

*Unfinished Conversation: Healing from Suicide and Loss*  
*A Guided Journey*

By Robert E. Lesoine and Marilynne Chöphel MFT

**Tool Kit for Your Journey to Healing**

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As you embark on your grief and healing journey, it's 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 will help you create more stability and well-being in your life, even in the midst of your grief.

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

- Mindful Observation
- Supportive Resources
- Fellow Travelers and Guides
- Emotional Weather Barometer
- Map of the Territory of Grief
- Inner Compass
- Instructions for Meditation: Sitting and Walking
- Tonglen Meditation: Taking in Pain and Sending Out Relief

**Mindful Observation**

Perhaps the most important tool for navigating your entire journey is being mindful—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 observes what is there 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're 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 these five primary ways of organizing experience and add your own ideas:

- **Thoughts:** Memories of the past, imaginings of the future, beliefs, values, “shoulds,” judgments, self-limiting thoughts, cognitive distortions, intentions, aspirations, 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, over-whelm, kindness/compassion, gratitude/forgiveness, joy/peace, affection/love.
- **Five Senses:** Smelling, tasting, seeing, hearing, touching/physical sensation.

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- **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, exploration, and kindness. Practice remaining aware of your experience, just as it is, with- out judgment and with compassion, even when it is difficult. Remember there's no right or wrong way to feel— simply observe 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 their effect. To survive the aftermath of your heartbreaking loss and move forward on your journey of healing, you will need to develop both internal and external supports.

### *What Are Your Inner Supports?*

Turn inward to connect with these inner realms. Be creative and add your own ideas:

- **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, capacity to give and receive support, healthy boundaries, capacity for and cultivation of empathy and compassion, capacity to be vulnerable and intimate, capacity to give and receive affection and love.
- **Your Spiritual Life:** Faith, inspiration, devotion, connection with something greater than yourself, prayer, meditation, capacity for and cultivation of harmony, mercy, tranquility, equanimity, surrender, reverence, wonder, happiness and joy, pure awareness.
- **Your Emotional Life:** Ability to feel and accept a full range of emotions from joy to sorrow, recognizing changes in your emotions, ability to regulate your emotions when alone or with others, 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, imagination, reasoning, integrity, perseverance, motivation, interest, open-minded inquiry.

- **Your Body:** Self-care, supporting your health, relaxation, deep sleep, moderation, ability to laugh and cry, capacity to enjoy the pleasures of the five senses..
- **Your Creative Life:** Journaling, expressing yourself through art, singing, playing music, writing, poetry, dancing, visioning, creating what has meaning.
- **Your Natural World:** Ability to appreciate beauty and nature, relationship with animals, ability to play and have fun.

### *What Are Your Outer Supports?*

Reach out to connect with these outer realms. Be creative and add your own ideas:

- **Relationships:** Friends, family, children, coworkers, social and recreational groups; skillful and caring communication; nurturing relationships with friends, family, and colleagues; generosity; giving and receiving support and service; enjoyment of interpersonal connection and intimacy.
- **Community:** Group connection, sharing meals and other activities, parties and celebrations, shared sports and recreation, shared holidays and rituals, support groups, health care providers, therapists, classes and workshops, continuing education, social service agencies, volunteering and serving others.
- **Your Material World:** Creating safety and stability in your home, finances, and relationships.
- **Your Spiritual World:** Spiritual practices and study, meditating or praying with others, spiritual community, ritual.
- **Your Intellectual World:** Reading, learning, continuing education, dialogue and debate, intellectual stimulation, games/ puzzles, lectures and performances, scientific curiosity, new experiences, culture, and travel.
- **Your Healthy Body:** Good nutrition, exercising to develop strength and flexibility, deep relaxation, sports, body-mind practices such as yoga or Qigong, martial arts.
- **Creative Nourishment:** Writing, poetry, art, music, singing, photography, dancing, listening to music, reading, cultural activities, performances, classes, creative projects.
- **Your Natural World:** Spending time in nature, gardening, animal companions, travel and learning about different cultures, scientific curiosity and learning, exploration and adventure.

### **Fellow Travelers and Guides**

A feeling of disconnection from not just your loved one, but also from those around you and from yourself, is natural after such sudden and tragic loss. Sharing your experience with someone who truly understands your grief is an important part of resolving the loss and healing. (See Appendix 2, “Creating Support”) Optimally your network of support will include:

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- **Your People:** Talk individually or gather with friends, family members, or others whom you trust to understand and care.
- **Journey Buddy:** Meet regularly with someone you trust, perhaps another survivor, who listens well, truly understands, and supports your healing.
- **Support Group:** Come together with others in a survivor’s support group or grief support group. (See Appendix 4, “Resources for Survivors of Suicide” for websites of organizations with survivor’s support groups, and its subsection Resources for Creating Survivor Support Groups that offers guidance for creating and facilitating suicide bereavement support groups.)
- **Travel Guide:** Work with a licensed therapist, grief counselor, mental health or health care professional, or spiritual counselor. If it’s 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’s 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 are organizations of therapists who use such holistic approaches, are highly respected in the professional therapeutic community, and have websites that list licensed therapists near you.
  - SensorimotorPsychotherapyInstitute  
[www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org](http://www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org)
  - EMDR Institute  
[www.emdr.com](http://www.emdr.com)
  - Foundation for Human Enrichment  
[www.traumahealing.com](http://www.traumahealing.com)
  - Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples  
[www.iceeft.com](http://www.iceeft.com)

## **Emotional Weather Barometer**

Pause occasionally during your reading, writing, or sharing to become aware of your present-moment experience. 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. Remember that your intention is to heal, not to re-traumatize. If you find yourself beginning to feel hijacked by intense emotions, stuck in avoidance, or overwhelmed by memories, step back from what you are focusing on until you feel more stable again. Return awareness to your body and breath, re-connect with what is grounding and comforting in the present moment, and turn to your Supportive Resources and caring connections for comfort.

In order to transform and heal through your grief, it's important to learn how to navigate through strong feelings and stressful situations without being overwhelmed by the emotion or shutting down and going numb. Explore ways to engage with the exercises in bite-size-pieces so that you stay within your "window of tolerance," choosing an emotional range and pace for yourself that feels safe, containable, and where you can bring compassionate awareness and choice to your exploration of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Remember that as the suffering of the past is met with the caring connection, wise perspective, and accepting embrace of the present, the traces of pain can arise, transform, and heal.

Whenever distressing feelings surface, think of them as passing weather systems—they will change—and simply notice your experience. You may sometimes feel *hyperaroused*: flooded by emotions, agitated, anxious, overwhelmed, dealing with racing thoughts, panicked, self-conscious, defensive and reactive, needing to control everything, or unable to stop crying. You may also sometimes feel *hypoaroused*: barely able to feel emotions, frozen and numb, passive, paralyzed, unable to think straight, shut down, disconnected from your self, immobilized, apathetic and uncaring, disorganized, or 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're feeling in writing, through action, or by talking with someone, but also know that feeling something doesn't necessarily mean you have to act on it.

Practice meeting difficult emotions, thoughts, memories, or conditions with the four steps of "RAIN," a mindfulness-based technique from meditation teacher Michele McDonald, to transform them into more manageable experience from which wise choices and skillful action becomes possible.

**R — Recognize** what is happening inside and around you with compassionate awareness. Notice the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations so that they can be acknowledged and responded to. "I am having this thought right now." "Sadness is present."

**A — Allow** your experience to be present. Accept the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations to be as they are in this moment, without resisting or holding on. Notice as they arise, change, and pass away. "Let it be." "I receive this moment as it is."

**I — Investigate** your experience with curiosity, openness, and a natural desire to know the truth of your own experience and that of others. Study the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations with an attitude of kindness and compassion. "What physical sensations am I feeling?" "What emotions are present?" "What is the story I am telling myself?"

**N — Non-identification** allows for meeting your experience with a spacious, neutral awareness and an open heart. These thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations are not unique to you, but are experienced by all people. "Rest in a compassionate open awareness that holds even this."

You can also choose calming and soothing activities such as gentle breathing, taking a break to stretch, or taking a walk. Or simply recall something beautiful and nourishing in your life, a moment of kindness you received, or something or someone you are grateful for. 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 stability and well-being.

*When you contact the all-worked-up feeling of shenpa (getting hooked on a negative emotion), the basic instruction is the same as in dealing with physical pain. Whether it's a feeling of I like or I don't like, or an emotional state like loneliness, depression, or anxiety, you open yourself fully to the sensation, free of interpretation. If you've tried this approach with physical pain, you know that the result can be quite miraculous. When you give your full attention to your knee or your back or your head—whatever hurts—and drop the good/bad, right/wrong story line and simply experience the pain directly for even a short time, then your ideas about the pain, and often the pain itself, will dissolve.*

—Pema Chödrön

*Living Beautifully: with Uncertainty and Change*

Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2012

## Map of the Territory of Grief

Losing someone to suicide is traumatizing, and the bereavement is complex. It's important to remember that the responses to loss are unique to each person, and all are quite normal reactions to an event as life altering as losing someone you love to suicide.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described five different experiences that commonly take place during any grieving process. They are not sequential, and they may occur separately or simultaneously. They may vary in intensity, change by the hour, or persist for days, months, or even longer. Feel free to add to these categories from your own personal experience of grief.

- **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, contempt, withdrawal of attention/affection, passive-aggressive behaviors, outbursts, outrage, aggression. Or it can be turned inward against yourself in self-judgment, self-blame, shame, withdrawal, self-destructive behaviors, self-harm. “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* had 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 overeat 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's very important that you discuss any signs of depression with your health care provider and/or a

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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 can experience more inner calm, deepen connection with your loved ones, and more fully live your life with enjoyment, contentment, and wellbeing.

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 Tool Kit to make sure that you’re creating the support you need to continue moving forward on your healing journey toward the life you want to live.

## **Instructions for Meditation: Sitting and Walking**

### *Sitting Meditation*

During your grief and healing journey, it can be very helpful to sit silently for a period of time each day. If you're not familiar with meditation, here are some simple suggestions. Create a meaningful space for meditation. You might include some special objects such as a flower, sacred articles, a photo, remembrances of your loved one, or lighting a candle.

Sit comfortably on a cushion with legs crossed or on a chair with your feet resting on the ground. Place your hands comfortably on your lap or your thighs, and allow your eyes to rest softly open or closed.

Allow your spine to lengthen, your head to be relaxed and upright, and your heart area to be open. Relax your body and let your belly soften. Release your facial muscles and allow an inner smile to bloom.

Gently bring awareness to your breathing. Breathe in a way that's natural and comfortable for you. Let your awareness rest lightly on each breath, letting go and relaxing with each out-breath.

Allow any thoughts and feelings to arise and pass in a very relaxed and nonjudgmental way. As thoughts arise, you might silently acknowledge them as "thinking" and then let them go, returning your awareness again and again to your relaxed body and gentle out-breath. Allow your thoughts and feelings to drift by like floating clouds. Open your awareness to the silent stillness—just sitting . . . breathing . . . and relaxing your body and mind.

### *Walking Meditation*

Practicing meditation while you're walking can bring you more peace and well-being. Walking meditation is a valuable companion practice with sitting meditation, and some may find a "moving meditation" more comfortable. The goal of walking meditation is not to arrive at a destination, but the walking itself. Here are some suggestions.

Walk in a slow and mindful way, either inside or out of doors. Take relaxed and leisurely steps, and let worries and emotions fall away. With every step, become aware of each foot naturally lifting, moving, and then meeting the earth.

Let your awareness rest with your breathing and the physical sensations throughout your body as you move, and open your senses to what you're seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching in the moment.

If your attention wanders into thoughts about the past or the future, let the thoughts go, and gently return your attention to the sensations of movement and of the touch of each foot as it peacefully makes contact with the earth.

Allow an inner smile to arise as you walk. With every step simply remain present . . . relaxed . . . aware. You may also silently repeat the following phrases, suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh, with each step . . . "I have arrived . . . I am home . . . In the here . . . In the now."

## **Tonglen Meditation: Taking In Pain and Sending Out Relief**

Tonglen is a practice for connecting with pain—your own and that which is all around you, everywhere you go. It’s a method for overcoming the fear of suffering and awakening the compassion that’s inherent in all of us.

To begin, sit comfortably with your spine long and your belly soft. Close your eyes, gently relax your body, and place your awareness lightly on your breath. For a few breaths, rest your mind in a state of openness and stillness. As you are ready:

- 1) Bring into your awareness someone you care about who is hurting and whom you wish to help—someone who is in some physical or emotional pain in their life. Breathe in with the wish to take away all of their pain, suffering, and fear. Then as you breathe out, send them ease, happiness, or whatever would relieve their suffering. Breathe in their pain so they can be well and have more space to open and heal. Breathe out, sending them relaxation or whatever you feel would bring them relief and well-being.
- 2) When your *own* pain arises—fear, resistance, anger, helplessness, stuckness—change the focus and begin to do Tonglen for your- self, for what you are feeling. Breathe in your own pain, with the wish to be relieved of this suffering. And breathe out, sending to yourself whatever brings ease, relaxation, openness, compassion, and relief.
- 3) And now, make the practice bigger. As you practice Tonglen for the person you care about or for yourself, breathe in for the mil- lions of other people just like you who at this very moment are feeling exactly the same pain and misery. And breathe out, for all those people, whatever would bring relief to their suffering. Simply contact what you’re feeling and breathe in, take it in for all of us—and send out relief to all of us. Breathe in the feeling completely, letting it touch you, with a willingness to feel the suffering of humanity. And breathe out, radiating out compassion, loving kindness, freshness, openness, anything that heals, relaxes, and that helps you and others to open to and enjoy life. Let yourself contact the suffering and the joy of our human condition and how universal this experience is.

As you practice, breathe in as if through every pore, letting it melt your heart open, knowing that there is nowhere for it to get stuck inside. And breathe out as if through every pore, sending out, radiating out your compassion in all directions. Rather than doing what’s habitual—what- ever is painful is pushed away and whatever is pleasurable is held on to— Tonglen reverses that habit. When it’s painful, breathe it in, let it touch you, overcoming your fear of pain. When it’s delightful, send it out, and share it with others—relaxation, happiness, and well-being.

Tonglen can be done for those who are living or no longer living, for strangers, for animals, for anyone who is experiencing pain, fear, or any form of suffering. It can be practiced as a formal meditation or as an everyday habit, right on the spot—breathe in and breathe out, feel fully when you see or feel physical or emotional pain, with the wish that all beings be happy and free of suffering.\*

\*Adapted from Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2000) and *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005).