



HEALING THROUGH WRITING

A Guide for Continuing Your Own Writing Practice for
Personal Healing & Wellness

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I created this guide to follow the same format as my in-person workshops so that you can engage in your own healing writing practice from anywhere. This guide follows 7 modules, each one focusing on a different theme. The introduction module includes one writing exercise, while each module that follows provides a warm-up writing exercise and a longer writing exercise. Depending on how much time you have, you can do both in one sitting, or break them up to different days as your schedule allows.

The idea in following this guide is that you begin your personal exploration in a directed, chronological order. That being said, you are by no means limited to the writing prompts or the topics provided. This is simply a way to show you how delving into different parts of your experience from the past up until present day can provide a wealth of healing and personal understanding. My goal is to show you that through your own expressive writing you have the tools within you to mend old wounds and relieve yourself of emotional baggage.

Why Writing?

Dr. James Pennebaker, who is the foremost researcher in the field of expressive and therapeutic writing, has proven that writing honestly about emotional upheaval produces marked improvements to health on both an emotional and physical level.

Just as one might endeavour to develop a personal yoga or meditation practice, writing is also a tool you can rely on as part of your personal healing and wellness practice. The value of having writing as a tool for your own personal healing is that, once you are opened up to how and why it works, it is a practice that you can take with you for the rest of your life, anywhere, anytime. Whether writing becomes something that you do on a daily, weekly or intermittent basis doesn't matter and is something that is personal to you. Some people find it essential to write on a daily basis, while others turn to writing only as they feel compelled or called upon to use writing as an outlet.

If you are just coming back to writing after a long time away from it, or you are beginning to explore writing for the first time, this approach to writing is a good way of coming to the page gently and giving yourself a chance to not only explore emotional upheaval and experiences throughout your life, but to also clear away any baggage, intimidation or trauma directly related to writing.

Next: How To Do It

How To Do It

Find a space where you feel comfortable to write. This can be on your bed, on the floor of the spare room, in a coffee shop; it doesn't matter, as long as it's a place where you can go to be quiet and have uninterrupted time to write. If it can be the same place each time, this is even better because it will help signal to you that your mind and body that this is writing time.

You can use a beautiful journal or a plain spiral notebook for your writing, but I recommend a plain notebook so that the pressure of what goes inside of it is removed. People tend to feel that what goes into a beautiful, expensive notebook needs to be "good" and what we are aiming for here is not good but, rather, true.

If you can, take yourself through a brief breathing exercise or meditation, even if it's only for a few minutes, to bring yourself into a calmer state. This is a wonderful way to prepare to settle into the writing.

Whatever feels natural and good to you is exactly right. There is no wrong way to do this! The only requirement is that each time you come to the page, you do so with a willingness to go where the writing takes you, and as much as possible to get out of your own way. Don't try to control or judge what comes out through your writing because whatever is emerging is doing so because it needs to come out and is in your highest interest to acknowledge and explore at that time.

Ideally, write for 20 minutes straight without stopping. If you can't, that's okay. Write for as little or as long as feels good and natural to you. The worst thing you could do would be to abandon writing altogether just because you can't do it for 20 minutes. So just use this time frame as a guidepost and then work with whatever space you have to devote to it on that given day. Some days it might be nothing, or only a few minutes, and others it could be an hour or more. It's all good.

This writing is for you and you alone, unless you want to share it. Sharing can be a beautiful part of the healing and writing process, it's just that we must be careful about opening ourselves up to criticism. This kind of writing is not so much about the craft of writing, but the tool of writing as a healing outlet and an ongoing practice. If you do decide to share your writing, please let the person know that there are two rules for reading your writing (unless you are sharing it with the aim of being published and in that case require an editor/critical eye for your work):

- 1) Only positive feedback and comments (especially on new writing that hasn't been revised).
- 2) No critiquing of grammar, spelling or punctuation.

Next: Additional Resources

Additional Reading on Writing for Healing and Creativity

Big Magic & "Magic Lessons" Podcast – by Elizabeth Gilbert

- This is an excellent guide to living a creative life: How to do it, why it's so important, and why it is every person's right and duty to give credence to their creative urges. Gilbert also has two seasons of her podcast where she brings in experts to help guide and inspire people from all walks of life struggling to launch their creativity.

The Gifts of Imperfection – By Brené Brown

- This book gives courage and reason to accept our "imperfections" and how those seemingly imperfect parts of ourselves can truly provide us with our greatest gifts and be the backbone to our character and individuality once we accept them.

The Glass Castle – by Jeannette Walls

- This is one of the most raw and visceral memoirs to have been written in the genre that I have ever come across. This book really shows how being raw and vulnerable in your experience can be liberating and healing for yourself as well as other people who relate to your experience.

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Writing to Heal the Soul – by Susan Zimmerman

- This is part memoir and part in-depth guide to using writing as a means of coping with extreme grief, using many examples from the author's personal experience.

Next: The Modules

Module 1: Introduction

"There is no greater agony than bearing the untold story within you,"
-Maya Angelou

Writing Exercise

Brene Brown says in *The Gifts of Imperfection* "Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky, but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."

So let us be brave together.

Our first writing exercise is going to be for twenty minutes without stopping. Set a timer if you can on your phone or on the oven. If you feel the need to go past the time limit, don't stop yourself, write until you feel you've gotten it out, just as long as you write for at least twenty minutes.

What I would like to invite you to do is to write a letter. This can be a letter to yourself—yourself now, when you were younger, or even your future self. Or it can be a letter to someone else—a loved one, someone who hurt you, or someone you hurt; a friend, a dog, someone living or dead. It can be a letter of gratitude or compassion and understanding, or it can be a letter revealing feelings of hurt and anger that you've never opened up about. Just follow your intuition with the first person that comes to mind—don't question it or try to change who it is. As strange as it might seem, go with it, as this is your higher self showing you a relationship or a part of yourself that needs healing.

Start your letter the old fashioned way with the word "Dear. So "Dear 5 year old me" or "Dear Mom".

The most important thing you can do in writing this letter is that you are completely honest, and that you let the thoughts and feelings come out that need coming out, even if they aren't pretty or you would be afraid or ashamed if someone were to read them. No one will read them unless YOU want them to because this is your private practice.

Please don't concern yourself with spelling, grammar or vocabulary.

I would like you to take the full twenty minutes to write this letter. Even if you think at first you don't have enough to fill the twenty minutes, I have often found that it's only near the end that the good stuff starts coming out because the first portion acts almost as a runway to get the juices flowing and the momentum going so that you can get to where you need to be. If you find that at any time you are stuck and don't know what to write, don't panic. All you need to do is keep your pen to the page. If the thought running through your head is "I don't know what to write" then just write that. Write it as many times as you need and eventually, your mind will open up and what needs to come out will flow.

No matter what happens with this first exercise, know that it's all okay. Trust that whatever your experience is, it's all part of the process. You can repeat this as many times as you like if you find that you have more than one person that comes up.

I am here with you in spirit as you begin this most wonderful and important first step in your healing through writing. Once you've finished, please listen to the closing meditation led by Kathy to bring your writing practice to a close.

Okay. Let's begin.

Module 2: The Inner Child and Childhood Experience

"Things usually work out in the end."

"What if they don't?"

"That just means you haven't come to the end yet."

-Jeannette Walls, The Glass Castle

Warm Up Writing Exercise

In order to get our writing selves warmed up for today, I would like to invite you to start with a brief writing exercise.

Adjust yourself so that you are seated comfortably, prepared to write. As you sit with your pen in hand, poised over your paper, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and picture the blank space in front of your eyes as being a large movie screen. Imagine that on the movie screen your inner child appears. How old is he or she? What does she look like? Hold that image in your mind's eye for a few moments and then open your eyes. With this image of your inner child in your mind's eye, I would like you to take 10 minutes and write from the point of view of the image of the inner child you saw on that screen, beginning with the words "I feel..."

Let's begin.

Long Writing Exercise

I would like to invite you to write about a significant childhood memory. Likely as I've been discussing childhood memories throughout this module, an image has already appeared in your mind of a scene, a moment, or perhaps even just a feeling that you recall from your early years. Now, I will say that this does not HAVE to be a painful or difficult experience that you write about—not at all. It could be that initially what comes up is a happy, loving memory. And maybe that's all that does come up, or maybe behind that memory is something a little harder to bear. The fact is that most often, the memory of something that was painful, confusing or traumatic is what will come to mind first and this is exactly what's needed because it needs to be cleared. This is not meant to make you relive past hurts. Rather, it's coming up because it is being called up now to be healed and released. This process can be likened to clearing out the junk in the attic or the basement before you are able to find the keepsakes and heirlooms lie beneath. The kindest thing you can do for that inner child you encountered earlier today is to let the memory come up and out into the light. Acknowledge whatever feelings, thoughts, words and emotions come out about this experience. You might question your memory and feel that you're not sure if that experience really happened. You might wonder if you're making it up or making it worse or more exaggerated than it really was. But trust in the knowledge that that is not possible because whatever comes up is sacred to your experience of it, and as such, cannot be made up or exaggerated. It is authentic and true because it is yours.

When you are finished writing for 20 minutes—or more if you so desire—please listen to the closing meditation with Kathy to seal our practice for today.

Let's get started.

Module 3: First Love

"Maybe your first love is the one that sticks with you because it's the only person who will ever receive all of you. After that, you learn better. But, most of all, no matter what, a piece of you forever remains left behind in the heart of the one you loved - a piece no future love could ever get, no matter what. That piece holds innocence - the belief that love really can last forever. It holds friendship and pain, trial and error, that one kiss you'll never forget and that night under the stars you can never get back. It holds youth and everything you thought love would be. Everything that was proven wrong."

Warm Up Writing Exercise

Today I would like to invite you to warm up with a little exercise that will help to access your connection to the idea of first love. Ease yourself into a comfortable position for your writing. Gather your pen and paper and as you sit there, take a moment to ask yourself what first love as a feeling or experience means to you—not what you think the correct definition is but rather, personally, what is the importance, significance, and the true meaning of first love as it has marked and shaped your life. An example could be that first love happened to act as your initiation into the understanding of love between yourself and another person, the first time you felt real connection with someone; or, it could be how the lack of first love, how finding a first love true love has eluded you and how that makes you feel.

Okay, ten minutes just to get ourselves started.
Let's begin.

Long Writing Exercise

Make sure you are seated comfortably and have your pen and paper ready to go. As always, we are going to write for 20 minutes—or more if you choose—but at least for 20 minutes without stopping. Remember, if you find yourself stuck or blocked, there is no need for concern. Just put your pen to paper, write whatever thoughts are floating about in your mind, and you will see that this will ease into opening the pathway for what needs to come out. I would like you to please go back in time to the moment when you knew you were experiencing a first love, or true love, whatever words resonate with you more. This is a broad umbrella under which any experience that comes up to you is exactly right so don't worry if it doesn't fit the exact mold of romantic first love. Before you begin writing, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, allowing yourself to remember what it felt like in your body to experience first love; the sensations that you felt. Allow those sensations to bring you back. Use all of your senses—sight, smell, touch, sound, taste—to help bring you back there. Once you can see in your mind's eye yourself and the other being associated with your first love, hold that image in your mind. Now gently open your eyes, and with that image and those sensations alive within you, begin writing starting with the words "You were my first love..."

Module 4: Loss

"Any sorrow can be borne if you can turn it into a story.
With our writing, we honour the extent of our losses."
– *Isak Dinesen*

Warm Up Writing Exercise

Let's get warmed up now with a brief writing exercise to get our writing energies flowing. Now of course you do not need to be confined by the topic—feel free to go wherever it takes you. This is merely an invitation or a starting point to get things going, so allow your mind, heart and your pen to take you where you need to go.

I would like to invite you to write for the next ten minutes on the following phrase:

"When I said goodbye"

You can use these exact words as the starting point for your writing or just as a general theme, whatever feels right to you.

Okay, let's start our writing for the next 10 minutes and see what comes through you.

Long Writing Exercise

I invite you to begin today's writing on someone—or something—you have lost. This can be a loss due to death, or a loss in any other shape or form. A loss of a person, a pet, a sense of self, a feeling of purpose, a feeling of security, a loss of home or sense of belonging. Anything at all. The most important thing with this exercise is that you don't try to control what comes out. If the first thought that pops into your mind is to write about the loss of, for example, something more abstract such as the loss of your sense of childlike wonder, don't try to change it because it doesn't feel like what the definition of loss is—please just go with that and see where it takes you.

I invite you write for at least 20 minutes. You can certainly continue writing for more and I encourage you to do so if it is flowing, but at least commit to writing for 20 minutes. If at first the words don't come, that's okay. Just keep your pen to paper, let yourself write anything that comes to mind, and what needs to come out will eventually unfold.

Okay, let's begin.

Module 5: Parenthood

"Blessed are the cracked for they shall let the light in."

– *Anonymous*

Warm Up Writing Exercise

Let's get started with our brief warm up exercise to get our writing energies flowing.

I would like to offer you the following sentence as a prompt to get things started. Of course you can write about whatever comes to mind and don't feel you have to be confined to this idea, but it's something to work from if you need a little nudge:

"When I hear the word Mom, I feel..."

"When I hear the word Dad, I feel..."

Remember, even with this first warm up exercise, it's important to dig deep and not push back any thoughts or feelings that rise to the surface. Go where it needs to take you. Write for about ten minutes or so and then let's come back and explore the idea further.

Long Writing Exercise

It's possible that you have been carrying thoughts and feelings surrounding parenthood without even knowing they exist, just a small tug here and there whenever a situation comes up that touches on it that you then push back down. Or, it's possible that due to your particular path as a parent or not, you bear wounds that feel deep, open and fresh and the burden has now become too wearisome to continue carrying anymore.

I invite you today to begin your writing with one of these phrases, depending on which resonates with you the most:

Being a parent is a choice that...

Not being a parent is a choice that...

Let us begin our writing for at least twenty minutes. If you want to continue writing beyond that time, absolutely please do. What is most important is to not interfere with whatever comes up, and to dig deep. Go to the places that are not so comfortable for you, because that is where you will uncover the parts that need the most healing.

Okay, let's begin.

Module 6: Your Greatest Fear

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.

-Eleanor Roosevelt

Warm Up Writing Exercise

Let's start our warm up exercise for the day and get our writing energies flowing with an exercise that touches on the other side of fear. I invite you to work from this phrase and see what comes up—remember to let things flow.

"If I wasn't afraid of [fill in the blank] then I would..

This can bring up a lot of emotion, or it could be something that inspires you and shows you something about yourself—where your true desires and path lie—and where you need to go in your journey forward. Whatever it is, this is an excellent way to discover what is currently blocking you.

Let's write for 10-15 minutes on this and see what we come up with.

Long Writing Exercise

Likely as you have been listening, thoughts and emotions have been swirling around within you, pondering "What am I afraid of?" You might already have an idea of what you will write about, or you might be unsure. I encourage you to come to the page today with no preconceived notions of what you are going to write about. Let yourself be surprised at what comes up and don't force it to be "the thing" you have already identified as being your greatest fear. In allowing whatever needs to come through without preconceived ideas or judgment, you give your soul permission to reveal to you what could be underlying and at the source of what you are familiar with as being your biggest fear.

I invite you now to write from this prompt:

"My greatest fear is..."

Let's not put a timer on this and see where it takes you—remember, the question is phrased as just one fear, but that doesn't mean you can't write about more. So let's again be brave together and begin our writing for the day.

Module 7: Where are you now?

"To write about what is painful is to begin the work of healing."

—Pat Schneider, *How the Light Gets In*

I invite you with this last module to take what you have learned so far and write about what you are going through today. You can use any format—letter writing, one of the prompts already provided or you can just start with exactly what comes out of you as you put the pen to paper. The idea with ending this journey with "Where are you now?" is to let you explore what you are still holding onto or experiencing at this time of your life, using what you have learned by now of how expressive writing is a valuable tool for healing and then taking it from here in whichever way comes naturally to you.

You can write for 20 minutes, or 10, or 60, whatever time you are able to devote to today, please do so. Going forward, if you are able to write for even 10 minutes a day when you are feeling stressed, anxious or sad, I encourage you to do so and allow the writing to guide you towards healing.

Thank you for being brave enough to come with me on this journey and allowing me to be your guide.

I am ever humble for it.

With love and light,

Allison