

Journaling workshop for grief

Grief is essential to the healing process – rather than something we need to recover from, grief is the recovery. Grieving can accompany any kind of loss, from bereavement to loss of a job or a health condition. Grief is also a core part of the trauma recovery process, in which we grieve what was done or not done in our childhood. In the end, grief is a coming to terms with life as it is, rather than as we had hoped it would be.

The stages of grief / grief curve designed by Kübler-Ross & Kessler has five stages grouped around a core process of making meaning – Kessler views finding meaning in our losses as the sixth stage but also the overarching principle of grief.

1. Shock/denial
2. Anger/acute pain
3. Depression/overwhelm
4. Experimentation
5. Decision making/integration

Whilst we don't want to sit in any one of the stages, we also need to have compassion for where we find ourselves, and our unique progress through the stages. We may move back and forth between stages for a long time, or stay predominantly in one before moving forward quite quickly. As with mental health generally, our experience is always fully unique and needs to be approached with gentleness and acceptance.

Grief impacts on our mental health by narrowing our window of tolerance – this is the space between hyper- and hypo-arousal where we are calm, connected, and appropriately regulated. When we are in grief our window of tolerance narrows and we may find ourselves more reactive, irritable, low, grumpy, or dysregulated. Again, this is completely normal and needs to be received with acceptance and compassion. As we heal, our window of tolerance will start to widen again. Remember that what we resist persists, but where we can feel into and find acceptance in our state we can start to move forward.

The following journaling prompts are grouped around the five stages so may or may not feel appropriate for where you are today. You may also want to experiment with them around a less acute grief initially before diving into profound bereavement.

Stage One – Shock & denial

In this stage we are in freeze, a state that engages to enable our survival in the immediate aftermath of a loss. Freeze is accompanied by numbing, dissociation, reduced awareness of the body and emotions, feeling sluggish and lethargic. This is the stage in which we are able to cope with all sorts of practical details after a loss, and the full intensity feels slightly at arms length. In this stage we want to gently upregulate in our bodies and awareness, bringing language back to our experience.

Somatics – bilateral stimulation; swaying; rocking; heel drops; gentle stretches.

1. Mood ladder: draw a ladder or staircase. With the bottom step as very low and depressed, and the top step as happy and engaged, and the middle step as blah/basically ok, label the steps with the predominant emotions you would expect to experience at each stage. Can you recall how those emotions feel somatically and in your mood? What experiences/memories do you associate with each stage?
You can then use the ladder to assess your current state – checking in with a little body scan, can you identify which step you are on? Looking at the next step, what can you do for yourself just to move up one rung?
2. Draw a coffee or tea cup (your choice!). Fill up the inside of the cup with all the kinds of life-giving activities you normally find helpful to your mood (eg – taking a hot bath; walking in nature; cuddling the cat; watching Ted Lasso...)
Ask yourself about the last few days – what needs do you have that haven't been met recently? What is one thing you can pour from your cup of lovely things that would help you right now?
3. When we are in pain we often focus on reducing or moving away from the distressing emotions. Instead, think about emotions like gardening – we can choose to either continually weed the flower beds (boring, sore back!) or, we can crowd out the weeds by planting lovely flowers. Set a timer and write for 2 minutes about the kinds of emotions you would like to experience MORE of – notice if you find this tricky, or keep gravitating back to what you want to get away from, without judgement, just be curious. Read over your journaling and choose one activity from your coffee cup that might help you bring more of those emotions into your life.

Stage two – Anger

Anger can be a difficult emotion to manage and express, especially if you are gendered female – women are often raised to be sweet, and anger is frowned on or used to disparage (calm down dear...). Anger can also be a risky emotion to feel and express if you are part of a minority population.

But anger is essential because it tells us when something is bad for us, unfair, unjust, or has crossed a boundary. In grief, anger tells us just how bad the loss is and helps us to feel that intensity. Anger in grief can also bring up a new awareness of the need to assert or change boundaries, including relational boundaries. When I had a miscarriage in 2018 I learned very quickly which people it was safe to allow to speak into my experience, and who really wasn't safe. Shifts in relationships can be one of the hardest parts of grief, but this stage can help us come back to our core values and what is most essential to our lives.

Somatics – foot stomping; shaking; isometrics; squeezing pillows; voo breath; loud music!

1. Expressing anger through language can be very tricky. For this exercise, grab some crayons or coloured pens/paint, and draw the feelings. Don't worry about aesthetics or composition, instead, focus on the feeling of your hand/arm moving over the paper and how you can channel the feelings into colour and line. Which colours feel right for anger? Should the lines be thick and intense with pressure, or scribbly, or very controlled? Is the colour dense? Do you want to work and rework it? Remember that line, texture, and colour are all forms of language too. Notice how you feel after expressing yourself in this way.
2. Now we are going to take a closer look at the cause of the pain – titrate this experience and don't take on too much at once. If you feel dysregulated at any point, pull back and remind yourself this is just a writing exercise that you can stop at any time. Set a timer for 2, 3, or 5 minutes depending on how you are feeling, and write about what has changed for you since the loss. Try to find language for the emotions that come up as you write about your losses and the changes. Notice any sense you have as you write about boundaries that are shifting or need to be reasserted. What support can you find for yourself?

Stage three – Depression

Depression occurs at the lowest point of the change curve. This is when the reality of our changed situation starts to sink in, and we begin to accept that we can't change what has happened. Depression is also part of the overwhelm of our system after the intensity of the early stages of grief – as we cycle between anger (hyperarousal) and freeze (hypoarousal) the dorsal brake can kick in as a protective measure to slow things down and give us time to rest. In this stage we often judge ourselves for our mood, lack of resilience, and for finding other people too much. Instead, try to think of this stage as our nervous system communicating our need to rest to us. Be ok with being here for a while and focus on acceptance and soothing. Somatics – closed holds and gentle arm squeezes; rocking; weighted blankets; calming scents; warmth like hot water bottles and baths; deep belly breathing; if you struggle to cry try using music or sad movies (anything where an animal suffers sets me off straight away) to help you find some release.

1. Creativity can be a soothing way to find expression in this stage. Even if you don't normally consider yourself creative, try this exercise: make a list of words you associate with grief; make a list of metaphors for grief; think about grief as a landscape, what does that landscape look like? If grief was an object, what would it be? Try doodling grief – what colours and textures will you use? Now take your lists and write a 4-5 line poem using the metaphors and associations you have conjured up. Notice how it feels to create. You can use this approach to write short poems about any experience, or about your loss itself.
2. Depression feels endless. Where in the first stages of grief we are trapped in the past and wanting to find change, depression traps us in an unending present where we lose sense of time passing. Reminding ourselves that one day this too will pass can be very helpful. Make a list of the feelings and experiences you are struggling with at the moment (Right now I feel... Right now I am trapped by this thought...) then add a second part to each statement beginning with 'In the future I will feel', ie – Right now I feel sad and I can't cry, but in the future I will be able to cry and the sadness will lift. Refer to your statements every time you feel trapped in your low mood.

Stage four – Experimentation

As we start to emerge from depression, we begin to see glimmers of hope. These may be slight initially, and happen alongside triggers to take us back into the earlier stages. But over time the glimmers will become stronger and more frequent. In this stage our window of tolerance is starting to expand again, and things that felt impossible will seem less so.

This stage can feel very vulnerable, and be accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame, especially after a bereavement – it can feel like a betrayal to leave behind the loved one and move forward. Be compassionate with yourself and recognise that it is ok to go slowly and gently. In this stage we want to prioritise practicing safe self-care, and reopening ourselves to safe relationships. We can also use our imagination in this stage to practice activities we aren't yet ready to fully experience. Just as our nervous system reacts to negative imaginations as if they are real, so too imagining good and positive experiences can build our confidence and sense of wellbeing in advance of actually taking actions.

1. List 10 (or more!) things that you have always wanted to do/try/experience, or simply quite fancy, if money/time/health was no object. You can start small, would you like to try forest bathing, wild swimming, watercolours, writing a short story; and work up to bigger experiences, like going to Bali, joining a salsa class, learning coding etc...
2. Pick one thing from your list and free-write for 5 minutes about what it would be like to try this thing. Visualise the feelings, sensations, and all the details. For example, if you recently lost your job, try visualising the first day at your new dream job – what would the building be like, what would you be wearing, what about the weather that day etc. If you are imagining travel, use all your senses to describe the feel of sand under your feet, the sun on your skin, the sound of the waves...
3. Now spend a minute writing about what it would mean for you to take this action and give yourself this experience. Notice the emotions that come up for you, and how your body responds to the thought of gifting yourself something new.

Stage five – Integration

In the final stage we start to actually make decisions and take actions that begin to move us forward. In this stage we integrate our grief and loss into our story and start to make meaning from it, for example finding ways to support others by sharing our experience, or identifying the new opportunities we are choosing to take in the space created by our loss. This is the stage in which we truly open to new possibilities and feel like we are coming back to ourselves again.

1. Take 5 minutes and write about what your experience of grief has taught you. How have you changed and grown through this season? You might like to focus on a powerful experience, perhaps of being able to support a friend, or of establishing and holding a boundary. Take time in this process to acknowledge the ways you supported yourself through the hard times and the work you put into healing and growing.
2. Write a letter to yourself now from a future version of you who has done something new (eg – from your list in the previous exercises) – perhaps from a you who is sitting on that beach, or who is at work in a new exciting role. What does future you have to say? What might they thank you for that you are doing now, that is enabling them to step out in new ways? You could also try this exercise writing from yourself today back to past you in the earlier stages of grief, noticing and being thankful for how you cared for yourself when you were shocked/angry/depressed.
3. Full integration and recovery is seen when we are able to restart our relationships with others and come back into full attuned connection. To finish this journaling class, think about the people in your life who have supported you through your grief, and write each of them a personal message – you could send a text, a whatsapp, or go old school and send them each a postcard. Tell them what you would like them to know about how their support and behaviour helped you through, and encourage them to keep being their amazing, wonderful selves.

I hope you have found this journaling workshop helpful and encouraging. Please do get in touch and let me know what was impactful for you, it is always really positive to receive feedback.

Francesca x