



# Therapeutic Writing: Tools Everyone Can Use

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BSW 1992, MSW 2011

Child Welfare (20 years)

High Conflict Custody and Access (10 years)

Traumatic Bereavement (11 years)

Compassion Fatigue Specialist (10 years)

Professional Resilience and Wellness (7 years)

Author: *The Twentieth Year: A Memoir of Miscarriage* (2019), *Best Interests, A Novel* (2021)

Songwriter: *I Hope You Stay* (2020), *One Breath at a Time* (2020), *I'm No Hero* (2021), *Stone Angels* (2021)

# Grief

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- A natural response to loss
- Universal experience of suffering
- Based on attachment
- An expression of love

# Trauma

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- Exposure to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury or actual or threatened sexual violence
  - Direct
  - Witnessed
  - Indirect
  - Repeated or extreme indirect exposure through professional duties
  - Intergenerational

# Wellness

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- the state of being in good health, especially as an actively pursued goal
- the pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health
- the quality or state of being healthy in body and mind, especially as the result of deliberate effort

## Writing about grief can help mourners:

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- Reflect on meaning and significance of death
- Map the feelings and experiences of grief
- Release tension and express sensitive thoughts
- Find clarity and perspective over time

<https://www.griefhealingblog.com/2014/07/writing-as-healing-tool-in-grief.html>

# Writing about traumatic experiences:

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- helps make meaning from devastating events,
- allows people to transform pain and let go of the past,
- empowers individuals to move forward with their lives.

<https://www.edgemagazine.net/2018/08/writing-to-heal-and-transform/> Diana Raab

# Writing for Wellness empowers people to:

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- Deal with difficult emotions
- Identify coping strategies
- Improve communication skills
- Promote self-care
- Create and maintain self-directed change

Just seeing your words validates them - the page reflects back



# Writing can help physical healing:

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- Based on the way people use writing to interpret their experience
- A relief of stress occurs through cognitive processing in developing a coherent narrative
- Venting isn't enough; the benefit comes from understanding and learning from their experiences

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing#> Bridget Murray

# Phases in the experience of writing to heal

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- Experiencing pain and grief
- Breaking the silence
- Acceptance and organizing the story
- Finding meaning or making sense
- Reframing the story and moving forward

## Include Facts and Feelings:

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- Writing about *factual experience* and the *emotions* creates the most profound results.
- *Negative and positive emotions* are all important
- Face the hardships, but avoid getting stuck in a repetitive negative cycle.

Write Yourself Happy: The Art of Positive Journaling, Megan C. Hayes, 2018

## Emotional and physical benefits happened when:

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Participants wrote for 15 minutes daily for 4 day about their deepest thoughts and feelings about a traumatic incident of their choice.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231337110> Emotional and physical benefits of expressive writing  
Baikie and Wilhelm

# Benefits of Writing

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- Fewer stress-related doctor visits
- Lower blood pressure, improved mood
- Improved working memory
- Fewer intrusive thoughts & avoidance symptoms
- Reduced absenteeism from work

## Risks of Writing:

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- emotional charge is involved with writing about traumatic events
- often an increase in distress and negative mood at the beginning of a writing practice.
- Distress tends to be short-lived.

# Tips to Reduce Risk

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- Ensure privacy for your writing
- Time yourself and set limits
- Write freely, honestly, without editing
- Give yourself permission to stop anytime
- Have a plan in case you become upset

# Expressive Writing Tips

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- Give yourself quiet, contemplative time
- Don't hold back or censor yourself
- Include your dreams & quotes that inspire you
- Date journal entries
- Try to end on a positive note with some small gratitude

Expressive Writing for Healing, Mary Potter Kenyon 2018



# Writing for Wellness

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- *Reflexive exercises* are designed to focus inward, to inquire after our own thought processes intuitively. (lists)
- *Free-flow exercises* leave no space for the inner critic or censor. (free-writing with prompts)
- *Journal exercises* help to structure experiences into a narrative.
- *Descriptive writing* focuses the writer in the moment - mindfulness through a pen.
- *Reflective exercises* work to help us perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints. (question prompts)

# Consider Providing Supplies

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- Journals
- Pens
- Stickers and/or bookmarks
- Handouts with instructions

# Consider Guided Writing Sessions

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- Give prompts and allow time for writing in session
- Make voice or video recordings with personalized prompts
- Share a list of resources that contain writing prompts on a topic that would be useful for the person's circumstances

# Let's Experiment

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## Reminders as writing begins:

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- You can write about whatever feels safe
- Feel free to skip an invitation if it feels too hard
- You will not have to share your writing
- You will not receive feedback about the mechanics of your writing, or the content
- There is no way to do this wrong

# What to do if you're blocked:

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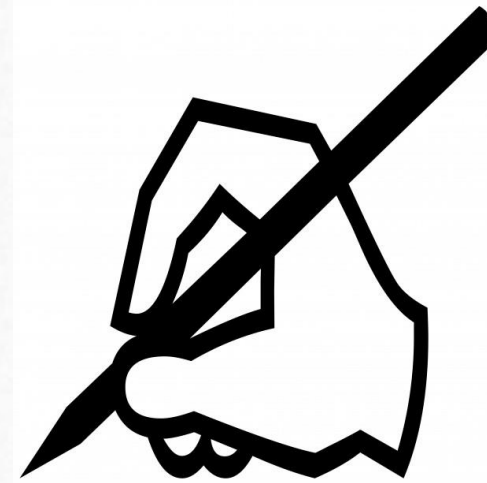
- Write about something else that interests you
- Doodle or draw
- Breathe, and just wait for the next prompt

## Brainstorming and Lists

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**Make a list** of whatever comes to mind.

Don't think about it too much or correct your work.



# Make Some Lists (30 seconds each)

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- What you were planning before the pandemic happened
- Stressors that have had an impact since the pandemic began
- What you have learned to do since the pandemic began
- Things that have surprised you about yourself during the pandemic
- Things that have disappointed you during the pandemic
- Words or phrases you never want to hear again





## Timed Free Writing (5 minutes)

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Looking at the lists you just made, begin writing about anything that feels important to explore.

Write whatever comes into your mind, without judging it and without worrying about grammar or spelling.

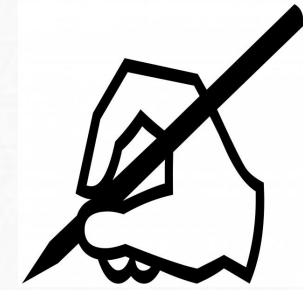
Write until you hear your timer ring.

# Free Writing Prompts: (3 minutes)

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- If I could, I would...
- It will be great when I...
- Let me tell you about...
- I remember when...

# Using Images as Prompts



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- Helps focus on details
  - Visual stimulation reaches different learning styles
  - Sparks feelings or memories

<https://thewritepractice.com/picture-writing-prompt/> Sarah Gribble

# What About Those Feelings?

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# Writing from Images (2 minutes)

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- What has it felt like to be with your feelings over the past month?
- Write about it, comparing it to one of the images on the last slide, or using another image that works for you.

# Question Prompts

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- Invite exploration without assumptions about answers
- Allow a specific focus; helps narrow in on the problem
- Encourage examining the same situation from different angles

<https://theblushingmind.com/healing-is-not-linear-50-grief-journal-prompts/>

## Reflection Questions (1 minute each)

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What do you do to help you feel strong?

What do you do to help you feel and then release pain?

What do you do to find forgiveness where it is needed?

What do you do to shine your light in the world?

# Invitation to Letter Writing

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Write a letter to a person in your life,  
**or** an open letter to many people in your life:

- What do you want them to know?
- What do you need from them now?
- What do you hope for your relationship?



# Options for Journaling

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- Free writing
- Prompted writing
- Images and words
- Art journaling
- Gratitude

## Lists: Turning Points (30 seconds each)

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Moments when you knew things had changed

People who have changed toward you

Routines that have changed in your day-to-day life

Changes in your beliefs and understanding of the world

Challenges that are rising up in your life

## Free Write: Change (2 minutes)

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Choose a change you have noticed. Write about the change – what is it, what are you doing about it, what else do you wish would happen

- Be gentle with yourself.
- Pause as needed.
- Shift topics if needed.

## Free Write: Challenge (2 minutes)

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Choose a challenge that is rising now. Write about the challenge – what is it, what are you doing about it, what do you wish would happen

- Be gentle with yourself.
- Pause as needed.
- Shift topics if needed.

## Free Write: Success (2 minutes)

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Choose a success you have had. Write about it – what is it, what are you doing about it, what do you hope will happen next

- Be gentle with yourself.
- Pause as needed.
- Shift topics if needed.

# Invitations to Gratitude Practice

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- Make a list of 10 things you are grateful for this week. If it's been a tough week, just list as many as you can.
- Choose one thing you are grateful for and write a thank you note to someone, something or to the universe.

# Warmth & Wisdom (1 minute each)

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- What do you hope for your writing practice?
- What will help you when writing is hard?
- What wisdom do you want to remember as you write?

# What did you notice?

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- What did it feel like to make lists?
- Did making lists inspire your free writing or did something else come up?
- Did your pen move easily, filling the page, or were words hard to find? Was it the same with all of the exercises?



Offer an Invitation:  
Would you like to share a few lines of your writing?

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Invite listeners, to silently appreciate the reading, or offer a comment on something they love about the piece.

# Putting it into Practice

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- Would you feel comfortable sharing these activities with people you work with?
- What will you want to remember as you begin to invite people to write to heal?

# Suggestions for Using Therapeutic Writing

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- Offer invitations as “homework” in individual work
- Provide supportive instructions to reduce risks
- Allow the person the freedom to structure the writing experience and choose the writing topics
- Do not give feedback on the mechanics of the writing
- Encourage the person to keep their writing in their possession or destroy it safely if they don't want to keep it

# Finish with Self Care: How Are You Getting By?

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- **C**omfort Measures
- **O**pening up to Others
- **P**lanned Self Care
- **E**mbracing Emotions

# Take Good Care of Yourself

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breathe.

Get comfortable.  
Notice your breath.  
Place a hand on your heart.  
Place a hand on your belly.

“Inhale calm.”  
“Exhale stress.”

4-7-8

# Shine Your Light

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