



## Safety Guide and Instructions for Loss History Map

People commonly report that their current loss stirs up thoughts and emotions related to previous losses. This exercise offers an opportunity to review those past experiences in an intentional way by examining them again from the perspective of an older and wiser you, and to offer compassion for your younger, vulnerable self who may not have received the consolation and support needed at the time.

The goal of the **Loss History Map** is intended to 1. place your current loss in the context of your entire life journey and 2. identify the coping resources you previously acquired to deal with past losses.

Each of us has experienced multiple losses throughout our lives, large and small. There is no value to comparing ourselves to others, but to simply acknowledge our own losses. Many people try not to think about or dwell on those difficult memories, preferring instead to, "let go and move on." However, as the Grief River Guide suggests, "We can't get to where we want to go unless we understand where we have been."

Additionally, in times of crisis, it is challenging to find or learn new ways to cope. Acquiring new coping resources typically takes time. There will always be a learning curve. Therefore, a good place to begin is to inventory your existing coping resources. Think of this exercise as a review of where you've been on your life journey and take an inventory of what's already in your boat as you try to navigate the current set of rapids.

### **Caution: you may want to consider the following safety guides**

- It is reasonable to assume this journey through your memory may trigger intense or distressing thoughts and emotions. If you become overwhelmed, you may stop this exercise at any time.
- Take breaks; you can always return to the map later. Each time you revisit your loss history, you may remember additional losses that you'd forgotten or dismissed, or considered insignificant.
- Pay attention to your physical reactions while doing this exercise. Take note of your embodied response to loss. When you notice you are distressed, slow your breathing, and focus on releasing your distress with each exhale. Identify places of tension/tightness/clenching of muscles and intentionally try to relax those parts of you. Observe and be curious about other internal sensations.
- Vocalize self-affirmation statements, use meditation or prayer, or other self-regulating practices to return to a sense of calm throughout this life review exercise.

### **Instructions**

(Note: these are the instruction for the adult map, additional simplified versions of the map are available for children and teens. Feel free to adapt these instructions to the participant's corresponding developmental level.)

1. Your Grief River Life Map is divided into decades. Make a note of each of the losses you have experienced at the appropriate place on the river timeline.
2. Begin by noting the losses related to the death of a person or animal companion. Consider other non-death losses, tangible and intangible. For memory prompts, see the pdf, "Other Losses," on [www.griefriver.com](http://www.griefriver.com)
3. After you have listed all the losses, large and small, that you can recall, use the International Scale of River Difficulty (ISRD), a scale of 1 - 6, to rate each loss. 1. means "easily managed," 6. means "overwhelmingly difficult."

## Reviewing your Loss History

Reflect on this experience when you are done. There may not be room on the map to list all your losses in any detail. Consider journaling or making notes for yourself about the thoughts, memories, and physical sensations that arise in you. Some people find it helpful to sit or engage with nature after completing the map.

It may also be beneficial to talk about this experience with another trusted person, whether that be a therapist, support group participant, family member, or friend. Telling your story or "having a witness," experiencing their empathy, validation, and consolation, offers us the opportunity to integrate these often "disenfranchised" parts of our life journey. Instruct your witness that their job is to listen and support, not judge, rationalize, re-evaluate, explain, or defend a particular person, place, or point of view. Also, don't forget to consider the other expressive arts as additional ways to externalize or convey what you take away from this experience.

## Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth

Resilience is the ability to navigate challenges. Post-traumatic growth is a recognition that, having survived a traumatic experience, a person realizes they have been changed in a positive way or has grown as a result of the trauma. On the back of the page or on a separate piece of paper, make a list of the coping resources you have acquired over the course of your life. Some people refer to these as the "gifts of grief." However, you define them and keep a running list as you continue on your journey; they provide the tools and the sources of self-confidence and self-efficacy that will help you with whatever you encounter around the next river bend.

## An Additional Step

After you have identified your loss history and rated each loss using the ISRD, you may want to repeat this Headwaters exercise, only this time identifying your Joy History, noting the positive points on your life journey. Short or long, these are happy occasions, proud moments, times of intimacy and connection, periods of peace, contentment, strength, and hope.

When grieving and mourning a person, object, or way of life, we can be easily overwhelmed, feel disempowered, and lose hope for the future. Doing an exercise like the Loss History Map may feel like stirring the waters and dredging up all the muck from the past, and at first glance might not seem helpful. However, life is not all sadness a woe; it also has its positive moments. Perhaps we need to look at both our loss history and our joy history to gain a sense of balance or perspective and a reminder that loss and joy are episodic. Like a river, life is a series of passing moments, each moment leading and blending into the next; the challenge always before us is to learn how to go with the flow.

