# Write to Heal Grief

**A Workbook**

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# Write to Heal Grief Workbook

Writing is a good way to explore your thoughts and express your feelings.

Writing can help:

- Reflect on what the loss means to you
- Review the facts and the feelings of your loss
- Release sensitive, painful thoughts
- Find clarity and perspective over time

Writing about grief and trauma can help make meaning from devastating events, helping people to transform pain and let go of the past, empowering individuals to move forward with their lives.

*Benefits:*

- Lower stress
- Improved mood
- Improved physical, mental and emotional health

*Risks:*

Writing about grief and trauma can stir things up in a new way, and this can be painful.

*Tips to Reduce Risks:*

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

**When You're Ready to Try**

- You can write about whatever feels safe. Feel free to skip an invitation if it feels too hard.
- Don't worry about grammar or spelling, just let the thoughts and feelings flow.
- This is your process and there is no way to do this wrong.

  Please take care of yourself – if any exercise becomes too overwhelming, stop writing and seek support. Remember there are people available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at distress lines and they're there to listen if you need to talk to someone.

**A Note About Sharing Your Writing:** If you're thinking about sharing your writing, consider what you hope to receive in response. As you decide who to share it with, think about how they might feel about what you'll be sharing and how they might respond so you can be prepared.

***May these exercises bring you some insight into your feelings,***
***and may they bring you some small comfort as you heal.***

**Write to Heal Grief**
**Begin Here**

## Brainstorming and Lists:

Make a list of:

- Stressors in your life at the time of the death

- Feelings you have experienced since the death

- Things you do for comfort when you feel pain

- Things you wish you could say about the death

- People who have showed up to support you

- The things people have done that have helped

- Words or phrases you never want to hear again

- What you find hardest about your loss

- Things you change if you could

### Timed Free Writing

Looking at the lists you just made, set a timer and begin writing about anything that feels important to explore. You can use this space or write in a separate journal. Write without worrying about grammar and spelling. Write whatever comes into your mind without judging it. Write until you hear the timer ring.

(begin with a short length of time and make the timed sessions longer if it feels right)

## Sentence Starters for Grief

Finish these sentences with whatever comes into your mind as you read the writing prompt. Do not judge your thoughts or feelings, just let them flow and reflect on them.

When it comes to this loss, I feel like…

Right now, I need more…

One thing I will always remember about the person who died is…

I will never forget…

The person who died taught me…

My favourite story about the person who died is…

Others think I should…

What I need from others right now is…

I take care of my own health by…

Something I'm concerned about is…

Five words that describe the person who died are…

I want to tell the person who died…

Since the person died…

I feel the person close to me when…

The death has changed the way I…

It's still hard for me to…

## Reflection Questions

How did it feel to write about grief?

Were there any surprises about what came up in your writing?

Which exercise did you prefer? What did you like about it?

What else might you want to write about using these strategies to explore your feelings and experiences?

# Creating an On-Going Writing Practice

## Invitation to Write-Reflect-Release

Write your thoughts and feelings about a grief experience in your life for, setting a timer for 15 to 20 minutes. In your writing, really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different thoughts and feelings each day. It's recommended that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up, unless the process of remembering and writing is causing you significant, immediate distress. You may continue writing after the time is up if you wish.

All of your writing will be completely confidential and for your own personal reflection only unless you choose to share it with someone. Don't worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. When you're finished, you may choose to read and reflect on what has come out on the page. If you wish, you may release it all by safely destroying the papers.

## Letter Writing Invitations

### *Letter to Your Self – Past, Present or Future*

Begin by setting a timer for 3-5 minutes. Close your eyes, or choose an object to focus your eyes on while you think about yourself in the past, present or future. Imagine yourself as your best friend would see you – with all of your strengths and flaws known, but not preventing a sense of caring and kindness.

When the timer signals that is up, begin a letter to yourself. Write a message you feel it is important for your past, present or future self to hear. Write it in the voice of the kind friend who sees the real you, offering love and support.  End the letter with a message of hope that despite the difficulties you are coping with, you are strong enough to get through this.

### *Letter to Someone Else*

When someone dies, or is no longer part of our life for other reasons, there may be things that remain undone or unsaid in a relationship. Consider your personal situation. If you had the chance to speak to the person, what would you tell them?

Write a letter to the person. Release the things you wish you could have said or done by writing in as much detail as you are comfortable with. This letter is yours and you may choose to keep it private. You can tuck it away to review later, you can share it with someone else, or you can safely destroy it after writing to release yourself from the feelings about your experience with the person.

## Writing Prompts

Sentence starters are a common type of writing prompt. You can find prepared journals you can buy that include writing prompts. Some have one prompt a day for 365 days, and others are offer a variety of prompts based on a theme. Writing from a prompt can help you explore ideas from different perspectives and may inspire you to think and write about something that has been beneath the surface of your feelings.

Try the following prompts. If you like them, consider looking for a book that includes writing prompts in a theme that interests you.

*When I was younger, I had no idea…*

*I wish I had known…*

*What I want most right now is…*

*I want to tell everyone…*

*The thing I am most proud of…*

*When things are really difficult, I know…*

## Write Your Stories

Writing out the stories of what happened can help make meaning from devastating events people have endured, It can help people cope with their grief experiences and adjust to their situation as they look toward the future. Writing can help you deal with difficult memories. As you put words down that describe what happened to you and how it affected you, you may begin to see things from a new angle. This can help you release pain and embrace hope.

Think about your life, and especially the moments that feel important to you. Make a list of the big events that have had an impact on your thoughts, feelings and experiences. If it makes sense, you can put these events on a timeline to show the order they happened, you can make a mind map to show related events, or you can mark the events on a geographical map to show where they happened in the physical world.

When you have a list of events, you can start writing the stories. As you write, use your senses to remember the scene and allow yourself to describe it with words. Take your time. Sometimes the first draft is very raw with feeling, or the sequence of what happened is out of order. That's all right, it's all part of remembering. This process can help you make some sense of what has happened to you and how it has affected you, so feel free to write a second draft that feels clear and true to you with the perspective you have now looking back on the past.

Some people turn these writings into a memoir that they publish and share with the world. If this appeals to you, it's a good idea to work with an editor you trust with your story who has the skill to help you shape it in a way that others can read and follow without difficulty. When it is our story, it is hard to have a neutral mind for grammar, spelling and the coherent narration of our experiences. An editor can help you polish your final product for publishing.

## Journaling Ideas

There are many ways to keep a journal. Here are some examples to help you get started, but don't feel limited by these suggestions. Be as creative as you like!

### Gratitude Journal

Each day, make a note in a dedicated journal:

- Something that made you smile
- Something you are grateful for
- Something you love
- A good news story

### Free Writing Journal

In the morning, or before bedtime

- Set a timer for a time that feels right to you.
- Write, moving your pen across the page steadily writing whatever comes into mind.
- Continue writing until the timer sounds.

### Share Your Story Journal

Begin with whatever feels like the beginning for you.

- Write what you remember. Use your senses.
- Write out the details without censoring yourself.
- Write until you feel like the story is complete or "caught up".
- Decide if you want to write it out again.

### Use Writing Prompts

- Purchase a book or research writing about grief online.
- Choose writing prompts that interest you and spark memories or ideas.
- Set a regular time to write in your journal – daily, weekly or whatever works for you.
- Use the same prompt over time to see how your grief is evolving.

### Keep a Feelings Record

- Use key words and identify your feelings several times a day.
- Use a thermometer image and make a visual record of your fluctuating feelings

### Make an Art Journal

- Choose a journal with blank pages
- Combine drawing, painting, collage and writing to express your feelings and reflect on your experience with creative variety.
- Use colour and texture to make your story vivid.

# Resource List

**Expressive Writing: What's on Your Mind and In Your Heart**
*by John F. Evans*
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/write-yourself-well/201208/expressive-writing

## Writing for Wellness: Theory and Prompts

**Writing to Awaken: A Journey of Truth, Transformation and Self-Discovery**
*by Mark Matousek*
Theory, insights, tips and prompts for introspective writing about personal experience.

**Let It Out: a journey through journaling**
*by Katie Dalebout*
Guidebook with journaling exercises, prompts and techniques to help you find your purpose, heal yourself and create the life you desire.

**Write Your Self Well…Journal Your Self to Health**
*by Ina Albert and Zoe Keithley*
A writing workbook with a series of thought-provoking writing exercises intended to develop skills to be in touch with your spirit.

**Opening Up by Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain**
*by James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth*
Theory, stories and examples of using writing to heal, with practical exercises to help you try expressive writing for yourself.

**The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness or Loss**
*by Sandra Marinella*
Theory, stories and examples of using writing to heal, including techniques, prompts and exercises.

**Write Yourself Happy: The Art of Positive Writing**
*by Megan C. Hayes*
A guide to using life-affirming emotions in a journal to support well-being through personal expression, creativity and goal-setting, including case studies and exercises to put well-being into words.

## Writing to Heal Grief and Loss: Theory and Prompts

**Writing to Recover**
*by Harriet Hodgson, BS, MA*
Each page has a one sentence writing prompt to guide the writer in writing about many of the feelings and experiences of grief.

**Writing to Heal the Soul: Transforming Grief and Loss Through Writing**
*by Susan Zimmerman*
This guide includes writing about the experience of grief and healing, with several writing exercises offered throughout the book.

**Expressive Writing for Healing: Journal Your Way from Grief to Hope**
*by Mary Potter Kenyon*
This book is primarily filled with pages for journal entries that are peppered with quotes about grief and hope. Each chapter also contains a few pages of guidance - about journaling and about grieving - written by the author.

**A Path Through Loss: A Guide to Writing Your Healing and Growth**
*by Nancy Reeves PhD*
This guide has an abundance of information about grieving, with a focus on healing and growth. About half of the book is filled with guided journaling opportunities and space for writing.

**Grief's Courageous Journey: A Workbook**
*by Sandi Caplan and Gordon Lang*
Brief writings intended to help the writer understand grief and suggesting steps toward healing are interspersed with space to write based on prompts related to the theory being explained.

**Progressing through Grief: Guided Exercises to Understand Your Emotions and Recover From Loss** *by Stephanie Jose, LMHC, LCAT*
Divided into three segments: Understanding Grief, Emotions and Reactions and Journaling Through Grief, this book offers theory as well as several sections for writing about the topics under consideration.

**Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss**
*by Jessica Handler*
This text offers guidance and tips to help the writer remember, research and organize a memoir project when the subject is grief and loss.

## Mostly Prompts:

**The Book of Me: A Creative Guide to Self-care**
Michael O'Mara Books

**The Joy of Now Journal: mindfulness in 5 minutes a day**
by Paige Burkes

**The Daily Zen: A Creative Companion for Beginner's Mind**
by Charlie Ambler

**The Nocturnal Journal: A Late Night Exploration of What's Really On Your Mind**
by Lee Crutchley

**How to Be Happy (Or at least less sad) A Creative Workbook**
by Lee Crutchley

**The Scribble Diary: My Brain Right Now**
by Lisa Currie

**The Well-Being Journal: Creative Activities to Inspire**
Michael O'Mara Books

**Choose Calm: A Journal for Healing Anxiety, Breathing In and Letting Go**
by Nadia Hayes

**Start Where You Are: A Journal for Self-Exploration**
by Meera Lee Patel

**Create Your Own Calm: A Journal for Quieting Anxiety**
**by Meera Lee Patel**

**Made Out of Stars: A Journal for Self-Realization**
by Meera Lee Patel

**Connecting with Loneliness: A Guided Journal (Prompts to Discover Self Love, Build Connection and Embrace Joy)**
by Jessie Everts