



# BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Healing after loss, begins with self-compassion and ends with self-acceptance. Learning to love ourselves can be a lifelong journey that requires a great deal of time and attention. Being kind to yourself is a caring and compassionate approach to dealing with emotional distress. This tool kit will help you to begin.

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The Life I Choose

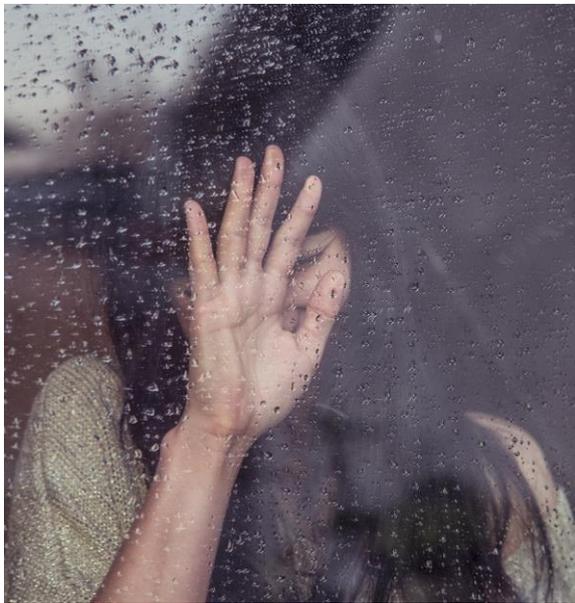
## Be kind to yourself

Relationship loss comes in many forms, but the common human experience that follows is a process of grieving. Where connection is lost, but the affiliation continues, this process may begin many years before there is a practical ending.

The important thing to hold on to, is that while there are common themes, each of our experiences are different, and all our reactions and emotions are valid. No-one can tell you how to feel in the aftermath; your emotion is your own and will likely, at times, surprise even you.

### Grief

The [stages of grieving](#) are well documented, but what is less clear to many people, is that they are not linear stages. You do not start with denial and end with acceptance, moving neatly through the stages in between. Grieving is messy. And I mean *MESSY* like a toddler meeting an open tin of Dulux, with no-one to say “no”!



You could be experiencing the bargaining stage one moment, feeling like doing anything to get the relationship back and then become overwhelmed with anger. Acceptance (the final stage) is particularly tricky, because you can feel as though you have accepted the loss and begun to move on, only for something will trigger you back into depression, or worse, wanting the relationship back.

Grief isn't something to fear, or to rush through. Trying to get to the end of it, or to “move on” too quickly, is just a means of pushing down the pain, because it *is* scary and it hurts like hell. The awkward truth, is that the only way to get to the end of the difficult emotion, is to feel the anger, confusion, fear, deep sadness and shame.

Indeed, there are scores of – what might be considered negative – emotions that can rush in on the back of relationship loss. It might help to challenge the concept of “good” and “bad” emotion. If, like me, you come from a religious background, you might even have been told that feelings like anger, bitterness and jealousy are sinful.

### Emotions

I started studying emotions about a decade ago, and well before I suffered 2 major relationship losses in the space of 4 years. I am so grateful for that! It meant I had already shed my deranged thinking about emotion and come to realise, that an emotion is actually a biological response in my body to *my perception* of what is going on around me.

That “perception” bit is hugely important. It means that what we think, can affect how we feel, and happily, we can control what we think. Intense emotions, if just allowed to flow through us, are usually short-lived, even if they reappear many times in a single day. It's where our minds go that can hijack us and keeps us in a place of deep discomfort for days, weeks, or even years.

Emotion isn't good or bad, it's primarily an expression of our physical response to perceived threat, damage, loss – or other stimuli that creates a sense of comfort, well-being and safety. Internalising emotion (that is, burying it inside and therefore hanging on to it) can create physical illness over time. Your body actively helps you to allow major stress to be released, to prevent this. This is *feeling*.

We'll come back to managing emotion through getting control of your thoughts in the section called *Changing Your Mind*, but for now it's enough consider the following:

1. Give yourself permission to fully feel whatever you feel.
2. Allow the emotion to flow through you (if you want to cry, howl, shout, swear, fall to the floor, write, exercise or do any other activity that allows you to release emotion, just do it!)
3. Try to name what you are feeling (the feelings list might be helpful for this).
4. Once the emotion has diminished, let it go. Don't let your thoughts hold you in the discomfort.

#### Loving yourself

Loving yourself in the middle of distress can be tricky. Relationship loss can leave you feeling unlovable and undesirable, but that isn't the truth. One person's opinion doesn't change your true value, lovability or desirability. We will look at this in detail in the *Building Confidence* section. For now, let's discuss the benefits and outworking of being kind and loving to yourself.

Living with distress can lead to self-destructive behavior, such as self-medication with alcohol or drugs, isolation from friends and support, casual (and sometimes unsafe) sex, unhealthy eating habits, even self-harm. Feelings of not being enough can challenge us to the core.

Whether you feel as though you love yourself or you feel self-loathing, it will help and strengthen you, to act in a kind, loving way towards yourself. What follows are some practical suggestions to help you to do this.

**Sleep well.** Even nap during the day if you need to. If you find yourself having difficulty sleeping, or wake up in the night and lie ruminating on negative thoughts about the past and future, don't fight for sleep. Try making a warm, caffeine-free drink and heading back to bed with a captivating book, or listen to a book on Audible. Just relax, but keep your mind focused on what you are listening to or reading. Sleep will eventually find you. Keep your bedroom dark, warm and uncluttered.

Make it a beautiful place, where you want to be. If it helps you, cuddle something. A dog? A large soft teddy? Even a pillow! Then if you wish you can imagine that you are being held by your completely safe person. Allow yourself to concentrate on the visualisation... feel cosy, safe and loved. To this day, I do this on the odd nights when I lay down and feel lonely or upset.



**Get outside.** Walking, whatever the weather, in a pleasant outside has been shown to improve mood and well-being, as well as improving fitness of course. Start small and build up. Use the walking time to listen to something that nourishes you, be that music, the radio, a podcast or an audible book. Listening to books designed to help you with your personal journey can be extremely helpful and encouraging. Walking can also help you to work out a powerful emotion. I found that brisk walking really helped me to get through a very powerful angry period and I used the anger to fuel the walk.

**Exercise.** Other exercise can also be helpful, even if, like me, you often feel you hate it! The calm and breathing techniques of yoga are powerful in many situations to control anxiety, fear, panic and stress, and a 20-30 minute yoga session will leave you feeling more centered. The key is to choose something that suits your personality and your lifestyle. If I had to go out to a yoga group, the act of going would be an obstacle, not a help. So, I use a DVD at home. For someone else, it would be the act of going and being part of something bigger than themselves that saved them.

**Eat well.** This is such a hard one for many of us, who have a relationship with food that is steeped in comfort. At the worst of times, I would say eat what you feel you need to eat, but eat healthily as well. So, plenty of fresh vegetables, a bit of fruit (especially berries), chicken, fish, eggs or pulses (lentils, chickpeas, beans), whole grain rice, nuts, seeds and that kind of thing. If your pain motivates you to lose weight (and you need to) embrace the journey. But now is not the time to be beating yourself up about *anything*, let alone the odd tub of ice-cream that might be consumed!



If you can't be bothered to cook and don't feel like eating, you could whizz up some fruit or vegetables into a smoothie. Consuming some healthy foods will boost your well-being, as they are rich in nutrients, vitamins and minerals. Make sure you get some omega 3 oils too, even if you need to supplement for a while. If you haven't been eating well for a while, then it could help you to take some supplements – a good all round vitamin and mineral supplement, plus essential oils and maybe an energy booster like Q10. Depression is often associated with poor nutrition over time and there is plenty of research to show that supplementing [Omega 3](#) and [B-group vitamins](#), amongst other micronutrients, can help boost to boost mood, where good nutrition has lapsed.

**Comfort yourself.** I almost called this section pamper yourself, but I think that has specific, narrow associations, and I want to encourage you to do whatever you know will comfort and encourage yourself. Possibilities include pyjamas time and duvet days, engage with animals (don't get one to meet your own needs, unless you are able to meet all of their own, but maybe dog sit for a friend, go horse riding or walk dogs for a rescue), learn some breathing exercises, do any physical activity that will give you an endorphin top up (stretching is great), have a massage, facial or aromatherapy session, take a pamper bath, use scented candles, watch uplifting videos on YouTube (I love to watch courageous rescues), cook a lovely meal for yourself (if you enjoy cooking), look for cathartic activities to release emotion (anything from throwing bottles into a bottle bank to 10 pin bowling) or create something in any media. Even something as simple as a perfect cup of tea or coffee can exude comfort. Experiment and keep a log of what works for you. Over time, you'll create a useful resource, which will help you through the dark times without you hitting the self-destruct button.

**Maintain positivity.** This ragged world we find ourselves sharing and the way that you experience it, is greatly affected by your own default attitude, perhaps more than any other single thing. If you were a positive person before your world imploded, you are likely to know the path towards maintaining a positive outlook, even in your distress. For those of you who are naturally more pessimistic, maintaining a positive mind set can be hard work, but work that is absolutely worth the effort. The law of attraction (like attracts like) is such a powerful realisation. So, what is the law of attraction? This definition is from an [excellent website](#) that deals only with this topic. If you struggle with negativity, understanding this can impact you greatly:

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*The Law of Attraction can be understood by understanding that 'like attracts like'. What this means is that whether we realize it or not, we are responsible for bringing both positive and negative influences into our lives. A key part of the Law of Attraction is understanding that where you place your focus can have an intense impact on what happens to you. If you spend your days wallowing in regrets about the past or fears of the future, you'll likely see more negativity appearing, but if you look for the silver lining in every experience then you'll soon start to see positivity surrounding you every day. Therefore, the Law of Attraction encourages you to see that you have the freedom to take control of how your future develops, shaping it in the ways you choose.*

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**Challenge hostile self-talk.** Many of us have an inner critic, which we often listen to and sometimes give aggressive expression to. I have been so bad at this. In my dark moments, I might pass a mirror and say – under my breath – “Who are you kidding, you fat, ugly bitch?” Or I will leave the house prematurely, remember that I’ve forgotten something and call myself a “Stupid cow!” or worse. It’s been a long battle for me to realise the internal effect of this kind of self-talk. My own self-image is reasonably robust, but self-confidence I am only just learning and some of the foundations are poor. I recently realised that I still have issues genuinely *believing* that I am enough. I *know* that it is true, but I often struggle to *believe* it. It’s a war between my rational mind and my inner child, who was utterly convinced that she was absolutely ‘not enough’. It’ll be a journey throughout my life I should imagine, but I have made giant strides forwards over the years. This hostile self-talk is one bastion that remains to a degree and which I must challenge in the everyday. My task is to learn to talk to myself with the same courtesy and kindness I extend to everyone else.

**Don’t engage with negative ‘support’.**

Positivity needs to extend not only to yourself, but to the people you surround yourself with. There are a group of people who will secretly delight in your ‘failure’ and feed off your angst. If you engage these people in your journey and share with them the details of your trauma, they – albeit subconsciously – will work to keep you in the prison of your struggles. It benefits them to do so. We all need at least one person who can really hear us and feel us and empathise with our situation. Just as importantly we all need to protect ourselves from those who will feed us with negativity, and bolster our own negative thoughts



and words. If possible, I would encourage you to make a pact with yourself not to openly criticize and spread venom about the person you were in a relationship with. Yes, speak your pain and distress to somebody worthy of hearing it, but bitter resentment and hatefulness just reinforces stuff that you will eventually want to let go of; emotion that holds you in the past. Once you share it with another person they too must let go of it, before you get to be completely free, and you can't control whether that will happen.

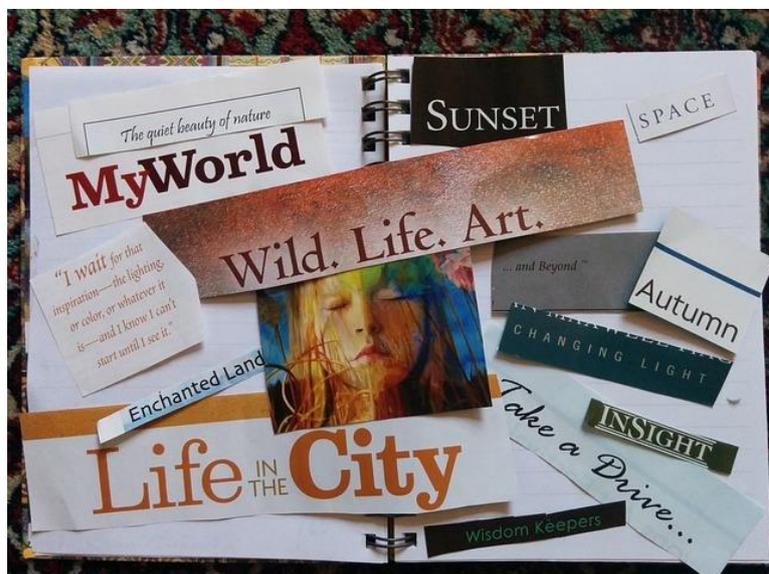
**Commit to self-improvement.** Each of us must find our own forward momentum on our journey of recovery. I put this here, because of the great benefits that pursuing self-improvement have brought me. I have listened to so many inspirational TED talks and encouraging audio-books while walking, as well as completing several online courses and training packages. Areas have ranged from business to personal, from dog behaviour to psychology. Embrace whatever inspires you and helps you take the focus off your circumstances, even if just for a few minutes at first. Ideally find something that interests you so much that you can lose yourself in it.

**Maintain human contact.** This one is very hard for me to appreciate from the extroverts point of view, as I have always found my own energy and healing in solitude. But even as an introvert, I accept that I have been helped and encouraged over recent years from maintaining meaningful contact with the rest of humanity. Now for me just being part of an online community, a brief text exchange with a close friend, or the hellos and goodbyes of clients dropping their dogs into day care at my home, were all – at times – enough. I am guessing that extroverts will need far more engagement to thrive. So, know yourself and what makes you feel energized, and then look for positive ways to get out there and do the things that will nourish you.

**Record your journey.** There are so many ways to do this these days, either publicly or privately. Choose something that suits your personality and strengths. A few of the possibilities are:

- A diary
- Journaling
- A bullet journal
- A blog
- Photography
- A book
- Poetry
- Scrapbooking
- Doodling
- Drawing.

The benefits of doing this include the process of creating, the thoughtful nature of making a record, the discipline of keeping a record over time and the beauty of looking back and realising that you – and your perceptions and emotions – are changing and progressing.



**Cut yourself some slack.** Emotional trauma and loss can derail even the most productive of us. Whether your issue is getting going, or getting off the busyness treadmill (apathy and busyness are both defence mechanisms), at times the cracks will show, and your life won't go to plan. Whenever you feel like using the word 'should' to describe your behaviour or progress, remind yourself that you are doing the best you can, and tomorrow has the potential

to be better. Don't beat yourself up for what you perceive as failure, or scold yourself for not always being able to make the best choices. Be your own best friend and love yourself with that kind of passion. Finally, always remember that love is what you do, not what you feel. Feeling follows hard on the heels of doing.