire journey—especially through difficult times—is simply paying attention, without judgment, to whatever you are experiencing inside and around you. No matter what is happening at any moment, practice holding a calm and spacious awareness as you notice:

- Thoughts (memories of the past, imaginings of the future, beliefs, values, the “story” you tell yourself about your self, others, and life...)
- Emotions (anger, fear, surprise, joy, love, sadness/despair, shame/disgust, hurt/anguish, nuances of mood...)
- Five-sense perception (smell, taste, sight, touch, hearing)
- Movement (micro-movement to large movement, locomotion, postural change, facial expression, gestures...)
- Inner body sensation (pain, pulsing, tingling, tightening, relaxing, numbness, sensing the body's structure, energy, and function...)

These are the moment-to-moment lived elements of our daily lives, as well as how we experience grieving and healing. As you journey through this book, listen in on these five levels and meet your felt experience with compassion, openness, acceptance, and an attitude of curiosity and exploration. There's no right or wrong way through grief – simply notice what you are experiencing and give it expression.

2. Supportive Resources

The greater the impact of tragic loss and distress, the more resources are necessary to balance the effect. To survive the aftermath of heartbreaking loss, you have drawn upon some adaptive survival strategies. But to go forward on this journey of healing requires developing effective internal and external resources.

What are your Internal Resources?

- Psychological (self-awareness, choice, stable sense of self, patience, courage, determination, wise choices, ability to create safety...)
- Relational (communication skills, ability to give and receive support, healthy boundaries, promoting connection, capacity for empathy, compassion, love...)
- Spiritual (faith, connection with one's essential self and with something greater, prayer, meditation...)
- Emotional (capacity for full spectrum of emotions from joy to sorrow, emotional nuance, ability to self-regulate...)
- Intellectual (capacity to think things through, problem solve, reflect, hold perspective, learn new things, develop skills...)
- Somatic/body (self-care, good health, ability to relax, strength and flexibility, ability to take action...)
- Creative (journaling, creative expression through art, singing, playing music, writing, dance...)
- Natural (appreciation of beauty, nature, animals, plants, the elements...)

What are your External Resources?

- Relational (friends, family, co-workers, social and recreational groups, strong support system...)
- Community (health care providers, therapists, libraries, support groups, classes and workshops, social service agencies...)
- Material (safety, shelter, food, work, transportation, financial...)
- Spiritual (meditation, prayer, spiritual practices, place of worship/meditation, spiritual community, ritual...)
- Somatic/body (good nutrition, hygiene, exercise, relaxation practices, body work, classes and workshops, body-mind practices such as yoga, martial arts...)
- Creative (classes and workshops, listening to music, reading, cultural activities, performances...)
- Natural (spending time in nature, creating a healthy living environment, gardening, animal companions, recreational and sports activities...)

Note: See "Survivors of Suicide Resources" Handout for additional suggestions for support.

3. Fellow Travelers and Guides

Sharing your experience with others who deeply understand your grief is an important part of resolving loss and supporting healing. Optimally your network of support will include:

- A few trusted and caring friends and/or family members
- A grief support group (local groups, on-line blogs and chats)

- A "Journey Buddy" who listens well, understands, and supports your healing
- A therapist who can be your Travel Guide
- A spiritual counselor, teacher, and/or community

Note: The Unfinished Conversation website can connect you with a "Journey Buddy" or "Journey Group." We can match you by age, gender, nature of your loss, and/or the area where you live. The website suggests guidelines on how you might use the book *Unfinished Conversation* to support your journey together. Visit www.unfinishedconversation.com.

Working with a therapist as a Travel Guide as you move through the aftermath of tragic loss is an important aspect of healing. If this is possible for you, select a therapist who is licensed, experienced, and has had some training in the treatment of traumatic experience. It is important that you work with someone you feel safe and comfortable with. Most therapists will offer an initial brief session for you to meet and interview them. There are many different approaches to therapy. We would suggest finding a method that works with how your loss has affected you mentally, emotionally, as well as the effects on your body and nervous system. The following websites list therapists who use such holistic approaches:

- **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute** - www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org
- **EMDR Institute** – www.emdr.com
- **Foundation for Human Enrichment** - www.traumahealing.com
- **Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples** - www.iceeft.com

4. Emotional Weather Barometer

Distress triggers the fight-flight-freeze responses of the central nervous system. You might feel agitated and full of anger at one moment, anxious and afraid the next, and later find yourself feeling passive and disconnected. It is important to navigate through strong feelings and stressful life circumstances without flooding with emotion or shutting down and going numb so that you create the most effective conditions to explore, transform, and heal.

You may feel:

- emotionally flooded
- agitated
- anxious
- overwhelmed
- hyper-vigilant
- panic
- racing thoughts
- defensive and reactive
- unable to stop crying

On the other hand, you may feel:

- emotionally constricted
- frozen and numb
- passive
- paralyzed
- unable to think
- shut down
- disconnected from your self
- disorganized
- isolated

Whenever feelings arise, think of them as passing weather systems—they *will* change—and simply notice your experience. Pushing away your feelings will only bury them, so allow emotion to arise and pass through you, giving it expression in a supportive way. So that you are not too activated or too shut down, as you notice your distress level start to increase, choose practices that are comforting such as gentle breathing or other calming techniques, to return to a more manageable emotional range. Draw upon any of your supportive resources to create the optimal emotional safety and stability for working through your grief and creating more well-being.

5. *Map of the Territory of Grief*

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described five different experiences that normally take place during the grieving process. They may occur separately, simultaneously, fluctuate by the hour, or persist for days, months, or even longer.

Denial: You try to minimize, ignore, or refuse to accept facts, feelings, reality, and the impact on you. “This can’t be happening.” “I feel fine.” “It’s not that bad.”

Anger: This can be turned outward against others with irritability, impatience, judgment, frustration, blame, a short fuse. Or it can be turned inward against yourself in self-judgment, self-attack, or shame. “It’s not fair!” “Who’s to blame?” “Why me?!” “How could I let this happen?!”

Bargaining: You try to negotiate with reality by focusing on all of the “if-onlys”—“If only *that* did or didn’t happen.” “If only he or I, did or didn’t, say or do, *that*.” “If only *this* happened before or after *that*.”

Depression: You experience deep sadness and a depressed mood for most of the day. You may feel fatigued and want to stay in bed all day, or you may be unable to sleep. You may over-eat or have no appetite. You may feel helpless, hopeless, or have diminished interest or pleasure in activities. You may feel irritable, anxious and agitated, or feel shut-down and immobilized. You may be unable to think or concentrate, or you may be tormented by guilt. You may also have your own recurring thoughts of death or suicide. “Why bother?” “What’s the use?” “Why go on?” As you go through such great loss and bereavement, it is very important you discuss these signs of depression with your health care provider and/or a therapist.

Acceptance: You begin to come to terms with the impermanence of life, your own mortality, and that of your loved ones. There may be fleeting moments of acceptance, or longer stretches when you experience some emotional stability, objectivity, and a broader perspective. “It’s going to be O.K.” “I can respond to even this change with growing skill.” “I will meet these feelings of loss with kindness and wise choices.” “I’m prepared to face what comes.”

6. *Inner Compass*

Grief has its own pace and resolution for each of us. Listen inward to your wiser self to find your own bearings, then chart your course in a way that feels true to you. Choose the path of healing that you will take to best support your unique grieving process. Discover your own timing, maintain your inner and outer supportive resources, anchor yourself in patience and compassion, and remain open to the caring support of others. Gradually your loss and grief can be transformed into a larger perspective of your loved one’s life and your own. In time you can experience more inner calm, deepen trust and intimacy with your loved ones, and more fully live your life with enjoyment, contentment and well-being.

The place to be on your healing journey is right where you are, resting in this moment, this breath, this step that you are taking right now. From time to time, check your Survivor’s Tool Kit by reviewing this list to make sure you are providing the support you need to continue moving forward on your healing journey toward the life you want to live.

*This Tool Kit is offered to you with the hope that the traces of the painful past will be released.
May transforming your pain give rise to courageous compassion, kindness, and equanimity.
And may your heroic grieving and healing journey allow a renewed relationship
with your self, your life, and with your loved one.*