

HEALING WITH WRITING

Keeping a Journal

*“Writing is a form of verbal medicine.
Used wisely, it can initiate self-discovery and healing.”
Barry Lane*

Writing as a Healing Practice

If you are working with deeper issues such as old hurts, unresolved conflicts, deep loss, unfinished business, or a pattern that seems to repeat itself in your life, then taking some time to explore these difficulties in a journal can lead you to greater self-understanding and resolution.

If you choose to use a journal for your visual exercises, this section discusses additional ways to use your journal interactively with your imagery to achieve healing transformation. Like the previous visual process, certain kinds of journal writing can help to shift your focus to a more positive state. Because therapeutic writing is strictly for the purpose of healing, it is not subject to the censorship and judgment we often associate with writing. Journaling as a healing practice provides a safe place in which to open up, express and explore your stressful feelings and thoughts, and also connect with your spirit and positive emotions.

Writing Approaches

There are numerous methods you can try to access, release and transform your issues, as described in the following sections.

Releasing Feelings: Timed Writing

To bypass your Censor and Judging mind, try writing very fast for 3 to 5 minutes. You can use this to vent bottled up emotions, allowing you to release them in a safe place rather than acting on them.

Writing in Third Person

When you shift your writing from first person (e.g., I'm angry at Jane) to third person (“she's angry with Jane”), you shift from being inside your emotion to seeing it in a more objective, dispassionate way. You become more the detached Observer or Witness, rather than the participant. You can see yourself and your situation more like a viewer watching a movie. This brings perspective to the issue.

Writing in First Person Looking Back

When writing about something troubling that happened, you can describe it as if you are looking back on it—what happened then—and what your feelings are now. You simply fast forward to a future time as if this event is long past and you are looking back on it. This helps provide distance and shifts you out of being inside the issue or event you're struggling with.

Dialoguing

While attending a workshop on journaling connected with the Center for Journal Therapy, our teacher introduced us to the use of varied techniques that included visual as well as written exercises. One of the techniques I found valuable was the process of dialoguing. This method was developed by Dr. Ira Progoff, a psychotherapist who studied with Dr. Carl Jung and is known for his development of the Intensive Journal Workshop. It offers another tool for gaining awareness about diverse areas of your life, connecting with your true self, and developing a more meaningful life. This method can be used independently in a writing journal or in conjunction with the drawing exercises, in which you can dialogue with different parts of your drawing.

Types of Dialogues

There are many types of dialoging as noted in "Journal to the Self," by Kathleen Adams. As noted in the reference, the first five types of dialogue include dialoguing with persons, work, the body, events and circumstances. You can also dialogue with emotions, objects, sub-personalities and resistance blocks. Finally, you can dialogue with your Inner Wisdom or Higher Self (meaning the Light within you).

Form and Preparation for Dialogue

Whatever you choose to dialogue with, think of it as an exchange between you and someone or something else, similar to a role play, but in which you play both parts. Thus it is written like a conversation, and looks like a movie script, where you always identify the speakers in the dialogue.

Before entering into a dialogue in your journal, or with parts of your drawings, start with a brief entrance reflection by focusing on who or what you are dialoguing with, reflecting a moment on your relationship to your dialogue partner, any questions you would like to ask, and statements you would like to make. If you are dialoguing with an abstraction, such as Inner Wisdom, it may help to personify it in some way to make the relationship more accessible. For example, depending on what I am writing about, I might imagine Inner Wisdom as a healing figure or a wise counselor or sage.

It is recommended that you write as quickly as possible, and keep your hand moving. Writing quickly is a critical component because it frees the intuitive right brain to flow without the judgmental intervention of the reasoning left part of the brain. As with the drawing exercises, this allows you to tap into answers to questions that cannot always be accessed by the reasoning mind. This helps to open the heart and mind to express whatever is stored or buried.

When beginning a dialogue, write down who or what you are dialoguing with, and your question or statement. Let the object of your inquiry speak for itself. As with the visual exercises, begin with where you are—whatever stressful issue you are dealing with.

Examples of Dialogues

Below are a few examples taken from “Journal to the Self.”

Dialoguing with Persons:

Me: It's just like every other situation in our marriage. You always get your way! You always get to call the shots! Well, what about ME? What about MY needs?

Him: You never let me know you had any needs! How can you fault me? You acted like your whole life revolved around taking care of me. You sacrificed too much of yourself for me.

Dialoguing with an Emotion:

Me: I'm not even sure I'd know you if I felt you.

Love: Describe how you felt last Saturday in the mountains.

Me: Good. I felt peaceful, warm, connected with nature. It was a good feeling.

Love: HOW did you feel about Debbie?

Me: Warm. Close. Happy to be sharing the day with her. Glad we're back together.

Love: That was me.

Dialoguing with your Wise Mind

As noted in “Journal to the Self”, “the Inner Wisdom Dialogue allows you to give voice to the part of you that knows your Truth.” This dialogue process can be combined with Part 2 of the drawing exercises on transformation to connect more deeply with your Wise Mind and elaborate on any aspect of your transformative visual exercises. In other words, you can pose further questions to your Inner Wisdom to obtain greater insight.

If you choose to dialogue with your Inner Wisdom, it is important to follow the same guidelines as you did with the visual exercises. Stop, make time for yourself, find a quiet place, and take a moment to focus on the problem you're working with. Take whatever time you need to connect with your Inner Wisdom. Set an intention to open to it, and trust in its responses. Express your thanks for whatever guidance it provides.

Following is an example of what a dialogue might look like:

Mary: I am shattered, exhausted from this latest horrible tirade from John. It has devastated me and I'm in total despair.

Inner Wisdom: Keep turning to me. Remember that I am always here. I never leave; only you step away and forget me. Rest. Meditate in me. You feel lost now but your light will be rekindled in time. You are in the midst of a relationship that has serious harmful effects on you and your health. You must move away from it and turn to me.

Writing Gratitude

Journal therapy writers are quick to point out that while writing about your problems, negative thoughts and emotions can help you safely release and better understand them, it is equally important for healing to write about the positive things you are experiencing.

Writing about the good aspects of your life helps to shift your focus and energy from what is wrong in your life to what is right in it; from what you do not want to what you do want; and what you do not think you have to what you do have. Gratitude has been said to shift you into a state of Great Fullness: a heart that opens and fills up with greater feelings of happiness, joy, love, compassion and other positive states associated with your higher self.

Gratitude includes looking at the hardships and challenges you've experienced as opportunities, rather than obstacles, that make you stronger and help you grow more connected to your spirit.

Some of the things you can explore are:

- All you appreciate about yourself and others
- All you are becoming
- All you take for granted, such as food, shelter, the caring things others may have done for you
- What you have learned from the difficulties in your life, how they have made you stronger, and how they have deepened your connection with spirit
- The unique gifts you were given to contribute to the world, whatever abilities, skills or talents you have
- Times in your life when you were completely happy

Writing on Beliefs and Affirmations

I believe that affirmations to help you counter negative thoughts with positive ones are only effective when you uncover what is at the root of the negative belief that gave rise to the affirmation in the first place. Believing in the affirmation is crucial to its effectiveness. If you do not believe it, use your journal to explore why. Often our beliefs are unconscious and we are unaware of them. In addition to using the visual exercises to uncover hidden beliefs, writing can help you get to the root of the negative beliefs that may be holding you back from achieving what you want in your life. Used in combination with the visual exercises and using the guided visualization to connect with your spirit, you can work on letting go of self-limiting beliefs that do not serve you, that keep you stuck and impede your growth.

In his book, “Excuses Be Gone,” psychologist and author Wayne Dyer discusses the importance of tuning into your Inner Wisdom to transform negative thoughts and beliefs into positive affirmations. He says you can change the way you look at things and experience them in your mind. We carry ideas and beliefs from conditioning that block us, creating false views about what we can and cannot do. These beliefs, he says, are like a virus on a computer that duplicates itself, infiltrates and spreads. To surmount the virus, you must make your No. 1 relationship be to your higher power, and with the help of that power, examine the belief to root it out. Only then can you manifest what you want to manifest. Following are some of his examples of thought blocks and turnaround affirmations:

*It will be difficult
I have the ability to accomplish any task.*

*I am weak; I'm not strong enough
I have strength, which comes from my source. I let go and ask spirit to give me strength and courage.*

*I am scared, fearful.
I can accomplish and get through anything because I am never alone. Spirit is always available.
I give the fear to spirit.*

*I'm overwhelmed by things piling up.
As I unclutter my life and organize it, I gain control.*

*Nobody will help me.
The right people and circumstances are here for me at all times. I need only reach out and then listen for wisdom.*

Affirmations, when drawn from the work of altering false beliefs, can be like mantras that plant seeds for positive growth.

Before writing your affirmations, set an intention for a goal you want to reach. Let's say you want to initiate a new project but you're afraid to take the big step. Explore your fears and any underlying beliefs. Add an affirmation you believe that helps to anchor your intention and helps it to become a reality.

You might write: *I want to launch a website, but I'm afraid.....*
Then write an affirmation such as: *“I have all the knowledge and skills to make this project a reality and I trust in my spirit to support and guide me in this effort.”*

Remember that the affirmation should always be in the present tense, using positive words.