



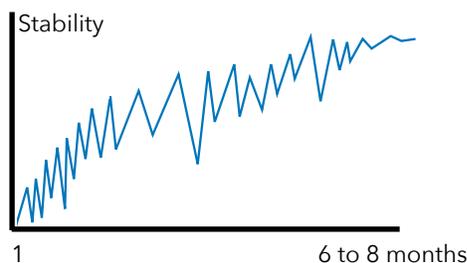
Resilient grieving: easier on the HEARTS of the bereaved

If you are reading this document, it must be because you have just lost a loved one. The pain you feel may be impossible to describe. I want to start off by offering you some kind words. I could offer you my sympathies, but for some people, this seems like a tired cliché. Instead, I hope I can offer you words that will help you to breathe when it feels like it's hard to come up for air.

You didn't decide to lose someone. This makes it even more important for you to choose what is right for you now, whether that's getting through the next few weeks or the next few hours. I hope this text will help you to do that. It is inspired by people who have recovered from the worst things that could have happened to them.

As a psychologist, I have often seen resilience in my clients. But this ability to bounce back, to get back on our feet after we have lost someone, is always surprising. Why? Because a lot of our information about grieving comes from media, and they only tell us the most dramatic stories. Usually, we only hear about the people who have had the most difficulty bouncing back.

You have probably heard that there are stages you have to go through to get better. This is no longer true. It's like saying that you need to find a pay phone to call someone. Public telephones are a thing of the past, like the stages of grief. George Bonanno's research (on thousands of people) has shown that resilience is the most common reaction when people are grieving. He didn't find any evidence of stages. Instead, he saw that the majority of people managed to get better (with ups and downs, of course). As time went on, the highs were higher, and the lows were not as low, as you see in this graph:



These people didn't have to wait for their grieving to be finished to have some moments of relief. Another researcher, Lucy Hone, discovered the secrets of resilience. She was able to use these strategies when she lost her 12 year-old daughter in a car accident. She is the one who came up with the term "resilient grieving". The ideas that I am going to share with you here don't come from people who have had an easy or sheltered life. This makes what they say all the more credible.

It is normal to ask all kinds of questions when a something tragic happens. Some questions will cause even more pain, and others can help us take meaningful action. I would like to propose some questions from the second category. You are unique, and so is what you are going through. So nothing that I am suggesting should be taken as an obligation or a prescription. However, I would like to invite you to reflect on some themes that may help. I have grouped the most important under the acronym **HEARTS** (**H**ope, **E**motions, **A**gency, **R**elationships, **T**ailored, **S**elf-compassion).

We cannot take away all the pain of grieving, but there are ways to get through it that are easier on the hearts of the bereaved. I have to tell you that I was hesitant to use this acronym. I was concerned that some people might find it trite. I decided to keep it because many of my clients have told me that the pain they felt was as big as the love they had for the person they had lost. Others told me that it was love that helped them to keep going- love for the people in their lives who were still there and love for those they had lost.

I would also like to tell you that I lost several members of my family before the age of 9. This experience helped me develop a profound belief that it is possible to lose people we love and have many happy years afterwards. Of course, I wish they had stayed in my life. But I learned from a very young age that just because their hearts stopped beating, it didn't mean mine had to stop loving or being moved by life.

So I want to share these examples of themes that have allowed other people like you to take care of their **HEARTS**. I hope these ideas remind you of what might be good for yours.

Hope

Optimistic people are not naive. They see things the way they really are, but they choose to shift their gaze and devote all of their attention and effort to things they can control. They are also aware that happiness, like suffering, doesn't last forever. This helps them cope with the pain, because they know it has an end. It also helps them to have hope, to imagine a time when they won't hurt as much.

When they don't have much energy, they spend it on the people who are still alive and the things they can still do. If that's difficult for you right now, set aside a time to just think about what is still important to you. Identify what might be in the future. Who? What? Slowly start devoting part of your day to these things. What made this relationship meaningful was the time you devoted to it. The time you spend with other people and other dreams will make them more valuable to you.

Emotions

You may have heard that sadness and anger are the most appropriate reactions when you are grieving. It's not true. What's more, this idea makes people feel guilty when they have more pleasant emotions. These more pleasant emotions are also normal and

appropriate reactions. It's as if this loss highlights other people and other moments that are important to you.

If you have lost a loved one before, you know that it's possible to feel even more love for others, or gratitude for those who are helping you. You may have felt proud of being able to take care of your children or to honour the person who died at the funeral. You may have found yourself talking about the good times with family and laughing. You may have been inspired by something you read, or experienced a moment of wonder in nature, or even felt relief if the past few years have been difficult.

Give yourself permission to feel and to express all your emotions. You don't have to wait for the sadness to go away to make space for emotions that make you feel better. They too are real, they are just as appropriate, and they will help you to get through this.

Agency, direction

The loss you have suffered probably doesn't make sense, and you should not waste time looking for meaning in the past. But many people need to find some meaning, some sense of direction in the future. It's as though this cannot have happened for nothing.

You are in a situation where you had no choice. And after a loss like this, many people need to get behind the wheel, to choose the

direction they want to go in, to take control of what happens from now on. As an example, I once worked with a young man with a drinking problem whose best friend died in a car crash, while intoxicated. He said to me, *"That could have been me in the coffin. I didn't want my friend to die, but it was a wake-up call. I was about to hit the wall and that was the moment I decided to take control of my life."* What direction do you want to take now?

Relationships

Chances are, the people around you feel a little helpless. They may be awkward. Don't confuse their helping skills with their love for you.

I hear you say that you don't want to bother them. This makes it even more important to be specific in your requests and to give them the right job. They can't read your mind. Some people are good at making you laugh, others help you get out of the house, others are good at listening. If your loved ones knew how to help you, they would. What would each person want to do if they knew you needed it? Tell them.

If this is too difficult, remember that these people are not just in your life to help. They are there because you love them, because they love you. Don't isolate yourself. Staying connected with the people you love is another way to get through the toughest times, perhaps by holding on a little bit tighter.

Tailored

There are too many rules about grieving. I would like you feel you can ignore them all (including mine if they don't work for you). There is no one-size-fits all; grieving is tailored to you.

If you ask yourself *"What should I do?"* or *"What do I feel like doing?"*, you may feel overwhelmed, and you may feel that you don't want to do anything at all right now. I hope you will ask yourself an easier question instead: *"If I ____, is there a good chance it will make me feel better, or could it make me feel worse?"* I hope

this last question brings you back to what you know is right for **you**.

You might also think about these questions: In the past, what has helped you get through other difficulties? How did you stay hopeful? How did you manage to get up in the morning? This might be the first time that you are grieving, but it's not the first time that you have faced adversity. Be inspired... by yourself.

Self-compassion

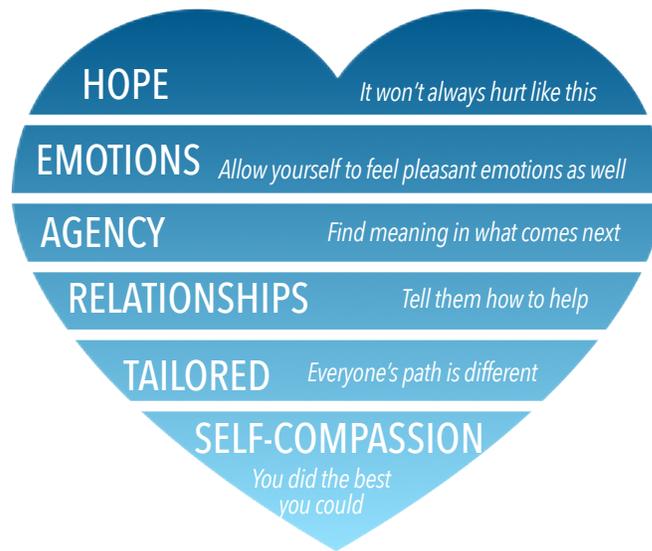
I invite you to start by speaking to yourself with compassion, to surround yourself with people who recognize that you have done the best you could under the circumstances. These people can help you speak to yourself with more kindness. It's hard enough to have lost someone. Don't overdo it by blaming yourself. It would be like kicking somebody who is already down.

There may be circumstances surrounding the loss that make you feel guilty. You cannot judge your past actions with the information that you have now. Of course, if you had known, you could have done things differently. But you didn't have a crystal ball. You did the best you could with the information you had. You didn't decide to lose a loved one, but you can choose how you talk to yourself now. Compassion is like the blankets handed out by the Red Cross after a disaster. Everyone gets one, regardless of their circumstances.

I hope the following questions and ideas help you reflect on each of these themes. You may not have the energy to answer all of these questions. I invite you to choose the theme that most appeals to you and the questions that will help you to choose what's right for you now.

- Brigitte Lavoie

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What helps you to feel hopeful that you can get through the next few weeks?

You may feel angry or sad. You also have the right to feel relieved, grateful, and proud. You can have moments of laughter and love. What is surprising about your reactions so far?

What is still meaningful for you? How can you spend some time on this in the next few days?

What exactly do you need from _____? How could you let them know exactly how to help you?

Take time to identify what is most helpful for **you** right now, what helps **you** to keep going, what **you** are doing that keeps things from getting worse:

What compassionate and kind messages can you repeat to yourself over the next few days?

Hope

What helped you remain hopeful during other difficult times in your life?

What has kept you hopeful since ___?

Notice the moments which are not as bad, which are a little bit easier.

What helps you to believe that it's not always going to hurt like this?

What do you know about yourself that tells you that you are going to get through this?

Emotions

You can give yourself permission to experience sadness, anger, fear AND you can give yourself permission to experience more pleasant emotions. These pleasant emotions may sound like whispers, while the others are louder. If you pay attention to these whispers, it will help you keep your head above water and give you the strength you need to face the most difficult moments.

Give yourself permission to do activities that help you feel these emotions (gratitude, love, interest, amusement, inspiration, pride, hope, serenity, wonder, joy).

Notice and savour the moments when any of these emotions happen naturally without effort on your part.

Remember the times each of them took up more space in your day.

Do something that would allow a more pleasant emotion to settle in for the next hour.

Emotions are like visitors: just because sadness is there, it doesn't mean that others can't drop by. You can even invite them to stay.

Agency, direction

Some people think, "This can't have happened for nothing." If this is the case for you, you may feel the need to make sense of what happens next. It's normal for some hopes to come back into focus. You can let them take up space, little by little.

What is still meaningful to you? Can you devote some time to it in the next few days?

When you can imagine a project that would be meaningful to you, what is it? Who could you trust to talk about this dream with?

If you feel there are things that need to be different from now on, you don't have to take action right away. But it may do you some good to imagine these possibilities. Don't be surprised if you feel compelled to act. This is also a normal reaction.

Relationships

The people around us can have different roles. Make sure you give them a job they can do. Don't confuse their ability to listen to you or to know what you need with their love for you.

Who thinks you have what it takes to bounce back? What gives them this conviction about you?

Who can you do activities with that make you feel good (going out, playing sports, taking your mind off things)? Even if you don't feel like it, can you continue with some of these activities?

Who do you like, even if they aren't very good at helping in difficult times? Can you keep them close despite their limitations by telling them that you won't talk about what happened, but that it would do you good to see them?

For whom is it worth continuing? What are you still doing for them despite what you are going through? Some people will tell you that you need to think about yourself and to stop doing so much for others. But for some people, helping others is what gets them through the most difficult times. If this feels right for you, you have the right to explain this to your loved ones.

Tailored

It may be the first time that you have experienced a loss like this, but it isn't the first time that you have faced challenges. In past difficulties, what helped you get through the first few days?

What helped you keep going in the most difficult times?

What personal values or beliefs have been most helpful?

Imagine a less difficult day despite the current situation. What does it look like? Can you give yourself the conditions to have this more often?

What gives you the strength to put one foot in front of the other?

Self-compassion

What are the most helpful, caring phrases you have heard since the event? Can you repeat them, or post them somewhere where you will see them?

What would you say to someone you love who was going through the same situation as you? When things are difficult, can you ask a loved one to repeat these words to you?

If you had a good relationship with the person who died, what would they want you to tell yourself right now? If it helps, you can imagine it in their voice.

If the relationship was not very good, can you choose another voice to speak kindly to you and tell you that you did the best you could, under the circumstances, given the nature of the relationship?

There are clichés and well-worn messages that might bother you right now. You may even be irritated when you hear them. But there may also be some messages (from songs, movies, books) that are really helpful. If so, I invite you to listen to that song, or watch that movie, or reread that author who makes you feel good.