

Prompts for Learning from Our Mistakes

There is no learning without mistakes ~ Mary Walton

It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop. ~ Confucius

Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.

~ Winston Churchill

1. **Facts:** What are the facts of what happened?
2. **Story:** What is the story I am telling myself about what happened?
3. **Feelings:** How do I feel about what happened and about the story I'm telling myself?
4. **Actions:** What did I do to engage or disengage with what I felt?
5. **Result:** What was the outcome of the chosen action?
6. How does this experience demonstrate your **strengths**?
7. How does this experience offer **an opportunity to practice** a skill you're working on that will help you live your life the way you want to be living it?

OR!!!

If you are not currently practicing a skill that might have been relevant in this experience, then how does the experience reveal **an area where you could learn a new skill** to help you unlearn an old way of thinking or acting that is preventing you from living your life the way you want to be living it?

8. How will you use this experience to **reorient yourself towards the joyful life** you imagine for yourself?

Expressive Writing Workshop

Instructor: Michelle Superle

Making sense of your life starts with questions, not answers. ~ Allison Fallon

One of the secrets of a happy life is continuous small treats. ~ Iris Murdoch

At the “**Write Your Story**” expressive writing workshops, coaches Alison Fallon and Donald Miller help participants conceptualize life events they’ve experienced in the form of a three-act screenplay, like this:

**“Act 1:
The Challenge**

Identify the challenge you’ve experienced that you’re going to write your story about.

**Act 2:
The Fight**

Explain how the fight to overcome that challenge changed your life and made you a better person.

**Act 3:
The Transformation**

Realize and own the fact that you are different so you can leave the old you behind.”

From <https://writeyourstory.com/>

Intrigued? Excited? Inspired?

Good! Let’s write!

First thing you need to know: **Expressive writing is for everyone—not just writers.**

Research shows that 15-20 minute expressive writing sessions can help anyone support their mental and physical health. Expressive writing is meant to be a private form—not for sharing. It provides a platform to make sense of personal experiences.

There are two basic approaches you can use to incorporate the power of expressive writing into your life: writing to heal, and writing to feel.

You can turn to **Writing for Healing** as a tool to process major life events and exceptionally difficult experiences. This approach involves 4 sessions of 15-20 minutes each, and is best used for “one off” type situations.

In contrast, you can use **Writing for Feeling** daily (or several times a week) to help regulate your emotions, make sense of your experiences, and stay focused on what’s important to you.

Level 1: Writing for Healing—Processing Hard Stuff

*See booklet!

Level 2: Writing for Feeling—Daily Self Care

Unless otherwise noted, the suggestions and prompts in this section come from *The Power of Writing It Down: A Simple Habit to Unlock Your Brain and Reimagine Your Life* by Allison Fallon, which I heartily recommend (and the page numbers you see refer to the pages in this book).

To get a free PDF of Chapter 1, click here! <https://thepowerofwritingitdown.com/>

When Fallon describes the power and importance of expressive writing, she says, “let me be clear: what I’m not saying is that writing can ‘cure’ you of whatever problem or difficulty you are currently facing.... Sometimes it can help to light the path before us, to put us back in touch with our own power. Sometimes it can help us ask better questions and—hopefully—get better answers. It’s a way we can try at least to make sense out of the chaos. It’s not everything. But it’s something” (page 89).

According to Fallon, “making sense of your life starts with questions, not answers”(page 78).

Here’s a great warmup question to get you focused; you can even use it every time you sit down to write. List everything that’s “true right now” for you (page 106).

Next, here are some big questions to think about as you embark on an expressive writing practice, because expressive writing can help you answer them (from page 78):

- “Am I okay?”
- Can I be myself?
- If I am myself, will people reject me?
- What do I do with a faith that no longer fits me?
- Can I make peace with the people in this world who will not accept me?”
- “What truth am I not telling?” (page 106)

Now that you know a bit about the benefits of establishing a regular expressive writing practice for self care, I recommend pausing to try a warmup activity that really taps into the spirit of expressive writing.

First, read the picture book *The Heart's Song*, by Gilles Tibo:

<https://49thshelf.com/Books/T/The-Heart-s-Song>

Now that you've experienced Miss Matilda's story, here are some reflective questions to get you thinking in the expressive writing mode:

What brings you joy?

What do *you* fix as a way of helping others?

How do you help mend a broken heart? (Yours and/or someone else's)

How would you like your community to support you after you've experienced loss?

How do you bring others joy to others?

How do you bring others joy to others?

What is *your* heart's song?

Now that you're in the expressive writing groove, you can try out an expressive writing activity that Allison Fallon calls “*The Infinity Prompt*”, which she developed to help you “turn your life into stories worth telling”. You can use the infinity prompt an endless number of times to explore any experience you've had or situation you've been in. Give it a try!

First: “You’ll need to pick a circumstance from your life that you’d like to write about.... If nothing comes to mind right away, consider an event of your life that feels ‘charged’. By ‘charged’, all I mean is that it has some electricity to it. You feel it in your body. The could be something as simple as getting honked at in traffic this morning.... Big event, small event, it doesn’t matter. The point is that it is an event that matters to you” (page 97).

Then, “Once you have the event you’d like to write about, get out a pen and a piece of paper and answer the following questions.

1. Facts: What are the facts of what happened?

‘Something’ took place in your life. When you write about facts, pretend you are describing it as though it’s happening in front of you on a movie screen.... Facts are the objective details of what happened: who, what, where, and when.

2. Story: What is the story I am telling myself about what happened?

We create stories based on our *thoughts* about the facts of what has happened to us. These stories stem from our *interpretation* of what happened. A great way to get to the story is to say, ‘What this meant to me was...’ or ‘The reason I think this took place is...’

3. Feelings: How do I feel about what happened and about the story I’m telling myself?

A great way to name a feeling is to talk about where you feel it in your body.... take a minute and go over what you’ve written above—the facts and the story. What do you *feel* in your body?

4. Actions: What did I do to engage or disengage with what I felt?

The action...is the thing you do *because* you feel the thing you felt, or to *keep* from feeling it.... [for example] ‘To keep from feeling this feeling in my body, the action I take is...’

5. Result: what was the outcome of the chosen action?

This is what happens as a result of your actions. For example, if your action (response to shame) is to hide, the result might be that you are isolated and alone. If you feel yourself getting defensive (‘But it wasn’t my fault!’) or resistant (‘What else could I have done?’), know that you’re

on the right track. This is all a natural and normal part of the journey you are on” (pages 98-99).

In addition to the 5 questions Fallon has developed for the Infinity Prompt, I (Michelle!) am adding 3 follow-up questions for you to reflect on and write about—for a total of 8—the infinity symbol!

So, after you’ve completed Fallon’s 5 questions, move on to these next questions that I’m posing:

6) How does this experience demonstrate your strengths?

Although your first five reflections on this experience may not seem to focus on or reflect your strengths, it’s important to recognize that every situation we experience does in some way show our unique strengths. So branch out in your thinking! Figure out which of your personal strengths helped you in the experience you’re writing about.

7) How does this experience offer an opportunity to practice a skill you’re working on that will help you live your life the way you want to be living it?

For example, are you working on a way of changing your thinking or behavior that you could have tried out in this situation? If so, then write a description of how you could have applied the skill during the experience. Describe what may have occurred if you had applied the skill.

OR!!!

If you are not currently practicing a skill that might have been relevant in this experience, then how does the experience reveal an area where you could learn a new skill to help you unlearn an old way of thinking or acting that is preventing you from living your life the way you want to be living it?

For example, perhaps you were taught during your childhood that the way to cope with getting honked at in traffic is to roll down your window, shout at the other driver, and give them the finger. But if you are now striving to live your life in a way that allows you to feel calm and peaceful as much as possible, then you may decide that you want to unlearn that old habit and learn a new way of being in such a situation. You may decide that you want to learn the skill of deep breathing so that when you get honked at in traffic, you can take deep breaths instead of shouting at the other driver.

If this is the case for you, then here is your prompt:

My old habit of _____ is no longer serving me well. I would like to learn to _____ instead. Once I have practiced, then I will be able to do _____ during an experience like this one. This will bring me closer to the life I want to be living because_____.

8) How will you use this experience to reorient yourself towards the joyful life you imagine for yourself?

If you're anything like me, you tend to conclude an exercise like this one full of regrets, with a pinch of self-loathing thrown in. But that mindset is a dead end. It won't serve us as we keep striving towards the lives we imagine ourselves flourishing in. So, to conclude this expressive writing exercise, take a moment to decide how you're going to use this experience to re-emphasize and re-commit to how you want to be living your life.

WARNING!

***There are 3 potential pitfalls to watch out for during this process, according to Fallon:**

-- "You might mistake your thoughts or feelings for facts" (page 103).

*Hi, it's Michelle 😊 Just wanted to say—for this one, the Feelings Wheel might help! Check it out:

<https://legacy.camosun.ca/covid19/documents/camhelps/9-Feelings-Wheel-Handout-2019.pdf>

-- "Having a hard time applying words to your thoughts" (page 103).

*Hi, it's Michelle 😊 Just wanted to say—for this one, some of the tips from this fun and funny blog post might help! Check it out:

<https://advice.theshineapp.com/articles/5-ways-to-write-through-tough-emotions-because-to-all-the-boys-ive-loved/>

-- Believing that expressive writing can enable you to become your own therapist; "by using expressive writing **in tandem with** therapy, I've seen... [people] fast-tracking their progress" (104). *More on this at the end of this resource booklet! 😊

During expressive writing, when you're turning your life experiences into coherent stories, an **especially exciting opportunity** is “the ending that hasn't been written”. Fallon promises that you *can* “**get to a ‘happily ever after’**” (page 169).

She admits that while we're living our lives, “It's painful to sit and wait and wonder what's going to happen. It's painful to stay in the story when we don't know. But the reason we write our stories while we are in them is that it helps us to see more clearly. When we map out a story the way an author maps out a memoir, it helps us see where we are in the story right now. It helps us expand our ideas about how the story might end. And it helps us move in the direction we would most like to go” (page 171).

Fallon reminds us that “The idea that stories have to wrap up perfectly in order to wrap up at all is not only untrue, it often keeps us from finding the deeper, better resolution. Even when the facts of our story can't change, our thoughts and feelings about the story can....

No matter what story you are looking to resolve in your life...don't forget what you have already learned and know to be true:

- You are the protagonist in your own story. The resolution will be about you and nobody else.
- Your narrator voice knows everything you need to know because it knows you better than anybody else does.
- While the external problems in our stories don't always perfectly resolve, the internal problems can and do” (page 174).

During the past decade, Fallon has worked with hundreds of people to help them find their stories. She knows that everyone is “waiting for a hopeful ending” (179). At the conclusion of *The Power of Writing it Down*, Fallon offers this hopeful promise to her readers: “I wonder if it will help you to know that when writers come to work with me to map out their personal stories, they are almost *always* standing in this kind of chaotic, unresolved moment....

If you think of your life as a story, consider that maybe all is not lost, but that you're just standing in the “all is lost” moment right now. How does it change the way you see it? You are the only hero of your story. You are the protagonist. Only you can decide what happens next” (page 180).

Oh hi! It's Michelle again 😊 You can try this out by adding a conclusion to every experience you're righing about. Include a description of “what happens next”—you can even add more than one possibility for what happens next!

*So then, as you conclude every expressive writing session, you can finish with the question, **“What happens next?”**

Infinity and beyond...

According to Fallon, “When we make even a small commitment to put our words on paper, we never know what might happen. But one possibility is this: our voices will carry us and come back to us from the past. They will remind us who we are. Again and again and again.

Through the gift of the written word, you now have a tool to digest and metabolize all that happens to you” (page 184).

You can create beauty in your life because “When you exercise the power of language to name how you think and feel about [“uncomfortable or alarming” things], those things no longer have power over you. They no longer overwhelm you” (page 185).

Hi, it’s Michelle again! 😊 Next, I recommend that you make a conscious decision to bring beauty and joy to your life by writing. Try this...

Prompt 1: Write a letter to yourself that you will open one year from today.

Prompt 2: What brings you joy in your life right now? If you could change one thing in your life, what would you change to ensure that you experienced more joy?

Fallon leaves us with some final thoughts: “when your heart pulls you to write things down, it’s often an invitation to some measure of healing and relief. When the words come, the writing life draws us back to the one thing that can never be taken away, regardless of our unexplainable losses: our voice. Writing is not a cure-all. But it does invite us to reconnect with our memory, to make meaning of our unique experience and sometimes to speak the truth we didn’t feel we could speak anywhere else” (page 190).

Next steps...

If you're interested in developing your own regular expressive writing practice, then check out Fallon's super helpful blog post on the kinds of timelines you can expect for the results—improvements to your mental and physical health—to start kicking in: https://findyourvoice.com/how-long-to-get-writing-results/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Feeling+misunderstood%3F+Remember+this&utm_campaign=FYV+Writer+s+Club+%7C+October+10%2C+2022&vgo_ee=51zfCbwYNn73C95sQ3xEwrlCnO62%2BtosOSIPFs19F8o%3D

<https://www.outsideonline.com/gallery/sheep-herding-s-martinez-peru/>

Even more steps...

If you have enjoyed Fallon's method of expressive writing, you might like to join her club for more ideas to keep you at it. Here's the link for registration:

https://findyourvoice.com/?vgo_ee=51zfCbwYNn73C95sQ3xEwrlCnO62%2BtosOSIPFs19F8o%3D#writersclub

Here's another resource for expressive writing journaling prompts.

<https://psychcentral.com/blog/ready-set-journal-64-journaling-prompts-for-self-discovery#the-journal-prompts>

The resource above also includes great tips for developing a regular expressive writing practice. Best of all, there's a guided method for creating your own self-affirmations!

Another form of expressive writing to consider—grief writing...

Now that you know a bit about expressive writing and have hopefully tried it out, you may have started realizing that some of the experiences you're writing about involve loss—even grief. You may find it comforting to know that there's a special subgenre of expressive writing that specifically supports loss and grief, called grief writing or grief journaling.

If this specific focus seems like it would be helpful for you, here are a few resources to check out what it's all about and even give it a try.

“What kinds of losses can I write about?”

This information comes from the following website:

<https://refugeingrief.com/writing-your-grief/>

“Deaths of anyone important to you: spouses, parents, siblings, children, partners, friends, family members, colleagues – if their death impacts you, you can write about them

Miscarriage, still-birth, TFMR, genetic differences, birth defects and birth-story outcomes tied to loss

Accidents, sudden death, illnesses, natural disasters, & other life-altering changes

Suicide, overdose, violent crime, and other deaths considered “taboo”

Any loss you identify as being deeply part of you – especially if it’s never been acknowledged”

Grief Journaling Prompts

This information is from the following website:

<https://mindfulnessandgrief.com/grief-journaling/>

“One grief journaling study found that directed writing focused on meaning reconstruction topics was more helpful than freeform grief journaling that focused on emotion and disclosure. Grieving participants who received the guided grief prompts experienced long-term improvement on prolonged grief disorder, depressive, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. They also saw improvement in physical health.

Choose a writing prompt from below to get you started...

I remember when you and I...

This is what I have to say to you....

The first time I did _____ without you I...

My happiest memory of you is...

The greatest lesson I have learned is...”

If you give grief journaling a try and find that it’s helpful for you, then you might consider trying a guided journal to give you more momentum and focus. Here’s an

example: https://www.amazon.com/Grief-Peace-navigating-compassion-mindfulness/dp/1800650191/ref=as_li_ss_tl?dchild=1&keywords=from+grief+to+peace&qid=1620076987&sr=8-3&linkCode=sl1&tag=stang0a-20&linkId=a6288a1a86249980069c8afb439e2532&language=en_US

If you want to take it even further, then you might want to try a focused course on grief writing, such as this one: <https://writers.com/course/writing-our-grief>

Beyond grief...

The book *Bittersweet* by Susan Cain is a resource I absolutely adore because it connects grief and joy in powerful, thought-provoking ways. Here are Cain's own Top 10 "Teachings" from *Bittersweet*: https://susancain.net/wp-content/uploads/Bittersweet-Teachings_OneSheet.pdf

I've adapted these beautiful teachings into questions that function as powerful expressive writing prompts. Give them a try!

As you consider the Qs and start writing, be as flexible as possible in your answers and responses. Interpret the Qs in whatever way is most meaningful and relevant for you. There are no wrong answers!

Teaching 1. *Follow your longing where it's telling you to go.*

Prompt 1. What is your longing? Where is telling you to go?

Teaching 2. *Transform your pain into beauty, your longing into belonging.*

Prompt 2. What is beautiful about your pain? How could your longing connect you to belonging?

Teaching 3. *The art we love best, the music we love most, express our yearning for a perfect and beautiful world.*

Prompt 3. What does your perfect and beautiful world look, sound, and feel like?

Teaching 4. *Upbeat tunes make us dance around our kitchens and invite friends for dinner. But sad music makes us want to touch the sky.*

Prompt 4. What yearnings do sad songs stir up for you?

Teaching 5. *Whatever pain you can't get rid of, make it your creative offering.*

Prompt 5. If you turned your pain into a creative offering for your inner circle, your community, and/or the world, what would you want to offer people? How would you hope it would affect them?

Teaching 6. *Creativity has the power to look pain in the eye and turn it into something else.*

Prompt 6. If you could turn your pain into creativity, what project would you want to work on? Why?

Teaching 7. *Our oldest problem is the pain of separation, our deepest dream is the desire for reunion.*

Prompt 7. What reunions do you most desire? How would a joyful reunion look, sound, feel?

Teaching 8. *You don't have to believe in the deities of the ancient books to be transformed by spiritual longing.*

Prompt 8. What is your spiritual longing? (Even if you're not religious.)

Teaching 9. *We transcend grief only when we realize how connected we are with all the other humans who struggle to transcend theirs.*

Prompt 9. With whom does your grief (or sadness) connect you? How?

Teaching 10. *We're just humans: flawed and beautiful and longing for love.*

Prompt 10. What are your beautiful flaws? How are they also your superpowers?

Here is a prompt that encourages you to invite beauty into your every life; it's from Susan Cain's interactive Bittersweet app:

“For today, let's practice how YOU can immerse yourself in beauty every morning. For me, this means sitting down at my laptop, with a latte and candle nearby, visiting a place of inspiration, deep inside my own mind. I look at art, listen to music, take a walk. What are some beautiful objects or practices you could bring to the start of each day? What beauty might you like to share with others? Try to think of some specific examples...”

I highly recommend the app—for many reasons, but especially since it's exceptionally complementary with expressive writing. You can sign up here:

https://courses.susancain.net/?_gl=1%2Ang7uk2%2A_ga%2ANzc3MjY5ODI5LjE2NjU1NTUwNDQ.%2A_ga_6K3L5CX2RP%2AMTY2NTU1NTA0My4xLjAuMTY2

[NTU1NTA0My4wLjAuMA..& ga=2.255919561.318701864.1665555044-777269829.1665555044](https://www.ingridfetell.com/NTU1NTA0My4wLjAuMA..& ga=2.255919561.318701864.1665555044-777269829.1665555044)

Towards joy...

Another source I highly recommend as complementary for your expressive writing practice is the book *Joyful* by Ingrid Fetell Lee.

Her “Joyspotter’s Guide” gives you a clear window into Lee’s joyful philosophy. Try using the questions as expressive writing prompts!

<https://attachments.convertkitcdn.com/124728/d54b1dc1-30c3-4739-bcdd-1d6edb17ae51/AoJ-JoyspottersGuide.pdf>

You can sign up for more fabulously joyful guides and resources on Lee’s website: <https://aestheticsofjoy.com/learn/>

And, in this thought-provoking blog post, Lee poses 5 questions to ask yourself in order to deepen your joy. They make great expressive writing prompts! 😊

<https://aestheticsofjoy.com/2021/02/13/5-questions-to-deepen-your-joy/>

And here’s evidence of something really joyful—achieved by writing merely ONE sentence a day for decades!

https://www.tiktok.com/@iamdarbysdad/video/7151911417627643178? kx=Ma4U40-okvLzHz THb5Ub3P fpXBMe7qKsf6NQKRdGc%3D.RbtsBF& r=1& t=8WLN GNAgZRb&is from webapp=v1&item id=7151911417627643178&utm campaign=5%20Things%20Newsletter%3A%20October%2014th%2C%202022%20%2801GF9EBDNF1E0ARF9RCCDWM9DC%29&utm_medium=email&utm_source=5%20Things%20Newsletter

As you’ll recall from the Writing to Heal workshop, I recommend keeping a daily joy journal. **Here’s the prompt:**

Take one minute to write one sentence describing one thing that made you happy today.

You can do this!

Next level steps...

If you want to take your expressive writing practice even further, then you might enjoy learning about one of the therapeutic methods it's related to—narrative therapy.

Here's a great explanation of narrative therapy (which is meant to occur under the guidance of a trained mental health professional):

<https://positivepsychology.com/narrative-therapy/>

If this sounds like your jam, then you can give it a try on your own with these writing exercises: <https://positivepsychology.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/3-Positive-Psychology-Tools.pdf> *****NOTE!!!** These exercises are written for and directed to professional therapists, but you can safely work through them at home alone.

And if you decide you want to work with a therapist who specializes in narrative therapy, then here's a directory:

<https://counsellingbc.com/counsellors/approach/narrative-therapy-229/practice?inline=true&page=1>

Many therapists offer a sliding scale for session fees.

And, finally, here are some books I recommend for supporting your expressive writing practice:

Denborough, David. *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience.*

DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives.*

Fallon, Allison. *The Power of Writing It Down: A Simple Habit to Unlock Your Brain and Reimagine Your Life.*

Heermann, Tammy. *Reframe Your Story: Real Talk for Women Who Want to Let Go, Do Less and Be More.*

Marinella, Sandra. *The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness, or Loss.*

Pennebaker, James, and Joshua Smyth. *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain.*

Happy writing! 😊

WRITING AS A WAY OF HEALING

Workshop

Developed by

Lauryn Joly and Dr. Michelle Superle

Introduction:

The Benefits of Expressive Writing¹

What we thought happened, what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths. It isn't that we use our writing to deny what we've experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspective.

Louise DeSalvo, Writing as a Way of Healing

The books *Writing as a Way of Healing* by Louise DeSalvo and *Opening Up by Writing it Down* by James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth provided enlightening information that guided the development of this workshop.

Both books explore the effects of using writing to connect our feelings with events we've experienced. In these works, the authors concluded that there were no significant benefits from writing superficial commentary about events without including emotional reflections. Further, simply venting emotions without thoughtful reflection tended to make people feel worse. However, by linking a description of the objective details of an experience with the deepest feelings and emotions about them, an understanding and acceptance begins to form—often because the experience is approached from a new perspective.

One of their most important observations is that you DON'T need to be a writer to do expressive writing and experience its benefits! 😊

¹ By Lauryn Joly

James W. Pennebaker² was one of the first researchers to discover the benefits of expressive writing, and his early work has since been corroborated by extensive follow-up studies conducted by other researchers.

This research (which is described in both books) found that expressive writing can facilitate many benefits, including:

- A sense of control from owning your story
 - Separating the event from the narrative imposed on it, looking at your experiences more objectively, and connecting your personal feelings to your experiences can change how you view what happened. (DeSalvo)
- Reduced anxiety and psychological stress
 - Pennebaker and Smyth suggest that therapeutic writing provides a relief similar to that experienced when an individual makes a confession.
- Enhanced understanding
 - Putting the experience into words makes it easier to understand, because you can see and read the language of something that you may not have spoken out loud before. (Pennebaker and Smyth)
- Increased immunity
 - Studies have found that people who wrote about their thoughts and feelings after traumatic experiences had increased T-lymphocytes when compared with the members of a group who wrote about superficial topics. (Pennebaker and Smyth)

While there are many benefits of expressive writing, it is also true that it can be uncomfortable—especially at first. Pennebaker and Smyth advise, “Many people report that after writing, they sometimes feel somewhat sad, although this typically goes away in a couple of hours. If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics”³.

² “James W. Pennebaker, PhD is a nationally recognized expert on the connection between writing and better health. He and his students are exploring the links between traumatic experiences, expressive writing, natural language use, and physical and mental health. His studies find that physical health and work performance can improve by simple writing and/or talking exercises....He is the Regents Centennial Professor of Liberal Arts and the Departmental Chair in the Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Austin.... Pennebaker has written or edited nine books and over 250 articles....He has received numerous awards and honors, including Distinguished Contributions to Social and Personality Psychology and the Outstanding Book Award from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology.” <https://expressivewriting.org/about-the-authors/>

³ Page 26, *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*. By James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth. Guilford Press, 2016. <https://www.guilford.com/books/Opening-Up-by-Writing-It-Down/Pennebaker-Smyth/9781462524921>

According to Louise DeSalvo⁴, expressive writing is most beneficial when undertaken with good self care in place. She finds that her own expressive writing process feels safest when she's providing herself with good care, and she urges her students to do the same.

In particular, DeSalvo recommends

- A steady, calm, predictable daily routine
- Emotional support, for example by checking in with friends regularly
- Working with a therapist
- Keeping a journal “about the positive aspects of [your] life to maintain [your] perspective while [you] work” (Page 105).

DeSalvo states that it was especially powerful to write about “what I was excited by, proud of, grateful for, enjoying most, committed to, learning, and giving/sharing. So, though I was writing about pain, my journal acted as a welcome respite and necessary balance” (Page 105).

Besides these foundational works on expressive writing, we have also been strongly influenced and inspired by the principles of narrative therapy⁵ as it was pioneered by Dr. Stephen Madigan⁶. Therefore, we have created this resource package in alignment with the techniques of narrative therapy, which aim to support and foster resilience.

⁴ “Dr. Louise DeSalvo taught writing and literature at Hunter College in Manhattan. Her ‘Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work’ (1989), was named one of the most important books of the 20th century by Women’s Review of Books.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/11/obituaries/louise-desalvo-dead.html>

⁵ See *Narrative Therapy* by Stephen Madigan. American Psychological Association, 2019. https://books.google.ca/books/about/Narrative_Therapy.html?id=fjAovQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

⁶ “Dr. Stephen Madigan is a best-selling therapy author and award winning Couple Therapist who is recognized world wide as a highly gifted couple therapist...Dr. Madigan holds two Masters Degrees in Counseling (MSW, MSc) and a Doctorate Degree (PhD) in Couple and Family Therapy....He is a registered Clinical Counsellor in British Columbia (BCACC).” <https://www.stephenmadigan.ca/about-dr-madigan/>

Writing as a Way of Healing

Workshop

Developed and facilitated by

Lauryn Joly and Michelle Superle

We can use our writing...to affirm our very significant strengths. For every survivor has them.

Louise DeSalvo, Writing as a Way of Healing

Warmup Activity #1

Describe your favourite place using each one of your senses.

Step 1: Brainstorming

My favourite place is _____

It looks like...	It sounds like...	It smells like...	It tastes like...	It feels like...

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Step 2: Writing

Describe your favourite place using each one of your senses.

Warmup Activity #2

Recall and reflect upon the most difficult challenge you've ever faced. Now describe what you're most proud of in relation to how you coped with the situation.

Expressive Writing Activity #1

To be completed during the workshop. Focus this activity on an upsetting experience you had that's still bothering you.

Brainstorming—take 20 minutes to make some notes in response to these prompts.

What I experienced during event	The order of the main events I experienced
	1 2 3 4 5 6
What I thought about it at the time	How I felt about it when it was happening

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What I think about it now	How I feel about it now

How I processed the event through my senses

What I saw	What I heard	What I smelled	What I tasted	What I touched/felt

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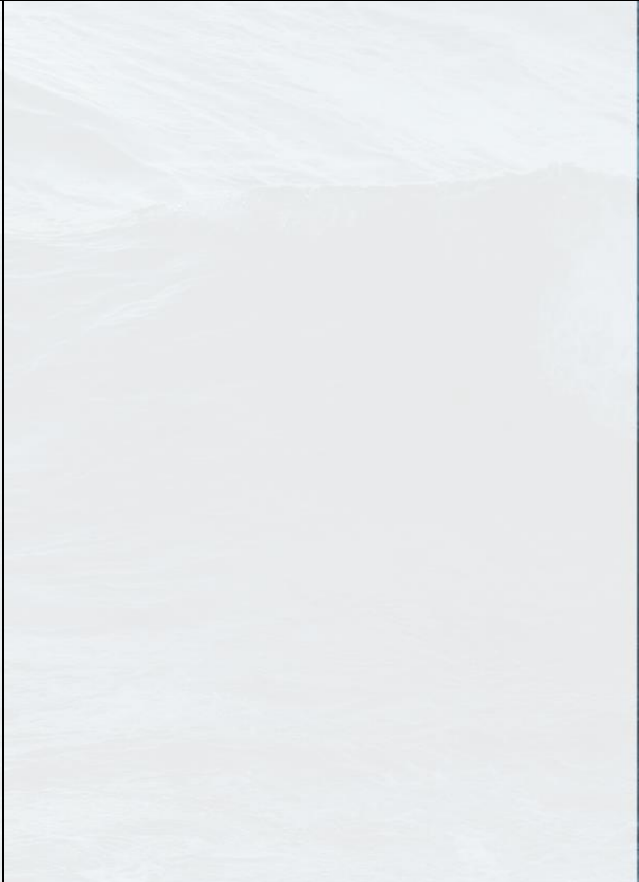
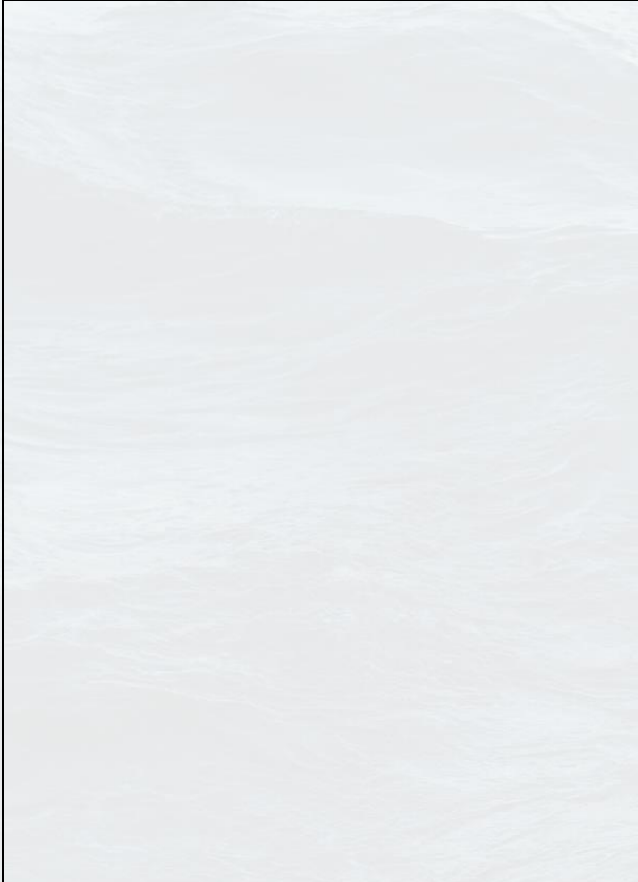
How my pre-existing skills helped me during the experience	I'm most proud of how I...
What I've learned about myself through the experience	How I'm stronger and wiser now

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What sustained me during the experience

What sustains me now



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What I've learned about myself that makes me proud to be me...

HOMEWORK!!!

Keep a JOY JOURNAL—daily

Take one minute every single day to jot down an experience that brought you pleasure that day.

You can note how it made you feel if you'd like, but the most important thing is to describe the experience in as much detail as possible.

In particular, make sure to connect the experience with at least one of your senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and/or smell).

Example: I loved hearing the birds sing when I woke up this morning. They sounded like a little choir. They reminded me that Spring is on the way.

Expressive Writing Activity #2

To be completed at home the day after the workshop.

*Advice from Pennebaker and Smyth⁷ on how best to complete this activity:

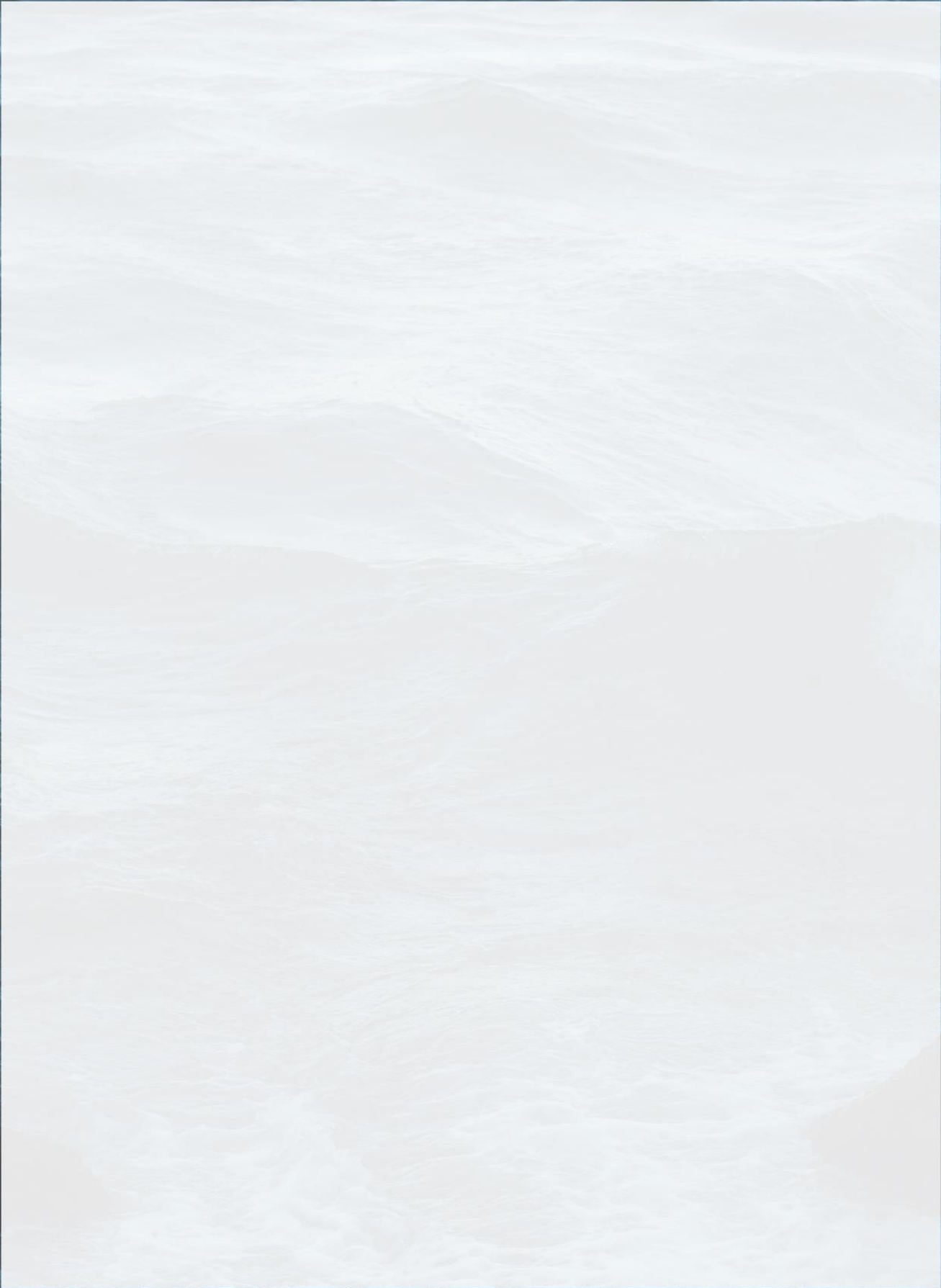
“Find a quiet time and place for this...writing exercise. Write for 20 to 30 minutes, focusing on your deepest emotions and thoughts about a stressful or upsetting experience in your life. Whatever you choose to write about, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. Write continuously, and don't worry about spelling, grammar, or style.

Warning: Many people report that after writing, they sometimes feel somewhat sad, although this typically goes away in a couple of hours. If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics” (Page 26).

⁷ *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*. By James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth. Guilford Press, 2016. <https://www.guilford.com/books/Opening-Up-by-Writing-It-Down/Pennebaker-Smyth/9781462524921>

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Take 20 minutes to write about your frightening experience, using ideas you generated with the prompts above. Make certain to include BOTH your thoughts AND your feelings in your description!



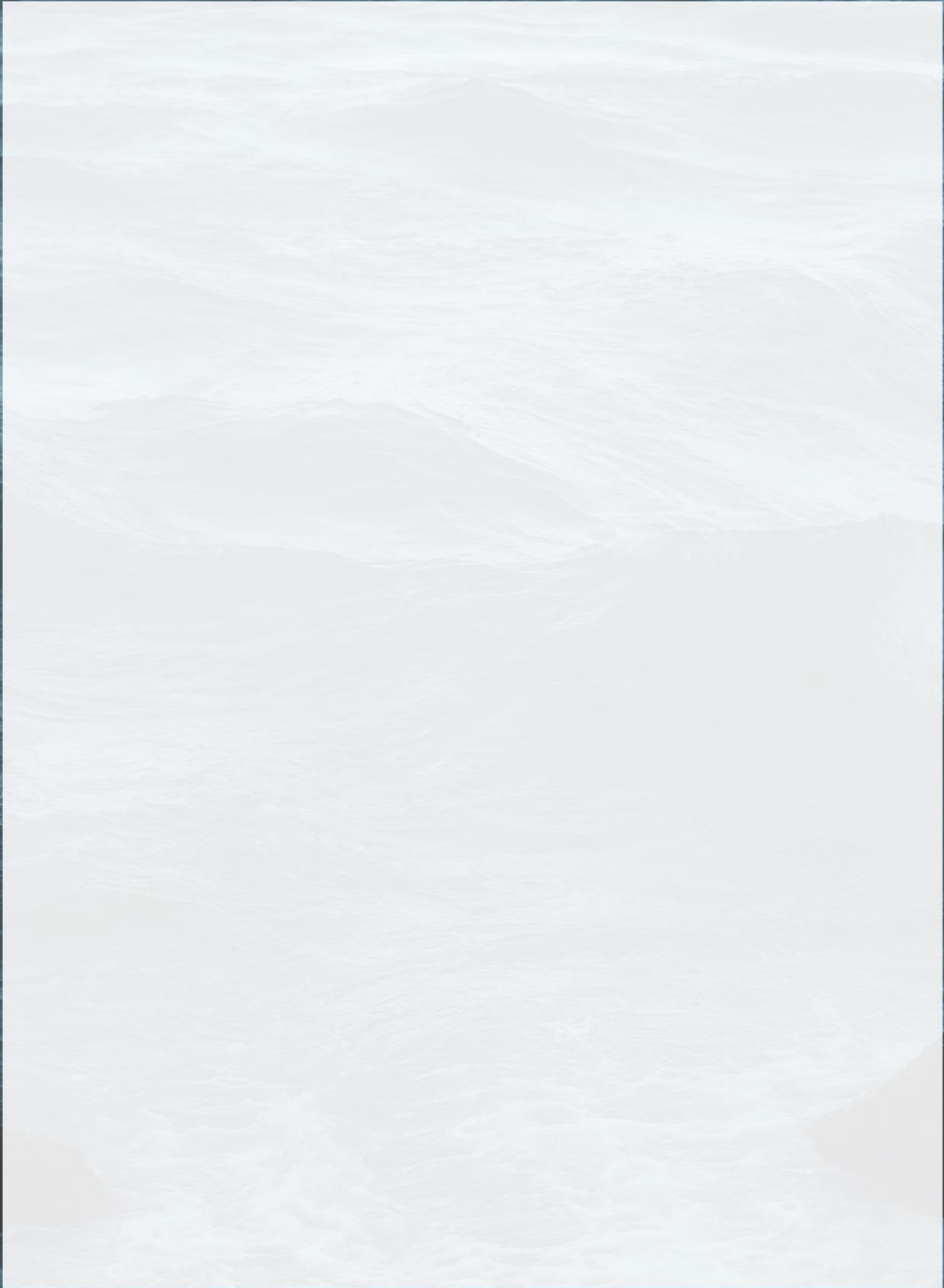
Expressive Writing Activity #3

To be completed at home the day after Activity #2.

*Before you start, make sure to review the advice from Pennebaker and Smyth on how best to complete this exercise—see Activity #2 on page 12!

Take 20 minutes to write a simple version of your story, using the material you generated in Activities 1 and 2.

Make certain to include BOTH your thoughts AND your feelings in your description!



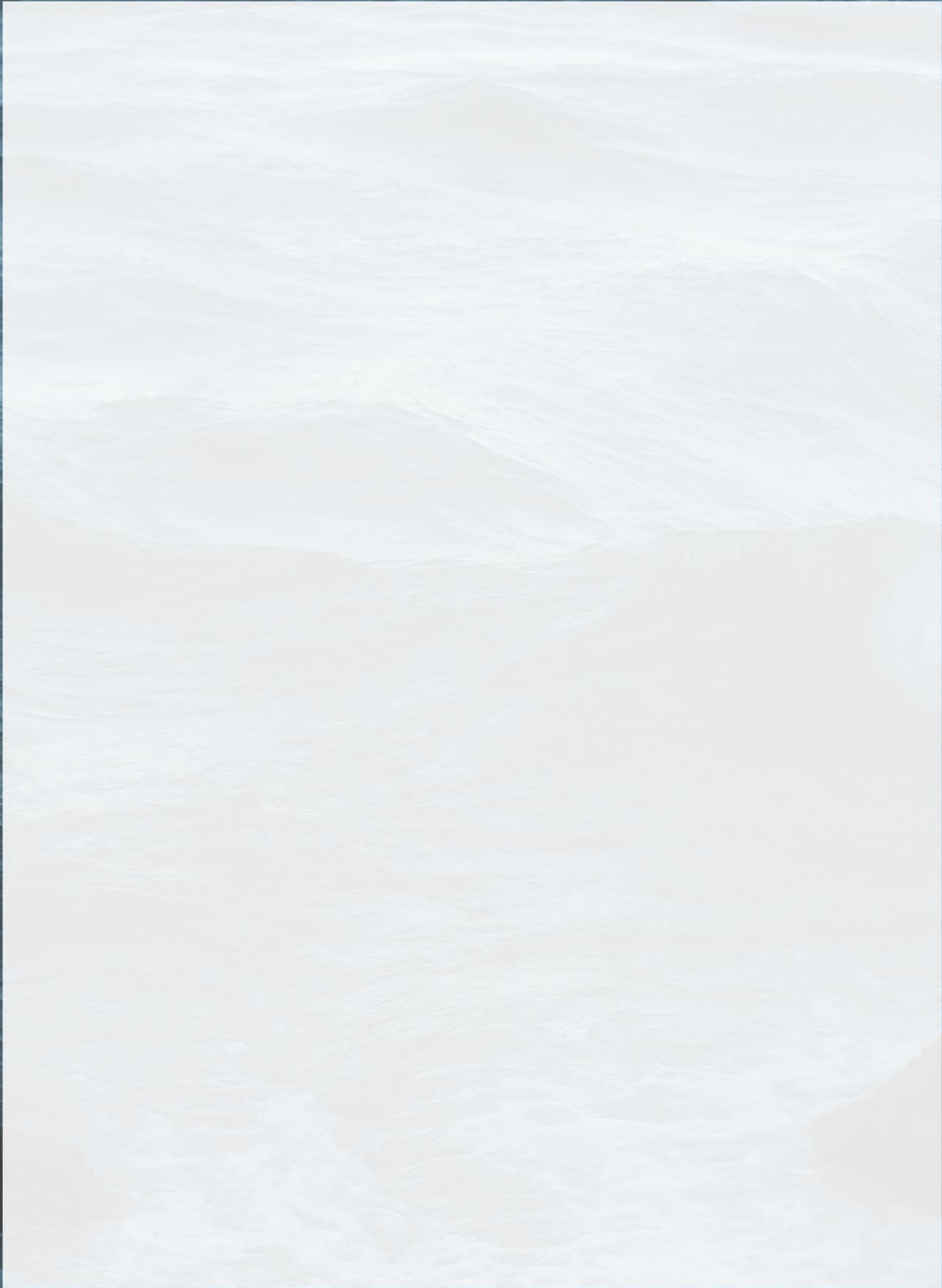
Expressive Writing Activity #4

To be completed at home the day after Activity #3.

*Before you start, make sure to review the advice from Pennebaker and Smyth on how best to complete this exercise—see Activity #2 on page 12!

Take 20 minutes to re-write a more detailed version of your story, using the simple version you drafted in Activity #3 and fleshing it out.

Make certain to include BOTH your thoughts AND your feelings in your description!



Expressive Writing Activity #5

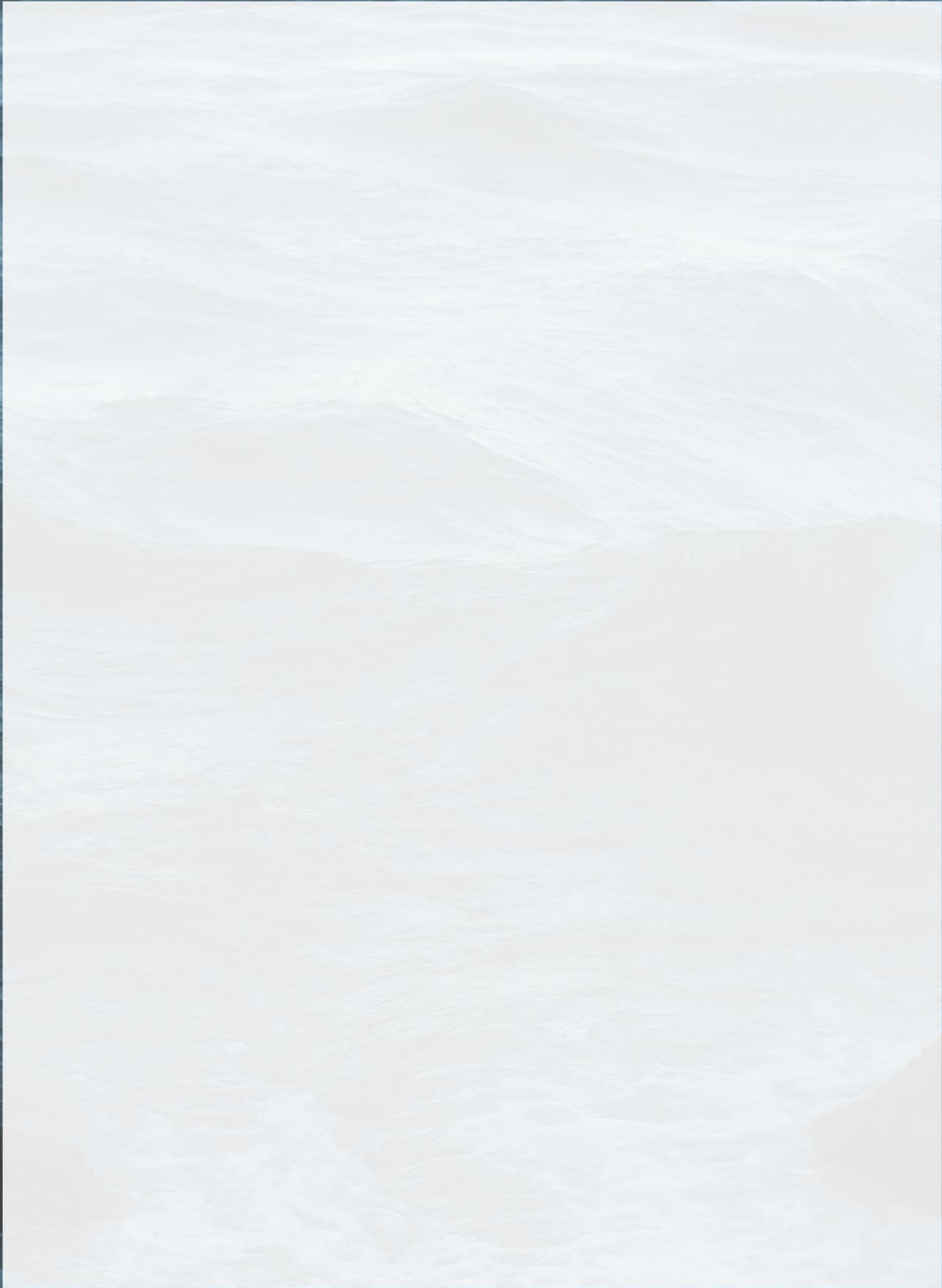
To be completed at home one week after completing Activity #4.

Take 20 minutes to complete this letter writing exercise.

Write a letter to yourself, pretending to be your parent, godparent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or 'future self'. In this scenario, you are a very beloved child.

Include the following components in the letter:

- Describe how and why you are proud of yourself for coming through this difficult experience.
- Offer yourself encouragement and compassion—the way you would to a child that you care very deeply about and for whom you wish to provide the most loving emotional support.
- Recommend three self-care activities to the child (for example, re-watch one of your favourite funny movies, take a nap, go for a walk in your favourite place), and give the child permission to take the time and energy to enjoy these pursuits.
- Sign off with your greatest hope for the child (for example, I hope that you'll soon be able to enjoy the sunset again, or, I hope that you'll feel ready to visit your friends soon, or, I hope that you'll begin to take pleasure in cooking again) as they heal from the experience—and provide assurance of your confidence that they will get there in their own good time.



Appendix

Excerpts from *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, by Louise DeSalvo. Beacon Press, Boston, 1999.

Page 11

As a teacher of writing, I regularly witness the physical and emotional transformation of my students. I can see how they change physically and psychically when they work on writing projects...that grow from a deep, authentic place, when they confront their pain in their work. Through reading scientific studies, I have learned that writing can help anyone—not just people who consider themselves writers—significantly improve their psychic states and also their physiological well-being.

Pages 13-15

Why Write?

Writing is cheap. You don't need special equipment to begin. Only some paper and a pen....

Writing doesn't need to take much time. Though we can take as long as we choose (or as we have), we can write for, say, only twenty minutes or so...whenever we can, and we can continue to reap the benefits of writing....

Writing is self-initiated; writing is flexible. We can write when we can. We can write when we choose. We can write when we write best....

Writing is private, or you can share it. We can keep our writing to ourselves....

Writing is portable. It can be done practically anywhere....

Writing can be done whether we're well or ill.

....

*Writing to heal requires no innate talent, though we become more skilled as we write, especially when we pay careful attention to the process of our writing....*the writing I suggest here we all can manage. Learning something about the writing process, and learning to witness our writing practice...enables us to use writing in a deeper way.

Page 24

Confronting the chaos of our most difficult memories and feelings...and translating them into coherent language can have “remarkable short- and long-term health benefits.” For when we deal with unassimilated events, when we tell our stories and describe our feelings and integrate them into our sense of self, we no longer must actively work at inhibition. This alleviates the stress of holding back [25] our stories and repressing or hiding our emotions, and so our health improves.

Page 25

Writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail *and* how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health.

....

In other words, we can't improve our health by free-writing...or by writing objective descriptions of our trauma or by venting our emotions. We cannot simply use writing as catharsis. Nor can we use it only as a record of what we've experienced. *We must write in a way that links detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings—then and now—about what happened.*

Both thinking and feeling are involved. Linking them is critical....

In controlled clinical experiments, then, only writing that describes *traumatic events and our deepest thoughts and feelings about them, past and present, is linked with improved immune function, improved emotional and physical health, and behavioral changes indicating that we feel able to act on our own behalf.* And this was accomplished in the experiments by only one hour of writing—fifteen minutes a day—over a four-day period!

Page 43

Expressing [the shock] in language robs the event of its power to hurt us; it also assuages our pain. And by expressing ourselves in language, by examining these shocks, we paradoxically experience delight—pleasure, even—which comes from the discoveries we make as we write, from the order we create from seeming randomness or chaos.

Ultimately, then, writing about difficulties enables us to discover the wholeness of things, the connectedness of human experience. We understand that our greatest shocks do not separate us from humankind. Instead, through expressing ourselves, we establish our connection with others and with the world.

Page 57

What are the transformative qualities we can aim for as we write?

A healing narrative renders our experience concretely, authentically, explicitly, and with a richness of detail.

It tells precisely what happened. It is accurate. It is rooted in time and in place. We describe when and where this happened. We describe the people who were fully involved.... We describe things in a way that is uniquely, authentically ours; our narrative can't sound as if someone other than ourselves has written it.

Research has demonstrated that depressed and suicidal people are much less likely to report memories or happenings in an extremely specific way. Instead, recollections tend to be overly general and vague....when narratives are reported in an overgeneralized way, any situation seems more catastrophic than it really is.

Page 59

A healing narrative links feelings to events.

It describes how we felt then and how we feel now. It compares and contrasts past feelings about and current feelings about events. It charts the similarities or differences in our feelings over time.

....

A healing narrative is a balanced narrative. It uses negative words to describe emotions and feelings in moderation; but it uses positive words, too.

....

“How can we possibly write positively about a painful subject?” I’ve often been asked. “By describing what sustained us during that time,” I say.

Page 60

A study by Pennebaker discovered that the more people described positive emotions in their writing, the more likely they were to be healthier afterward. But describing negative emotions either excessively or very little or not at all correlated with poorer health. Describing negative emotions in moderation correlated with improved health.

This suggests that we profit most from understanding an event’s positive and negative aspects. We must not, of course, deny our negative feelings: we must express them. But neither must we deny our positive feelings: these also must be expressed. Balanced narratives make us feel hopeful.

....

A healing narrative reveals insights we’ve achieved from our painful experiences.

A healing narrative doesn’t just narrate what happened to us and how we feel. It is a way for us to reflect upon the significance of what happened. It connects our experiences to other experiences in our lives or to those of other people or to society.

Page 61

A word of caution. Reflections about cause and effect that can harm us are based on questions like “Why did this happen to me?”, “What did I do to deserve this?”, “How did I invite this?” Questions such as these indicated that we are ready to blame ourselves for the trauma that occurred, and such self-blame is harmful. It is more helpful to examine our personal experiences in a broader context.

....

Often, our narratives begin in chaos. They become healing narratives as we organize them, as we ask ourselves, “Then what happened?”, “Who was there?”, “Why?”, “Did that happen before or after?”

Page 74

It is not what you write or what you produce as you write that is important. It is what happens to you while you are writing that is important. It is who you become while you are writing that is important.

Page 104

Before I began writing, I had learned what I needed to do to write without precipitating an emotional crisis. I knew now that to take risks on the page without endangering ourselves, we must do so from a position of relative emotional safety. I prepared to do the work, and as I worked I continued caring for myself, “What must I do to write this...and enjoy the process of doing it, though I’ll be working with difficult emotional material?”

Page 105

I always had emotional support available. I checked in with my...friends weekly, sometimes daily. And I was in therapy while writing, which helped integrate the difficult and shameful feelings my writing was unearthing. I wrote in my journal, too, about the positive aspects of my life to maintain my perspective while I worked.

....

I began to write about what I was happy about in my work, what I was excited by, proud of, grateful for, enjoying most, committed to, learning, and giving/sharing. So, though I was writing about pain, my journal acted as a welcome respite and necessary balance.

Page 154

As a child, [Alice] Walker wrote to comfort herself... Walker compares her lifesaving habits to the tradition of Native American sand painting. In Native American cultures, she reports, “when you feel sick at heart, you do sand paintings. Or you make a basket. The thing is that you are focused on creating something. And while you’re doing that, there’s a kind of spiritual alchemy that happens and you turn that bad feeling into something that becomes a golden light. It’s all because you are intensely creating something that is beautiful. And in Native American cultures, by the time you’ve finished the sand painting, you’re well. The point is to heal yourself.”

Page 160

bell hooks, in *Daughters of the Yam*, reminds us, though, that not everyone who is severely traumatized can afford to pay for therapy. Writing often provides the only available healing outlet for poor people. James W. Pennebaker and Amina Memon, in “Recovered Memories in Context,” say writing about extreme trauma has proved so helpful precisely because it is self-directed and unmediated by another person. Stephanie Mines, in *Sexual Abuse, Sacred Wound*, says that if therapy for abuse survivors “involves the creative arts, the intervention or supervision of a therapist may not be necessary.”

Page 175

But trauma acts, too, as a “strong stimulus to the imagination,” as the distressed person tries to replace what has been lost or to restore what has been damaged. Creativity, then, seems a basic human response to trauma and a natural “emergency defense against depression.”

One important reason this is so is that writing conveys messages to the self about the inner state. Unfortunately...this healing function of creativity isn’t well known, even among therapists and literary critics, much less among...ordinary people, all of whom could benefit enormously from knowing about this age-old means of psychic self-care and how it functions.

The psychic repair accomplished by writing may never be final or complete, especially in cases of extreme trauma or abuse. Still, the [176] ongoing discipline of writing may help us ward off the most crippling aspects of depression. Because...depression and obsession go hand in hand—we continuously revisit the traumatic event—writing serves as a distraction. It can provide new and healthier obsessions (especially if the writer pays attention to [daily] ritual and order). And, perhaps most important, it can provide an imaginative, healing antitoxin (to use the word that Anais Nin used to describe her writing) to our psychic pain.

Page 176

We can use our writing...to affirm our very significant strengths. For every survivor has them.