

Reflections on Rupture:

Finding Meaning in the Mess of Crisis, Grief and Loss

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INTRODUCTION

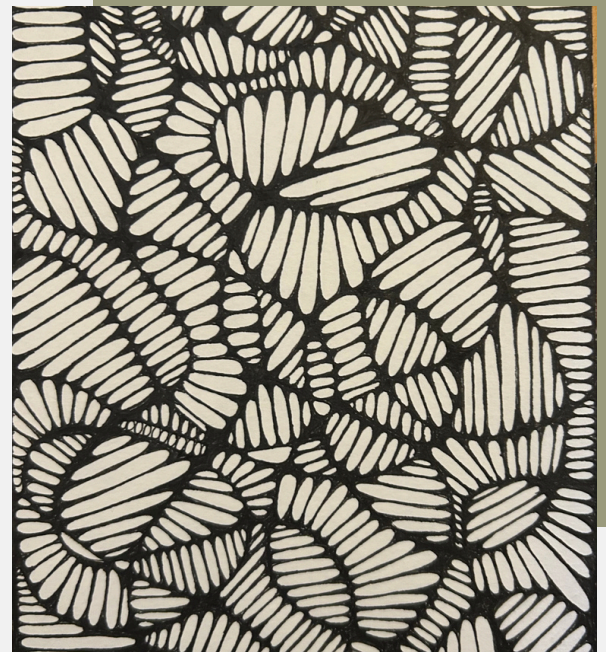
This reflection guide emerged from a series of profound conversations with educational crisis leaders and school social workers who experienced significant personal ruptures while maintaining professional roles focused on supporting others.



experienced moments of rupture—from health crises and personal losses to traumatic community events. What emerged were universal themes of healing and growth—from redefining boundaries and prioritizing authentic self-care to transforming professional identities and integrating grief as a nonlinear journey. What we didn't anticipate was the profound impact of the interview process itself—the act of witnessing and being witnessed created moments of deep connection that rippled beyond the conversations themselves. There is something deeply sacred in the exchange of stories—in offering your truth and having it held with reverence, in receiving another's vulnerable sharing and honoring it with your full presence. Many participants wrote to us later, expressing how the simple act of sharing their stories with attentive listeners had illuminated aspects of their experience they hadn't previously recognized.

What began as a research project for the School Crisis Recovery and Renewal (SCRR) fellowship evolved into something far more meaningful—a collective exploration of how we navigate the territory between personal crisis and professional identity.

We began by sharing our own stories of crisis and loss, creating space to process experiences that had transformed us. These conversations sparked curiosity: How did other professionals navigate similar ruptures? What wisdom might we gather from their journeys? This led to a series of in-depth interviews during which we explored how professionals



We hope this guide serves multiple purposes in your journey. First, as a reflective tool offering questions, prompts, and imagery to help you navigate your own path from crisis to renewal. The collective wisdom gathered here can help you make meaning of your experiences and find your way toward healing.

Second, we invite you to use this guide as a framework for creating tangible moments of connection within your communities or among colleagues. Consider facilitating similar conversations, using these themes and questions as starting points. There is healing power in both sharing your story and in being the one who listens with an open heart. This reciprocal exchange can foster deeper understanding, compassion, and ultimately stronger bonds.

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As Buddhist teacher Lama Rod Owens reminds us:

Healing does not happen in isolation. Our culture over-prioritizes the self with the expectation that you will meet all your needs on your own, and if you don't, then it is a personal failure. However, true healing does not happen alone. Even when a meditation practice may outwardly seem like a solitary practice, we are practicing connection- to our breath, to the earth, to our ancestors and guides, and to each other.

We are practicing coming home, to ourselves and to each other. Healing happens when we are able to pause and check in with what's present internally, giving love and kindness to the woundedness we carry. And, healing happens when that vulnerability is witnessed by the community.

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This guide is our invitation to that profound homecoming—to yourself and to each other.

Whether you're currently in the midst of rupture, moving toward renewal, or supporting others through their journeys, we offer this as a companion for the messy, nonlinear path of transformation that follows crisis.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO HEALING

These interviews revealed several practical approaches that helped people navigate through crisis:

Embodied Practices

- Movement (walking, swimming, dance)
- Somatic awareness
- Rest and sleep
- Physical touch (massage, acupuncture)

Expressive Practices

- Journaling and writing
- Art-making and creative expression
- Storytelling
- Music and song

Connection Practices

- Authentic sharing with trusted others
- Professional support (therapy)
- Community rituals
- Spiritual practices

Meaning-Making Practices

- Life planning (including death planning)
- Reflection on values and priorities
- Creating rituals to honor loss
- Finding purpose in helping others

KEY THEMES

These five themes emerged consistently across our interviews with individuals who experienced significant personal and professional ruptures. Each represents a crucial dimension of the journey from crisis to renewal, highlighting both challenges and pathways toward healing.

Personal Pacing and Permission

When our lives are suddenly disrupted by crisis or loss, many of us discover we've been operating at an unsustainable pace. Honoring one's own timeline for healing emerged as fundamental to recovery. Many described how societal and professional expectations often dictate a quick return to "normal" functioning, but their bodies and spirits demanded something different.



Giving oneself explicit permission to grieve, rest, and prioritize personal needs marked a critical turning point. One person told us, "I had to give myself permission to break, to be held," while another shared, "The added shame I was putting on myself made it more prolonged. It's giving myself more grace and understanding for the process that I needed to go through."

This permission extended beyond the immediate crisis—participants realized they needed to fundamentally rethink their relationship with time and pacing. The wisdom of personal pacing became evident as participants learned to discern what was possible in each phase—sometimes simply surviving, other times processing or growing. As one reflected: "Sometimes you have to survive the day to thrive for the season."

Authentic Support and Connection

Crisis has a way of revealing the true nature of our connections. While all participants acknowledged the importance of support, many struggled with asking for and accepting help, particularly those accustomed to being helpers themselves. The interviews revealed clear distinctions between helpful and unhelpful support. Specific, tangible assistance (meals, childcare, household help) proved more valuable than generic offers. Quality of presence—the ability to truly listen without rushing to offer solutions or make comparisons—was repeatedly emphasized as crucial.

Professional support, particularly therapy, was mentioned by nearly all as essential. Several specifically sought therapists who could address spiritual dimensions of grief or who understood cultural contexts of loss. Perhaps most significantly, crisis experiences often revealed who could truly provide authentic support. As one person reflected: "When my relationship to myself changed, my relationships with others had to change too." Many described being surprised by who was present and who withdrew during their hardest moments, sometimes leading to painful but necessary shifts in their social circles.

Transformation of Professional Identity

For those who dedicate their lives to supporting others through crisis, experiencing personal rupture inevitably transforms their professional identity and relationship with work.

Many described a profound shift in how they understood their role. One expressed this powerfully: "I felt like a hypocrite... in a lot of ways, my own personal crisis made me realize how much that was falling short." This recognition often led to leaving positions, establishing clearer boundaries, or fundamentally reimagining how they engaged with their work.

Institutions often failed to accommodate these transformative shifts. Participants described inadequate leave policies, lack of supportive re-entry processes, and the expectation to "pick up where they left off." This rigidity often catalyzed the recognition that "I am disposable in the context of an institution, but that doesn't diminish my value and importance."

What emerged across interviews was a more sustainable, authentic relationship with work—one that honored both personal needs and professional values, stripping away performative aspects of work identities and fostering more genuine engagement.



Artwork by Erin Hughes

Redefining Boundaries and Self-Care

Perhaps the most consistent theme was how crisis forced a complete reconsideration of boundaries and self-care practices. Many described how they had chronically overridden their own needs before their crisis made this impossible to continue. One articulated this clearly: "I have chosen to put my needs last in so many ways in my life. Like, how many times do we wake up feeling exhausted and depleted, with nothing to give, and we drive ourselves to work?" Crisis disrupted this pattern, making it impossible to continue ignoring bodily wisdom and emotional needs.

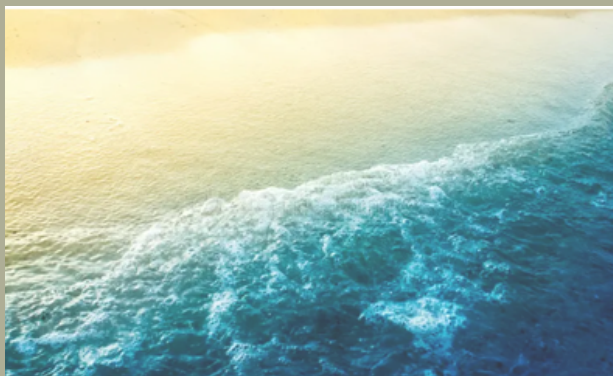
Self-care transformed from a luxury to a necessity. Participants moved beyond superficial practices to more fundamental nourishment. Movement practices featured prominently—swimming, walking, Pilates, dance—as ways to reconnect with their bodies after dissociative periods. Creative practices like drawing, writing, and music served as essential emotional and creative outlets.

Importantly, many distinguished between self-care practices needed during acute crisis versus renewal phases. In crisis, sometimes dissociation or distraction were necessary survival mechanisms. During renewal, however, practices that fostered integration and presence became more important.



Artwork by Erin Hughes

Perhaps most profound was the shift in relationship to self-care from obligation to permission—moving from "I should take care of myself" to "I deserve care." As one powerfully stated, they learned "to be soft and broken and yet still be a whole person who requires some leaning on."



Nonlinear Grief Integration

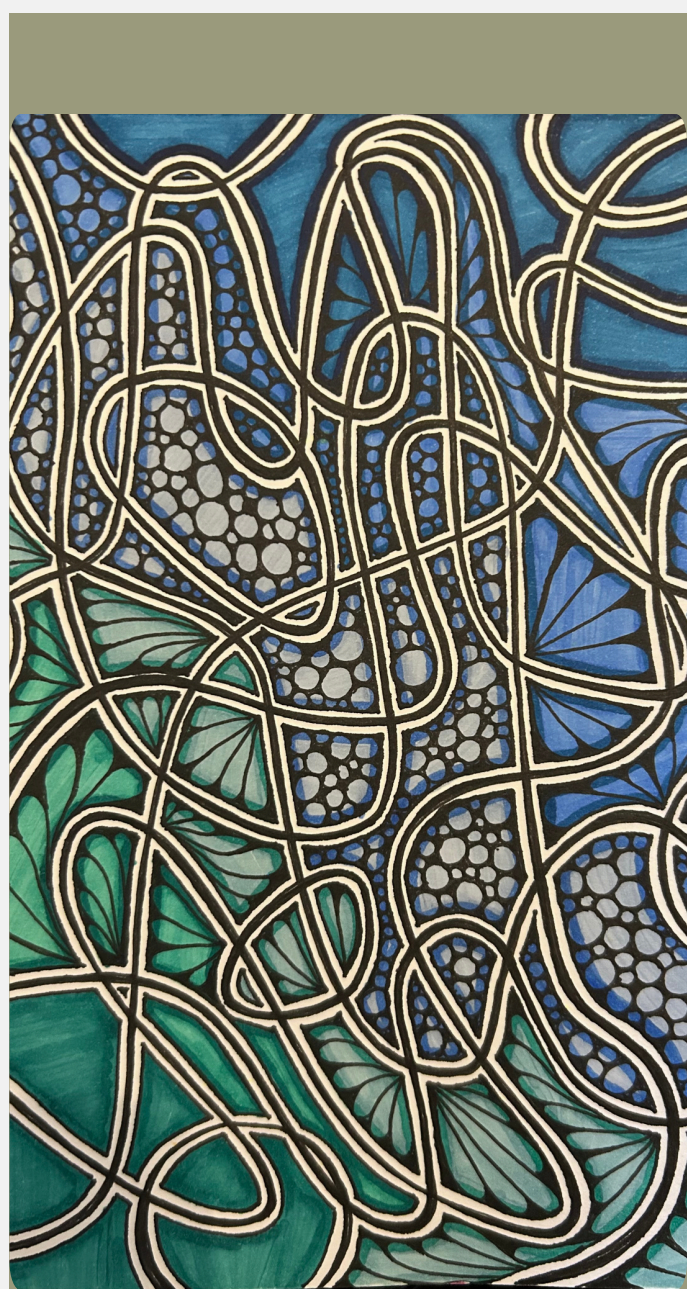
Our research challenged conventional narratives about grief that suggest a linear progression toward "getting over it." Instead, participants described a nonlinear process of integration where loss becomes woven into their ongoing identity rather than something to move beyond. They described cycles, waves, and spirals that continued to emerge years after initial losses.

The oceanic metaphor appeared repeatedly. One interviewee offered an eloquent description: "Grief is like an ocean. It covers me whole. And sometimes, just my toes are dipped in... But in the beginning, I am barely floating. Sometimes I'm drowning."

Triggers and anniversary reactions remained significant even years later. Several described creating rituals around important dates related to their losses, finding ways to honor these times rather than pushing through them. The concept of "both/and" thinking characterized many approaches to grief—holding seemingly contradictory experiences simultaneously: gratitude and pain, connection to what was lost while building new meaning. As

one reflected: "There's a fragility that is not a weakness, that is the strength because that's a reminder that I'm human."

Time emerged as both healer and teacher, but not in simplistic ways. Many described unexpected gifts that emerged years later—a greater appreciation for life, a deeper capacity for empathy, and a clearer sense of purpose. As one participant shared: "Renewal means to become new again with a lot of those re-membered parts."



Artwork by Erin Hughes

Reflection Questions

This list of questions is designed to support reflection during times of personal rupture, crisis, grief or loss, helping to deepen awareness and aid in your healing process.

- What has come undone? What are you grieving?
- What is your most common way of reacting to crisis?
 - What is activated in you?
 - How does this reaction assist you and what needs are often left unattended?
- What is the source of discomfort that is impacting you the most?
- What is feeling most disruptive to your well-being (mentally, physically, emotionally)?
 - What insight does this offer about your most critical needs?
 - How did your experience of rupture or loss bring these needs to the forefront?
 - What small, concrete, daily choices can you make to care for these needs?
- What sensations are you feeling?
 - What is your body trying to communicate?
- What activities help you metabolize overwhelm?
- How can you spend your time and energy to regulate your nervous system?
- What are some of the rituals that can keep you afloat as you work to survive this experience of rupture?
- If you could name a picture or an image for what your experience feels like right now, what would it be?
- Is there an image or a natural element that would help you move towards renewal?
- Do you have everything you need to fall apart?
- What needs have you been ignoring or neglecting?
- What supports do you need to have in place to be able to focus on your well-being at this time?
- What is grounding for you?
- In the midst of rupture and upheaval, what holds you together?
- In retrospect, were there signs of imbalance prior to what happened?
- What were you ignoring, or pushing to the side that is now highlighted in your experience?
- Who were you before the rupture, and who did you feel obligated to be?
- What obligations do you want to let go of?
- What is feeling like a burden that needs to be let go of?
- If there is resistance, where does it come from?
- What do professional boundaries look within work that is so deeply personal and meaningful to you?
- What has this rupture revealed to you about yourself?
- How has it uncovered the parts of you that need healing and restoration?
- What has felt meaningful during this experience?
- What new wisdom or insight is emerging?