

# Healing Grief Retreats

International Death, Grief and Bereavement Conference Poster Session,  
La Crosse, WI, June 6, 2017

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Curriculum for 6 hour grief retreat for high school students or young adults

## 1. **Introduction** of leaders and self-introductions of participants

Begin in seated circle.

Ground rules for creating a safe space: What do they need in order to feel comfortable and safe?

Brief overview of day: People heal in a variety of ways. Some through talking, some through being alone and thinking or writing, some through physical movement, some through art or music. There are endless possibilities. Today we're going to offer a variety of healing practices. Our hope is that you will take something from the day which you can continue to use on your own.

## 2. **Step Forward**

Move to standing circle area. Take one step forward if:

- If you have lost someone you love.
- If you have lost a friend.
- If you have lost a family member.
- If you have lost someone else important to you.
- If you have ever felt angry at your loved one since they died.
- If you ever feel afraid others will die.
- If you sometimes feel like no one understands what you are going through.
- If you feel a little nervous about this day.
- If you have found inner strength you did not know you had.
- If you have been told something hurtful about your experience of loss.
- If you have ever felt your grief somewhere in your body.
- If you have felt alone in your grief.
- If your grief has impacted any of your friendships.
- If you believe healing can happen after the death of a loved one.  
(Dooley-Harrington)

## 3. **Opening Ritual**

- Light the single candle. "I light this candle in memory of those we loved and lost. Their light remains with us and is present here today." Leave the candle burning throughout the day, if possible.
- Pass the bowl of rocks and have everyone take one. Tell them they will get a rock back at the end of the day.

- Invite them to share a bit about the person they lost. Lastly, ask them to share something they gained from their loved one as they put the rock back in the bowl. (Putting the rock back in the bowl signals it is time for the next person to share.) Depending upon the size of the group, you may need to limit what they say to the name of the person they lost, their relationship with the person (mom, friend, brother), and something they gained from their loved one. One of the facilitators can model how to keep it the desired length.

#### 4. Talking Circle

Move back to seated circle area. Discussion on the holistic impact of grief. Today is about healing and a variety of ways to do so. When we experience a profound loss, we feel it all over – grief impacts our whole being. Most people feel grief physically. *How have you felt your grief physically?* It can impact our social lives. Sometimes friends can't relate to it or don't know what to say so they might distance themselves. *How has your loss impacted your relationships?* Loss can make our minds foggy or cause us to be disorganized, forgetful, and scattered. It can make it hard to focus and to be a student. *How has your grief impacted your work or school?* It can cause us to ask some pretty big questions about life. Our spiritual life can help us through grief or it can be totally shaken if the things we thought about the world seem no longer true. *Would you say your loss has impacted your spiritual life?* Certainly there is an emotional response. After the loss of a loved one, most people feel sad. But sadness is not the only emotion. *What other emotions have you felt?* Anger, fear, confusion, resentment, jealousy...can all be part of grief. C.S. Lewis, "No one told me grief would feel so much like fear."

Discussion on myths and truths about grief

While everyone grieves differently, there are some basic truths about grief.

- Grief is a normal process. You are a normal person having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- Grief is a healthy response to the loss of someone dear.
- Grief changes – it's up/down, back/forth.
- Loss can change us. Depending upon the depth of the loss, we may not return to normal. We may have to create a new normal.
- It's generally complicated. A mixture of many emotions and reactions.
- It is a unique experience. Everyone grieves and heals differently.
- Grief is not just emotions. It lives in our body, mind, and spirit and affects all aspects of our lives.
- It is a unique space in our lives and deserves compassion, respect, understanding, and acceptance.
- It is a healing process.
- Grief itself doesn't necessarily end. We will always miss and grieve for the person we lost. What does end is the intense period of mourning and deep longing.

## **5. Breathing/Muscle Scan with Visualization**

Offer a brief explanation of how our central nervous system is impacted by strong emotions and why it is important to have ways to physically calm ourselves. Then walk them through a breathing exercise coupled with a muscle scan and visualization. During the visualization, we have them create a safe space for themselves which they can return to, but there are many visualizations to choose from.

## **6. Nature Walk**

One of the ways some people heal is by being in nature. Nature can provide powerful healing images for those who have lost a loved one. The cycle of nature reminds us of death and life because every year we see these changes. Nature can provide hope and inspiration. Walking in nature can shift our thinking and our emotions. And simply being in nature can offer us a safe place.

Today we are in this lovely setting in the woods. We're going to go outside for about 15 minutes. You will wonder on your own. While you are outside you can do one of several things.

- Find a physical representation of some aspect of your grief. A rock, leaf, stick, or something which might symbolize your loss or what your loss has felt like. Take a picture of it if it is too large to bring back. Or just describe it to the group.
- Find a representation or take a picture of something that feels sad but hopeful. Or just hopeful. Or just sad. Maybe a shoot of green coming up around the fallen leaves.
- Focus on how nature survives challenges. What might this image say to you?
- Simply experience the quiet and beauty of the woods. Don't look for anything in particular. Just walk, breathe, and look. Does it shift your mood?
- Find a spot to sit. Focus on your senses. What do you smell? What can you touch and how does it feel? What do you hear? What do you see? How does focusing in on your senses shift your focus from your fears/sadness/worries?

## **7. Talking Circle**

Sharing of nature walk and relaxation exercise

## **8. Yoga**

We invite a yoga instructor to lead the participants in a few poses which accentuate strength and balance.

## **9. Music and Lunch**

Participants are invited to play a song which connects with their grief. Most will have music on their phone. Provide a speaker system with auxiliary cord. The central focus of this time is informal connection with peers.

## **10. Grief Quotes**

Have a series of quotes about grief printed off, one per page. Scatter around the room. Ask participants to read the quotes and choose one which speaks to them. When they return to the circle, they can share their quote and why they chose it.

## **11. Art Activity**

- Take a piece of card stock. Trace and cut out your hand or leave the card stock whole. Have magazines, scissors, markers, colored pencils, any miscellaneous art supplies available. Add pictures/words/etc. which TELLS YOUR STORY. Can be of your loved one - or of your grief. Where you are now? What do you need? What is the glue that holds your life together? What are your strengths? Something else? All of the above?
- On the opposite side, create a representation of your hopes for your future - when you are in a place of healing and peace. A place where your grief is part of you, but not all of you. Where you are living with joy and meaning. Consider what is possible. What is your vision for yourself? What do you want to bring into your life? What does healing look like for you?

## **12. Talking Circle**

Sharing of yoga experience and artwork

## **13. Journaling**

Writing about your loss can be a powerful healing tool. Intentionally setting aside time to reflect is a way to stop and honor grief. Writing can bring greater understanding to our emotions, can help us focus on hope and meaning, and can promote exploration of how to reinvest in life. When we are numb, it can help us connect with our thoughts. For some it is grounding and a way to contain thoughts or feelings. Journaling highlights the uniqueness of the grief process and can help track change and healing. It offers a way to tell and retell our story without fear of judgement. Ultimately the honest self-reflection gained through this type of writing can enhance a deeper connection with not only oneself, but with others as well.

There is no right or wrong way to journal. The writing is for your eyes only. Your journal is your private place to honestly express what is going on. It can be in words, images, scribbles, lyrics, or any form which works for you.

We encourage participants to establish a journaling practice at home. Boundaries are an important part of this. You don't want to live in your journal. Also time of day can be important. If it is hard to fall asleep after you journal, don't do it right before bed. If you do journal right before bed, end with writing three things from the day for which you are grateful or which helped you get through the day. Some people journal daily - others weekly or monthly.

Here are three individual options we offer for the day.

- a. Four Things: Ask them to make a four-part grid on a blank sheet of paper. Write “Thank you,” “I’m Sorry,” “I Forgive You,” and “I Love You” in the four quarters.
- b. Start a letter with “Dear Grief.” (What’s Your Grief)
- c. Choose one of the prompts they connect with from the journaling handout.

#### **14. Talking Circle**

Reflections on day. What was something helpful from today? What will you tell others about today? What can you continue to do at home?

#### **15. Closing Ritual**

Set out a tray with three candles. Add it to the table with the candle from the morning.

- Ask participants to gather in a circle around the table.
- Light one candle to represent your past. Who and what you lost. Your memories. Light candle #2 to recognize the present. Perhaps your current emotions – the sadness from your loss. Or what you learned from your loved one or the gifts she gave you. Light #3 to represent your future. What do you hope for? What is possible? New activities, new relationships, happiness, things you don’t even know about yet. (Bailey)
- Ask everyone to reflect on a hope for themselves. After a few moments of silence, go around the circle and invite everyone to share, “My hope for myself is \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Pass the bowl of rocks around. Ask everyone to take a rock as a physical reminder of the day. Of something they want to take away from the day.
- End with a poem. I like *Playing with Three Strings* by Rabbi Harold Schulweis. <http://hmsi.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/32-Playing-With-Three-Strings.pdf>

#### **16. Evals**

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Participants leave with: 3 votive candles, rock, art project, handouts (Self-Care, Journaling, Quotes, Centering Breath).

Supplies: Art supplies (cardstock, oil pastels, markers, colored pencils, magazines, scissors, double sided tape or glue, children’s clay, etc.), yoga mats, one large candle, tray with three candles, bowl of rocks, printed grief quotes, name tags, portable speaker system, bags with three votive candles. Clay is helpful to have for the art project if you have a sight-impaired participant.

Choose a warm inviting location that has room for a circle of chairs and an open area for yoga.

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## Identified Need

Multiple high school students and young adults died by suicide during 2011 and 2012 in Winona, MN. Bereavement services in our town of 28,000 include individual therapy and Hospice-run support groups for adults. While young adults are welcome to attend these groups, their unique developmental stage can put them out-of-step with older adults. The high schools offer crisis response following the death of a student, but not on-going groups. We identified a gap in services available to the bereaved within these two populations.

## Development

A steering committee was formed with representatives from the high school (a counselor and a psychologist), two area colleges (one counselor and the director of Wellness Services), Hospice (the chaplain and a board member), the community (a retired newspaper editor), Live Well Winona (a local non-profit organization which serves as a hub to connect and engage community members, programs, organizations and employers in healthy activities), and a private practice therapist. We received a start-up grant of \$800 from the Elizabeth Callender King Foundation. Currently we are funded by the Winona Health Foundation.

## Goals and Objectives

Goal: To provide a variety of healing practices for intuitive and instrumental teen and young adult grievers within a supportive community

Objectives:

- To create a safe space for participants to be present to their own grief
- To provide an opportunity for silent reflection
- To provide an opportunity for grievers to connect with bereaved peers
- To create paths for healing through the expressive arts
- To assist participants in pursuing new meaning following loss
- To gain tools for future use during grief

## What we have learned

- Contact the media for press release and a story.
- Form a committee with representatives from a variety of walks.
- Work closely with the high school staff to advertise and recruit students.
- Consider a shorter version of the above – a 2-3 hour option.

## **Evaluation**

- 100% of attendees said “Yes” to “Attending this retreat was of value to me.”
- 100% of attendees said “Yes” to “I would recommend others attend a similar retreat in the future.”
- 100% of attendees said they were likely or very likely to use a portion of the information presented today.
- “What are some things you expect to use from today’s information?  
*Yoga, journaling, drawing, the quotes, learning more about grief, strategies for dealing with anxiety, relaxation, opening up to more people about my grief, to accept and embrace grief, compassion toward oneself, living moment by moment, stress relievers, to feel safe in disclosing my feelings,...*

## **Comments**

- *This retreat helped me to continue my grieving process in a more healthy and comfortable way.*
- *This was very helpful for stress/emotion/state of mind/spirituality. I’d like to attend again.*
- *It helped me a lot. I will definitely use these coping mechanisms.*
- *It was both loving and kind.*

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# Quotes

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Print off one per page. Scatter around the room. Ask them to wander, read the quotes, and choose one which they connect with. Bring it back to the circle, share the quote and why they chose it (or just share the quote if they prefer not to expand).

*Your absence has gone through me like a thread through a needle. Everything I do is stitched with its color.* W. S. Merwin

*If ever there is a tomorrow when we're not together... there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart... I'll always be with you.*

A. A. Milne Christopher Robin to Pooh

*I'm not sure what enlightenment is, but I'm sure it has something to do with turning pain into love.* Miriam Greenspan

*Your grief is as personal and unique as your fingerprint.* Therese Rando

*Grief is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.*

*Death ends a life, not a relationship.* Morrie Schwartz

*What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.* Helen Keller

*Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.* Mary Anne Radmacher

*The purpose of grief work is not to "get over" your loss but to adjust to its consequences and help you restore your balance.* Phil Rich

*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Reinhold Niebuhr

*Give Sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o'er-wrought heart and bids it break.* William Shakespeare

*We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey.* Kenji Miyazawa

*The pain passes, but the beauty remains.* Pierre Auguste

*Grief only exists where love first lived.*

*Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.* Fred Rogers

*Think not so much of “moving on” but of “moving forward.” And as you move forward you ALWAYS do so with your loved one by your side, in your heart, within your very breath. They are part of you now and always. You move forward with them and continue to engage in life because of their inspiration. Ashley Davis Bush*

*Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim. Vicki Harrison*

*I know now that we never get over great losses; we absorb them, and they carve us into different, often kinder, creatures. HPLYRIKZ.com*

*Grief changes us. The pain sculpts us into someone who understands more deeply, hurts more often, appreciates more quickly, cries more often, hopes more desperately, loves more openly. HPLYRIKZ.com*

# Journaling Prompts

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Journaling can be a valuable tool for grief. There is no right or wrong way to journal, and the possibilities are endless. It can be helpful to find a quiet, private, safe place to journal. And when you are done for the day, create an ending for yourself. Remind yourself you are done for today and now you will return to your daily activities. Remind yourself you will return to your journal tomorrow, next week, or some later date. Here are some prompts taken from the following resources.

Make a list of the ways in which you are taking care of yourself through your loss. See how long you can make it.

Who is in your support system? Does it feel adequate? If not, how might you expand your support?

Make a list of mads/sads/glads.

I am mad you \_\_\_\_\_. I am sad you \_\_\_\_\_. I am glad you \_\_\_\_\_.

Write a letter to your loved one. Write about what has happened since s/he died.

Make a list of all the different emotions you have experienced since the death. End with, "I accept all my feelings."

Write about what you gained from your loved one. How did s/he influence your life? How do you expect him/her to continue to influence your life?

How has your life changed since your loved one died? What has NOT changed?

What has been most helpful in your grief?

What has been missing and how might you find this?

Write about your strengths. What are your greatest strengths? When have you been at your best? What qualities do you use during tough times?

Some of the changes I've faced in my life since the death include \_\_\_\_\_.

The thing I'm having the most trouble adjusting to is \_\_\_\_\_.

Some things that might help me include \_\_\_\_\_.

Write a letter of advice to an imaginary person going through your experience.

What are some of your favorite memories of your loved one? Write about them and end with, "Thank you for this memory."

I get meaning in my life from \_\_\_\_\_.

What advice or direction would your loved one offer to you now?

What do you want to say to your loved one?

Write a letter to your loved one.

I will always remember \_\_\_\_.

I wish \_\_\_\_.

I have been feeling \_\_\_\_.

I want you to know that \_\_\_\_.

Thank you for \_\_\_\_.

I will carry you with me by \_\_\_\_.

Make Lists:

I am \_\_\_\_.

I believe \_\_\_\_.

I hope \_\_\_\_.

I will \_\_\_\_.

What questions do you have for your loved one? How do you think s/he would answer these questions?

How do you stay connected with your loved one?

With grief, we can feel the whole world is spinning out into chaos. It is not. Look for places where you feel grounded. Where life feels solid. The lifelines you have always had are still there. Look for places where you feel connected. List your connections. List times when you feel grounded.

Create a metaphor. My grief at first was like \_\_\_\_\_. Now it is like \_\_\_\_\_. Someday it will be like \_\_\_\_\_.

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# SELF-CARE

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Practicing self-care is always a smart thing to do, but when we are grieving the loss of a loved one, it takes on added importance. It becomes essential when we are knocked off-balance by loss. Following a profound loss it is common to lose our appetite, have difficulty sleeping, feel exhausted, withdraw from people, struggle with concentration, question the meaning of things or the workings of the world, etc. Because loss can affect us on all levels, we must practice self-care on all levels. Consider the following self-assessment.

## PHYSICALLY

### *How has your loss affected you physically?*

Are you eating periodically throughout the day even if you aren't hungry? Are you remembering to drink water? Are you getting at least six hours of sleep a night? Are you sleeping too much? Are you getting some sort of exercise – or at least moving your body each day? Do you feel physically anxious or scared?

ASSESSMENT: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

### *What are you doing to take care of yourself physically and what might you add to this?*

Some possible ideas: Carry a water bottle. Find some comfort foods that you can eat. Focus on eating enough to remain healthy. Minimally go for a 20 minute walk each day. Get a massage. Take a bubble bath. Talk to a health care provider if you can't sleep or can't seem to wake up. Remind yourself to breathe and relax when anxious.

SELF-CARE: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## SOCIALLY

### *How has your loss affected you socially?*

Do you have two to three people you can talk to anytime you need? Do you surround yourself with people who treat you well? Do you socialize with friends, even though it may not be as enjoyable as it once was? Do you spend some time with people and some time alone each day?

ASSESSMENT: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

***What are you doing to take care of yourself socially and what might you add to this?***

Some possible ideas: Identify the nurturing people in your life and spend more time with them. Say “yes” to some social invitations and “no” to others. Remind yourself it is okay to have fun – laughter is great medicine. Find someone who doesn’t tire of your stories.

- SELF-CARE: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **SPIRITUALLY**

***How has your loss affected you spiritually?***

Do you take time to reflect on the big questions of life? How and when do you experience hope? Do you notice something good in each day? Do you have a sense of purpose? Do you notice when you feel peaceful? Do you feel connected with others, nature, or something bigger than yourself? Do you reflect on what your loss means to you? Are you able to identify the gifts you received from your loved one? Do you continue to feel connected to your loved one?

- ASSESSMENT: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

***What are you doing to take care of yourself spiritually and what might you add to this?***

Some possible ideas: Find someone safe who allows you to explore these big questions without judgment. Find a spiritual book and read a few pages a day. Go for a walk in nature. Practice rituals or attend a church service. Focus on how you remain connected to your loved one. Thank your loved one for what you gained from him/her. Take a meditation or yoga class.

- SELF-CARE: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **ACADEMICALLY and INTELLECTUALLY**

***How has your loss affected your academic and intellectual life?***

Do you remember what you need to do each day? Are you able to motivate yourself to do your homework? When you study, can you concentrate? Do you go to class? Are you taking time for any of your hobbies? Do you experience moments of contentment when pursuing a previous interest?

- ASSESSMENT: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

***What are you doing to take care of yourself academically and intellectually and what might you add to this?***

Some possible ideas: Make lots of lists – don't rely on your memory. Before you leave your room/apartment, take a moment to focus on your breath and state an intention for the day. (e.g., "I will notice the good in this day." "I can make it through this day.") Notice when and where you are most likely to concentrate. When you start to study, tell yourself "This is what I am doing now. I will cry/remember/talk later." (Repeat as needed!) Remember what hobbies/interests used to bring joy. Try some of them again for a short time. Choose ones that don't require deep concentration. (Something artistic or musical can be great.) Notice what is enjoyable or interesting, even if it only lasts a moment.

- SELF-CARE: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **EMOTIONALLY**

***How has your loss affected you emotionally?***

Are you able to identify your emotions? Do you allow yourself to experience a full range of emotions without judgment? Do you take time to acknowledge your loss? Do you give yourself permission to mourn? Do you keep yourself safe when you focus on your loss? When you think of your loss, are you able to remain physically calm? Do you have ways to safely turn away from your loss at times?

- ASSESSMENT: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

***What are you doing to take care of yourself emotionally and what might you add to this?***

Some possible ideas: Do something comforting or indulgent each day. Ignore hurtful advice. Watch for warning signs of depression and check it out with a professional. Allow yourself private space to grieve. Consider journaling daily or weekly. Remind yourself you can be terribly sad and "okay" at the same time. Tell yourself it is okay to "take a break" from mourning at times. Volunteer and take some time to focus on someone else. At the end of each day, focus on and name what helped you get through the day. Be patient with yourself.

- SELF-CARE: 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

***The purpose of grief work is not to "get over" your loss but to adjust to its consequences and help you restore your balance. Phil Rich***

# CENTERING BREATH

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Five minutes of focused breathing in the morning can set the tone for the entire day. Some people call it mediation, others prayer or centering or simply deep breathing. It doesn't matter what it is called, but it can be powerful. Early in the day before you rush off to class or work, take (two to) five minutes for yourself. Secure your privacy and turn off all noise. Get physically comfortable and close your eyes. Be intentional about this time and space.

Deep breathing begins with taking a long, deep and slow breath in through your nose. Feel your belly rise as you breathe as deeply as you can. Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth. Rest at this end of the breath for as long as is comfortable and then take in another long slow breath. As you breathe, feel your stomach rise when you inhale and fall when you exhale – your chest will barely move. After several rounds of slow deep breathing, imagine pulling new energy, love, and/or hope into your being as you inhale and letting the anger, guilt, and/or fear float away as you exhale. Note where you might be holding tension in your body and consciously relax those muscles. Now find an intention/affirmation that fits (one of the ones listed below or choose one of your own) and repeat this saying as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply. If you lower and slow your breath, your brain will respond by reducing anxiety, lowering blood pressure, and slowing your heart rate. Focusing on your breath also prevents your mind from chasing after all the concerns of the day.

Two to five minutes of the same at the end of the day pulls your day together and calms emotions before trying to sleep. Couple this with identifying the things from the day which soothed your grief or provided support.

By “practicing” this daily, it will become easier to use as needed throughout the day. It is an excellent tool when attention is needed on the task at hand. When you feel physical stress or experience overwhelming emotions, focus on your breath for a few moments. This will bring you back to the present and prevent spinning out in sadness over the past or fears of the future.

## POSSIBLE INTENTIONS/AFFIRMATIONS

I am finding a way.

I am capable.

I will survive.

I will find meaning in my life.

I will notice the goodness in this day.

I have the strength I need.

I will be present today.

I will take care of myself today.

Healing takes time.

Today is a new day.

I am open to life.