

LIVING *with* LOSS

WRITING THROUGH GRIEF



"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal, and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same."

– Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

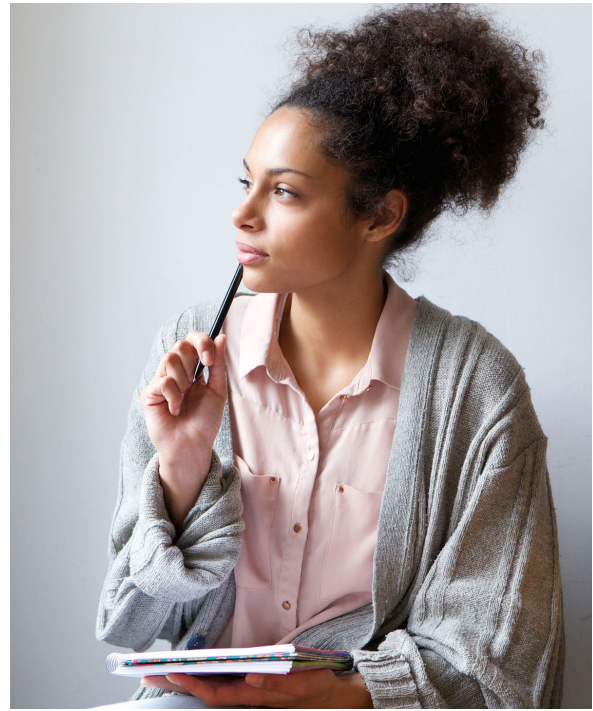
The experience of grief and bereavement is emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically painful. As a result, it is an important step in the healing process to take time to reflect on your loss and how it has affected you. According to the National Institutes of Health, experts agree that expressing emotion is unique to each person and that people need to grieve in their own way and time. While talking to family, friends, professional counselors, and/or bereavement support groups can be helpful for coping, it can also be beneficial to have an outlet where you can express your emotions freely and privately. There is some research from Harvard Medical School and others that suggests that writing can help those who are grieving and coping with loss process their feelings. Specifically, expressive writing about your grief promotes a space to explore emotions associated with your loss more deeply without worrying about how others might react to your feelings. People have reported that writing about grief can be "valuable," "meaningful," and that it helps you "feel better afterward," according to Harvard Medical School.

What is expressive writing?

Put simply, expressive writing is the process of writing about your feelings that are associated with a particular distressing experience. The goal of expressive writing is to write from the heart and to write for you, not others. You should not focus on writing with correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but rather writing in a way that allows the free flow of emotions.

Harvard Medical School suggests “truly letting go” as you write how you feel and why you feel this way. Such deep and honest expression can uncover suppressed emotions making the experience not only “emotionally revealing” (Lu & Stanton, 2009, p. 679), but freeing, say professors Qian Lu and Annette Stanton.

Expressive writing may not be right for everyone. It requires a willingness to open up and articulate your feelings through writing. You do not have to be a great writer to keep a grief journal, as this is for you. No one else will see your writing unless you chose to share it. This writing experience is about exploring your innermost emotional experience related to your grief and loss.



If you are interested in writing through grief, consider creating a grief journal. To get started, it can be helpful to follow these journaling recommendations from Harvard Medical School among others.

- Be open and honest with yourself.
- Focus on the experience of your feelings.
- Have patience, and start simple.
- Don't focus on spelling, grammar, or punctuation.
- Write about anything that comes to mind; be spontaneous.
- Write about how you feel and why.

Write for a few minutes a day a few days a week or for as long or little as writing feels good or helpful to you.

How to start a grief journal

For some, writing in a journal may come easily, organically, and spontaneously. But others may struggle or wonder how to start. Writing can be carried out independently or you may find writing activities in a bereavement support group or class on loss and grief in your community. The following steps from NYS Funeral Directors Association can help you get started.

- 1. Choose a journal.** You should consider the way in which you are most comfortable writing. Some prefer to buy a new journal that is especially for grief journaling, while others prefer to write on notebook paper kept in a binder. You may also choose to keep a digital journal on a laptop, home computer, or smart phone. The key is to set yourself up in an accessible and comfortable way to explore your grief. You may also want to find a safe, private space to store your journal if you want it to remain private.
- 2. Decide when to journal.** It is important to determine when you feel most comfortable writing. For example, if you are a morning person, you may want to set aside time in

the morning to write. You may want to only write on the weekends, or a time when you know you will have uninterrupted alone time to be able to really let go and explore your emotions. The key to keeping an expressive journaling practice is finding a time that you can invest and engage in the writing process – even if it is only for a few minutes a day. The Harvard Medical School suggests that writing may have stronger effects when it is done over multiple days.

- 3. Decide where to journal.** Find a meaningful setting in which you feel most comfortable journaling. This will be different for each person. It may be in the comfort or convenience of your home or outside in a relaxing nature setting. Some people like to find a place that connects you to the person you care about and are writing about. You may want to turn on some soft music, light a candle, and grab a cup of tea. The key is to find a space where you feel unguarded and safe to explore whatever emotions, positive or negative, that arise while writing about your loss. But, also be open to keeping your journal with you at all times, as you never know when you might want to record something.
- 4. Let it flow.** Once you have completed steps 1 through 3, you are ready to quiet your inner critic and simply let your thoughts and feelings flow through your pen and on to your paper. Again, your emotions may surprise and even upset you; but, the goal of this exercise is for you to uncover distressing emotions for which you are not aware or do not want to share with others. If you get distracted, that is OK. Gently bring your awareness back to your journal or pick up where you left off at another time or on another day.

Keep in mind that some journaling sessions may be more productive than others. Some days you may be able to write for only a few minutes while other times you may feel more inclined to write for longer periods of time. If you are struggling to write, you can write about the experience of struggling to write. The key is to be willing and open to explore your own thoughts, feelings, and emotions surrounding your grief and experience of loss.



After you have completed a writing session, you may want to review and reflect on your words while in the moment. On the contrary, you may want to put your journal away and reflect on your writing at a later time. When you read your writing, you may be surprised by the emotions and thoughts that you have written down. Your reflection may spark some insight into your inner world and can begin to encourage healing. Expressive writing through your grief has therapeutic value.

Other ideas for your journal

You should design your grief journal uniquely the way you want it to be. You may want to only include your writing or you may choose to include photos, quotes, scriptures, or poetry if such symbols move you or aid in your healing journey.

Heather Stang, author of *Mindfulness and Grief*, suggests these grief writing prompts to assist you with accessing your emotions and experiences:

- “I remember when...”
- “This is what I have to say to you...”
- “My happiest memory of you is...”
- “The greatest lesson I have learned is...”

Sharing your writing with others

Some people who keep a grief journal decide that they would like to share a piece of their writing with others who are grieving. In-person or online bereavement support groups can provide a safe and empathetic space for people who are grieving to share their personal stories, talk about their loved one, and express their inner emotional experiences. Some people even share their personal stories with the intent of helping others feel a sense of hope and validation of their own grieving experience. Deciding to share your writing can be a vulnerable experience, therefore be sure to share only the information with which you are most comfortable and do not mind going public. You may find that sharing your writing provides you a sense of connection to others, especially if they respond by sharing similar feelings and emotions.

CONCLUSION

The experience surrounding loss can be difficult to discuss and admit or share with others. However keeping it bottled up can take a toll on your physical and emotional health and well-being. Creating a grief journal and expressively writing about your grief can provide you the space to let your emotions out so you can process your feelings. Writing about your experience with grief and loss can be therapeutic as it helps to reconnect you with YOU.

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