You First

COACHING FOR MODERN CAREGIVERS

Reflection Guidebook

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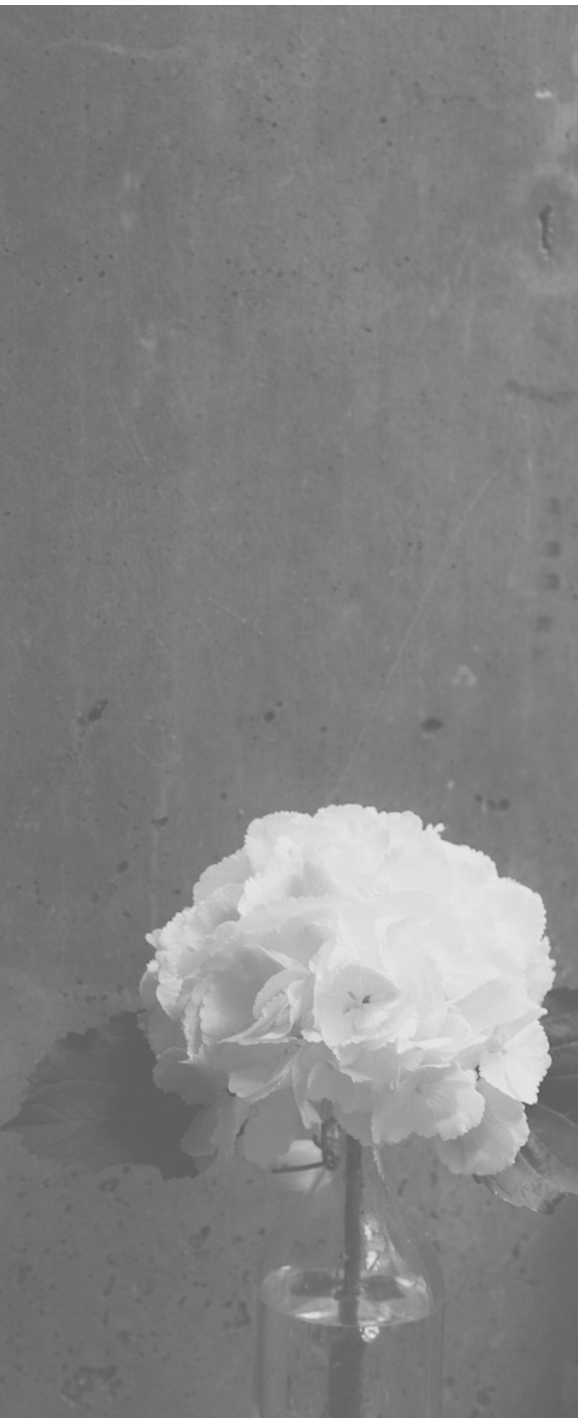
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How to use this Guidebook

This little Guidebook exists to help lead you through some self-exploration around your thoughts and feelings – and to increase your awareness of any challenges, issues, or questions that you may want to receive coaching on during our group sessions.

There is not a lot of text in this Guidebook, and that's by design. It's meant to be an active document, a tool for you to use to help you stay out of the Black Hole of Caregiving.

(The Black Hole of Caregiving = when you are engulfed in *doing, doing, doing* mode, and/or stuck in an emotional spin-cycle, and/or disconnected from your relationship with the loved one you are caring for.)

At first glance, the reflection prompts may seem rather simplistic (and some may not initially resonate with you), but they are truly little keys that can unlock some doors within you.

The prompts are not offered in any particular order, so you are free to wander through them. Even if you choose just one question to focus on and experiment with, you can gain insights that will enable you to plug a significant mental energy leak or two.

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If you feel resistant to any particular prompt, that's okay. No need to judge your resistance. Sometimes resistance is there to let you know that this is an area that needs a closer look, yet sometimes it's ***also*** suggesting to perhaps leave that exploration for another time (or to explore the prompt ***with*** someone like me).

If you are at all able to make the space in your life to write down your reflections, notes, and patterns you notice, I strongly encourage you to do so. Getting your thoughts out of your head and onto a piece of paper stops the mental spin cycle and creates some energetic distance between you and what you are thinking and feeling. Seeing your thoughts on paper makes it much easier for you to examine and question the stories you are telling yourself.

Maybe you'll print out this Guidebook and spend time with it on a regular basis, or maybe you'll flip through it whenever you hit an emotional roadblock. Either way, I hope it provides you with some nourishing food for thought.

Kristine

P.S.
I'm happy to elaborate on any of this material during our coaching sessions – please feel free to ask.

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Tenets of a Modern Caregiver

These are the 4 core concepts that have both shaped my personal perspective on caregiving **and** enabled me to remain committed to my choice to give care even when the going got (and continues to get) rough:

1) **You are doing this for YOU.** Adopting this perspective is one of the healthiest and most self-sustaining things you can do… deciding that, ultimately, the reason you are choosing to give care is so that your heart and mind will be at peace knowing you stepped up to the plate to the best of your ability and acted in alignment with your values when you were needed the most.

2) **You are not "putting your life on hold" to give care.** THIS, right here and now, IS your life. At the end of this experience, you won't be handed extra years to add onto your life. And you do not have to sacrifice the whole of your life to caring for your loved one(s) – that is a choice you can make, but it's absolutely not a requirement.

3) **Self-growth is your main reward for being a caregiver.** You are fortunate if you get any other "rewards" or acknowledgments during this journey, but you can count on getting opportunities to dig deep and grow. If you choose to embrace those opportunities, difficult though they may be, you will end your caregiving journey with such priceless assets as increased strength, wisdom, and empathy.

4) **You can't compare the care. You can't compare the pain.** All caregiving situations are unique. My situation may be easier than what you are facing in some ways and much more difficult than your situation in some ways. Making judgments about caregiving situations is always, always, always comparing apples to oranges. Likewise, it can seem that the pain you are experiencing as a caregiver pales in comparison to the pain your loved one is dealing with – especially if they are in physical pain, and especially if they are dying. The significance of each person's pain is equal even though the texture of each person's pain is different. Again, apples and oranges.

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Conserving Energy While Giving Care

Although I'm still a work-in-progress, these are the 6 approaches I now strive to take in every situation that I encounter as a caregiver in order to conserve as much of my own mental energy as possible:

1) **I accept the reality of each situation.** I refrain from resisting what actually IS happening.

2) **I speak kindly to myself throughout each situation.** I refrain from beating myself up and judging how I feel.

3) **I accept the limits of my influence within each situation.** I refrain from attempting to change or worry about or rail against people and circumstances that I have no ability to alter in that present moment.

4) **I acknowledge and process my feelings in healthy ways throughout each situation.** I refrain from repressing/denying my emotions as well as inappropriately venting my emotions.

5) **I allow myself to ask for and receive help, as needed, in each situation.** I refrain from unnecessarily isolating myself and unnecessarily shouldering the load alone.

6) **I remind myself that my job is neither to fix anything nor to save anyone.** I refrain from telling myself the story that I am indispensable in this situation (because the truth is that I could get hit by a bus tomorrow… and everyone, including the loved one I am caring for, would ultimately figure out a way to carry on).

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To Keep in Mind

As painful as it can be to acknowledge your limitations as a caregiver, the healthiest path that you can take is to surrender to these five truths about your loved one's situation as early and as fully as possible:

You didn't **cause** it.

You didn't **create** it.

You can't **control** it.

You can't **cure** it.

You aren't meant to **carry** it.

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Reflection Prompts

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What is the tone you use when you talk to yourself?

The number one thing you, as a caregiver, can do to conserve your energy is to speak to yourself with a kinder, gentler tone.

Chances are, you will mess up as a caregiver (again and again). While that can't be avoided, you **can** decide to give yourself grace rather than criticize yourself (which may not feel "natural" at first). **If that sounds like a difficult thing to do, why do you think that is?**

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"What am I making this mean?"

When I notice that my emotions are all stirred up, that is one of my favorite questions to ask myself.

We are the ones who add meaning to our circumstances – and we can make choices that make us feel more calm, more clear, and more compassionate (towards ourselves and others). **What if, for a few days, you experimented with noticing when you are feeling "bad," and then asking yourself that question, and writing down your answer (to see if a pattern emerges)?**

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Do you "take the bait" and, if so, when?

Your loved one's personality may be contentious (or becoming more so due to biological changes or medicinal effects).

Deciding to unwind any habits that you have of engaging in unnecessary and/or repetitive arguments, conversations, debates, nagging, etc. with your loved one can save you a lot of energy. **What if, for a few days, you experimented with not taking the bait, and responding to them in a different way (or not at all)?**

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When are you picking up the slack and the dropped balls?

Please don't exhaust yourself trying to make sure that nothing "hits the fan." During this whole caregiving experience, some unwanted stuff is **going** to hit the fan. It will.

Keep in mind that if you've been routinely picking up the slack, everyone else around you is out of practice. Also keep in mind that, regardless of the stories you are telling yourself, not every ball is equally important and not every ball that someone drops will trigger a Huge Disaster. **What if you experimented with letting the next, less-important ball that's dropped just sit there so you can see what happens?**

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Are you trying to be your loved one's counselor or therapist?

Just as you, as a caregiver, needs support, your loved one needs someone – of their own – who has the skills to help them navigate through these uncharted waters of change and loss.

This is not a position you can fill – it's not even healthy for you to try. You are **not** their resource for personal growth – *nor do you have to pick up the slack if they refuse to grow.* **Have you noticed yourself taking this role on or crossing this line?**

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In what way is this circumstance inviting you to grow?

Exploring the question above is a much better use of your energy than fighting with the reality of What Is Actually Happening or distracting yourself by labeling your circumstances as "good" or "bad" – "lucky" or "unlucky" – "wanted" or "unwanted."

If you are open to it, self-growth is available within ANY circumstance. That said, sometimes you won't have the energy (or be in the mood) to focus on your growth… **but what if you started to experiment with gently acknowledging these little invitations as they come into your life and exploring what they have to offer?**

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Are you trying to get someone to change?

If you don't have enough influence or leverage in a relationship with someone then you are wasting your energy trying to get them to change in any way.

Concepts of justice, idealism, and fairness consume copious amounts of energy in situations where you don't have influence. Same with being surprised or disappointed with someone's behavior or choices when they've exhibited those traits time and again. **What if you experimented with allowing yourself to stop being shocked or disappointed whenever a walrus acts like… a walrus?**

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Are you attempting to save the day?

In order to protect your energy (and sanity) as a caregiver, it's important to pull yourself back from the extremes. You are not capable of being anyone's savior – and trying to be only sets you up for failure or heartbreak or burnout.

Do you wish you could just scoop your loved one up and lift them out of these challenging or dire circumstances? I know, me too. **If you've been trying to micro-manage people or control outcomes, how might you begin to nurture a deeper relationship with (or heal your relationship with) Trust?**

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Are you resisting asking for help or allowing it in?

As a caregiver, you have offered help and it was accepted by your loved one… but you may not be as comfortable asking others to assist you – in any capacity. The good news is this is something you can get better at.

What are the stories you are telling yourself that are generating your reluctance – and what are some small, safe ways you can experiment with making requests and allowing yourself to receive help (in or out of your actual caregiving situation)?

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Are you ruminating on the past too much?

Our caregiver brains can consume a lot of energy looking backwards, dwelling on "if only / what if / I wish that / why didn't I" scenarios.

Looking to the past can be a rudimentary coping mechanism to find momentary relief from the present moment… but it can result in an unhelpful spin-cycle of thoughts and feelings that leave you feeling drained and defeated. **What if you experimented with giving yourself a full day where you pay close attention to your thoughts and didn't allow your brain to think about the past?** (Each time it habitually goes there, you draaaaag it back to the present, again and again.)

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Are you projecting into the future too often?

Our caregiver brains can consume a lot of energy looking forwards, trying to predict outcomes or navigate potential scenarios or troubleshoot imagined catastrophes.

Worrying about the future can be a rudimentary coping mechanism to find momentary relief from the present moment… but it can result in an unhelpful spin-cycle of thoughts and feelings that leave you feeling drained and anxious. **What if you experimented with giving yourself a full day where you pay close attention to your thoughts and didn't allow your brain to think about the future?** (Each time it habitually goes there, you draaaaag it back to the present, again and again.)

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Are you allowing enough pleasure into your life?

Allowing yourself to experience the restorative effects of pleasure doesn't even require you to DO anything extra. You can start by encouraging yourself simply to notice all of the teeny tiny bits of pleasure that float into your day naturally… the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches that stimulate momentary delight.

You can, of course, proactively find ways to infuse your life with more laughter, beauty, spontaneity, indulgence, peace, comfort, sensuality, tenderness, silliness, etc. **If you've been resisting allowing <u>enough</u> pleasure into your life, why do you think that is?**

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"What am I not allowing myself to feel?"

This is the most effective question I have to unlock the door to my own emotions (which isn't always an easy thing for me to do).

Often we caregivers have to repress or compartmentalize our feelings to get through situations. That's understandable, yet, from time to time, you have to let your emotions out (so they can fully run through you). **What if, for a few days, you experimented with asking yourself this question at least once each day and writing out your answer?**

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What is the message your emotion is trying to deliver?

Feeling bad isn't "bad." All of the emotions you feel while on this caregiving rollercoaster are knocking on your heart (or punching you in the gut) because they have a message for you to pay attention to.

Yet emotions can sometimes be so messy, inconvenient or destabilizing that we expend extra energy judging ourselves for having them and/or numbing them entirely. **What if, for a few days, you experimented with welcoming your emotions when they pay you a visit and pausing to truly listen to what they have to say?**

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How are you allowing yourself to process your anger?

Anger, sadness, rage, and grief are the Four Horsemen of the Caregiving Apocalypse.

We caregivers get aaaaangry, and that's okay. It's very important to separate out your loved one as a person from the disease (or condition) that is disrupting their life, your life and (possibly) your family's dynamics. That way, you can direct your anger toward the disease (or condition) and not towards the person whom you are caring for. **Have you been allowing yourself to process your anger when it shows up – and, if not, why not?**

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How are you allowing yourself to process your sadness?

Anger, sadness, rage, and grief are the Four Horsemen of the Caregiving Apocalypse.

We caregivers get saaaadddd, and that's okay. Caregiving situations can generate sadness around so many things. And it's okay if your sadness seems illogical or disproportionate or disruptive… there's truly no need to judge it, you just have to feel it. **Have you been allowing yourself to process your sadness when it shows up – and, if not, why not?**

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How are you allowing yourself to process your rage?

Anger, sadness, rage, and grief are the Four Horsemen of the Caregiving Apocalypse.

We caregivers can experience RAGE, and that's okay. Rage usually manifests as a deeper, more visceral experience of being angry – rage wants to come out of you physically. Since it's best if it's not directed at another person, it needs to be released from your body in some other, physical way. And there's truly no need to judge it, you just have to process it. **Have you been allowing yourself to process any rage you may have – and, if not, why not?**

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How are you allowing yourself to process your grief?

Anger, sadness, rage, and grief are the Four Horsemen of the Caregiving Apocalypse.

We caregivers can begin experiencing grief long before (or even without) the death of the loved one we are caring for. Grief often comes in waves of emotion and is connected directly to loss – and there can be so many different losses, big and small, that occur as your loved one and their life (and your life) change due to their illness (or condition). **Have you been allowing yourself to process your grief when it shows up – and, if not, why not?**

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Participation Policy

We, the founders, coaches, and support staff at You First, are invested in upholding and exemplifying the following tenets so that we can provide guidance and foster community in an atmosphere conducive to positive personal growth.

Your payment for and participation in this group program signifies both your **willingness** to embrace and maintain all four tenets of the Participation Policy and your **understanding** that transgressions will be taken seriously and will likely result in a termination of your membership.

1) We are committed to maintaining supportive, safe spaces.

You are encouraged to **support** your fellow members by holding space for them, celebrating them, and sharing resources and ideas with them.

That said, you are required to help your fellow members feel **safe** by refraining from offering any type of **unsolicited** advice, tips, feedback, or coaching (on any topic, personal or professional). When you have the desire to share something that you think will benefit a fellow member, first **ask** if they are **open** to receiving your suggestion before you offer it – let **them** determine when the timing might be right for an exchange with you, and be gracious if they decline. Trust that everyone is on their own journey in their own perfect timing and it is not your job to fix or save or coach them.

With this commitment, you are helping to create a space where everyone can feel comfortable and at ease.

2) We are committed to preserving confidentiality.

Our coaching sessions and community connection platform are most powerful when members can be open, specific, and candid about their circumstances and challenges. To that end, you agree to keep the information shared by fellow members within our sessions and on our platforms **confidential**.

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3) We are committed to communicating with emotional maturity.

We expect you to take responsibility for your own energy and emotional regulation while participating in our sessions and communicating on our platform – this applies to both written and verbal interactions, personal or professional.

Each of us has good days and bad days and you are always welcome to show up "as is." That said, we ask that when you do show up, you contribute as much focus and presence as you can in order to create a positive learning environment for you and your fellow members.

Collect your thoughts before you speak. Take a breath before you react. Reflect for a moment before you press send.

Rudeness, inflammatory comments, hate-speech, threats, and harassment will not be tolerated. Also, this is not an appropriate forum in which to share your views on politics, religion, or medical theories.

If you ever have problems, concerns, or suggestions – regarding fellow members, the coaches, the staff, or the program materials – bring those issues to our attention so we can consider whatever may need to be addressed or altered.

With this commitment, you are helping to cultivate clear, empathetic connections.

4) We commit to fostering intersectional social justice.

The spaces we invite you to create and occupy with us are inclusive across ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, physical appearance, physical abilities, and cognitive differences. We are antiracist and we stand with movements aimed at dismantling the white heteronormative ableist ageist colonial patriarchy.

We are committed to learning and unlearning, which means we are committed to owning and rectifying – to the best of our abilities – the mistakes and missteps we will inevitably make. These are the standards we hold you to as well.

With this commitment, you are helping to create a more inclusive, fair, and welcoming world.

The following people acknowledge and agree to actively support all of the above,

Kristine Oller, the support staff at You First, and ***you.***

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