

Naomi Yano

When
LIFE
Hits
HARD

Healing For Your Heart and Mind



WHEN LIFE HITS HARD

EMOTIONAL ICU

HEALING FOR YOUR HEART AND MIND



Hi, I'm Naomi.

I'm a Registered Psychotherapist, Certified Emotionally Focused Therapist, and Clinical Supervisor for therapists in training. I have over a decade of experience specializing in relationships, and understanding the things that make us happy or cause us pain, in relationships. Life also hit me hard in 2010, and I know what it's like to feel like the world is crumbling, and the challenge of getting back on track.

I want you to know that this kit is meant for you, so you know that right now, everything you feel is perfectly valid. I want to help empower you to move through whatever it is you're going through, and on to something even better. That you can take whatever horrible stuff life may have given you, and harvest meaning, so you don't just survive, but you thrive.

Now, I am a therapist but I'm not your therapist and this is not meant to replace any form of professional therapy. Please take the information in this kit to support you and give you some ideas about how you can heal. And please seek professional help if and when you need it.

with care and compassion,
Naomi





9 STEPS TO GET BACK TO NORMAL

So life just hit hard and here you are.

WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?

You weren't expecting this curveball. You want to cope well and you just want to move on and you want to feel normal again.

Let's start with some practical advice:

First, don't make any big life altering decisions when in a heightened state of emotion, if at all possible (e.g. moving, changing jobs, leaving a relationship, etc). Even if they may end up being good decisions in the long run, you also risk making reactive choices in the heat of the moment that you may regret later. If you can, buy yourself time until you can feel more centered. Make small temporary choices to take care of yourself day to day until things settle down.

Talk to people, get help and be selective about who is supporting you. Surround yourself with people who will empower you to trust yourself. It is your life, not theirs. Notice when you feel better or worse, and stay connected with those who feel helpful.

You will find some questions throughout this kit. I encourage you to pause and answer them before moving on. There are no right or wrong answers. Stop and reflect, it may help you gather information to move forward. Let's see what we can observe and maybe learn in the process. Some questions may bring up difficult emotions, so please take your time, take breaks, skip the question, or get support from a therapist if it's too much.



Journal exercise #1

Let's name it. What happened to you? Write down the event, the change, the unexpected thing that has impacted you:



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Thank you for doing that! Just remembering the thing isn't always easy, never mind writing it down. It can bring up lots of thoughts or emotions that may not be comfortable. I hope you can trust me that it might help to get it all out though! If we put it all out on the table, my hope is that we can then do something with it that will help you. I'm not about venting for the sake of venting. I want you to express what's happening so we can transform it. I appreciate your bravery as we do this, so let's keep going. And remember to take it easy if it's feeling tough or intense. We can do this.





Journal exercise #2

List all the emotions you are experiencing. If you are having trouble finding words, check out this [Feeling Wheel](#) from the Gottman Institute to get some ideas. If you can, also write down the thoughts associated with each feeling (e.g. scared - I will never get better; sad - I miss that person, etc).

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Let's pause for a
moment again here.
Wow, look what you
just did.
How did that feel?

If you are feeling the emotions you are describing, that's perfectly normal, and very courageous! If you are feeling drained or need a moment, please go ahead and take a deep breath, step away and take care of yourself. But before you do, I want to be very clear here, that every emotion you just listed is okay! Even if your list might look different from someone else in the same situation, we will try to understand why every emotion you have is normal. And you can always add to this list later too. Every feeling here will be information for us, even if it doesn't make sense yet. Alright, when you are ready to keep going, let's do the next journal exercise.



Journal exercise #3

When you are having a hard time with your emotions, what do you say to yourself? What is the self-talk that goes on in your head? Write it down:



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What did you notice your self-talk sounds like? If you find yourself judging your reactions (e.g. something is wrong with me, why can't I get over this, you shouldn't feel this way, etc) you are going to take a long detour on this journey of healing. When we are harsh with ourselves, the usual outcome is that we feel worse (e.g. I'm not getting better, what's my problem? Now I feel even worse about myself for not getting better faster. I was already feeling like crap)! Let's begin with baby steps in a more efficient direction towards recovery:





1 STEP 1: Have a helpful attitude: love yourself

No matter what you are feeling, be kind to yourself! You may be in shock or denial (did that just happen?!), or going numb (I feel nothing), crying non stop (not the ugly cry again!), anxious all the time (my mind won't stop racing), anything else or all of the above, it's all normal!

Let's first allow and lovingly accept the big feelings here. The more we can do that, we will reduce the intensity of any added self inflicted pain (from thinking it's wrong to feel this). There is the saying "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." Our own self judgment adds suffering when we are already in pain. If we can eliminate the suffering, we still have to deal with pain, but at least then we have less work to do and can move forward with the long term steps to heal.

Every emotion is information, we need to learn what our body needs to recover. Let's start by not judging what is happening, and accepting with kindness, whatever is arising.



Ways I can love myself:

- If your self talk is pretty critical, try some of the journaling exercises on Kristin Neff's website: self-compassion.org and listen to her guided meditations (see the "practices" tab)
- Use these phrases or create your own as examples of loving self-talk:

There is nothing wrong with me, this is hard, but I am not defective

Everything I am feeling is for a reason, I may not know the reasons yet, but my body is trying to help me

I care about my feelings and how hard this is, I want to help myself get through this, it's important that I support myself

It's so hard to not be critical of myself, it happens so fast, I get so frustrated with myself, I want to be kind and it's hard to be kind

It's okay to feel whatever you feel, we'll figure this out

or Write Your Own:





Journal exercise #4

Practice the compassionate phrases with yourself. Then note: what do you notice? What is easy or hard? Could you say these kind and loving words to a friend?

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It's okay if it feels fake or weird at the start, especially if you don't usually talk to yourself this way. It takes practice to get used to it, just keep trying! And notice, when you are kind to yourself, what happens? The sadness and struggle may not go away, but you probably won't be increasing your frustration, which is a baby step in the right direction.



Journal exercise #5

When the feelings get intense and really big, what is the first thing you do to manage them? List what you do:



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When we feel threatened and our nervous system is highly activated, there is not a lot of activity in our "rational" brain. We kick into a kind of survival mode (think fight, flight, freeze, flop, fawn, etc) to just get through. It's automatic, not a conscious thoughtful process. Sometimes when the emotions run that high and it's getting overwhelming, we need to interrupt the increasing arousal and start to lower the intensity.



2

STEP 2: Cope with the immediate intense emotions to calm down



Any sort of distraction works well in these situations. Things like going for a walk, watching TV or scrolling on your phone. You are interrupting the emotional arousal to give your body a break.

Look at your journal exercise above (#5). How many of these are distractions? Can you think of any more to add that you can use?

If you need ideas to distract, here are a few:

- Exercise - go for a walk, a run, dance, go to the gym, etc.
- Listen to music you enjoy
- Call a friend or family member that you trust
- Cuddle with your pet if you have one
- Have a hot cup of tea
- Watch a movie or video
- Read a book
- Write in a journal

In addition to distracting yourself from the intense feelings, we also want to learn to actively and consciously reduce them. Distraction becomes problematic when it's the only thing you do. When it's our only tool, it can also be called avoidance, because we never actually process what's happening. It's important to add to your coping repertoire in order to effectively move through these emotions, not just distract yourself.



Four ways to decrease intense emotions:

Deep breathing exercises to slow down your heart rate and calm your nervous system. Examples include:

- Count slowly as you inhale and make your exhalation a little longer than your inhalation, continue until your heart rate slows
- Purse your lips and breathe, inhale through the nose and push the air out through your pursed lips in the exhalation, continue until your heart rate slows
- Inhale to a count of four, hold for a count of four, exhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, repeat (box breathing), continue until your heart rate slows

Distract yourself with a different physical sensation

- Put a lemon slice in your mouth and squeeze
- Hold an ice cube
- Hold a physical object (a rock, a ring, a hat, anything really) and notice what it feels like, pay attention to the sensations of touch, sight, sound or smell. Watch my video here for an example: [Mindful Grounding](#)

Use physical touch to comfort and soothe

- Wrap your arms around yourself in a butterfly hug, while holding yourself, tap each hand on your arm in an alternating pattern (right then left)
- Try different kinds of touch to find what is soothing for you, like gently caressing your arms or hands, holding your own face, stroking your head, etc.

Notice thoughts you have during this time that fuel the emotional intensity, **journal it out** and make a list of your beliefs (we will use it later)





Journal exercise #6

When the emotions are uncomfortable but not overwhelming, what do I do? List the other things you do when you are not feeling great but also not about to lose it (these may be the same strategies as above, or different):

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When we are in a state of panic, or intense emotional arousal, we can't think straight, it's hard to be logical. It's important to get out of that fight or flight mode first. Once we can reduce that arousal, we can consciously and intentionally practice how to continue to decrease the intensity, with the help of our logical brain that is now accessible. It's important that during these less intense moments, you practice the following strategies and get familiar with a more relaxed experience in your body.





3

STEP 3: Practice relaxing your body regularly

Did you have different strategies or the same ones for when things are tough but not intense? It's okay to use the same ones as above, but remember, the following practices are intended to be used regularly when you are not in full panic mode. First decrease the intensity (see above) and then try the following.

These additional strategies can be practiced when you are feeling anxious or upset, but also when you are relatively calm, and want to get even more calm (who doesn't want to feel more peace)? There's no bad time to practice getting more relaxed.



Ways to practice deepening relaxation in your body:

Use a guided visualization for relaxation

- Imagine that you are somewhere peaceful and calm. For an example, listen to my video on YouTube (about 8 min): [Guided Visualization for Relaxation](#)

Use progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

- Slowly tense and relax the muscles in your body to physically calm down. It's hard for an anxious mind to stay worried when your physical body is calm. For an example, listen to my video on YouTube here (about 15 min): [Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)

Use phrases of both validation and self compassion

- The order is important here (I explain the neurobiology of what is happening in my book if you want more details): acknowledge the suffering and then the reality. Try coming up with your own phrases. Here are some examples to get you started:
 - This is hard....and I can do it
 - It won't be easy....and I am capable
 - It hurts like hell...and someday I will be better
 - I am so sad....and it's not the end of the world

Okay, let's pause again. Thank you for staying with me this far!

Let's look back at all the things you have just reflected on. It's not always easy to slow down and observe yourself! If you have been able to notice yourself, it's really going to help you in this process. Another quote I love is from Einstein "insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." I don't want you to feel crazy, nobody likes that! So the more we can bring awareness to what we are doing that isn't changing things, the more we can start to notice where new options may arise!

You are so brave (and humble too) to be willing to explore your own self in this way! And I appreciate your willingness to try new things here with me.



Journal exercise #7

Who are you reaching out to for support? Family? Friends? Groups? Online forums? Doctor? Therapist? If no one, that's okay, but note that too. It's important information. These are the people who are helping me right now:



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There's nothing wrong with being able to do life by yourself. It's called independence. I think it's healthy to be able to self soothe and rely on yourself to get through difficult times. In psychological terms, we call it self-regulation. It's a great option. And it's also not the only option. We are social creatures, designed from birth, to need others to survive. Human infants rely on caregivers to survive. There's nothing wrong with getting help from others. It's another option. When we only rely on ourselves (extreme independence), or we only rely on others (co-dependence), we can run into problems. Psychological health is about flexibility and having choices. Can I sometimes trust myself and sometimes trust others when I'm having a hard time? This is called interdependency.





4

STEP 4: Rely on yourself and rely on others as needed

Have you reached out to others? If not, what has made it difficult? Who has been helpful? Have you had unhelpful experiences too?



Ways you can reach out to get help from others:

Professional Therapy

There are directories and professional associations you can find online that list therapists. If therapy is cost prohibitive, there are resources that can help make it more accessible. Examples may be subsidized agencies, therapists with sliding scales, student run clinics, and in Ontario, Canada, OHIP covered treatment. If you need help getting ideas, please see my blog post: [Low Fee or Subsidized Therapy](#)

Peer Support Groups

In person or online groups are often free or low fee, for example, join my [Recovery from Unexpected Loss, Pain and Change group](#)

Health Professionals

Your doctor may be able to support you if medication is a good fit or to address any physical symptoms. Your doctor may also have referrals in your area for other resources to support your mental health.

Trusted Others

This includes family or friends. Pay attention to the kinds of interactions you have and who helps or who doesn't. It's okay to step back if some well meaning people actually aren't helping you. If you are having a hard time finding support, keep looking!





Journal exercise #8

So this thing happened to you, what exactly about it makes it feel so hard? What outcome or belief scares you the most? What is the meaning of what happened? Write your thoughts down here:

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You may notice that the same thing can happen to different people, and they respond differently. Our response is influenced by numerous factors. I discuss some of these factors on my blog, including the context and what else is happening in life, our current capacity to cope with emotions, our perceptions and beliefs, and our overall sense of being alone in this world or with others (this last one is discussed in my book).



5

STEP 5: Make sense of your response

Now it's your turn to make sense of your response. As mentioned above, there are numerous factors you can consider.



Ways to understand your own response to what happened:

Take a look at this flowchart and use the journal entries above to create your own, you can **see mine as an example**

- Notice the perceptions of your rational brain and compare it to your bodily response (e.g. my brain may say "I'm going to be fine," but my body freaks out like "I'm going to die"). Pay attention to the bodily perceptions, this is important.
- Notice how you cope with those irrational feelings (actions) and what happens when you use these strategies. Does it help? Make it better? Worse? Stay the same? We are gathering information here. How do these actions and strategies help and how do you get stuck?

If you are having trouble identifying the perceptions, take a look at the **Thought Record** or **other exercises** from **Mind Over Mood** to start an exploration of what thoughts may be fueling your emotions. A professional trained to use this method would be beneficial.

My book provides very concrete examples of all of the above and what I learned and what this looks like. **Sign up here** to get information when it's released.



Journal exercise #9

What information have you learned about what influenced your response? What are some of the factors that make this hard? Where do you get stuck moving forward? What needs to shift? Is there a belief you can't let go of?




I truly believe that most of us, at any moment in life, are doing the best we can with what we know. And sometimes, we still get stuck. We have a hard time moving forward, we don't know what else to do. There's nothing wrong if you need another perspective, or a professional to guide you to see new options at this point. That's what therapists are for! If you feel like you've tried everything, please trust me that maybe there are other options that you don't yet know. Even as a therapist, I am constantly learning and growing myself. I don't know it all, and I seek out therapy myself in those moments too!



6

STEP 6: Find new options to move forward and understand with compassion, why you didn't see those as possibilities in the past

A person with a backpack is hiking up a rocky mountain trail at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The person is in silhouette, wearing a backpack and athletic gear. In the foreground, a dark-colored dog is also visible, looking towards the right. The background shows a hazy mountain range under the sunset sky.

It takes some humility and kindness to look back on our life and, in hindsight, say, "I wish I knew that back then!" If you are constantly learning and growing, that moment of recognizing we know better now may never go away. I don't think that's a bad thing.



Ways to move forward and find a new path out:

Take a look at this flowchart for how a new option can be experienced (it's oversimplified, but I hope you'll get the idea). If most of your coping strategies take you out of your emotions and bodily beliefs, those feelings and perceptions are not likely to change. You continue in your feedback loop. A new experience is required to process those emotions and beliefs and to find a new ending.

Experiential therapy is an effective way to proceed, especially when our bodily feelings aren't lining up with our logic. See ICEEFT for more information on Emotionally Focused Therapy. If it sounds like a good fit for you, the directory will help you find a therapist in your area.

Sign up now to be notified when my book is released, and I'll explain this in more detail, with concrete examples from my own experience. I will elaborate on the flowchart: what my particular feelings, beliefs and coping strategies were, and how I learned what the new options could be, and how it moved me forward. I didn't go back to normal, I arrived somewhere even better! I would like the same for you too. Join my mailing list, join our Facebook community, and let's do this together.





So here we are! Thank you so much for your willingness and openness to learn about yourself. Not everyone has the courage to do what you just did, to be so introspective, to ask yourself questions, to be curious and open to learning something new. It takes some humility to do what you just did. I hope you now have some new awareness and some direction in where to go from here to keep growing, changing and moving forward to an even better place you were before life hit. When life throws stuff at us, we can become bitter and angry, of course. We have every right to be upset. We can also find some way in the darkness to choose to make some meaning, to learn, to grow and to make the most of the awful things that happen. That is my wish for you. Please stay connected!

Additional support options:

1. If you are having trouble with your mood (e.g. high anxiety) or having difficulty sleeping, consult a doctor or health care practitioner to assess if you are a good fit for medication. Taking medication can be temporary, it doesn't have to be long term. It can get you over the hump so you can start to do the things that will help in the long term.
2. If you need immediate help and want to talk to someone right away, you can search for resources in your area. Search for "walk in counselling" or "distress lines" or "crisis centers" for example. See my link "[I need help now](#)" on my practice website for examples in my region. If you are in a state of emergency, please do visit your local emergency department or call 911.



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DISCLAIMER

Any information, advice or exercises in this kit may be therapeutic, but they are not a replacement for professional therapy. Uncomfortable or unpleasant emotions may arise, so engage at your own risk and to a level that is manageable for you. Please trust yourself with what feels helpful or not. Please seek professional assistance if you have questions or need additional support.

