



Writing Through Your Grief

My father died young, his body worn out from a life of alcoholism. Although I loved my dad, I also hated him. I hated what his drinking did to my childhood and to our family, particularly to our mother. Several weeks after my father's death, the anguish of my mixed feelings hit hard. A dear friend encouraged me to start keeping a journal. For months I poured out my feelings and struggles on paper. It helped tremendously in dealing with my father's death, and his life, and it helped me let go and open a new chapter in my life.



After the death of a loved one, you may want to get on quickly with your life. But remember to give yourself time to grieve your loss—time to remember and learn and say goodbye. Using pen and paper to reflect on your loss can aid this important process of grieving and growing.

According to psychologist James Pennebaker of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, pouring out your feelings on paper can strengthen your immune system and promote healing.

People who wrote about their deep feelings showed strikingly improved immune functions based on blood tests. Those who only jotted down trivialities failed to receive a boost in immune functioning. Six weeks after the journalists stopped writing, the findings still held—and the journalists who expressed themselves in depth had made fewer doctor visits.

WELCOME TO JOURNALING

It's OK if you're not the world's greatest writer. This is your private journal, a vehicle to assist you

in your journey through bereavement. Being able to write well is not critical. **Two things, however, are important: A commitment to take time on a regular basis to work with your journal; and a willingness to be completely honest and spontaneous as you express yourself in writing.**

Keep in mind that journaling can be helpful even if the loss was suffered years ago. Journaling about past losses can help release suppressed feelings, thoughts and attitudes, thus promoting healing and freeing up new energy for living in the present.

Your journal is more than an account of your loss and your journey through grief. It's also:

- ♥ **A Friend** who always listens and with whom you can share anything.
- ♥ **A Mirror** in which you see your inner and outer lives reflected.
- ♥ **A Teacher** who gradually leads you through your grief into healing.

As you are unique, your personal journal will also be unique. Create a journal that matches your nature and gives you what you need at this point in



your life. You may want to stick with traditional writing, or you may decide to express yourself in a variety of creative ways.

In addition to writing about your grief related feelings, thoughts and experiences, you may wish to include clippings or pictures in your journal. You might also write poetry, create stories, make up songs, draw, paint, diagram, doodle, type, word process or whatever else strikes your fancy.

CHOOSING A JOURNAL

Pick out a blank notebook that feels good to you. Don't hesitate to spend a little money on it and perhaps a special pen. Some people like loose leaf binders where the pages can be moved around or replaced. Others prefer a spiral or a bound notebook. Still others prefer tape recording their thoughts. You may have something totally different in mind. Whatever you choose as a format for your journal, invest yourself in it. Make it worthy of housing your inmost thoughts and feelings.

Keep your journal in a handy but private place. Try to write in it daily, preferably at the same time each day.

Many find early morning or evenings convenient times for journal keeping. Start each entry with the date and continue with whatever comes to mind.

But if the spirit moves and it's not your usual journaling hour, go ahead and act on it, particularly if you have had a hard time getting the journaling process underway. Once you are able to break down any emotional or intellectual barriers that may be preventing you from journaling, try to establish a regular time for your writing.

PRIVACY AND SHARING

Kathleen Adams, director of the Center for Journal Therapy in Arvada, Colorado, stresses the importance of privacy: "Store your journal in a place that won't tempt others to read it. Put your name and address and phone number on the first page. Also add a disclaimer: 'This is my personal journal. Please don't read it without my knowledge and permission.' Or just say: 'Keep Out!'"



Although privacy is important, after journaling for a period of time you may decide to share portions of your journal with a close friend or in a grief support group. This type of sharing can further aid the healing process for both yourself and others.

LET IT FLOW

Let your pen do the writing. Don't allow your inner critic to censor what comes out. Trust the process. Just put pen to paper and begin writing. Let it flow. Don't worry about punctuation, spelling or grammar. And don't worry about what comes out, even if it's surprising, scary, or very direct and blunt. Just keep opening up.

At the core of healthy journaling is willingness to trust yourself and open up your heart and soul. So pay very close attention to your inner sense about yourself and situations. Take note of the promptings of your heart as well as hunches, gut feelings, and those thoughts that seem to just "pop" into your awareness.

Try to concentrate on *what* you are writing, rather than *how* it sounds. Distractions can subconsciously serve to pull your thoughts away and prevent you from dealing with important issues. Focusing on the content will also help you ignore possible grammar and punctuation flaws.

What if you don't feel like writing anything at all? Honor that feeling if it only comes up occasionally. On the other hand, you may wish to write about that feeling and where it's coming from.

Some days you may fill several pages in your journal, while other times all you can muster are a few sentences. Don't be discouraged or feel tempted to abandon the effort. Remember that your journaling is a guidepost of where you are in the grief process. Feelings and thoughts tend to come in waves. You could be making great progress one week, but then get bogged down with issues that are harder to deal with and require more time to work through. The main thing is to keep at it.

PREPARING TO WRITE

Many journalists find it helpful to take a few minutes for preparation before they begin to write.

Gail Jacobsen, author of *Write Grief: How to Transform Loss with Writing*, offers several ideas on preparing to write:

1. In whatever way works best for you, allow yourself to relax totally and let go of intrusive thoughts. This is important as it enables your emotions and intuition to spark the creative, healing process.
2. Write in a quiet, comfortable atmosphere, perhaps in a favorite chair or room.
3. Set your own mood: Sit near a window with a pleasant view, or outside in good weather; light a candle; play a tape of gentle, non-intrusive music; dance, if you like.
4. Breathe deeply and let go of busy thoughts as you look at, hold, feel or smell a cherished object (photo, painting, mother's thimble, husband's sweater, dad's tattered hat, son's bat and ball, daughter's doll, loved one's favorite food, friend's book given to you before he or she died). After you have spent a few minutes in receptive reflection, begin to write the thoughts or memories that arise.

GETTING STARTED

If you're not sure what to write about, begin by completing a few sentence stems such as: *When I think about my loved one who has died, I feel . . .* ; *If right now I were given the opportunity to talk briefly with my loved one, here is what I would say: . . .* ; or *One of my fondest memories is . . .*

Consider topics such as Special Times We Shared Together; What I Wish I Had Said or Done; or What I Wish I Had *not* Said or Done.

Also consider exploring a variety of emotions common to the grief process such as shock, denial, guilt, anger, loneliness, regret, depression, acceptance, peace and appreciation. In addition you may want to focus on specific topics such as friends, the funeral, and other important deaths in your life that may be influencing your current grieving process.

One of the best and most natural ways of expressing yourself in a griefwork journal is to write letters to your deceased loved one. Share your pain, your disappointments, your hope, your

appreciation. Ask for forgiveness; extend forgiveness. Recall fond memories and share all the love of your heart.

This type of communicating through letter writing can be a helpful and healing process, not only for yourself, but according to the beliefs of many, it can also be a blessing to your loved one who has passed on.

INVOLVING CHILDREN

Remember that the healing process of grief is a family experience; children need help, too. While young children cannot write sophisticated journals, they may benefit, for example, from drawing pictures that represent their thoughts and feelings about the loved one who has died, even if the death was that of a cherished dog, cat, or other pet. Talking about the pictures can be a good way of sharing feelings, gaining understanding, and promoting healthy bereavement.

SPIRITUALITY

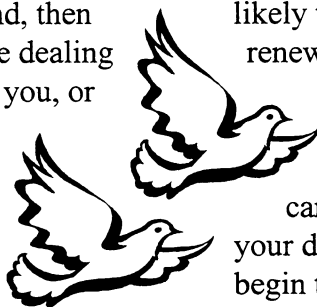
Perhaps more than any other event in life, the death of a loved one stimulates profound spiritual reflection, including an examination of one's beliefs about an afterlife. While the death of a dear one is a poignant reminder of the limits of physical existence, it often serves to awaken us more deeply to our spiritual identity. Though a painful loss can deepen our spiritual life, sometimes it also shakes up our beliefs as we ponder our losses, their meaning, and our purpose in life. We may even ask ourselves, "What kind of God would allow such things to happen?"

In his book, *Time Remembered: A Journal for Survivors*, Earl Grollman explains: "You may feel abandoned, forsaken, cheated by God. Many spiritual leaders in history have reacted this very way. The questioning of faith is a normal expressing of anguish and consistent with later spiritual growth. As time goes along, you may eventually draw strength from your religious heritage and find that you are not so angry with God after all. Faith may not take away heartache, but faith can help you live with it better, to accept the unacceptable."

Those who keep a griefwork journal often find that recording favorite passages from their religious heritage provides comfort and guidance. If you are so inclined, your writing also might take the form of prayers or a type of dialogue with God in which you write out a question to the Divine and, with quiet receptivity, write out what you feel God is wanting to say to you in response to your question.

REACHING OUT FOR HELP

Although journaling is primarily a private activity, it's important that you know when to reach out to a friend, family member or professional. If you want to share what you've been writing with someone whom you feel will understand, then by all means do so. If the issues you are dealing with in your journal are overwhelming you, or you find yourself very confused, or you simply want some expert feedback, contact a counselor who specializes in grief, or call your local hospice or comprehensive care center.



We are interdependent social creatures who need each other. In reaching out and accepting help from another, often we both receive and extend blessings. So don't hesitate to ask questions, lean on a friend, or seek help from a qualified professional counselor. When in doubt, reach out.

PAIN IS OUR TEACHER

In your own time, as you work through your grief you will come to the point where you focus on how you have grown through this difficult experience. You will see that pain has been your teacher, and that you have grown in wisdom and in a deepening of life's essential values.

Benjamin Franklin said it well: "Those things that hurt, instruct." After your journey through grief, you will not be the same person; you will be changed, strengthened, enriched. It is then time to begin writing about new beginnings, for when all is said and done, perhaps the greatest tribute you can pay to a deceased loved one is to embrace life with a new vitality and do your best to scatter kindness, wisdom and joy.

MANY POTENTIAL BENEFITS

While it takes courage to pour out your thoughts and feelings on paper, the benefits of "writing through your grief" are many. It helps you face your loss and say goodbye to your loved one or friend. You can release old hurts and let go of the past. It also enables you to take what you have learned into the present. Journaling through your grief may even strengthen your immune system and promote physical well-being. And it's a wonderful way of nourishing fond memories and keeping them alive in your heart.

As you see yourself reflected on the pages of your journal, you learn a lot. Gradually you're likely to find more balance in your life as well as renewed energy. Chances are you'll have more wisdom and sparkle to share with others. You'll see more clearly what's important to you and what's not. Through journaling you can open to your heart's deepest desires, clarify your daily priorities, explore fresh visions, and begin the adventure of bringing new dreams to life.

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