



Five Ways to Start Moving Forward

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Five Coping Strategies



Lesley Pyne
Supporting childless women to heal
and to create a life they love



Hello and welcome,

Firstly a massive thank you for downloading this e-book.

I was absolutely delighted to be asked to write as I'm a big supporter of Fertility Network UK having been a member of MoretoLife (MtL) for almost fifteen years and a Trustee for four years.

I've been where you are; we had six unsuccessful rounds of IVF and at the end I felt completely lost. My head knew that I wasn't going to be a mother, but it took my heart a long time to catch up. I know now that I was grieving, but I didn't know then. I just assumed I felt sad.

We hibernated for about a year and didn't see friends because we couldn't cope with children. Then we joined MtL and met some couples who went on to become our closest friends.

I believe this journey of ours is similar to the transformation that a caterpillar goes through to become a beautiful butterfly. I imagined that motherhood would be that transformation but when it didn't happen, I felt like I was stuck in a cocoon not knowing what sort of butterfly I wanted to be and I'd forgotten the instructions.

I spent 10 years in that cocoon, stuck in the dark, hiding from the world and all that happened was that the years passed. And [I don't want that for you](#).

I've used my experience of talking to and working with other women like you to write about the strategies which, when you practise them will make a really big difference to you and help you to move forward.

What you'll find here.

I know you don't want to be here, however I can promise you empathy, understanding and, most importantly specific strategies you can use to help you to cope with this life.

I've learned that it's important to start in a gentle way with small steps and in no time you'll be looking back and realise how far you've travelled.

This e-book includes five strategies. You can use them in any order, and you may find it helpful to come back to them from time to time. What I do know is they WILL help you.

Let's make a start.

Lesley





You're grieving

Apologies, maybe that was harsh, but it's true. So let's get it out in the open right at the start.

Let's agree that you're grieving. Your challenge is to come to terms with the death of the person you imagined you'd be, the life you imagined you'd have and many other things too numerous to mention.

Let's also acknowledge just how hard this is; you spent a long time pursuing the goal of being a mother and you gave it your all. And now you have to face the fact that there is no more trying to be done.

I'm sorry to say but you're in for a tough ride.

I'm not an expert on grief (although I've been through it a few times), but the main thing I know from personal experience is that **'what you resist persists, and what you embrace, you erase.'**

Ignoring your grief will make it worse, and the best way to get through it is to feel everything that comes your way.

Grief is a natural response to loss and it feels different to each of us. So the other thing I would say is that whatever you're feeling it is okay and it is absolutely normal.

The strategies in this booklet are aimed in helping you to build resilience whilst you work through your grief.

And **let's also agree that you can live a fulfilling life without children.** I know you may find that hard to believe just now but I, and many others are proof that this is possible.

1. Write regularly - Keep a journal

A great way to kick start your healing is to write, more specifically, to journal. Journaling has been scientifically proven to reduce stress and improve mental health. Psychologist James W Pennebaker's work has proven that writing helps us to focus and to organise what's happened to us, and writing about emotional upheavals for just fifteen to twenty minutes a day on four consecutive days can decrease anxiety and depressive symptoms and boost our immune systems.



I aim to write every morning. It did feel really awkward at first, but now it comes naturally to me. I write by hand, in a journal, but you may find that typing works better for you. The important thing is to write without censoring what you're writing and worrying whether or not it makes sense.



Making a start

Like any habit, it works best when you set aside a specific time and stick to it, and in time it will become a daily habit. I suggest you start by writing for ten minutes, and just write whatever comes into your head. Write about how you feel, how you felt yesterday, what cropped up and how you dealt with it.

Write about your plans for the day ahead; think about what challenges you may face today and how you'll deal with them.

Your journal is the place to acknowledge the discomfort and frustrations you currently feel. It is a place where you can be completely, 100% honest because you know that no-one will read it.

I keep my journals and I do go back and read them sometimes. This is really helpful to see how I've progressed and changed over time.

I use them like a scrapbook too, pasting in photos, quotes or messages that I've received from friends. And sometimes I write more than once a day.

There are many different ways to write, the important thing is to experiment and to work out what works best for you.

2. Start a gratitude practice.

Why Gratitude?

There's plenty of research to demonstrate that giving thanks makes you happier and more resilient, it strengthens relationships, improves health, and reduces stress. It shows that those with a daily gratitude practice have higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, and energy. In addition, they experienced less depression and stress and bounce back more quickly from adversity.

In summary, what you focus on increases so if you focus on the negative in your life, then you'll get more of that, and so the more that you can think and be positive, the better your life will become.

I get it, I'm grateful, isn't that enough?

I'd love to suggest that if you say 'I'm grateful' three times, spin round in a circle your life will be changed forever but you know that's not going to happen.

Having a positive attitude is helpful and you need more than that. I'm very convincing when I say that I have a healthy eating attitude, I know exactly what to eat to be healthy, and I have a shelf of healthy cookery books. But what good are they unless I

'I started out giving thanks for small things, and the more thankful I became, the more my bounty increased. That's because what you focus on expands, and when you focus on the goodness in your life, you create more of it. Opportunities, relationships, even money flowed my way when I learned to be grateful no matter what happened in my life.'

Oprah Winfrey

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practice? What good are they if I ignore them and eat a bar of chocolate? It's only by being mindful about eating healthily and practising that I'll become healthy.

The same is true of gratitude, an attitude will get you started but it won't get you the positive benefits I mentioned above.

Three ways to get your gratitude muscle working.

- i. Every day in your journal write down three things you're grateful for today and why. If you do this in the morning you'll start the day with a positive mindset.

Use something like this wording *today I am grateful for/truly blessed to have/happy and grateful for because.....*

I know you haven't got what you really wanted, but think for a moment, there are many things in your life to be grateful for. If you're not sure what these might be, think about health, your body, work, finances, friends and family, nature, what goods and services you have in your life.

- ii. Find a small stone that fits comfortably in your hand, maybe from a place that's special to you. Keep it by your bedside.

Last thing at night, hold it in your hand, think about your day and answer this '*What's one thing that I'm grateful for today?*'

It could be anything, what's the first thing that pops into your head? *Then say thank you.*

Doing this means that you'll search through all the good things that happened and in doing this you may find several things to be grateful for. And it also means that you'll end the day in a positive frame of mind.

And even if your day might seem to have been negative, there's always something good that happened. And if you feel like it, you could also say thank you for *one thing that made you laugh, and one thing you achieved today.*

I love this, my stone is from one of my favourite places and I find it a really helpful way to end the day.

- iii. If you want a variation to this, you could write your one thing on a piece of paper and put it in a jar. Then you'll have a record of gratefulness which you can dip into if you're feeling sad.

I use a variant of this process to record my successes and achievements and seeing how much I've achieved is very affirming, and surprising!

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3. Be kind to yourself.

We all have an inner-critic. Sometimes it can be helpful in motivating you, and at others it can drag you down. How often do you say things like – ‘you should have been more positive’, ‘you shouldn’t have done that’, ‘why didn’t you say yes’, ‘you’re so stupid.’

Why being kind to yourself matters, some theory

When you’re self-critical you tap into your brain’s threat defence system, the fight - flight – freeze response which releases cortisol and adrenalin. Your mind thinks it’s under siege and reacts to keep you safe. It makes you stressed, anxious and depressed and therefore not in a good state to achieve anything. This is great if you’re being chased by a lion, but it’s not so good if a colleague has just asked if you have children.

When you’re kind to yourself and you react with a gentle touch or a soft voice, this releases positive chemicals which calm you down and make you feel safe, accepted and loved therefore giving you a better chance of responding positively. Also physical gestures remind you of caring emotions; they release oxytocin and lead to positive changes in your bio-chemistry.

The key to self-kindness is to talk to yourself in the same way as you would talk to a person you love and respect.

Yes, I know that sounds easy when you say it quickly, and do you do that? If you’re like most people, at least some of the time you talk to yourself in a way that you would NEVER talk to anyone else, especially someone you care about.

How to put this into practice

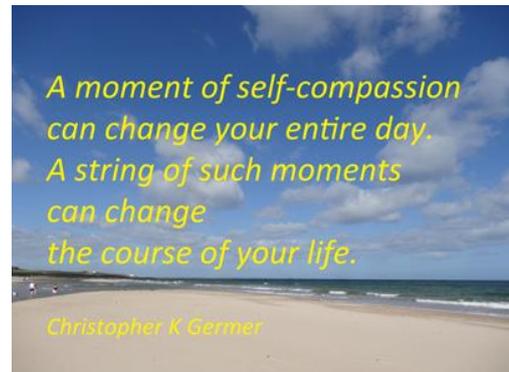
The first thing to start with is awareness, by noticing when you’re being self-critical, to listen for that negative voice in your head.

And when you hear the voice, bring to mind a close friend, someone you care for. How would you react to them if they were in the same situation? Think about what you would usually do; maybe you’d give them a hug, or maybe you’d say something like ‘don’t worry, it will be okay’ and notice how gentle, calm and compassionate your voice is.

Now treat yourself like that good friend and see what happens.

If your natural tendency is to respond with a hug you can do that by crossing your arms and squeezing them tight, or by rubbing your arm. Try different ways and see what works best for you.

You may have to try a few different phrases and as you practice and experiment, you’ll work out what messages you need to hear at different times.



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And if you're not yet sure what words work for you try these: 'I will talk to myself the same way I talk to the people I love.'

If you can do this some of the time over the next couple of weeks that will be a massive achievement. And if sometimes you notice later that's also excellent, you will find that you become more aware with time.



4. Setting and sticking to boundaries that work for you.

I only heard the word 'boundaries' used in a personal sense a couple of years ago, but now it seems to be everywhere. Essentially it means 'what's okay and what isn't okay.' Having boundaries is really important in life generally, and especially when you're grieving.

At this time you're not yourself, you could be easily upset by others and it's important to do what works best for you, and not fit in to the whims of others.

Let me give you a couple of examples: you may want to avoid places where there are babies, such as christenings, or visiting specific friends. You may not want to talk about what you've been through, or be with friends if they talk a lot about their children.

The lines will change over time as you get stronger inside, they're not set in stone for ever.

Here's a three step strategy to enable you to set and maintain boundaries.

i. Be clear what works for you

Think about what works for you, what you want both personally and as a couple.

For example in my early days I had no idea about boundaries and I was also low in confidence, so felt that I had to do whatever I was asked. This led to me feeling really upset after meeting friends and family with young children. If I was doing this now I would keep away as much as possible. So make a list of what you feel able to do and not do, who you feel able to see and don't want to see.

ii. Communicate this in a loving and firm way

Having decided, you need to tell those involved. This can be the hard bit and you may have to face the prospect of losing contact with those friends who don't understand (and I would argue that if they can't understand and treat you with compassion, they aren't good friends anyway).

But if you're open about what you're going through, that this is temporary and you need time to deal with your feelings, real friends will understand. And maybe they'll relish spending time with you and not talking about their children.

You could say something like... 'I'm struggling just now and finding it hard to be with children. I'd



love to see you and would it be possible to do so without your children? That would also give us time to talk, without distractions.' Or, 'when you talk about your children and show me photos, it upsets me because it reminds me of what I haven't got so I'd appreciate it if we could talk about something else please ...' Experiment and see what works best, do it on an email or text if face to face is hard. And remember the important thing is to put yourself first.

iii. Uphold the boundary

This is obvious but I feel I need to mention it as it's important to be strong and stick with your decision. This is not always easy but remember, you are doing this for you and your healing.

There will be resistance, but if you're comfortable with the boundary and the conversation was respectful it will be easier to stick with your decision. You may feel guilty, and that is also okay, it's a normal response to a new boundary. The key to overcoming this is to sit with the decision for a while rather than make any quick decisions and change your mind.

5. Armour up for difficult conversations – coping with baby talk, other people's pregnancies, and the 'do you have children?' question.

This is a big topic and comes up time and time again. Essentially coping with any discussion or question about babies and children is going to be hard for you right now. You are sensitive and in the same way that a butterfly can transform itself inside the safety and protection of its cocoon, you will heal best if you wear armour.

I've already spoken about some armour, such as boundaries and self-compassion and here are five specific techniques.

i. Congratulate, smile and leave.

Unfortunately surprise pregnancy announcements, baby photos, images of scans etc unavoidable. Remember though, there are no rules that say you have to look at other people's photos and be enthusiastic about their lives.

So my suggestion is simply this: [congratulate the person, put on your best fake smile and leave the room as soon as you can.](#)

Go to the bathroom, invent an urgent meeting, a phone call you have to make this instance, pretend your phone is ringing; the possibilities are endless. The important thing in all of this is put yourself first. I was so good at this at work that my colleagues thought I didn't like children and after a while stopped showing me photos.

ii. Find an ally at work

We all know that feeling of being alone and it can be hardest at work. So if it's possible to find an ally or friend, someone who you can be open with and tell your story to, will help you enormously. Having someone who knows your story close by is like creating a safe zone – she is someone safe you can run to when anything unforeseen occurs or you feel overwhelmed.

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Remember you don't have to go through this alone.

The following three strategies work well when used together, when you've read them through; spend a few minutes deciding how you can use them.

iii. Remember 'NO' is a complete sentence

Well, need I say more? There is no need to elaborate when people ask 'do you have children?' a simple NO is all you need to say. It does not require justification or explanation.

Said confidentially and assertively it will end the conversation. Of course you can elaborate if you feel comfortable doing so, but remember you don't have to; **NO is a complete sentence**.



iv. Play conversational pass the parcel

Viewing conversation as a game of pass the parcel where you control the music will make you feel a lot more confident and help you to avoid those topics you don't want to talk about.

Let me explain; I stop the music and hold on to a conversation only when I'm happy to do so and I pass it on when I'm not. And sometimes I'm happy to sit out, let it pass by and wait for the right opportunity to jump back in.

I'll keep it when it's about topics of my choice or I'm comfortable with and pass it on when it isn't. This works best when you've prepared and practised.

v. Prepare and practise.

Spend some time thinking about what you can talk about easily, maybe you love to cook or you have a hobby that you're passionate about. Make a list and keep adding to it.

Once you have the list, instead of waiting for people to ask you questions, go ahead and start conversations about the topics on your list.

Remember that people like to talk about themselves so think of a few questions to ask (eg 'I love your dress/tie, where did you get it?' or 'I recently saw ** at the cinema, have you seen it?') and even better, if you know they love to talk about gardening ask them about it.

Like everything, the key to getting better is to practice. The best way is to mentally rehearse situations, so imagine you're at an event at work; standing in front of the lady from HR, she asks you a question, and rehearse what you will say. It will probably feel strange at first, but when you're fully prepared, you'll be glad that you did.

Summary.

I hope you can now see how these three can work together. So when asked 'do you have children?' you could say NO, then give the conversation back by asking a question or keep it on your terms by talking about something you're interested in, for example 'No, but I love to travel instead / have an allotment etc'.

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Thank you and what next?

Thank you so much for reading through this document. I know from experience that these strategies will help you, so please keep practising and in no time at all you'll realise that you are starting to move forward with your life.

As it says on my logo above, my aim is to support and help you. It took me over ten years before I was living a fulfilling life, and I don't want that for you.

That's why you'll find plenty of free information, more strategies and much, much more free help on my website.

The best way to keep up to date is to sign up to my **blog**. It contains support and tips to help you to work out who you are and what you want to do with your life now. Obviously I write about childlessness; however, you can use just about everything you learn elsewhere in your life. You can sign up and read previous articles [here](#).

Right at the start I said that it's possible to live a fulfilling life without children. If you didn't quite believe me, then read my **Inspirational Stories** where women who've been where you are and are now living a positive life write about their experiences. I know you'll find these helpful. You can read them [here](#)

You can also other resources on my website such as [helpful books](#) and [websites](#).

I'd love to hear how you get on with these, and if you have questions please drop me a line at info@LesleyPyne.co.uk.

Thanks so much.

Lesley

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