

The First 90 Days

A crisis companion for the earliest weeks after estrangement

L. M. Harwood ©2026 · Still the Parent

The First 90 Days

The first ninety days after estrangement are some of the hardest you will go through. This is not a book about staying sad or dwelling on what happened. It is about what is actually happening in your body and brain during this time, and what you can do, in practical terms, to get through each stage. You do not need to feel ready for this. You just need to take it one phase at a time.

Phase One: Days 1 to 7 — The Body in Shock

The first week is not about understanding anything. It is about your body reacting to shock, and I want you to understand what is actually happening inside you, because once you see it clearly, you will stop blaming yourself for how you feel.

When you first realise what is happening, your body releases a flood of stress hormones. Cortisol and adrenaline. These are the same chemicals your body would release if you were in real physical danger. Your body cannot tell the difference between a threat to your life and a threat to your heart. It reacts to both the same way.

This is why your heart races. Why your chest feels tight. Why you cannot switch your mind off. Why you cannot sleep, even though you are exhausted. Why food holds no interest, or why you cannot stop eating. Why you cannot focus on a simple task. None of this is you falling apart. It is your nervous system doing exactly what it was built to do when it senses danger.

There is also a part of your brain called the amygdala. Its job is to detect threat and set off the alarm. Right now, yours is working overtime. At the same time, the part of your brain responsible for calm, clear thinking, the prefrontal cortex, is not getting the blood flow and energy it usually has. That is why your thinking feels foggy and your emotions feel huge. It is not that you have become irrational. It is that the calm, reasoning part of your brain has temporarily taken a back seat to the alarm system.

This is exactly why the first week is the worst possible time to make big decisions or send a long reply. Your brain is not built for careful thinking right now. It is built for survival. Whatever you write today will not be the same letter you would write in a month, once your body has come down from this state. Give yourself that time before you act.

What actually helps this week

- Wait at least 48 hours before responding to anything, even if the silence feels unbearable. Your brain is not in a state to make good decisions yet, and that is not your fault.
- Sleep matters more than almost anything else right now. Poor sleep keeps your stress hormones elevated and makes everything harder to carry. If you cannot sleep, see your doctor. Do not try to push through this alone.
- Try to eat something at regular times, even if you are not hungry. Your body is under real physical stress right now, and it needs fuel to cope with it.
- Tell one person today. Just one. Connection with another person has been shown to actually lower your stress hormone levels. You do not have to carry this alone in the first week.
- Keep your routine as normal as you can manage. Go to work if you can. Structure gives your nervous system something steady to hold onto when everything else feels like it has been pulled away.
- Go easy on the alcohol. It feels like it helps in the moment and it does not. It disrupts sleep further and adds to the load your body is already under.
- If the pain feels like more than you can carry, please reach out to a crisis line or your doctor. What you are feeling is a real physical response to a real loss, and support exists for exactly this.

What not to do this week

- Do not reply straight away, even if you feel a strong urge to explain yourself or ask why. Wait the 48 hours first.
- Do not show up in person uninvited. It rarely goes the way you hope, and it can make things harder to repair later.
- Do not make any big decisions this week. Nothing about wills, nothing about future contact, nothing permanent. Your brain is not in a state for that kind of thinking yet.
- Do not tell everyone straight away. You do not need to explain this to your whole circle in the first week. Choose one person you trust, and let that be enough for now.
- Do not search their social media over and over looking for answers. It will not give you what you are looking for, and it will only add to the distress you are already carrying.

- Do not judge yourself for how you are reacting. However you are feeling right now, whatever you are doing to get through the day, is a normal response to shock. This is not the time to be hard on yourself.
- Do not try to carry this completely alone. Reaching out for help this early is not weakness. It is one of the most useful things you can do for yourself right now.

You are not meant to feel okay this week. Your body is doing exactly what it is designed to do. You are meant to get through it, one day at a time.

Phase Two: Days 8 to 30 — The Rumination Loop

By the second week, the sharpest shock usually settles a little. What replaces it is different. Your mind keeps going back to the same thoughts, over and over. The same conversations replayed. The same questions asked again and again with no answer. This is a different problem to week one, and it needs a different response.

There is a network in your brain called the default mode network. It switches on whenever your mind is not busy with something in front of you, and its job is to process things that are unresolved. Your estrangement is now the biggest unresolved thing in your life, so your brain keeps returning to it. This is not you failing to let go. It is your brain searching for an answer it does not have yet.

What actually helps in these weeks

- Give the rumination a fixed time each day instead of letting it run all day. Fifteen minutes, same time, every day. Sit with the thoughts on purpose during that window. When the time is up, close it and move on.
- Get the thoughts out of your head and onto paper. Writing down the same replayed conversation, even briefly, changes its weight in your mind.
- Notice what sets the loop off. A song, a time of day, a place. Once you notice the trigger, you can prepare for it instead of being caught off guard.
- When you catch yourself mid loop outside your set time, redirect on purpose. Call someone. Start a task that needs your hands.
- Talk to someone who understands this specifically. A support group, a forum, someone who has lived it.

What not to do in these weeks

- Do not send repeated messages into the silence. It feels like you are keeping the door open, but for most adult children it does the opposite. It confirms the very thing they pulled away from.

- Do not enlist your other children, in-laws, or extended family to pass messages, gather information, or plead your case. It puts them in an impossible position, and it very often damages that relationship too, without getting you any closer to an answer.
- Do not send a long, sweeping apology for everything and anything. A vague apology asks your child to do the work of figuring out what you are even apologising for. It rarely lands the way you hope.
- Do not check their social media repeatedly. It will not give you peace. It gives your brain a fresh dose of pain on a schedule you do not control.
- Do not make any big decisions right now about contact, family gatherings, wills, or anything permanent. Your rumination is loud at this stage, and loud thoughts are not the same as clear ones.

Week one was your body reacting. This stage is your mind searching. Give it small, deliberate boundaries on both what to do and what to leave alone, and it will not need to search as hard.

Phase Three: Days 31 to 60: Reintroducing the Body to Function

By this stage, the sharp shock has usually passed and the rumination loop is not running quite as constantly as it was. But something else tends to show up now. Tiredness that will not lift. A flatness where things that used to interest you no longer do. This is not you giving up. It is what happens to a body that has been under sustained stress for over a month.

When stress hormones stay raised for weeks rather than days, they start to affect more than your mood. Your immune system weakens, which is why some parents get sick around this stage after holding up fine in the first few weeks. Your energy drops, because your body has been running on high alert for a long time and it needs recovery, not more adrenaline. Your ability to feel pleasure in ordinary things can flatten too. This is a real, physical dulling, not a character flaw. Your body is not broken. It is depleted, and it needs you to actively help it recover rather than waiting for time alone to do it.

What actually helps in these weeks

- Put one genuinely enjoyable activity on your calendar this week, and do it whether you feel like it or not. Waiting until you feel like doing something rarely works at this stage. Doing it first is often what brings the feeling back.

- Get a basic health check if you have been putting it off. Blood pressure, blood tests, whatever you have been avoiding. Sustained stress affects the body in real ways, and it is worth knowing where you stand.
- Build one small thing into most days that has nothing to do with the estrangement. A hobby, a walk somewhere new, time with a pet. Anything that gives your mind and body a genuine break.
- Reconnect with one friendship you may have let slide over the past month. Isolation makes this harder to recover from, and connection is one of the most protective things you can do for yourself right now.
- Find a regular source of support, not just one you turn to in a crisis. A support group, a counsellor, a community like this one. Use it on a schedule, not only when things feel unbearable.
- Move your body regularly, not intensely. Consistency matters more than effort here.

What not to do in these weeks

- Do not measure your progress by whether the pain is gone. It is not meant to be gone yet. Measure it instead by whether you are sleeping, eating, and functioning a little more than you were a month ago.
- Do not isolate yourself because socialising feels like too much effort. This is exactly the stage where isolation does the most damage, even though it feels like the easiest option.
- Do not fill this recovering energy straight back into monitoring the estrangement. If you notice yourself using this new stability to search harder for answers, that is a sign to redirect, not to push further.
- Do not judge yourself for still having bad days. Recovery from sustained stress is not a straight line upward. Some days will still feel like week one, and that does not mean you have gone backwards.

Week one was your body in shock. Weeks two to four were your mind searching. This stage is your body asking for genuine recovery, not just the passing of time. Give it that, deliberately, and the flatness will start to lift.

Phase Four: Days 61 to 90 : Neuroplasticity and the New Map

By this stage, you have usually made it through the worst of the shock, the searching, and the flatness. What comes next is quieter, but just as important. This is when your brain actually starts to change.

Your brain has a real, physical ability to rewire itself. This is called neuroplasticity, and it is happening in you right now, whether you notice it or not. Every time you build a new routine, have a new experience, or repeat a new way of responding to something, you are laying down new pathways in your brain. Over time, those new pathways get stronger, and the old ones, the ones built around expecting your child to be part of daily life in a certain way, get weaker from lack of use. This is not forgetting. It is your brain slowly building a new map of your life that reflects where things actually stand now, instead of where you expected them to be.

This is why the small, deliberate choices from the last two months matter so much. They are not just coping tools. They are the actual building blocks of a rewired brain. The more you repeat them, the more real and lasting the change becomes.

What actually helps in these weeks

- Start one new routine that has nothing to do with the estrangement. A class, a regular walk, a new interest. New, repeated experiences are exactly what drives this rewiring process, so this is not a small thing. It is the work itself.
- If you are going to make a decision about future contact, make it now, deliberately, rather than out of impulse or exhaustion. You are in a far better place to think clearly at this stage than you were in the first few weeks.
- Take stock of what has actually changed in ninety days. Sleep, appetite, energy, your ability to get through a day. Progress at this stage is usually found in function, not in whether the sadness has disappeared.
- Keep the boundaries you built in the earlier phases. The fifteen minute rumination window, the set times for checking in on things, the regular movement and routine. These do not stop being useful once the worst has passed. They are what keeps the new pathways growing stronger.
- Start thinking about the next stretch, not just these ninety days. This early period is about survival and stabilising. What comes after is about building an actual life. If you feel ready, this is a good point to look at a longer path forward, whether that is ongoing support, counselling, or a structured resource made for exactly this.

What not to do in these weeks

- Do not expect to feel finished. Ninety days is the start of stability, not the end of the grief. The love does not disappear on a schedule.
- Do not go back to old patterns just because you are feeling steadier. A steadier week is not a sign that checking in constantly or reaching out repeatedly is safe again. The same reasons to avoid those things still apply.

- Do not compare your ninety days to anyone else's. Some parents will still be deep in phase two at this point, and some will have moved through faster. There is no correct pace.
- Do not mistake a quieter mind for a resolved situation. Quiet is progress. It is not the same as finished.

The first week was your body in shock. The weeks after were your mind searching. The month after that was your body asking for real recovery. This stage is your brain quietly building something new underneath all of it. Keep giving it what it needs, and in time, the new map becomes the one you actually live in.

Still The Parent Website and Why the Prompts Work; Backed by Science

Some of the daily prompts on Still the Parent ask you to look honestly at yourself. What you may have done, what you could have handled differently, what part was actually yours. I know this can feel uncomfortable, and I want to explain why it is there, and why it is not the same as blaming yourself.

There is a real difference between blame and honest reflection, and the research backs this up clearly. Studies on self-compassion have found something that surprises most people. When someone is helped to look at their own mistakes with kindness instead of harsh self-criticism, they actually become more likely to take responsibility, not less. They are more motivated to make amends and more committed to not repeating the same pattern. Shame tends to make people defensive and shut down. Compassion, alongside honest reflection, is what actually opens the door to change.

This is exactly why the prompts are worded the way they are. Instead of asking what is wrong with you, they ask what you did, or what happened, or what you might do differently. That small shift in wording matters more than it seems. Something you did, you can also do differently next time. Something you are, feels fixed and impossible to change. The prompts are built to help you find what is genuinely yours to own, without asking you to carry blame that was never yours in the first place.

Why one or two minutes a day is enough

I know the prompts feel small. Some days you might spend two minutes on one and wonder if it even makes a difference. I want you to know that it does, and there is real research behind it.

Writing briefly about something difficult, even for just a couple of minutes, has been shown to genuinely help. Some of the earliest research in this area had people write for

fifteen minutes a day, but later studies found that even two minutes over just two days produced real benefits. It is not about how long you spend. It is about doing it, and doing it again.

Why it still helps even when it feels repetitive

I will be honest with you. I still find some of the prompts boring. I have answered questions that felt like ones I had already answered a hundred times, and some days I have gotten frustrated writing the same thing again in a slightly different way. But looking back, I can see clearly how much that repetition actually did for me.

Repetition is how the brain learns anything. Every time you sit with a question again, even one you feel you have already answered, you are strengthening a pathway in your brain rather than leaving it to fade. And the truth is, you are never quite the same person each time you answer it. A question that felt unbearable three months ago might feel a little more bearable today, even if you cannot see the difference in the moment. That is not because the question changed. It is because you did.

You do not need to feel inspired every time you sit down to answer a prompt. You do not need to feel like it matters that day. Just doing it, even briefly, even when it feels repetitive, is quietly doing the work.

Still the Parent

The Workbook Prompts

The Prompts for the first 90 days

Stage 1 & 2

STAGE 1 EXERCISES

When did it begin?

When did the estrangement begin, and how did you first understand what was happening? There is no right answer. Write what you actually remember.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

The silence started when...

The first time I truly understood something was wrong was...

What I remember most from those early days is...(this can be how you felt, what you said, who you said it to etc.)

◆ L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

Now that you have named when it began — what is one thing that has not been taken from you, no matter what has happened?(this can be your compassion, how you treat your family, your love, your ability to keep working etc)

What does the silence feel like?

Describe what the silence or absence feels like — not what it means, what it actually feels like. In your body. In your daily life. In the quiet moments.

Select all that apply — tick your answer(s):

- ☐ Lonely
- ☐ Sad
- ☐ Disbelief — it doesn't feel real
- ☐ Uncomfortable
- ☐ Physically sickening
- ☐ Like a weight I carry constantly
- ☐ Numb
- ☐ Something else

What is your mind telling you about these feelings? For example, does it tell you that you shouldn't feel this way, that you need to come to terms with it, or something else entirely?

◆ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

Even in the middle of that feeling — what tells you that you are stronger than this moment? It might be small (eg; I am still getting out of bed every day, I'm not giving up, I am trying to heal) . Write it down anyway.

What is hardest for you?

What is the hardest part of this experience for you specifically? Not the hardest part in general — the hardest part for you.

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ The loneliness
- ☐ The shame
- ☐ Not knowing why
- ☐ The guilt
- ☐ The silence itself
- ☐ Not being able to talk about it
- ☐ Missing who they used to be
- ☐ Something else

My thoughts: *Of the answers you selected, which one feels the heaviest right now? What makes that part so difficult for you? What do you find yourself thinking about most when it comes up?*

♦ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

And now the other side: what is one thing — however small — that you have managed, coped with, or done well since this began? (example: I am still going to work, I am still loving my family)

What do you wish someone understood?

What do you wish someone understood about what you are going through?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ That there is almost no support for parents
- ☐ That I didn't believe it at first
- ☐ That it affects my body, not just my mind
- ☐ That it feels surreal — like a dream I can't wake from
- ☐ That I feel physically sick at times
- ☐ That I am not the bad person people assume I am
- ☐ Something else

My thoughts: What do you wish people could see that they cannot see from the outside? What part of your experience feels unseen, misunderstood, or judged? If you could say one thing without being interrupted, what would you want others to hear?(example; how could this happen to me, I was a loving parent)

◆ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

What do you most want someone to say to you right now — not about the estrangement, but about you as a person? Write it here. Then read it back to yourself as though a trusted friend just said it.

How are you today — really?

How are you today? Not the answer you give other people. The real one.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

Today, honestly, I feel...

What I am not saying to anyone right now is...

The thing that is hardest today is...

◆ **Turning toward yourself**

On your best recent day — even a small one — what did that feel like? Even one hour of feeling like yourself counts. Describe it. (example; excited, happy, normal)

Just write where you are

What you are feeling right now is not an overreaction. It is a completely proportionate response to an extraordinary loss. Today, just write where you are. Nothing more is required. It can even be a list (example: Today feels heavy. "I am tired of carrying this." "I feel stuck.")

Did you know that just writing it down can help your brain come to terms with things. You may not see it like this but over time it will help.

When did your body know?

When did you get confirmation something was wrong — not just delayed or busy, but genuinely wrong? What was the moment your body understood before your mind did?

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

The moment I knew something was really wrong was...

My body understood before my mind did when (example; tight chest, headaches, confusion)

Looking back, the first real sign was...

◆ Turning toward yourself

In the time since that moment — what have you shown about who you are? You have kept going. What has that taken? Name it without minimising it. (I am strong, I am resilient, I am still loving, I am courageous). Make it a list if you want to, and repeat them to yourself several times

What have you lost beyond the relationship?

What have you lost beyond the relationship itself?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ The future I had imagined
- ☐ The phone calls I expected
- ☐ Grandchildren I pictured but may never know
- ☐ The person I thought they were
- ☐ My role as an active parent
- ☐ Family occasions and milestones
- ☐ The belief that my family was intact
- ☐ Something else

Of the items you chose above, For each one, write a sentence explaining what you think is lost.

For example;

The future I had imagined: that future was where we would have family gathering.

The phone calls I expected: I expected calls for my birthday, or to just chat.

L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

Now look forward rather than back. What do you want to gain — for yourself — now that you know you have to build a different kind of life? What is one thing you want for you? For example: I want to still have family gatherings, I want to learn how to swim, I want to meet new friends.

Who do you hide this from?

Who do you hide this from, and why?

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

I hide this from... because...

The person I most wish I could tell is...

Keeping this secret affects me by...

♦ **T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f**

Who has shown up for you — even imperfectly — since this began? Write about one person who has tried. (for example: my other children stuck with me, my best friend holds me when I cry)

The question in the dark

What question do you keep returning to, even though you know you may never get a satisfying answer? For example: Did I miss something important? Do they ever think about me?

Write a list of things.

◆ **L o o k i n g f o r w a r d**

Set the unanswerable question to one side for a moment. What is one question about your own life — not about the estrangement — that you do want to find the answer to? (example; will I ever be able to learn to swim, will I find peace, will I move on to bigger and better things) Write a list.

What the world doesn't understand

Estrangement has been described as grief with no funeral — a loss that has no form the world knows how to respond to. Write a few lines about what you wish people understood about what you are carrying.

For example: I wish people understood that this is not something I can simply get over., I wish people knew that I think about my child every day, even when I don't talk about them.

I wish people...

Which kind of estrangement was yours?

There are two kinds of estrangement — the one that builds slowly, and the one that arrives overnight without warning. Which was yours?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ It built slowly — I saw it coming but hoped it wouldn't
- ☐ It arrived overnight without warning
- ☐ I am still not sure which it was
- ☐ It is still happening — I don't know where it will end
- ☐ Something else

Why ask this question? *It matters because people often judge themselves for how they're feeling without realizing that the nature of the estrangement itself influences the grief.*

Write down whether there were signs, turning points, or moments that stand out to you now? (you can also write NO)

How has the way the estrangement unfolded affected the way you carry it today? Do you understand it a bit more, or are you still in shock.

◆ **T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f**

Whatever kind it was — you have survived the arrival of it. What does that tell you about yourself that perhaps you have not given yourself credit for? (example; that will cope, that you will work hard to move on)

What story have you been telling yourself?

What story have you been telling yourself about why this happened?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ It was my fault
- ☐ I was too strict
- ☐ My child got involved with the wrong people
- ☐ Someone convinced my child to do this
- ☐ My child was manipulated
- ☐ I will never understand why
- ☐ My child needs to find their own way and this is part of it
- ☐ Something else

My thoughts: Which of these explanations do you find yourself returning to most often?

Does it bring you comfort, guilt, anger, confusion, acceptance, or something else?

You do not need to decide whether the story is right or wrong. Simply notice the story your mind returns to when it tries to make sense of what happened. The deeper work is simply becoming aware of the narrative they're carrying and how that narrative affects you.

◆ **T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f**

Now write a different story — not a denial of what happened, but a story in which you are not the villain.
(For Example; I always treated my child with love and respect, I very rarely argued with them)

What would you want them to know?

If a close friend described to you exactly what you are going through right now, what would you want them to know?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ How I feel hour to hour
- ☐ How it is affecting my body
- ☐ How it is affecting my other relationships
- ☐ How it is affecting my work
- ☐ How surreal and isolating it is
- ☐ That I have no support and nowhere to turn
- ☐ Something else

So once you have selected what resonates with you, answer it. For example; How I feel hour to hour – some days I cry all day, other days I am ok unless someone mentions it.

♦ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

What would that same close friend — who knows you well — say about the kind of parent you were?

You keep going

You picked up this book and started this workbook because you are someone who keeps going. Today, write one sentence about what keeping going means to you right now.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

For me, keeping going means...

What gets me through is...

I am still here because...

Stage 2 Searching

STAGE 2 EXERCISES

What does ambiguous loss feel like?

Ambiguous loss is the experience of grieving someone who is still alive — someone who exists in the world but is absent from your life. In your own words, what does that particular quality of loss feel like for you?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ It feels like they died — but without anyone acknowledging it
- ☐ It makes me feel like I am a bad person
- ☐ It doesn't feel true — like it can't be real
- ☐ It feels unfinished — like a wound that can't close
- ☐ It feels like I am frozen while life goes on around me
- ☐ It feels humiliating
- ☐ Something else

Of the answers you selected, what is it about that experience that makes this loss so difficult to carry? Example; lack of recognition and validation, shame, disbelief, no closure, being stuck, embarrassment.

◆ Looking forward

Ambiguous loss is also ambiguous possibility. The relationship is not dead — it is unresolved. What does that leave open for you, even now? Write about the smallest version of hope that still exists other than reconciliation. For example; I may get to meet my grandchildren one day. I hope my child will be happy. I hope he or she will be successful. .

Where does the grief live in your body?

Where does the grief live in your body? Describe what you have been carrying physically.

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ Tight chest
- ☐ Disrupted sleep
- ☐ Low-level exhaustion that rest doesn't touch
- ☐ Stomach knots or nausea
- ☐ Loss of appetite or eating too much
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating
- ☐ Crying unexpectedly
- ☐ Physical heaviness — like everything takes more effort
- ☐ Something else

This is about recognising that grief is not just emotional, it can also be physical. What has this loss been costing you physically? It is important to see this.

From the items you selected, write if you intend to do anything about it and if so what. For example; Tight chest; I will start to learn breathing techniques to help with this. Loss of appetite; I will try to plan my meals for the day ahead of time and make them more enticing.

◆ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

Your body has been carrying this — and also keeping you going. What has your body done well in this time that you have not acknowledged? (for example; I have kept exercising, I have kept my walking routine, I have started to walk the dog more)

When did it surface unexpectedly?

Describe a moment in the past week when the grief surfaced unexpectedly. Not a dramatic moment. An ordinary one — a song, a question someone asked, a family you saw together.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

This week, it surfaced when...

I didn't expect to feel it, but then...

The smallest things still catch me, like...

◆ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

Now describe a moment in the same week when you felt something other than grief — even briefly. A laugh, a conversation, a meal, a piece of music. Write about that moment.

Where has shame been showing up?

Shame or guilt keeps parents isolated. In what situations do you feel shame or guilt about the estrangement.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

I don't think it's shame I feel, I think it is...

I feel ashamed when...

The thing I am most afraid people will think is...

♦ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

Shame says you are fundamentally flawed. What evidence from your actual life contradicts that? Write three things you have done that a fundamentally flawed person would not have done. (for example; helped a friend, Given my children a great education, taught my sister to swim)

What does the rumination sound like?

What does the rumination sound like for you? The loop your mind runs — the replaying, the re-examining, the questions at 3am. Write it down. Getting it out of your head and onto the page changes its weight.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

The thought I keep returning to is...

At 3am my mind goes to...

The loop usually starts with...

◆ L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

Now write about what you would rather your mind spend that same energy on. What would you think about instead? (for example: going on a vacation, getting some new clothes. Visiting my sister)

Write about something else entirely

The mind trying to understand something that cannot be understood is a mind working itself to exhaustion on a problem it was never designed to solve. Today, you are not required to find the answer. Write something — anything — that is not about the estrangement. (for example; what nice things do you have planned for this week. What movie do you love, what's your favourite food etc) make a list;

What does an ordinary day look like now?

What does an ordinary day look like for you now, compared to before? Not the dramatic differences. The small, daily ones. The ones nobody asks about.

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ Long and heavy
- ☐ Sad most of the time
- ☐ Difficult to get through
- ☐ Manageable — until something reminds me
- ☐ OK on the surface but not underneath
- ☐ Noticeably quieter than it used to be
- ☐ Fine some days, terrible others
- ☐ Something else

This is not about making it hard for you, its about identifying what is happening so you can avoid it or focus on how to deal with it better.

So;

Think about why you identified what you did and try to write down the small things that made you feel like that. For example; because I no longer hear my child's voice and I miss it, because some days I have so much work that I am distracted, other days I am not.

◆ L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

Now describe the ordinary day you want — not the one you had before, and not the one you have now. What would a good ordinary day look like, built around who you are becoming? (for example; to hear someone talking about my child and my chest does not tighten, to feel proud of who I am and what I have become)

Where is most of you, most of the time?

You may have found yourself split — partially present in your actual life, and partially still in a state of disbelief. Describe what that split feels like.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

Most of me is still...

The part of me that is present is...

I notice the split most when...

◆ L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

The part of you that is present — what is something good and positive it wants? Write about what the present version of you is reaching toward. (for example; to have days where I don't feel sad, to form closer relationships with my other children, to become a better friend)

What has the estrangement cost you socially?

Estrangement is rarely just between two people. What has it cost you in the wider world?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ Relationships with grandchildren
- ☐ Relationships with other family members
- ☐ Friendships — people who didn't know how to respond
- ☐ A sense of belonging in family gatherings
- ☐ The ability to talk openly about my life
- ☐ My identity as part of an intact family
- ☐ Something else

Explain the extent of the estrangement you have identified in the list. For example; do you have any contact with your grandchildren, do you feel you no longer belong at the family dinner and why? Question yourself and don't just let it be. You may be surprised at how hard you are on yourself.

◆ **Turning toward yourself**

Now name what has stayed intact — or what has quietly grown — in the same period. Something the estrangement did not take. (example; your promotion at work, your ability to reach out to other family members, Your interest in nature)

A letter you will never send

Write a letter to your child that you will never send. Not to persuade, not to explain — just to say what is true for you. **You will not send this. But writing it may change its weight.** For example; I don't understand what happened." "I'm hurting." "I think about you every day."

What gets you through the hardest days?

On the days when the grief is at its heaviest — what actually gets you through? Not what should help. What actually does.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

On the hardest days, what gets me through is...

The thing that helps most, even if it seems small, is...

I have learned that I can cope by...

♦ T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f

What does the fact that you have survived every hard day until now tell you about yourself?

What do you wish you could say out loud?

What is the thing about this experience that you most wish you could say out loud — to anyone — without fear of judgement?

Select all that apply — circle your answer(s):

- ☐ That I think about them every single day
- ☐ That I don't know if I did anything wrong
- ☐ That I am furious as well as heartbroken
- ☐ That I am relieved sometimes, and then ashamed of the relief
- ☐ That I don't know who I am without this role
- ☐ That I am afraid this is permanent
- ☐ Something else

Many estranged parents are surprised by how much energy goes into hiding certain feelings—especially anger, relief, confusion, resentment, jealousy, or fear. Writing about the thing they cannot say aloud can reduce some of the isolation and shame surrounding it.

*Write your thoughts: **why you don't say it** (is it shame, fear or you just don't know) and **what it feels like to carry it alone** (does it make you feel more lonely or do you feel better by hiding it, is it a bit of self indulgence).*

◆ Turning toward yourself

You just said it — here, privately. How does it feel to have named it, even in this space?

What has surprised you about how you have coped?

Looking back over the time since the estrangement began — what has surprised you about your own capacity to cope?

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

I didn't expect to be able to...

What surprised me most about myself was...

I have shown more strength than I knew when...

♦ **T u r n i n g t o w a r d y o u r s e l f**

Write one sentence about yourself as a person — not as a parent, as a person — that the estrangement has not changed and cannot change.

The grief nobody names

Estrangement grief has no ritual, no social permission, and no end point the world recognises. Write about what it is like to carry a grief that has no name. Bullet points is fine, just express your feelings (loneliness, emptiness, reality checks)

◆ L o o k i n g f o r w a r d

Now write about what naming it — here, in this space — gives you. Even slightly. Even imperfectly. (example; relief, confrontation, realisation)

You are still here

You have been carrying this. And you are still here.? Write about what still being here means to you today.

Sentence starters — complete whichever feels right:

Still being here or still being present means...

What keeps me going, underneath everything, is...

The person who benefits most from me staying present is...

F O R T H E H A R D E S T D A Y S

Affirmations for the Hardest Days

These affirmations are for the days when everything feels impossible. You do not have to believe them fully. You only have to read them.

Print them out and look at them several times a day

1. *This pain will pass. It has before and it will again.*
2. *I have survived every hard day until now. I will survive this one too.*
3. *I do not have to fix anything today. I only have to get through today.*
4. *I am not alone in this, even when I feel completely alone.*
5. *This moment is not the whole story.*
6. *I am worthy of love and care — from others and from myself.*
7. *It is enough to still be here.*
8. *Tomorrow I will feel differently. I do not have to feel better today.*
9. *I am allowed to ask for help.*
10. *I am stronger than this moment makes me feel.*