

A GENTLE REFLECTION WORKBOOK

Reflective Writing for Grief and Loss

A gentle guide to making space for the many ways grief can be felt,
remembered and carried.

START HERE

You do not have to make sense of grief today

Grief can follow the death of someone important, and it can also accompany other profound losses. These pages offer a place to notice what has changed and what you need, without asking you to find a lesson, move on or feel a particular way.

Grief has many contexts

You might be grieving a person, a relationship, a home, health, fertility, a role, a community, a hoped-for future, or a way of life that has changed. Some losses are recognised by others; some are private, complicated or difficult to name. More than one loss can be present at the same time. This workbook does not rank losses or decide which ones count.

There is no single correct pattern

Grief can feel intense, muted, confusing, physical, practical, or different from one hour to the next. You may feel sadness, anger, relief, numbness, longing, guilt, gratitude, or nothing you can name. Feelings can coexist. A day with laughter does not cancel grief, and a hard day does not mean that you have failed to heal.

You are not required to write a full account. You might use a few words, a voice note, a list, a drawing, or one question. You can skip anything that feels too close, return another day, or ask someone supportive to sit with you while you reflect.

Make a little room around the writing

- Choose a time and place that feel manageable, not perfect.
- Decide how long you want to spend. A few minutes can be enough.
- Keep something comforting or grounding nearby if that helps.
- Stop, pause, or close the page whenever you need to.

Writing is one way to be with an experience; it is not a test or a treatment you must complete. You can use this guide alongside support from people you trust or a qualified professional. If a prompt brings up more than you can hold today, leave it and take care of the present moment first.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What would help me feel steady enough to begin—or to decide not to begin today?

01 | RHYTHM AND TIME

Grief does not follow a timetable

People often talk about grief as if it should move through a set sequence and then be finished. Real experiences are more varied. You may circle back, feel several things at once, or notice that a loss changes meaning over time.

There is no deadline for missing someone

Grief can come in waves, settle into the background, or appear unexpectedly. You might feel more able to manage one day and find the next difficult. Dates, places, music, conversations, ordinary routines or a new milestone can bring a memory close. A wave is not proof that you have gone backwards; it may be a response to something that matters.

You may also experience stretches when you feel absorbed in work, family, practical tasks or something enjoyable. Moments of relief and connection can sit alongside sadness. You do not have to earn them by grieving in a particular way.

Notice your own pattern

If it helps, look back gently at a few days or moments. What tends to bring the loss close? What gives you a little breathing room? Is there a time of day when the feelings are sharper? You are gathering information, not building a timetable or judging yourself for the answers.

Some people find a rhythm in talking, remembering or keeping a ritual. Others prefer privacy, practical activity, quiet, movement or a change of focus. What helps may change too. You are allowed to revise the ways you care for yourself.

When other people set the pace

Comments such as “you should be over it by now” can add pressure to an already difficult experience. You do not have to defend your timeline. A short boundary may help: “I am finding my own way through this,” or “I do not want to discuss it today.” You can ask a trusted person to help communicate that boundary.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What changes in my grief over time, and what helps me meet those changes with care?

You might notice a date, a quieter moment, a routine, or the kind of support you want.

02 | NAMING WHAT CHANGED

Make room for different kinds of loss

Naming a loss can help you understand why it matters. You do not need to justify it by comparing it with somebody else's experience. If the words feel difficult, you can begin with "I miss...", "I wish...", or "Things changed when...".

Loss can be visible or difficult to explain

Bereavement after a death may bring practical changes as well as longing and sorrow. Other losses can involve separation, estrangement, illness, a change in ability, a move, unemployment, infertility, retirement, migration, a disrupted identity, or the end of an expected future. Anticipatory grief may begin while a change is unfolding. Ambiguous loss can involve someone who is physically absent or emotionally changed, or a situation without clear answers.

Some grief receives little social recognition. You may hear that a relationship was not "official," that you should be grateful, or that the change is not serious because it was not a death. Lack of recognition can leave a person carrying both the loss and the effort of convincing others it mattered. Your experience does not need public approval to be real to you.

More than one loss can overlap

A change in health can also affect independence, work, friendships and the future you imagined. A death may alter family roles, finances, routines and a sense of safety. You might miss what existed and what you expected to happen. These layers can be hard to separate, and you do not have to sort them all out at once.

Try naming each layer without ranking it. You might make a list, draw a map, or finish one sentence and stop. "What I lost" can include a person, a place, a role, a routine, an assumption, a chance, or a feeling of certainty.

If you notice yourself comparing losses, pause and ask what the comparison is doing for you. It may be an attempt to find permission to grieve. You do not have to prove that your loss is the worst, the most visible or the most permanent. You can make room for what this change means in your life.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What has changed, ended, or become uncertain—and which part feels most present today?

03 | BODY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Notice how grief is showing up

Grief is not only a thought or an emotion. It may affect energy, concentration, sleep, appetite, memory, movement, relationships and everyday tasks. Experiences vary widely; there is no checklist you have to match.

Look for your own signals

You might notice tiredness, restlessness, a tight chest, a heavy feeling, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, irritability, tears, numbness, changes in sleep or appetite, or a wish to be near reminders. You might notice none of these, or something not listed here. A physical or emotional change can have more than one cause, so avoid using one feeling as proof of what you “should” be experiencing.

Ordinary tasks may need more effort for a while. Decisions, messages, meals, paperwork or social plans can feel unusually demanding. If you can, make tasks smaller and more concrete: answer one message, prepare one part of a meal, or ask somebody to sit nearby while you begin. Accepting practical help is a valid way to care for yourself.

When your capacity is lower, it may help to separate what truly needs attention today from what can wait. A short list can reduce the pressure to hold everything in mind. You could choose one essential task, ask someone to share another, and give yourself permission to postpone the rest.

Ask what the moment needs

- Would quiet, company, movement, rest or a change of focus help right now?
- Is there a practical task someone could share or take over?
- Would a predictable routine help, or would flexibility feel kinder?
- Do I want to remember, talk, write, or leave the subject for now?

You do not have to turn every feeling into an action. Sometimes noticing “this is a difficult moment” is enough. Sometimes your body may need food, water, medication as prescribed, rest, warmth, fresh air or help from a clinician. If a new or worrying physical symptom concerns you, seek appropriate health advice rather than assuming grief explains it.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What is one small act of care that fits my actual capacity today?

04 | MEMORY AND CONNECTION

Remember in a way that feels true

Writing can make room for memories, questions, affection, anger, unfinished conversations or complicated feelings. You do not have to make the story neat or turn a person into only their best moments.

A relationship can hold mixed truths

You may miss someone and also remember ways they hurt you. You might feel love, anger, relief, regret, distance or uncertainty. If the relationship was complicated, grief may include what happened, what did not happen, what you hoped for, and what you need to protect now. You are allowed to write honestly and privately.

Some people find comfort in continuing bonds: carrying a phrase, value, tradition, story or memory forward. Others do not want a ritual or a symbolic connection. There is no required way to remember. You can choose what feels supportive, change it over time, or decide not to do it.

A few gentle writing choices

- Write one ordinary detail you want to remember, without making it a complete story.
- Describe something you wish others understood about the loss.
- Write a letter you do not need to send. You can stop at any point.
- Name one question that may not have an answer, and what it is like to carry it.

A memory may bring regret or an unfinished conversation. Hindsight can make the past look clearer than it was. You can notice what you wish had happened without deciding that you should have known then what you know now. If there is a practical repair you can still make, you can consider it gently; if there is not, the feeling still deserves care.

You do not owe anyone access to what you write. Keep it private, share a small part with a trusted person, or destroy it if that feels right. Before writing a letter or revisiting a memory, decide what boundary would help: a time limit, a grounding activity afterwards, or another person available.

If you are not ready to write about the person or the loss, write about the present instead: what you can see, what is happening around you, or what you need for the next hour.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What would I like to remember, say, question, or keep private?

05 | DATES AND SUDDEN WAVES

Prepare gently for moments that may be hard

Anniversaries, birthdays, seasonal events, places, sounds, family routines or unexpected reminders can bring grief close. You may anticipate some dates and be surprised by others. Planning can create options, but it cannot control every feeling.

Make a flexible plan

If a particular date is approaching, think about what you may want—not what you believe you ought to do. You might keep the day ordinary, make a small ritual, visit a meaningful place, spend time with someone safe, change a routine, or leave the decision until nearer the time. You can make a plan B if your energy or feelings change.

A plan can include who to contact, what practical tasks can be moved, where you could take a break, and what you can say if you do not want to talk. A message such as “I may be quieter that day; please check in without expecting me to explain” can reduce pressure.

You might plan in three small parts: before the date, decide what can be prepared or changed; during it, choose one or two options for company, privacy or a ritual; afterwards, allow time to rest or return to routine. The plan can be flexible. You are not required to follow it if your needs change.

When a wave arrives unexpectedly

Try orienting to where you are now. Notice a few things you can see or hear, feel a steady surface under your hand, or name the date and place. You might take a short pause, step outside, sit with someone, or let the feeling pass without demanding that it make sense immediately. Choose what usually helps you; grounding is an option, not a test.

Sometimes reminders are tied to a loss that was frightening or traumatic. You do not need to approach a memory alone or force yourself to relive it. Consider support from a qualified professional if the impact feels difficult to manage or is affecting your safety and daily life.

Afterwards, reflect only if useful: What helped? What was too much? What might I change next time? A difficult date is not evidence that you failed to cope.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What choice or support would give me a little more room around a difficult date or reminder?

06 | SUPPORT AND BOUNDARIES

Let other people know what helps

Grief can change what you want from other people. You may need company, practical help, listening, privacy or direct information. Needs can differ from day to day. You are allowed to ask for what would help and to change your mind.

Make the request specific

People often want to help but may not know what to offer. A specific request can make the next step clearer: “Could you bring dinner on Thursday?” “Can you sit with me while I make this call?” “Please say their name; I want to remember them.” “I cannot talk about this today, but I would like company.” You can ask someone else to help communicate if direct conversation feels difficult.

If somebody responds in a way that does not help, you can set a boundary. For example: “I know you mean well, but advice is not what I need right now.” “Please do not tell me how long grief should last.” “I will let you know if I want to talk.” You do not have to explain everything to make a boundary valid.

It can help to make a small support map: one person for listening, one person for practical help, and one service or professional you could contact if things become difficult. The same person does not have to meet every need. If you cannot think of anyone right now, that is useful information to share with a support service.

Support may come from different places

A trusted friend, family member, community or faith group, bereavement service, peer support group, counsellor or health professional may offer different kinds of help. Cultural, spiritual and family practices can matter; so can choosing a different path from people around you. There is no single support route that fits everyone.

If grief feels isolating, think about one person who can hear a small part of the truth. You do not have to tell the whole story. If your distress feels unbearable, you are struggling to stay safe, or daily functioning has become very difficult, reach out to someone you trust and seek appropriate professional or urgent support.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What would I like someone to understand or do—and what do I want to keep for myself?

07 | A FLEXIBLE TOOL

A reflection to return to

Use these steps in any order. You can answer one, speak them aloud, or ask someone to sit with you. You do not need to reach acceptance, closure or a final explanation.

1. Name the loss in your own words

What has changed, ended, or become uncertain? You can name a person, relationship, role, place, ability, expectation or future.

2. Notice what is present today

What feeling, memory, body signal or practical worry is closest right now? What can wait?

3. Include the context

What else is happening in your life? What makes this moment harder, and what gives you even a little room?

4. Remember what matters

What do you want to carry, honour, question or keep private? Mixed feelings are allowed.

5. Choose one act of care

Would you like company, a boundary, practical help, rest, a ritual, a change of focus, or support from a professional?

6. Close gently

What will help you return to the rest of today? You can put the writing away and leave the bigger questions open.

A short example

"I miss the ordinary phone calls. Today I heard a song that reminded me of them and felt the loss sharply. I do not need to decide what the song means. I could message my sister, listen once more if I want to, or take a break. Any of those choices is okay."

There may be no answer that makes the loss feel fair. The purpose of reflection is to make a little room for what is true and to notice what you need now.

A closing thought

You can carry love, pain, change and ordinary life together. You do not have to do grief the right way or finish it on anyone else's timetable.

Take one sentence with you

- My loss matters, even if others do not understand it.
- There is no deadline for the way I grieve.
- I can ask for support and set boundaries.
- I can leave some questions open for now.

If you would like support, you can speak with someone you trust or a qualified professional. Space to Breathe Therapy can also be contacted to ask whether its support is right for you.