

Writing Your Way to Peace and Power:
Empowerment Journaling as a Pathway to Healing and Growth

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Writing is a form of personal freedom...writers will write mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.” –Don DeLillo

Release your pain.

Express your thoughts and feelings.

Find your voice.

Speak your truth.

Connect to your spirit.

Tell your story.

Process your experiences.

Make your action plan.

Bear witness to your own transformation.

Let your creativity break through.

These are pathways to healing, empowerment, and transformative growth for men and women who have experienced sexual violence. Writing is a vehicle that can be used to travel these pathways. Sexual violence can create internal unrest and lessen the feeling of personal power. This chapter will introduce you to a journaling method and offer strategies that can become important tools for the journey to peace, power, and transformation. Survivors of sexual violence often struggle with issues of shame and guilt. Trusting other people, feelings of safety and security, and self-esteem are often threatened by experiences of sexual violence. Withdrawing from or avoiding relationships and shutting down emotionally, or increased conflict in relationships and having trouble controlling one's emotions are other common consequences. Sometimes these factors prevent the survivor from disclosing the experience or sharing what they have gone through in the aftermath¹⁻³. Unfortunately, this way of coping can prolong the time it takes to fully emerge from living in the shadow of sexual violence. Journaling allows you to process your experiences, thoughts, and feelings so that you can emerge strengthened with

increased clarity and positive feelings about yourself and your purpose.⁴⁻⁷ Through a process that can happen in your own time, with your own voice, in your own way, writing can forge a path to come into the light. *Empowerment Journaling* (EJ) is offered here as an approach to writing that focuses on methods that can help you find your peace and claim your power.

Psychologists have done decades of research that provide strong evidence that writing helps to decrease distress over time, improve physical health and immune system functioning, increase working memory, as well as enhance positive well-being.⁸⁻¹³ The research supports what everyday people have known for centuries—that writing heals, empowers, and transforms. From keeping a daily diary, to documenting a trip in a travel log, to reflecting on happenings in the world, to telling one’s life story, to expressing feelings through lyrics and poetry, to composing a love letter, writing has always served important personal, social, and cultural functions. Writing is a powerful opportunity for personal expression that emphasizes freedom, choice, and self-determination. Writing interventions have been used by therapists in the form of journaling, poetry, and structured “homework” exercises. Writing is used in education to teach critical thinking, reflective practice, and encourage self-evaluation. Writing is an active, creative process that happens at the intersection of internal processes, external experience, and the culture and context in which experience occurs. Journaling is a vehicle for self-expression that differentiates itself from other forms of expressive arts therapies because the act of writing, which requires language and cognitive functions, provides an opportunity to integrate thinking and emotional processes in a holistic process. Lepore and Smyth suggest that writing has a powerful role “to positively shape, or reshape, human experiences, in the context or aftermath of stressful life experiences” (p. 3).¹⁴

So, how does writing help? Writing helps by opening an opportunity for you to clear your mind and release built-up feelings. Writing helps by providing a place to express yourself and speak your truth freely, without interruption or judgment. Writing helps by integrating your thoughts and your emotions so that you can feel whole. Writing helps by setting aside time to organize your thoughts, set goals, and figure out how you are going to achieve them. Writing helps by allowing you to actively process something that can lead to insights, revelations, and new understandings. Writing helps by giving you space for your creative self to break through. Writing helps by documenting your journey so that you can see how far you have come. Writing helps by providing a safe space where you are in control. Research studies are increasingly adding knowledge that is giving us better clues on the multiple mechanisms involved in the pathway between writing about something personal and the beneficial outcomes that studies consistently find. These include: catharsis, exposure, emotional regulation, self-affirmation, narrative coherence, meaning making, benefit finding, broaden and build theory of positive emotions, insight and reflexivity, self-understanding, experiential learning, identity stabilization, and the integration of emotional and cognitive processes.¹⁴⁻²² For readers interested in the theoretical and empirical foundations for writing as an effective element of the healing process, I particularly encourage you to explore work by James Pennebaker , Gillie Bolton, Stephen Lepore, and Joshua Smyth.^{8-9, 12-14, 18-19}

A JOURNAL ENTRY YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

“Visualize and Mobilize”

Purpose: To provide a space to identify your wants and needs and begin making steps towards fulfilling them.

What is something that you would like to see manifest in your life? 1. Write it down. *Example:* “I want a car so I don’t have to take the bus to work anymore”. Close your eyes and transport yourself to your life with the change you want. Visualize it. 2. Now, write a description of a snippet of a day in your life with this change. *Example:* “I wake up in the morning and....”. 3. Finally, make a list of three things you can start doing right now that will move you towards the change. *Example:* “1. Save \$100 out of every pay check; 2. Research cars and prices; 3. Identify cars within my budget to test drive.” Activation of the behaviors you identified in the third step may require assistance or further planning. Moreover, the specifics of what you want may change as you get more information or as your priorities shift. Flexibility in the target outcome is important. The healing process is the use of writing to increase the intentionality of your behavior, and to direct cognitive and emotional energy towards mobilizing yourself to action that reflects your values.

Incorporating writing into your healing process can be done in several ways. Writing can be guided by a therapist or counselor as part of treatment. Writing can be used as an adjunct to therapy through workbooks¹⁷ or writing groups.¹⁸ Most commonly, however, writing is a self-guided activity. There are many, many journaling and writing strategies that have been developed.^{7, 18-19, 23-24} Journal therapists and writing coaches agree that there is no single “best” way to journal. There is only the best way for you. The following three examples provide illustrations of how these clients found their way to journaling.

KAYLA: “But I don’t like to write”

Kayla was 32 years old when I met her. She had been sexually abused by her uncle from age 9 until she ran away to live with her boyfriend when she was 17. By the time she was 25

she had been beaten, thrown down steps, strangled, and raped by this boyfriend too many times to mention. After a brief period of homelessness, she was hired by an elderly woman as a live-in caregiver. She hasn't been in an intimate relationship since then and has steadily gained weight over the years reaching her highest weight of 314 pounds when I started working with her.

"That's not going to work for me", Kayla stated emphatically.

I responded "How do you know?"

"Because I don't like to write, it gives me a headache."

"OK. I hear you. Do you have a notes function or notepad in your phone?"

"Yeah."

"How about if you just type in a note with just one word each day that describes something about how you are feeling or something that happened. If you sat on the couch all day watching TV you could write "bored" or "couch" or "TV".

"That seems stupid".

"It may *feel* stupid too. But what will it hurt to try it?" I smiled.

"Alright. Whatever." Kayla smiled back.

"Let's start right now. Take your phone out and type in just ONE word that describes something about how you are feeling or what you are thinking now."

Kayla typed the word "nothing". For three weeks she either input the word "nothing" or didn't input anything at all. Then one day she typed the word "mad". And she typed "mad" everyday for a week, sometimes more than once a day. The last input she made in her phone was the word "mad"... 27 times with no spaces. She then sent me a text and said she was ready to write.

Kayla's been writing ever since. She told me writing still gives her a headache...but that it's the good kind of headache.

FREDDIE: "It happened so long ago, what's the big deal"?

A friend told Freddie about me. He didn't want to come to therapy, he just wanted to "ask a few questions". I told him that I could do a single consultation and evaluation session. Twenty-six years old, married, with a 1 year-old son, and a successful restaurant business, he shared with me that when he was 7 years old, his swimming teacher at summer camp had molested him. He found out that the man had died recently and since then he had not been able to get what happened out of his mind. His "just a few questions" started off with wanting to know if there were exercises he could do to get certain thoughts out of his mind and what the formal criteria was for being considered a homosexual. Although experiencing distressing symptoms, Freddie did not meet criteria for any major mental illness and said that he didn't have the time or money to come to therapy regularly "unless he had to". Since he was a veteran, I told him about a strategy that some VA hospitals were doing with veterans that involved writing and asked him if he want to try it. We went over a handout together and he was willing to give it a try. Writing served as a stepping stone to subsequent psychotherapy for Freddie who, a couple of years later, pursued therapy with a colleague to whom I had referred him.

JULIE, KIM, & GAIL: "The Scarlet Letter Club"

Sharing and connecting with others who have had similar experiences is an important pathway to healing and empowerment (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006). A few years ago I had the opportunity to advise the start-up of a journaling group for three college women who were close friends. Julie, my client, had recently experienced date rape and described the reactions when she disclosed it to her two best friends. Kim shared that she had never been raped but remembered her teenage cousin making her sit on his lap and look at pornography on the internet with him while he "rocked" back and forth. Gail disclosed an experience during

high school of partially stripping at a party, exposing her breasts in video chats, and the fear she felt when she began being “cyberstalked” by boys who became obsessed with her. Though different experiences, these young women found commonality in their feelings of shame, guilt, and fears that a “normal” man would not want them if he found out about their experiences. They felt like they were somehow “marked” and damaged. Julie joked about them forming a “Scarlet Letter” club and the journaling group evolved from there.

Empowerment Journaling

“One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience.” -James Baldwin

What does the term “empowerment” mean? Empowerment can be defined at many different levels of analysis including internal, behavioral, interpersonal, and community. At all levels it refers to a process where people gain mastery over their own situation.²⁰ The emphasis of the journaling approach presented here is to first enhance empowerment at the internal, psychological level of analysis. It is my experience that this can then extend to the actions one takes, the quality of relationships, and involvement in addressing issues (such as sexual violence) in one’s community or society as a whole. The central purpose of empowerment journaling is to utilize writing as a method of self-expression to help you gain greater awareness, knowledge, and compassionate understanding of yourself, including your thoughts and feelings, your needs, and your life experiences. Just as knowledge is power, self-knowledge is self-empowering. The experience of sexual violence involves someone imposing their will on you without regard for your feelings or needs. It is an act where the intention is to take away your power and dominion over your own body. For many survivors, the lasting effects of sexual violence are rooted in the ways that the experience increases separation from a sense of empowerment over one’s self and life circumstances. Healing must involve reclaiming your own power and gaining control over

your own well-being. Writing is a useful vehicle for traveling the path of healing and empowerment because it allows you the freedom to exercise your power to determine when, where, what, and how you write.

Some readers may already journal regularly. The empowerment journaling approach can be incorporated into or expand your current journaling repertoire. Some readers may have journaled in the past or tried journaling but felt it did not work. Empowerment journaling is likely a different approach from the journaling than you have tried previously. Trying something new or with a fresh perspective can be tremendously helpful. For those readers who have never kept a journal, empowerment journaling allows you start from wherever you are and go where you need to go. The method is quite flexible and is compatible with many different writing approaches and strategies. There are only three guidelines:

1. Write **when and where** you choose.
2. Write **what and how** you choose.
3. **Stop** when you choose.

The core process is choice. Nothing is forced upon you. There is no single way to do it right and there is no way to do it wrong. There are no hard and fast rules for how often you write, how much you write, or how long you write. You can write daily, weekly, randomly once a year, or somewhere in between. No one is going to give you a grade or impose their opinion on what you have written. Penmanship, grammar, punctuation and spelling are not important. It doesn't have to happen in a bound leather book with lined pages. You can journal on a napkin or on a post-it or in your smartphone. You can use a calendar, a composition book, a binder, or even keep journal entries in a file folder. If you like electronic media, you are free to use a word processing

program or a private account using blogging platform such as LiveJournal, Blogger, or WordPress. You can choose to use specific structured journaling strategies or just write freely. The primary goal of the empowerment journaling approach is liberation from what is keeping you chained to your past and blocking you from the life you are capable of living. Empowerment journaling promotes freedom from the “shoulds”, the fears, and those critical and judgmental voices in your head. The only requirement is that you make an effort to open your mind and your heart and let your truth guide your hand.

The Core Empowerment Journaling Methods:

Free Writing, Flow Writing, Expressive Writing, and Integrative Writing

“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.” -William Wordsworth

The common element in the core *empowerment journaling* methods is the process of writing your “stream of consciousness” as it occurs from moment to moment. In “free writing” you simply write your thoughts and feelings of the moment and follow where the writing takes you. Adams offers a variation on free writing that she calls “flow writing”.²³ Flow writing is inspired by an initial image or metaphor that can emerge during meditation. Ira Progoff, a psychologist and pioneer in the use of journaling, refers to these pre-writing meditations as “entrance meditations”.⁷ The purpose of “flow writing” is to help you connect with your truth in the process of making meaning of your thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. It enables you to access your intuitive knowledge, your survivor’s voice, and uncover meanings through the associations that you make with the stimulus. A guided meditation is often helpful to bring you to a relaxed and open state of mind where the image or felt sense of what you need to write about emerges. However, just closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths can help you to visualize or discover the stimulus for your writing. The basic process is that you start with the

image or metaphor and then just “go with the flow”, letting the authenticity of your thoughts and experience guide your hand. With both free writing and flow writing you can choose to set a timer to establish some boundaries for how long you write which can serve to increase feelings of safety and containment. The timer creates a writing context that balances freedom and safety. An example of “flow writing” would be to start with an entrance meditation that transports you to a place or time where you have felt safe and peaceful such as a comfortable chair or a stream in the forest or during a hymn at church. You would begin by writing about the place and just go from there. There are endless possibilities of where the writing takes you and your task is just to create an opening to allow what needs to be expressed or explored to come through you to your journal.

One specific, evidence-based, and well-researched application of stream of consciousness writing was developed by James Pennebaker and is sometimes referred to as the Expressive Writing Paradigm. Pennebaker’s expressive writing method has been extensively researched with multiple studies finding support for its use in helping with the trauma recovery process.⁹ The process is described in detail in James Pennebaker’s book, *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval*.¹⁹ Basically, the instructions are to write for 20-30 continuous minutes for four consecutive days describing a traumatic or stressful event as well as your thoughts and feelings about the event. It does not have to be your experience of sexual violence and you can write about different events on different day. The requirement is that you write about some stressful experience, situation, or circumstance. Expressive writing is a powerful process that sometimes results in a short-term increase of negative emotional experiences.⁹ However, research has consistently demonstrated that these initial feelings subside and most people experience longer-term symptom relief and increased sense of well-being. The

process may be best used if you have previous experience writing about painful thoughts and feelings. For newcomers to journaling, I recommend using this process with Pennebaker's book or guided by a therapist. Recent research has explored modifications to the initial written expression paradigm instructions and initial results suggest that writing for briefer period of time (e.g., two minutes) has positive effects. This suggests that a good entry point to expressive writing may be to keep writing times initially very short and monitor how writing about stressful or traumatic events affects you.

Writing freely about whatever comes to you is a time-tested approach with the evidence-based strategy of expressive writing serving as a prototype. However, the unstructured nature of flow writing or expressive writing is not everyone's cup of tea. Sometimes it is helpful to use a specific structured process so that your writing feels more directed and the purpose and value are clearer to you. It is always important to center yourself in the core element of the empowerment journaling method: choice. Even when you use a structured journaling process you are making an intentional choice to follow a particular strategy. If you decide to push yourself to write in a way that is outside of your comfort zone, make sure that you are actively choosing the strategy and not doing it because you feel that you have to.

The signature writing strategy for *Empowerment Journaling* is a structured three-phase variation of flow writing that I have developed with my clients over the years that I am calling "Integrative Writing". Integrative writing is best used when you are feeling overwhelming emotions, when your mind is racing, or when you feel that you are about to lose control. It is those times when you have lost touch with your own power and writing can help you to channel and focus your energy towards psychological empowerment, particularly at those times when you have impulses to engage in risky or self-sabotaging behavior. While a core process involved

in integrative writing is the use of free writing, and thus shares common ground with the previously discussed methods by emphasizing writing whatever comes to you, it is more comprehensive and involves more structure than flow writing or expressive writing. The intent of the structure is to provide a process that allows you to work through the intensity of your thoughts and feelings of that moment. A guiding principle of the integrative writing process is “this too shall pass”, which means that you center yourself in the knowledge that you can and will get beyond what you are going through. This strategy involves you taking an active role in the process of connecting to your power rather than giving your power over to the thoughts and feelings of the moment. There are three writing phases: Release, Recognize, and Reset.

Release. When you first start writing the goal is just to get it all out, to release it. Write with as much vivid detail about what you are experiencing, thinking, and feeling. Write about what you feel like doing at the moment or what you might want to say to someone. You can write the same thing over and over if you choose. The important thing is to write until the intensity of your emotions lessens. It is important to remember that overwhelming or negative thoughts and feelings are not the enemy. Having them does not make you “bad” or “wrong” or “weak”. However, they also don’t define you or an ultimate truth, only the truth of your experience in that moment. Think of your emotions as providing a signal that something within you needs attention. The pathway to relief from distress is to choose to accept intense emotional experiences as part of the scenery of your healing journey so that you can see them clearly. What you don’t see can take you by surprise. Writing is a safe method for releasing your emotions from the darkness and shining a light on them so that you can see them more clearly and engage with them proactively. Writing them down is also a way of demonstrating that your thoughts and feelings of that moment don’t define you but rather you have the power to name and define

them. Sometimes it can feel like waves of intense feelings are taking over and you may initially try to just push them out of consciousness. However, trying to suppress them lessens your ability to see them clearly and increases the likelihood that they will control you. Releasing intense emotions in writing helps to place them in the scenery rather than allow them to be the driving force. The distressing thoughts and feelings are only what you are experiencing in that moment, they need your attention and compassion, but they are not YOU. This first stage of the Integrative Writing Method facilitates empowerment by releasing some of what may be blocking you from experiencing and living from your own power. Once you have released the intensity of your thoughts and feelings onto the paper and see them clearly, it is time to attend to them.

Recognize. What is it that you are recognizing during this phase? Basically you are recognizing the meaning and function of the intense emotions that you just released. Writing has given you the opportunity to look at them clearly and with compassion. You can recognize them by writing about your understanding of where they come from and the consequences they have had for you. You can recognize them by writing about ways that they have helped you, as well as ways that they have potentially hurt you. You can recognize them by writing about their relationship to aspects of your identity development including gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion/spirituality. It is important to engage in a process of actively seeking to understand your emotional experience in the context of its origins, how its presence is a normative response to the sexual violence and related situations that you have survived, and how they have contributed to the person you are becoming. This is a very important phase of the integrative writing process. Some people may want to stop after they have experienced the initial catharsis of the release phase. However, ongoing healing and empowerment comes from actively engaging with the thoughts and feelings that were just released. Of course you should

take a break if you need one, but it is strongly recommended that you come back to this next phase of the integrative writing process as soon as you can. The complete process is not optimally effective without the recognition phase. Flow writing can be incorporated during this phase as imagery and metaphor can facilitate the recognition and meaning making process. You can also engage the recognition phase by speaking directly to a feeling or problem. The journaling strategy of “Dialogue writing” is often very helpful during this phase.^{7,23} For example, you can write a dialogue with your anger by taking on the voice of caring and compassion towards “anger”. Externalizing the feeling or problem through dialogue reinforces your position of power to name and proactively construct its meaning in your life. However, you can also recognize other significant representations and internalizations that are relevant to the intense emotional experiences you may have. Progoff’s *Intensive Journal Process* workshop offers an in-depth description of multiple ways of utilizing this method to dialogue with persons, activities or projects, the body, events and circumstances, society, and even your inner wisdom.⁷ These written dialogues can help you understand, accept, and feel more in control of your emotional experience. Recognizing these emotional aspects of your internal world involves relating to them with affirmation and compassion as you explore them through writing.

Reset. The final phase of release writing is to reset your emotional equilibrium by creating a role for the distressing thoughts and feelings in the form of an empowerment story. Writing is a documentation of your healing process and each time you write you are establishing elements of your unique empowerment story. Current research suggests that expressing experience in the form of a coherent narrative has psychological benefits²². Therefore, writing a *reset narrative* involves telling the story of your emotional experience (that includes a beginning, a middle, and current endpoint) by incorporating the understandings that you developed in the

previous recognition phase. The theme of the reset narrative is related to survival, growth, lessons learned, healing, power, voice, and/or transformation. The story can be quite short or it can be a longer and more autobiographical. An example of a brief reset narrative might look like this: *“I started hyperventilating and I really thought I was going to die. But I didn’t. I survived that like I have survived so many things in my life. Hyperventilating is my body’s way of making me stop and pay attention to my feelings. It reminds me that something is not working and I need to do something different. I used to ignore my fear but now I know that it is a message I have to listen to.”* Writing a reset narrative related to a particular overwhelming or distressing emotional experience establishes a reset point that you can return to as documentation of your healing and empowerment story. This phase of the writing does not have to be done immediately but is ideally done within 24 hours of the release writing. More importantly, if you are unable to construct a reset narrative on your own it can be very helpful to talk it through with someone. Others can often see our strengths and our progress when we cannot.

The integrative writing process, like the written expression paradigm, is often best begun with some level of guidance from a qualified therapist, counselor, life coach, or journal therapy facilitator. While many clients have reported positive experiences with the three phases of integrative writing, it is a depth-oriented process and each person should evaluate issues such as appropriateness, timing, and the availability of a support system. This is particularly important since the process is just beginning to be subjected to a systematic evaluation of its effectiveness through research. Also, keep in mind that empowerment journaling is ultimately about choice and freedom. You can experiment with parts of the integrative writing process that appeal to you, just as you would experiment with different journaling strategies so that you can find the

best fit for you in terms of characteristics such as degree of structure, depth of emotional processing, and your personal goals and objectives for writing.

Table 1. Summary of the Core Empowerment Journaling Methods

	Purpose	Focus	Process
Free Writing	Consciousness	Thoughts	Write whatever comes to mind from moment to moment
Flow Writing	Connection and Meaning Making	Imagery, Theme	Entrance meditation to identify stimulus and then write your associations and connections using your intuitive knowledge and authentic voice
Expressive Writing	Expression and Processing	A Stressful Event	Write twenty minutes for four consecutive days about a stressful event
Integrative Writing	Affirmation and Working Through	Intense Emotions	Three phases of writing: Release, Recognize, Reset

Top Five Supplemental Strategies for Empowerment Journaling

“Writing is an exploration. You start with nothing and learn as you go.” –E.L. Doctorow

As mentioned above, there are many different strategies that can be found in books on journaling and writing.^{5-7, 23-30} Different strategies will work for different people at different times and the empowerment journaling approach, with its emphasis on choice, is compatible with multiple approaches. I encourage you to try out several strategies so that you will have multiple resources for journaling to fit different moods and needs. There are also many variations of journaling with respect to style and atmosphere. Writing is both an expressive and creative process, however it is not only the content that involves personal expression. Choices

that you make with respect to what you will write on, where you will write, what you will write with, and how you will write are all expressions of you at that moment. You can choose to write in a particular place in your home, or in a café, in nature, with music or candles or incense, or sitting at the kitchen table. You can write with a pencil, a ballpoint pen, or a marker. I sometimes like to write with a set of colored pencils and choose different colors to express the various thoughts and feelings that I have as I am writing. With respect to how you write, you can choose to use one of the core empowerment journaling methods described above (i.e., flow writing, expressive writing, integrative writing). However, there are other choices you can make regarding how you write, the approach that you take. I have selected five strategies to present here that are particularly compatible with common challenges experienced by sexual violence survivors. These are strategies where many of my clients have reported experiencing an increase in psychological empowerment as a common result of the writing. All are flexible and meant to be modified to fit the style and needs of the writer. As you experiment with different approaches you will likely find ways of journaling that are a particularly good fit for you in their ability to facilitate your healing and transformation process. I also encourage you to explore some of the resources at the end of this chapter for additional ideas for journaling.

For many people, getting started is the hardest part. The “One Word” pre-journaling method that I used with Kayla is a very effective way to gently break down barriers to writing with people who don’t like to write or are resistant to the writing process. For some survivors of sexual violence, emotions and needs have been held in and blocked off for many years. It has been a way of coping with pain, and an effective way of keeping on with the demands of daily life. Over time, however, a person can come to believe that their feelings are dangerous, that they will fall apart if they look within. The more the feelings are held in, the more reinforcement

the person gets for their belief that their feelings will destroy them. It is like the monster under the bed. The monster gets bigger and bigger and scarier and scarier because as long as you don't face it directly, your mind can create the scariest of monsters. However, if you push through your fear and get down on the floor and peak under the bed, you will never find a monster that is quite as scary as what you had imagined and you can sleep much easier. The "One Word" pre-writing method gives you an opportunity to peak under the bed while still honoring the coping and the strength you have demonstrated throughout your life. Diving into the depths of your feelings may not be the best way to begin. The following five supplemental strategies describe journaling alternatives when there is a specific writing goal or when the core empowerment journaling methods seem to big or daunting.

Empowerment Journaling Strategy #1: "List Writing".

Making lists is a familiar activity for most people. Grocery lists, to do lists, Christmas gift lists, baby name lists, and lists of pros and cons are among the most common. Lists are a way for us to organize, evaluate, and modify something we want to accomplish, as well as a way to get that feeling of accomplishment when an item has been completed and can be checked off. A list allows us to see something in a comprehensive way, to get "the big picture". However, lists are not only helpful for their functionality, but the process of creating and making a list also has value. The brainstorming process involved in list writing can be an empowering experience. List writing can also facilitate empowerment through the identification of elements of the target issue that leads to greater clarity and understanding. Adams suggests making long lists (i.e., 100 items), writing quickly, and not evaluating along the way for phrasing or even to determine if it makes sense. She emphasizes that it is fine to repeat items because the emphasis is the continuous listing of the next thing that comes to mind even if it has appeared previously.²³ As

an empowerment journaling strategy, topics that are related to clarifying thoughts, venting feelings, or developing coping skills can be particularly helpful. Here are some example lists that I have found to be useful journal entries for survivors of sexual violence.

1. 100 things I want to say to the person(s) who perpetrated violence on me
2. 100 reasons why I avoid commitment in relationships
3. 100 ways that I have demonstrated my inner strength
4. 100 ways to nurture and take care of myself
5. 100 things I can do when I am feeling distressed about the sexual violence experience

Empowerment Journaling Strategy #2: “Positivity Writing”

Recent research has demonstrated the benefits of writing about something positive. Keeping a “Gratitude Journal” was popularized several years ago by Oprah Winfrey and is a well-supported intervention to enhance positive emotions and decrease negative emotions.³¹ Research conducted by Fredrickson and colleagues have found support for what she calls the “broaden and build” theory. Positive emotional states create expanded cognitive processes and create opportunities for additional positive experiences.³² This means that intentional focus on positive aspects of life can contribute to the development of cognitive and emotional strengths and resilience.

A JOURNAL ENTRY YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

“Simply Positive”

Purpose: To practice directing your attention to what is good and documenting it so that you can remind yourself later.

Think of one positive thing that you have seen, done, or heard about within the last twenty-four hours. It should be something simple like hearing a favorite song on the radio, or someone letting you merge in front of them in traffic, or finding out that your favorite team won last

night's game. Your journal entry is a simple, but detailed, description of what happened.

Example: "I went grocery shopping after work and my absolute favorite orange juice was on sale. I bought four of them." That's all. No reflections or feelings, the description is your entry.

Empowerment Journaling Strategy #3: Daily Monitoring

The Daily Monitoring strategy focuses on a specific behavior or feeling that you want to understand better or modify in some way. The purpose of the monitoring is to heighten your awareness of the behavior or feeling so that you can better target how and what you might want to change. For example, I worked with a client once for whom the use of foul language was woven into their everyday speech. He recognized that this was not appropriate in some situations and decided that he needed to modify how he expressed himself. I suggested daily monitoring of the times he used curse words in an inappropriate situation supplemented by reflections every few days on what he observed from the monitoring. This meant that he noted the time, place, and words that he used in his calendar. The process of monitoring disrupts the "automatic pilot" that we often function on where we just do what we have always done. Many people tend to operate in a default mode rather than making conscious and intentional choices. The activity of monitoring serves to maintain constant conscious awareness of the target behavior. For my client, monitoring strengthened his ability to pause and think before speaking and ultimately resulted in a decrease in his cursing. This is a natural journaling strategy for people who regularly keep a calendar anyway. However, a pocket sized calendar can easily be purchased or you can use the calendar function in your cell phone. Through increased self-awareness and consciousness, as well as observation of positive changes, daily monitoring can contribute to greater psychological empowerment.

Empowerment Journaling Strategy #4: Springboard Writing

This is an in-between kind of writing that merges structure with a free writing approach. It is one of the strategies I use most frequently. Adams describes the springboard approach as most commonly centered on a sentence stem or question.^{5,23} Examples include prompts like “I remember the time when _____” or “What masks do I wear?”. This is a very flexible writing strategy that can be tailored to the issues or themes that you want to explore. She suggests quotations and song lyrics as extensions of this strategy.²³ The guiding idea is that a springboard is anything that can serve as a jumping off point and launch your writing in a particular direction. In addition to sentence stems, questions, quotations, and songs, a journaling springboard can also come from a book you are reading, a movie you just saw, an observation you made in nature, a conversation you had with someone, a current event, or just about anything else. The springboard is whatever catches your attention and gives you pause. A song that you find repeatedly going through your mind can serve as a great springboard for writing.

Example: “I can’t get M.C. Hammer’s song “Can’t touch this” out of my mind. I don’t really know the words so I just kind of hum it in my head and then say “can’t touch this”. Why is this song in my head? I really don’t even like it. But it makes me kind of laugh because since first hearing it I always respond to the lyric “can’t touch this” with “don’t want to”. I feel good when I say this so maybe it has something to do with being able to be clear about my wants and needs...”

I love quotations and proverbs and often use them as a springboard for encouraging clients to explore the ideas or wisdom in the quotation in terms of how it applies to their own life experience and self-understanding. I developed a process for working with quotes called “QQM” (Quotation, Question, Mantra/Affirmation) that is available on my daily quotation

website, www.empoweredeveryday.com. You can search for a quote by keyword that focuses on a theme that you want to explore, or just choose a random date from the archives and use the associated QQM. Some clients have found it useful to subscribe to a daily quote site such as mine and write a few minutes everyday on the application of the quote to their own lives. Springboard writing contributes to empowerment by providing a forum to actively process a focus issue that can create a greater sense of self-understanding. Self-knowledge is an important foundation for the development of psychological empowerment. The more one knows and understands themselves, the more empowered and confident one feels to manage life's challenges.

Empowerment Journal Strategy #5: Mindful Writing

Mindfulness is a particular kind of awareness that involves the self-control of attention towards being fully present in the experience of the immediate moment with openness, acceptance, and compassion for the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise from one moment to the next.³³⁻³⁵ Mindfulness exercises are integrated into a number of evidence-based therapies that target stress and overwhelming emotions.³⁶⁻³⁷ Training in mindfulness meditation, or insight meditation, is becoming more commonly available as numerous books and research studies are being published that provide support for its multiple benefits and basis in neuroscience (the science of the brain). Available research suggests that some of the benefits of mindfulness practice includes increased concentration, positive emotional experience, improved immune functioning, decreased distress, and better regulation of emotions.³⁴ Powerful stuff. Mindful writing is a way of bringing yourself into present moment awareness by describing your environment, body sensations, passing thoughts, and moment-to-moment distractions in a way that does not judge the acceptability of anything that enters your awareness. Mindful writing can

be empowering through its effects on the ability to practice intention, attention, and awareness.

Mindful writing can be done with your eyes open, closed, or a combination of both.

Recommendations for closed-eye mindful writing include using unlined paper and just writing freely without concern about neatness or accuracy. Open-eye mindful writing can be done immediately after meditation or prayer to document your process. The following example is from a combination open and closed eye mindful writing session.

“I am laying in my bed propped up on my elbow so that I can write. The only light is coming from my bedside lamp and when I just looked at the light I spun off into thoughts about how it is good that I am conserving electricity...good for the environment and good for my bank account. I’m closing my eyes and getting centered now. I’m trying to just observe those thoughts passing by and bring my attention back to my awareness of myself, my breathing, and this moment. My dog is barking...again I’m trying to bring myself back to the present moment as I let the sound of the barking fade into the background. In this moment I am focusing my awareness on the feeling of the sheets and the pillows and the mattress of my bed. The sheets feel....”

A JOURNAL ENTRY YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

“Quick Body Scan”

Purpose: To establish awareness and connection to your body in the service of cultivating mindfulness and empowering you to listen to what your body tells you.

Take a deep breath and place your attention on the physical sensations that you are feeling right now. How is your body positioned? What is the temperature of your body? Notice any particular sensations, good or bad, in your body starting with your head, moving to your neck shoulders, arms and hands, to your chest and abdomen, to your back and hips, and down through

your legs, knees, and feet. Just write what you notice. *Example: "I am sitting slightly hunched over in my computer chair with my legs curled under the chair. I am neither hot nor cold but maybe a little clammy. My head feels like its swirling....etc."* The body scan is a technique to develop mindfulness. If you choose to do this exercise, remember that sensations in our body change constantly and the scan is less for evaluation (i.e., positive or negative) but to heighten awareness, practice self-regulation of attention, and lessen any disconnectedness from your physical body.

Important Considerations

Journaling is not the best healing pathway for everyone. Some people find it too difficult to write without evaluating and criticizing themselves. Sometimes people may truly not be able to write more than a few words. For others, writing raises anxiety or is a negative experience for one reason or another. If you feel strongly that writing is not for you then you should not do it. Period. While it is sometimes important to push yourself beyond your comfort zone, this should be done carefully and with full respect for your needs at any given point in your healing process. It may not be the right time to travel the journaling pathway. Or writing just may not be a strategy that works for you at all. Acceptance of yourself and your needs is an important element of empowerment and that may mean that one of the many other healing paths may be more effective for you.

Exploring painful experiences and feelings is difficult in any mode of expression and some discomfort should be expected. However, it is important to be mindful of what Pennebaker calls *The Flip-Out Rule*. The rule states:

“If you feel that your writing about a particular topic is too much for you to handle, then do not write about it. If you know that you aren’t ready to address a particularly painful topic, write

about something else. When you are ready, then tackle it. If you feel that you will flip out by writing, don't write." (p. 23)¹⁹

Some days may be good writing days and other days may not. The bottom line of the Flip-Out Rule is that you are in control and you don't have to write. Adams offers a wave riding metaphor for journaling that is very appealing. Think of the journaling process as an experience riding the waves of your inner world and if you get a sense that you have gotten too far from the shore then you just bring yourself back. Finally, if you do find yourself too far from shore and you are having trouble getting back to safety, it is time to find someone who can travel the healing pathway with you.²³ Seeking help from a therapist or counselor can be an important step in the process and is strongly recommended at some point in your journey to well-being and empowerment.

Conclusion

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart." –Rainier Maria Wilke

There are multiple pathways to healing and empowerment for survivors of sexual violence. Many sexual violence survivors just want to get past what happened and live a "normal" life. The desire to put it behind you is natural. However, part of the process of getting to the life you want is to accept where you've been, face where you are now, and make movement towards transformative growth. I often tell my clients "you have to go through it to get to it". This means that the path to getting beyond the experience of sexual violence and its effects may not be smooth or easy. There will likely be rough terrain, obstacles blocking your way, and storms that slow you down. Journaling can take you "through it" and help you get closer to an optimal place of well-being and empowerment.

With the growing body of research documenting the positive effects of writing on health and well-being, journaling is a method of intervention that is increasingly evidence-based.¹³ Journaling can be a helpful addition to your toolbox of resources for your healing journey. The *Empowerment Journaling* approach described here is an orientation that places emphasis on the freedom and choice aspects of journal writing. There are four core journaling options that are variations and modifications of stream of consciousness writing, as well as five supplemental methods that are more structured and give you additional options. It is recommended that you experiment with different strategies and assess which ones are a good fit for you. Journal writing can be thought of as an act of empowerment that essentially and fundamentally involves your voice speaking your experience in your own way at your own time. As you travel the path that journaling takes you, it is important to establish an internal foundation of compassion for and patience with yourself and your process. Ultimately, journaling requires a leap of faith-- faith in the writing process and faith that there is a peace and power within you that wants to emerge and become stronger. Journaling is a process that can help you connect to and live from that peace and power.

SUGGESTED ONLINE RESOURCES

www.empoweredeveryday.com (Dr. Shelly Harrell's daily quotations with journaling prompts)

www.journaltherapy.com (Kathleen Adams' site, The Center for Journal Therapy)

www.createwritenow.com (Journaling ideas and tips)

www.peerspirit.com (Christina Baldwin's site for writing workshops and circle groups)

www.lifejournal.com (*LifeJournal* software for electronic journaling)

www.davidrm.com (*The Journal 5* software for electronic journaling)

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