

A Letter from a Trauma Worker on the Anniversary

For everyone who is struggling right now – who may be overwhelmed, at a loss, and wondering how you're going to get through this – I am so sorry.

I am sorry for how hard it all is. For the weight of it. The magnitude. The intensity. For any way you feel alone, not seen, misunderstood, or unappreciated.

I am sorry for all that may have been hard *before* this last year – those things which were already deepening your fatigue and escalating your anxiety. For the ways the caretaking you were doing was wearing on you or your living situation was difficult. For how your job or school was challenging in all the wrong ways. For any way you felt unmoored coming into this last year, I am sorry.

Because then came the pandemic, with a deluge of confusion that rattled and unraveled our norms. Systemic oppression and structural supremacy continued to surface in exceedingly excruciating ways. The devastation from the climate crisis escalated, our democracy was strained to its outer limits, and political violence persisted around the globe. The external threats felt unrelenting.

And yet, in the face of profound pain, the expectation remained that you would continue to care for your loved ones, go to work, attend school, and contribute to society. Even as you learned to navigate new and terrifying challenges, you lost many of the rituals and connections that help humans cope. As those things abruptly stopped, so, too, did your sense of distracted purpose. The reassurance of routinely moving through the world was starkly replaced with something unfamiliar and unsettling. And for many of us, the uncertainty – coupled with monotony – has grown in ways that have seemed, at times, unbearable.

For so many, the landscape has been unrecognizable – both outside of us and, of course, internally. Even those of us familiar with internal struggle have encountered ravines and crevasses this last year so deep and cold we've not known how to climb our way out. For some, the discomfort or despair lasted a few minutes at a time. For others, a few days or weeks. For many, it is ongoing.

And because of the duration and complexity of challenges, it may be that you have moved in and out of discomfort and aggravation, through acclimation and acceptance. You may find yourself scaling peaks of what feels almost normal, only to slide down empty valleys of craving and desperation on a trail that loops back and crosses itself.

Suffering, even in response to shared events, is by its nature something most deeply felt alone. But know that I grieve with you at the depth of this collective struggle and feel deeply for those of you who are struggling with *how much* you are struggling. For the countless ways you may feel that you're failing others or that you're being failed by others. For all the times you've not been able to hold humility and grace with compassion.

I'm sorry for every time you've needed help, consolation, relief, or empathy and did not receive it. For the injuries, injustices, and sorrow that may have compounded over time. For the ways that what you've been experiencing has resurfaced earlier traumas, put pressure on existing fissures, and even tapped into something intergenerational that you know to be achingly real, though hard to fully understand. For each time your brain was drawn to think the unthinkable, again and again, I am sorry.

I am sorry for all the feelings coursing through you so quickly you don't know where to put them. You may feel like you are overflowing with sadness or disconnected with numbness. You may feel haunted by a sense that you can never do enough; a sense that runs so deep it's as if you feel that you'll never, again, *be* enough. You may feel paralyzed by helplessness or deeply disconnected with hopelessness. You may find your anger and rage unrecognizable. The persistence of your guilt may stun you and the cognitive quicksand you waded through may confound you. You may long for the creativity you used to be able to access. Perhaps you worry that you've forgotten how to laugh. Your inability to assume well about others may confuse you. You may feel exhausted in your body, spirit, and soul. The depths of how disheartened you feel may alarm you. The extent of your resentment and envy may feel like it knows no bounds. And you may have come to realize it is possible to feel depleted *and* yearning *and* avoidant *and* lonely all at the same time.

And you may feel afraid. Afraid of everything you're going to try to forget and all that may continue to torment you. Afraid of what the future may bring. Of losses you can't bear to conceive of.

For all the loss, I am so sorry. For the loved ones you've lost. For the funerals you've not been able to attend. The weddings you've missed, the births you couldn't be present for, the special occasions and the plans you'd been looking forward to that were canceled or diminished. I am sorry for the layers upon layers of loss. The way your job has changed, your relationships have changed, your school has changed, your community has changed, and anything that was better *before* has changed.

Despite these relentless waves, we each have within us the capacity to endure. There is no question this capacity has been, and will continue to be, challenged. I know that no words from me can turn your suffering into something else. But know this, we can struggle and still be okay.

Please don't give up. Please don't give up on yourself. Please don't give up on others entirely, no matter how tempting that might be. Cynicism is seductive, and also deeply harmful.

They say we are all in this together. Whether that resonates with you in this moment or not, I want to remind you that you are truly not alone. No matter what feelings you're mired in or which wave is currently crushing you, you are in very, very good company. In simply trying to get through each day right now – as a child, an adolescent, an adult, an elder – you are in good company. In facing what may feel like an insurmountable degree of caretaking for loved ones who are struggling physically or mentally, you are in good company. In your attempts to navigate school, your job, your life – you are in good company.

Please don't give up.

The way you are feeling right now does not define you, nor what is possible for you in the future.

Things won't stay this hard. Trauma shifts. It evolves. Overwhelm changes shape and substance and becomes manageable. And I understand this moment in time can feel never-ending. Yet, it will end.

Please don't give up. Believe in your capacity for this next moment, this next decision, this next breath, this next unknown.

If you know what helps you, do that. Find solace in what edifies you, what comforts you, what helps you feel held and whole. If you don't remember, ask for help. If that step doesn't go well, ask someone else or do something else.

Please know that you are cared about and cared for. Know there are those of us out here who collectively are – and will remain – here for you and yours.

Do not give up.

With Love,

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky
traumastewardship.com

My deepest appreciation to Julie McCann, Jennifer Sullivan, Connie Burk, Jake Fawcett, Michele Storms, Jon Conte, Matthew Reddam, and Ed Yong.