



Survivor's Tool Kit

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

Travel Advisory: Always carry a supportive Tool Kit and travel with trusted companions. Proceed with compassion and remember to take along the basics...

- ***Self Awareness***
- ***Supportive Resources***
- ***Fellow Travelers and Guides***
- ***Emotional Weather Barometer***
- ***Map of the Territory of Grief***
- ***Inner Compass***
- ***Instructions for Meditation***
- ***Tonglen Meditation***

Self Awareness

Perhaps the most important tool for navigating your entire journey is simply paying attention, without judgment, to whatever you are experiencing inside and around you. No matter what is happening at any moment, you can find a calm place inside that notices without being caught up in it or overwhelmed by it. Like taking a walk through a forest and noticing the trees, you can notice your experience moment to moment. Especially when you are going through a difficult time, letting yourself be aware of the following aspects of your experience can help you get some relief and perspective. Notice...

- **Thoughts:** memories of the past, imaginings of the future, beliefs, values, “shoulds”, judgments, the “story” you tell yourself about yourself, others, and life
- **Emotions:** anger/outrage, fear/anxiety, surprise, sadness/despair, shame/disgust, hurt/anguish, vulnerability, mood swings, overwhelm, kindness/compassion, gratitude/forgiveness, joy/peace, affection/love
- **Five senses:** smelling, tasting, seeing, touching, hearing
- **Movement:** pushing, reaching, walking, collapsing/ lengthening, kicking, throwing, punching, jerking, shaking, clenching, contracting/expanding, frowning/smiling, crying/laughing, freezing, taking action

- **Inner body sensations:** agitation/calm, pain/pleasure, heavy/light, open/closed, supported/collapsed, tense/relaxed, strong/weak, tingling, vibrating, pulsing, trembling, numb, short and shallow breathing/full and relaxed breathing

As you journey through this book, listen in on these five levels and meet your experience with an attitude of curiosity and exploration. Practice remaining aware of your experience just as it is, without judgment ... and with compassion, even when it is difficult. Remember there's no right or wrong way through grief – simply notice what you are experiencing and, when you are ready, express it in your journal or with someone you trust.

Supportive Resources

The greater the impact of your tragic loss and distress, the more resources you need to balance the effect. To survive the aftermath of your heartbreaking loss and move forward on this journey of healing, you will need to develop both internal and external supports.

What are Your Inner Supports?

Reach inward to connect with...

- **Your psychological life:** self-awareness, choice, stability, patience, courage, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, determination, wise choices, creating safety and comfort for yourself, ability to be flexible, adaptive, curious, and open
- **Your relationships with others:** ability to connect with friends, family, and strangers, communication skills, giving and receiving support, healthy boundaries, promoting connection, capacity for empathy, compassion, affection, love,
- **Your spiritual life:** faith, connection with your deepest self and with something greater, prayer, meditation
- **Your emotional life:** ability to feel and accept a range of emotions from joy to sorrow, recognizing changes in your emotions, experiencing life's challenges without flooding with emotion or shutting down, being able to think and feel at the same time
- **Your intellectual life:** capacity to reflect, think things through, solve problems, develop perspective, learn new things
- **Your body:** self care, staying healthy, relaxation, deep sleep, ability to laugh and cry, enjoying pleasure of the five senses
- **Your creative life:** journaling, expressing yourself through art, singing, playing music, writing, dancing,
- **Your natural world:** ability to appreciate beauty and nature, ability to play and have fun

What are Your Outer Supports?

Reach out to connect with...

- **Relationships:** friends, family, co-workers, social and recreational groups
- **Community:** health care providers, therapists, support groups, classes and workshops, social service agencies, volunteering and serving others
- **Your material world:** creating safety and stability in your home and relationships
- **Your spiritual world:** spiritual practices and study, meditating or praying with others, spiritual community, ritual

- **Your healthy body:** good nutrition, exercising to develop strength and flexibility, deep relaxation, sports, yoga, martial arts, body work, physical therapy, classes and workshops
- **Creative nourishment:** writing, art, music, singing, dancing, listening to music, reading, cultural activities, performances, classes
- **Your natural world:** spending time in nature, gardening, animal companions, travel

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

If it is possible for you to work with a therapist, select someone 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 respected therapy organizations have websites that 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

Emotional Weather Barometer

Distress triggers the fight-flight-freeze responses of the 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. In order to transform and heal through your grief, it is important to learn how to navigate through strong feelings and stressful situations without feeling overwhelmed by emotion or shutting down and going numb. Whenever feelings arise, think of them as passing weather systems—they *will* change—and simply notice your experience...

You may feel:

- flooded by emotions
- agitated
- anxious
- overwhelmed
- racing thoughts
- panicked
- self conscious
- defensive and reactive
- needing to control everything
- unable to stop crying

On the other hand, you may feel:

- barely able to feel emotions
- frozen and numb
- passive
- paralyzed
- unable to think straight
- shut down
- disconnected from your self
- apathetic and uncaring
- disorganized
- unable to cry

Pushing away your feelings will only bury them, so allow emotions, whatever they are, to arise and pass through you in a way that feels manageable. Notice if you want to express what you are feeling in writing, action, or talking with someone, but also know that feeling something doesn't necessarily mean you have to act on it. When you notice your distress start to increase, do some gentle breathing or other calming activities such as taking a break to stretch or take a walk. Remember to draw upon your inner and outer supports to help you stay safe and balanced as you move through your grief and create more well-being.

Map of the Territory of Grief

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described five different experiences that normally take place during the grieving process. They are not necessarily sequential, and they may occur separately or simultaneously. They may change by the hour, or persist for days, months, or even longer.

- **Denial:** You try to minimize, ignore, or refuse to accept your feelings, and/or the reality of the situation and its 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, criticism, frustration, blame, a short fuse. Or it can be turned inward against yourself in self-judgment or shame. "It's not fair!" "Why me?!" "How could I let this happen?!" "Who's to blame?"
- **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 feel depressed 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 have your own recurring thoughts of death or suicide. “Why bother?” “What’s the use?” “Why go on?” Depression is a natural response to tragic loss. As you go through the pain of your grief, 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 okay.” “I can accept even this.” “I will meet these feelings of loss with kindness and wise choices.” “I’m prepared to face what comes.”

Inner Compass

Grief has its own pace and resolution for each of us. Listen to your inner wisdom to find your bearings, then chart your course in a way that feels true to you. Discover your own timing, and make wise choices based on your own unique grieving process. Be patient and compassionate with yourself, maintain your inner and outer supportive resources, and stay open to the caring offered by others. In time your loss and grief will lead to a larger perspective on your loved one’s life and on your own. You will experience more inner calm, deepen connection 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 to make sure you are creating the support you need to continue moving forward on your healing journey toward the life you want to live.