

*how*  
*to*  
**HAVE  
YOUR  
BACK**



*Beginning Guide*

**GETTING TO THE HEART  
OF LOVING YOURSELF.**

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Dear Friend,

**Love yourself, come what may.** When it comes to suffering and healing, this is the path I trust above all else. It's the foundation of my writing, the first step in my clinical work, and the lesson I keep learning myself.

If it were that easy, I'd leave it at that. Love yourself, come what may. The end.

But I know it's deeper than that, and weightier, and so much more nuanced.

I know the path of our love isn't always clear. Or easy. Or fast or painless. Even when we love ourselves, there can be pain. In the very moment of opening the door to love, we can grieve for the love we didn't receive before and criticize ourselves for getting it wrong for such a long time.

I also know how scary loving yourself can be. *What if there really is something wrong with you? What if it doesn't work? Who would you become?*

It's confusing, too. Every time, the details of the path look so different. Oh, the *details!* The details are so compelling. I know the allure of certainty and control over circumstances.

And I know that no matter where you begin, the way through always turns out to be the same. The steps that bring you back to earth in moments of eager anticipation are the same that lift you out of being so over self-loathing, fear, or depression. It's always through the practice of loving yourself more.

I know this because most of the time, this is the message I most need to hear. It's also the message I'm quickest to forget.

**In every struggle, every pressure, every stuck place I've been, I've tried all the ways I can think of to find my way out. And every time, I remember that *out* was never where I wanted to be. I just wanted to find my way back to the path that leads me *through*.**

So, I write.

And I practice.

And I write some more.

And I get still and listen.

And if I could save the world, it would be with a massive sign saying, "Love yourself, come what may."

I hear the pressures everywhere. The desire, too. We want to love ourselves unconditionally, but we also want to be different. We want to rid ourselves of the hurting parts or the scared parts or the competitive parts. Those are the parts we call bad or silly. We push them away, ignore them, and bottle them up, forgetting that unconditional love reaches the whole of us.

**It's that unconditional part that's hardest for me to remember because it means loving myself outside of everything I'd constructed before to keep me safe.** What does it look like to love yourself outside of pressure or productivity? Outside of positivity, even? And I get so invested in working at a problem, making things happen, rushing through life.

Then I remember with bittersweet relief that it's always the path of loving myself through it all that I can trust.

The intentions in this beginning guide and the full-length *How to Have Your Back* guidebook are the signposts along that path. These are the simple instructions for loving yourself through the ups and downs in life.

**More than anything, I want you to know that you are worth caring about and taking care of. You're worth the time, interest, and energy of taking care of yourself, and that time, interest, and energy is all progress.** Always. Even when it feels like you're moving in reverse. Even you've forgotten what you learned the last time and swore you'd change forever.

Loyalty, loving interest, caring communication, heartfelt action, and dedication are never time wasted. Never, ever.

Each time you choose to give time, interest, and energy to yourself is evidence of your growth and caring. That's what loving yourself looks like, making the choice whenever you can. Then doing it again and again and again. And there are so many ways to make that choice.

This is why I practice what I practice and share what I share.

Let's choose introspection today. I offer these prompts based on the intentions of *How to Have Your Back* as a roadmap. Through light inquiry, explore each of the intentions in your life and take stock of your natural capacity to be so loyal and loving.

To loving you, unconditionally and finding your way through,

Leslie

## THIS IS OUR STORY OF FORTITUDE

### FROM HOW TO HAVE YOUR BACK

I've hurt. Who *hasn't*?

I've spent a long, lonely night wearing a t-shirt doused in cologne, crying over a pile of teddy bears and ticket stubs.

I've accepted lies as truths when I knew they weren't and told myself I should have known better when it hurt. I've called myself stupid for letting it happen again.

I've heard all the good lines like, "I have a ladder theory about relationships."

I've neglected my body and spirit, depriving both of the sustenance and attention they cried out for.

I've held on to things until my fingers went numb. Then, I grabbed some more.

I've also deeply regretted the pain I've caused others and shamed myself for my mistakes and oversights.

There was a time when I told myself of my inadequacy. In the story of me, I was the ugly stepsister. When I was four or five, I thought I was Snow White. My, how things change when you grow up.

I thought crying or worrying made me weak, too. "Stop letting it get to you," I'd say to my reflection, locked in the bathroom. "That was a year ago. Three years ago. *Ten* years. Move *on!*"

If I needed help, I compared myself to all the people who I assumed didn't, which was everyone. I wouldn't have asked for it if you promised me all the striped tops my closet could hold. I once drove myself to the hospital with a just-broken hand. One-handed, I steered my trusty Saturn across town through rush-hour traffic trying to ignore the swelling and throbbing and deep purple hue taking over my left arm.

When a friend found out, she sat me on her red loveseat, locked eyes with me, and after a long sigh said, "You know you can call me, right?" Yeah, I knew, but I still wouldn't have picked up the phone. At the time, I called this independence. Today, I see how I doubted my worthiness to reach out.

When I felt misunderstood, I was quick to take the blame. I'd lie awake, studying my yellow gingham sheets and pointing out all the things I should have said and done.

During times of illness or physical pain, above all else, I wanted to get over it. Not for my own comfort and well-being but for productivity. I can tell you from personal experience, productivity is not a natural part of recovering from anything that hurts. Definitely not concussions. Or having kids.

And under no circumstances would I let someone know what was *really* going on when I said I was “fine.”

That’s how I defined strength, and as strong and independent as I tried to act, I can see now that I was afraid. I feared pain and the possibility of discovering something horrible in me. So, I closed my eyes and covered my ears. In the moments when I needed my own support the most, I didn’t have my back.

Before I understood the power in showing myself loyalty, interest, or caring, I scheduled my days to the minute and compared myself to everyone I met. “Push harder” was my mantra. Get over the cheating not-officially-a-boyfriend boyfriend faster. Stay up until dawn studying. Run more miles and drop another jean size. I didn’t leave myself room to breathe, let alone live.

A part of me recognized the approach as misguided, harmful even, but I wore it as a badge of honor all the same. I walked around like, “Look at how strong I am!” I honestly thought dark circles under my eyes increased my value.

When I felt better, fleeting as it was, I congratulated myself on pushing through or fixing it. “It’s fine! I’m fine!” I proclaimed, only to find myself disappointed and ashamed when the same feelings and patterns returned, unannounced and uninvited. “It’s always something with me,” I’d think as I started my second pot of coffee.

This might surprise you given all I just said, but I wanted desperately to love myself. I attempted to color with my inner child and take myself out on “dates” to the duck pond, but I didn’t keep it up. My plan was self-improvement first, self-love later.

For a long time, I leaned on control for support, trying to arrange life outside of me to prevent pain on the inside. And I attempted to rid myself of shame and guilt through gossip and complaining with my friends. It always boomeranged back.

I pretended at positivity, too. I could recite all the motivational quotes. I treated affirmations like they could fix me. Skip the hard parts to get to the “over it” part faster? Show me where to sign!

None of these tactics worked, at least not for long. In the moments when even I could admit it, I felt helpless.

Today, I see a different story in me. I see a past of love along with the losses, dreams blooming from the disappointments, and healing following the pain. For all the aching my heart has endured in its time, I don’t see my story as a painful one anymore. I’m no victim here.

**My story is one of fortitude, like the grass riding out the fires in the savannas.**

I realized something along the way that changed the way I see everything. I’ve felt pain, but I’ve also felt hope and gratitude. And that’s made all the difference.

I’ve seen the simple things that save me, like the golden hour sun and the tiny yellow blossoms on the trees in my yard.

Even when I thought it was impossible, I've forgiven and meant it. I've received forgiveness, too.

I've loved more than I ever thought I could. And I trust it's safe to include myself in that love now.

I've awakened from nightmares and remembered how to dream.

I've nursed my body out of starvation and watched it create life.

I've seen with my own two eyes that the tears do eventually stop, and I've felt the sweet relief of peace.

And I've healed - even when I didn't know how!

These hands that once secretly wrote of my flaws in countless journal pages are the same hands that write the words in this book.

These feet that shuffled through my lonely Memphis apartment are the same that carried me through the happiest days of my life.

The heart and lungs that once burned with shame are the same that swell with joy when I play Mario Kart with my children.

*How did they learn to do that?*

This is the story I know by heart now, and I believe it's one we all share.

Each of us can look back and find amazement for all we've celebrated and all we've survived. **Ours is a story of resilience. It's a story of finding our way through the ups and downs of life.** This is us, peeling back layer after layer until we recover the truth of who we are, and by the end of this guidebook, loving ourselves through the process.

That last part, loving yourself through the process, is the secret to it all and the cornerstone of the lessons I'm sharing here. It's your own love that makes growth and healing and liberation possible. **Fortitude begins in love.**

It's your love you come home to at the end of a long day, after everyone's gone to bed. It's your love that sustains you when nothing works. And it's your love that encourages you to keep going when you'd rather hibernate in your room.

Don't get me wrong, it feels incredible to receive love from *others*, and none of us could survive without it. But there's no one on the planet powerful enough to hold you up without your love being there first.

**When the question is how to stop looking to others for validation and approval, how to trust yourself again (bad, bad mistakes and all), how to stop feeling so lost and start feeling sure of yourself, the answer is always this: begin with love and watch your life transform. Your own love is curative.**



I learned these lessons the long way. I spent so much time policing myself, practicing self-care in the name of perfection. This was my escape plan, how I'd control my way out of the truth that I was struggling. All this ever accomplished was making me feel smaller and more wounded.

I've learned that when you're invested and engaged in life, pain is inevitable, but so are joy and fulfillment. Especially when you're brave enough to have your back. You *will* feel things, some of them painful, when you reveal a piece of yourself. People and places and events will move you. You will cry tears of pain just as you will tears of joy when you open up to love. Your heart will race with fear, anger, excitement, and anticipation as you take those baby steps into your dreams. You will laugh and love and shout and hurt. Your belief in the human spirit will humble, inspire, disappoint, and make you believe all over again. And you will feel stronger, clearer, and more courageous when you show up for yourself and do the most loving thing you can.

**The most important lesson, though, was that having your own back is a *choice*. It's intentional. This is especially true if, like me, being your own worst critic has become a habit.**

This was my missing piece all that time. It never occurred to me that I had a choice in the way my life felt. I didn't yet see another way.

Today, I see it. You can have your back and flow with life through your own loving intentions. The loving intentions are:

## LOYALTY

*Seeing and treating yourself like someone worth caring about.*

## LOVING INTEREST

*Showing up and paying attention—without the judgment.*

## CARING COMMUNICATION

*Speaking to yourself with love and encouragement.*

## HEARTFELT ACTION

*Acting from the heart and taking the most loving steps available.*

## DEDICATION

*Bringing the love again and again, come what may.*

Think of anyone in your life who has your back. Think of the trust and respect in that relationship. The safety. Can you feel the warmth? And the security in knowing that they'll stand by your side?

Now compare that to the relationship you have with *you*. How do you feel when it's just you and you? Do you see yourself as someone you can count on? Do you have good intentions, and do you see the good in you?

This was mixed for me. I had all kinds of good intentions, dreams, and ambitions. I wanted wonderful things for myself, but I didn't always support myself in a way that made those wonderful things accessible. I didn't stand up for myself or ask for help, and I didn't take great care of myself. I thought I was a good person, but I also doubted in that goodness at the first hint of struggle. It's not that I didn't care, but I didn't really know what else to do.

And this is exactly why I'm sharing these lessons. I want all of us to learn and live by our true story of fortitude, beginning by having our own backs.

Let's begin.



I PROMISE  
TO EMPOWER  
MYSELF  
THROUGH  
MY GOOD  
INTENTIONS,  
INSIGHT,  
AND FAITH  
IN MYSELF.



# LOYALTY

*Seeing and treating yourself like someone worth caring about.*

**Having your back starts with the intention of loyalty, so that's where we'll begin.**

Loyalty means making someone a priority. Even in small ways, you're there for them when they need it the most. You don't give up on someone you're loyal to when they've failed or fallen. Instead, you continue to see the good in them. In your eyes, they're someone worth caring about and someone worth standing by.

**If nothing else, I hope you take this away with you when you finish this guide: You are someone worth caring about.**

That's probably the biggest, most important choice you could make when it comes to having your own back. This is the choice to accept your goodness, to see yourself through loving eyes, and to validate your worth as a person.

## INTROSPECTION:

The people I'm loyal to...

The causes I'm loyal to...

What this teaches me about my capacity for loyalty...

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being "this is missing in my life" to 10 being "I am filled with gratitude for the presence of this in my life," rate the loyalty you have to yourself:

My thoughts, observations, and inspirations about loyalty:



I WILL SHOW MYSELF THAT  
I AM NEVER ALONE  
BY BEING THERE FOR MYSELF.



## LOVING INTEREST

*Showing up and paying attention—without the judgment.*

Loving interest is the choice to notice things about you, like your thoughts or habits, and to do so without judgment. When you show yourself loving interest, there's nothing to panic about, criticize, or change. It's just showing up and listening. And this can lead to a beautiful transformation in you.

### INTROSPECTION:

The people I show an interest in...

The topics and parts of life I show an interest in...

What this teaches me about my capacity for interest...

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being "this is missing in my life" to 10 being "I am filled with gratitude for the presence of this in my life," rate the loving interest you have with yourself:

My thoughts, observations, and inspirations about loving interest:



When I'm ready to listen, I need only breathe and there, I will find my voice. So, I'm breathing.

*Inhale, stillness. Exhale, come home.*

*Inhale, listen. Exhale, believe.*

*Inhale, experience. Exhale, unfold.*



## CARING COMMUNICATION

*Speaking to yourself with love and encouragement.*

Caring communication is speaking to yourself with love and encouragement, just as you would with anyone you care about. It means offering yourself positive, constructive, and empowering messages focused on your goodness and strength. There are so many qualities that can make your self-talk caring, **to say it simply here, caring communication is the combination of positive self-talk and self-compassion.**

### INTROSPECTION:

The people I speak to in a caring way...

The topics and parts of life I speak of positively...

What this teaches me about my capacity for caring communication...

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being “this is missing in my life” to 10 being “I am filled with gratitude for the presence of this in my life,” rate the caring communication you use with yourself:

My thoughts, observations, and inspirations about caring communication:



I will speak to myself with care  
through the ups and downs in life,  
and if this ever scares me  
or reveals a pain I hadn't yet seen,  
I'll start right back at the beginning  
with my intention to be loyal to myself.





## HEARTFELT ACTION

*Acting from the heart and taking the most loving steps available.*

You can tell an action is heartfelt when you like how it feels and who you become while doing it. It feels meaningful and aligned to take heartfelt action. These actions come from sincere interest or inspiration, and they bring you enjoyment, soothing, and restoration.

### INTROSPECTION:

The people who I take heartfelt action for...

The topics and parts of life that inspire me to take action...

What this teaches me about my capacity for heartfelt action

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being “this is missing in my life” to 10 being “I am filled with gratitude for the presence of this in my life,” rate the heartfelt action present in your relationship with yourself:

My thoughts, observations, and inspirations about heartfelt action:

**You stand in a garden, Dear One. Your true nature slumbers here, so stand softer still.**

Nurture your garden. Be heartfelt, mindful, soulful in your living.

Leap with softness.

Burn with lightness.

Charge ahead with tenderness.

**And trust that the flowers will find you.**



## DEDICATION

*Bringing the love again and again, come what may.*

Having your back and loving yourself through all of life doesn't make the challenges go away. **You're not here to have a sanitized experience limited only to the few things you know you like. You're here to live a *whole*, wonderful, extraordinary human experience of discovery and evolution.** Sometimes this happens when the details fit together just the way you like, but often, it's through tearing down the house and taping it back together. And always, it happens through your intention to dedicate yourself to loyalty and love.

### INTROSPECTION:

The people who I show my dedication to...

The causes and practices I serve with dedication...

What this teaches me about my capacity for dedication...

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being "this is missing in my life" to 10 being "I am filled with gratitude for the presence of this in my life," rate your current dedication to having your back:

My thoughts, observations, and inspirations about dedication:



When you're called inward to your unknown depths, and you fear what lies beneath the surface, *breathe*. Remember then the current that runs from the very core of existence through the very core of all of us. You are an expression of life itself.

Dip your bucket into the infinite space inside, slowly and with reverence. Bravery isn't always doing the biggest or boldest thing but the most wholehearted.

**Look deeper, deeper, deeper still and have faith that you are loving enough for this.**



## ABOUT LESLIE RALPH



Hi, I'm Leslie, and I create things for people seeking tenderness and healing, the ones who want to bring the light back into their lives and love themselves unconditionally. Articles, visualizations, poetry, self-help...all for finding the clarity, building the courage, and practicing the compassion that fosters lasting inner peace and self-love.

I'm a regular contributor at Positively Positive and Tiny Buddha and the author of *[There, I Might Find Peace: Poetry and Meditations for Peace, Love, and Strength](#)*.

When I'm not writing for grown-ups, I'm creating picture books with my children, devising kitchen table science experiments, and sneaking up on my husband and kids with a camera.

### Read More:

Read my collection of [healing stories and words of validation and encouragement](#), infused with love and a little bit of magic. Here are a few of my personal favorites:

- For the courage to [let the walls come down](#).
- For [feeling the love flow through you again](#).
- Something from my epic poem in the making, *Love, Child. Love*.
- And for [the voice in your head](#) (it needs your love more than anything).

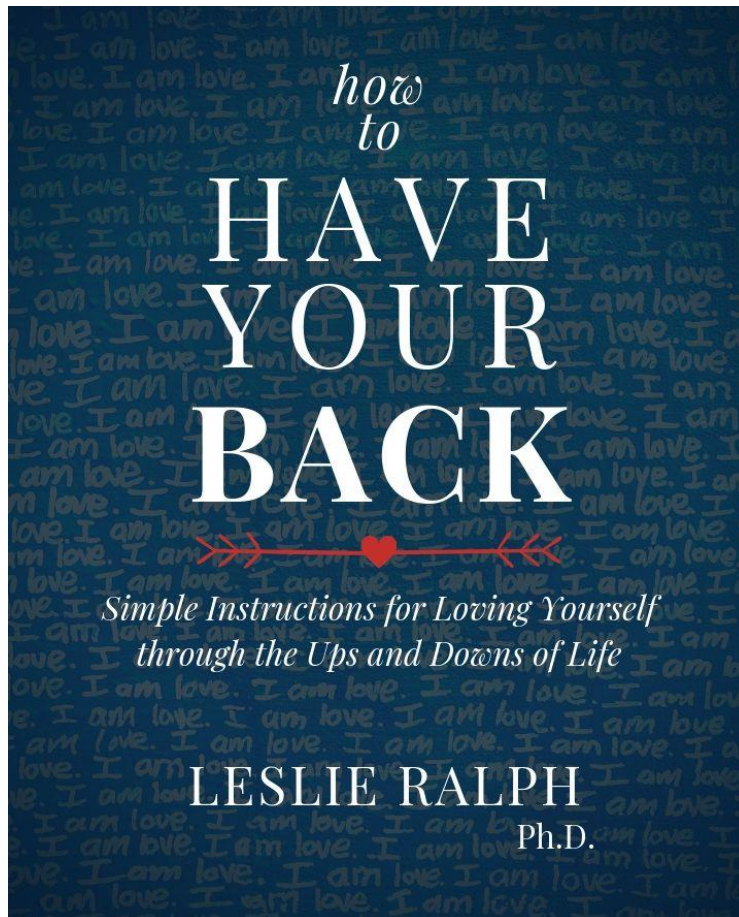
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*How to Have Your Back* is a guidebook for your journey back to your own love. I've filled it with my personal lessons learned the long way about loving yourself unconditionally. It's a book for all of us seeking inner strength and serenity, no matter what life throws our way.

Find out more at [leslieralph.com/howtohaveyourback](http://leslieralph.com/howtohaveyourback).