



Writing to Heal

Why Write?

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“Writing and keeping a journal have proven personally invaluable to many people. History has documented that people have comforted themselves via writing down their feelings and keeping a journal. We have all kinds of evidence, clinical and otherwise, that show the benefits.” (“Writing About Feelings Helps Emotional, Physical Healing,” Medical Tribune News Service. February 24, 2000).

I have been writing in journals since I was a child. My writing has carried me through broken relationships, the emotional highs and lows of growing-up, the loss of pets, career changes, physical relocations, and the deaths of family members. I found myself writing more when I was depressed, confused, or upset than when things were going well in my life. I wrote when times were tough and when I couldn't quite find focus and understanding. My journals became tools that helped me face my problems and myself, and eventually helped me find solace from life's challenges.

However, the most difficult time in my life was the death of my son. It was a time that I couldn't write about my feelings – or so I thought. After my son's death, I tried to keep a journal, especially after the first year he was killed. But the actual process of writing was extremely painful so I kept the true emotions within. It wasn't until the third year after his death that a flood of emotions came pouring out in my writing. I wrote in short poetic form, at first. During the fourth year after his death, I discovered the purpose for my writing, and my journaling slowly began to ease my pain. The writing or “journaling” was an important cathartic experience for me. Without it, I don't think I could have reached this point in the grief process.

Healing from any painful event, one must face the emotions and nurture the physical process of grief. Writing, or what many resources refer to as “journaling” is a way to physically express one's hurt and pain. I do believe the physical release of the pain must best suit the individual – the means could be art, music, creating something,

gardening, etc. – but for me, it was eventually through my writing that lead to my healing process.

“Scientific research shows that brief, intense bursts of emotional release writing - only 15 minutes a day, for only four consecutive days – is correlated with increased immune system functioning that can last for several weeks. Since grief often compromises the immune system and leaves you more vulnerable to colds, flu and infection, these writes can help your physical as well as your emotional health” (“Managing Grief through Journal Writing,” Kathleen Adams).

Facts about the importance of Writing to Heal:

- One of the ancient methods for healing and personal growth is the art of storytelling. Personal journaling is a way of putting our experience “out there” so we can reflect on our thoughts.
- Self-honesty on paper can reveal truths about us. It is a way of self-discovery. Few of us take the time to find the wisdom within us, but it lies within each of us.
- Life-based writing is one of the most reliable and effective ways to heal, change and grow. The journal, notebook, computer creates a bridge between the past and the future.
- The power of writing is accessible to anyone. Do you desire self-directed change? You only need to be willing to explore your feelings.
- Writing can provide focus and clarity to issues, concerns, conflicts, confusions, and grief.
- Journaling can also be in the form of prose and storytelling or poetic writing which can sometimes be more powerful in expressing strong, symbolic thought. Your poetic writing doesn’t have to rhyme. You might also choose to create more rhythm and rhyme in your writing and put it into a song.
- Especially when dealing with the grief process, feelings are initially so raw that writing may be the only method of release. Society does not offer us much help or understanding when dealing with individual grief. We are often expected to “return to work” or “resume everyday life” when those actions are unbearable. Short journaling during this time can help us adapt to the daily routine.

How to Get Started

Getting started is the biggest hurdle. I hope the following steps will help make it easier on you. These 12 ideas are taken from Kathleen Adams (The Center for Journal Therapy). Her article “Managing Grief through Journal Writing” helped me tremendously.

1. There are NO rules. Don’t worry about spelling correctly or having to punctuate or using the correct grammar. You are not being judged or graded by anyone.

(This was one thing that I could control in my life during a time that was out-of-control. There was a sense of freedom knowing that I could do this for myself so when I finally started writing, I wrote furiously about my son.)

2. Choose a journal that fits your lifestyle and feels comfy and nurturing. This includes the keyboard.

(I, personally, prefer the hand-written journal. There is something very cathartic in the actual process of putting pen to hand. Plus, not only is the choice of journal important to me so was the pen that I used.)

3. Time can feel like an enemy when you are coping with a loss, so it's comforting and reassuring to document your movement through this journey. You can number or date each entry or try writing in a one-year diary with pre-printed pages.

(I believe the dating of each entry is important. It helped me to track my own progress and later I discovered just how far I had come with dealing with my grief.)

4. Get in the habit of writing three words that describe your feelings at the beginning and end of every journal entry. This helps you track your emotions over time and gives you an opportunity to notice the changes and shifts in your emotional progress.

(Remember, that gaining an understanding of your feelings is the first step of healing. Feelings change and grow with the healing process and writing can offer help to achieve this.)

5. Set a time and write fast and furious for a predetermined number of minutes – 5, 10, 15 or more. (This is up to you and your energy and desire.) When the time is up, close your book or file and move on. You can come back as often as you wish. *(Timed, free-flowing writing can be an excellent way to start. Some of us can't think of the first word to put down. When you time yourself, start writing immediately and don't stop. Even if you just write one word until the thoughts start to click...stick with it. Try a free association with words. This can help get ideas and feelings out as well.)*

6. Because it is common for memory to be affected directly with grief, make "to-do" lists, and keep them right in your journal or day planner.

(Grief and emotional pain truly plays havoc with our memory. Journal writing or even recording things we need to do can help us stay somewhat focused and we don't feel so lost.)

7. Make other lists, as well. Lists are great for organizing and categorizing, and their structure is comforting when things in your life feel like they may be spinning out of control. Write lists of your emotions, memories, plans, ideas, fantasies and more.

(I made lists of all my emotions – the anger, the resentment, the pain, the love, etc. Facing the myriad of emotions after the loss of a child or loved one is essential.)

8. Before you go to bed, choose something you'd like to experience the following day – a feeling of hope or pleasure. Write the word down in your journal, and then write for five minutes reflecting on the outcomes or what it would be like "if..."

(I wasn't concerned about how long I wrote at night, but writing at night helped me wind down my day. Grief makes sleep a difficult thing to accomplish for many of us and some nights I barely wrote, but I tried writing until I found myself drifting off to sleep. Also, try selecting a word from one of your previous lists and go from there. I say – whatever works- that's what you need to do.)

9. When you are aching for your loved one, try writing "Captured Moments" – brief vignettes written quickly, like a sketch in time. Make intense and vivid descriptions and try to reach for sensory details – sight, smell, touch, taste, and feel of things.

(I found myself writing about the way my son looked, talked, smelled, felt – the sensory memories were comforting. One thing I feared after the death of my child was the possibility that I would forget the sound of his voice, especially his laugh or the scent of his clothes or the look of his smile. Of course, I will never forget my son, but at the time of my heightened grief, this was an important exercise for me to do and this type of writing became my personal photo album.)

10. AlphaPoems are an easy and structure way to get started with poetic expression. Write the alphabet, or the letters of any word or phrase – like your son or daughter's name – write these letters vertically down the side of your page. Then write a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter on the page. Try this even if you think you're not a poet or that it sounds silly.

(The outcome of these poems can surprise you. You might want to keep some of these for later.)

11. Unsent letters are an excellent way to maintain a sense of communication with your loved one. These can offer you opportunities for comfort and peace of mind.

(These letters are effective ways to transmit any feeling that you thought you could not say directly or did not have time to say. In a way, they act as a form of personal closure.)

12. Sometimes the only way to get through devastation is to imagine a time when it might not hurt so much. Write a “One Year from Today” entry – try to fast-forward yourself to the healing side of the grief. Try to distance yourself from today and take a glimpse of your life in the future and what you wish to accomplish.

(I remember my husband saying that he wished he could fast-forward time so the pain would not be so great after losing our son. This was probably the most difficult suggestion to try but it does have great merits if you stick with it.)

I do believe that writing can help anyone who faces the most horrible tragedies. Perhaps, at first, the actual process of writing might be too difficult but it can gradually help you through some feelings that you never thought possible. I think, all in all, that if you decide to write, that you write on a regular basis, that you write whatever you want to and feel at the time, that you write without much thought because you want to get your emotions released so don't inhibit yourself in any way. Also, remember that it's okay to cry while you write, just don't give up. I wish you well in this journey of grief, and I hope you write to heal.

Resources that might help you develop your writing to heal:

- Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions (Guilford Press). James W. Pennebaker, PhD.
- Then Way In: Journal-Writing for Self Discover (Stewart, Tbori & Chang). Rita D. Jacobs.
- The Healing Way. Journal for Cancer Survivors (Element Books). Margie Davis.
- A Spirit Journey (Upper Room). Anne Broyles.
- The Joy of Journaling (Eagle Wing). Paul and Patricia D'Encarnacao.
- Transformative Journaling. Richard Johnson.
- Journaling to Recover (Abbey Press). Barbara Reznicek.
- Tracks in the Sand: Your Guide To Recover Journaling (Thomas Nelson). Vance and Bethyl Shepperson.
- It's Okay to Cry (a book about pet loss, K & K Communications). Harley King.

Useful website resource for grief journaling:

“Managing Grief Through Journal Writing” – Kathleen Adams
www.journaltherapy.com