

Writing To Heal Stress, Grief And Loss

During this era of sheltering-in due to the COVID-19 pandemic, stress is the word most often used to describe the high levels of anxiety, anger and fear that so many people are experiencing. But when looked at through the lens of loss – loss of everyday freedoms, loss of employment, loss of income, loss of health, loss of life – framing our collective and individual experiences as one of grief due to loss may be more accurate.

Healing writing – also called expressive writing or grief journaling - can be a way to explore the many complex and multi-faceted emotions you may be experiencing at this time due to COVID-19-related losses.

Writing that heals is not about recounting the events of your life – it is about speaking your individual truth to yourself so that you can let go of a painful experience and move forward. The most important part of that truth is putting your feelings, emotions and thoughts on paper; it is through speaking your truth – naming the hurt – that transformational healing occurs. In other words, through the process of writing you uncover deeper understanding, resolution and a way to move forward through your grief.

There is extensive research showing that engaging in expressive writing is one of the most powerful and effective means to ease and ultimately heal sorrow and the pain of loss. According to research done by Harvard Medical School and elsewhere, the process of healing writing can:

- Provide an avenue for figuring out what you truly feel, think, believe and understand regarding what you are experiencing
- Boost your immune system functioning, mood, and sense of well-being
- Help you make sense of pain and loss, bringing structure and order to the inner chaos of grief and pain
- Help you uncover the power of the words you say to yourself and how those words impact your perceptions and perspective
- Offer clarity regarding possible life roads to explore
- Tap into the subconscious
- Help to uncover purpose and meaning in your experience

Please consider the below writing guidelines as a way to explore your covid-19 experience or any other painful experiences of grief, loss and stress.

Guidelines for Healing Writing

Consider writing in a journal that is specifically for the purpose of exploring your loss. Date each entry – this allows you to see how your grief flows and changes over time. Keep and re-read what you write – again this helps you to see more clearly your grief’s healing path.

Doing several minutes of relaxing or mindful breathing can help aid in the writing process. One simple technique is to: gently close your eyes; breathe just a little slower and deeper than normal to comfort; and focus your attention on the area of the body where you notice the breath is most prominent (nose, throat, chest, stomach). Do this for several minutes. When you feel relaxed, begin the writing process.

Steps for Healing Writing

1. Give yourself permission to tell yourself the truth. Write quickly, by hand, without editing your thoughts or pausing to correct grammar, spelling, punctuation etc. Continue writing until you feel “finished”, about 20 minutes (this is the point at which your mental energy will start to ebb). Try to write in a place where you won’t be interrupted.
2. Include your thoughts, feelings and awareness regarding the events you describe; put down not only what you feel but why you feel that way. Write for yourself – not an audience.

To explore the same story more deeply, consider:

3. Writing the same story three times on consecutive days: once in the past tense; once in the present tense; and once in the third person.
4. On another day, rewrite the same story again using your non-dominant hand – for example, if you’re left-handed, write the story with your right hand.

The purpose of rewriting the story many times in many different ways is to see what emerges, what new details and insights arise – what enlightenment shines forth – in the retelling of the same event or story from different perspectives. Rewriting the story can also help you to step back and see “the story” more objectively, revealing the blessings, life lessons and gifts of why this particular life event “happened for you” not “to you” (maybe there were things you thought were a negative at the time but in the end turned out to positively impact your life by putting you on a new path etc.). Research has shown that writing is more effective in easing stress, grief and loss when done repeatedly over a series of days or months.

Writing about grief and loss can trigger strong emotions - don’t be surprised if you cry or feel temporarily sad after writing. Feeling the full impact of your loss is part of the healing process. Exploring your feelings

through writing can lead you to the other side of your pain by allowing emotions and thoughts to flow that may get stuck within you due to stress or the pain of loss.

If, however, you have gone through a deeply troubling situation of loss (such as suicide, violent death, the trauma of sudden death, or the inability to be with a loved one while dying due to COVID-19 restrictions), exploring that loss with the help of an experienced therapist or grief support specialist may be needed. Journaling may be part of the healing work you do, but it is not a substitute for professional support.

The *Remembering A Life Grief Journal* is available in the [Remembering A Life online store](#); the journal provides writing prompts, as well as information on the process of grief journaling for those looking for more structure in the writing process.

About the Author

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