

JOURNALING FOR HEALING

“To close the door on pain is to miss the chance for growth . . . Nothing that happens to us, even the most terrible shock, is unusable, and everything has somehow to be built into the fabric of personality.”

--May Sarton

Life events like trauma, illness, injury, and loss challenge our human impulse to make meaning, because no one asks for or deserves them. Intentionally creating a narrative about events like this can be transformative and healing. While we often try to avoid the pain associated with such experiences, suppressing or inhibiting these thoughts and feelings takes tremendous energy and results in long-term health consequences and changes in thinking. Confronting painful or traumatic experiences, on the other hand, can ultimately result in reduced stress and improved health (Pennebaker, 1997).

“Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. . . . If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we’ve basically cut it off at the knees. Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither. Just the way exposure to light was deadly for the gremlins, language and story bring light to shame and destroy it.”

--Brene Brown

Shame is often one barrier to really absorbing, probing and understanding traumatic experiences . We fear the judgments that others will make, or the judgments we ourselves make simply because we’ve had an experience. We fear that the experiences we’ve had somehow make us unworthy or unlovable. Because we can write for ourselves alone, journaling offers an opportunity to practice telling our stories without judgment. In so doing, we can, in Brene Brown’s words, “bring light to shame and destroy it.”

Self-Care

While journaling can be an important component of self-care, it's also important to recognize that it can be a difficult process. As you enter into a journaling practice, spend time developing a broad repertoire of self-soothing and coping strategies. Also, be responsive to yourself; pay attention to your body and respond to signs of increased stress. If you feel overwhelmed by the process, stop, engage in other self-care strategies, and seek assistance.

It's important to keep in mind that creating a healing narrative is a process. Our first attempts at telling our story are often disjointed, even chaotic. The most important component of this process is to allow ourselves to tell the story in it's fullness **without judgment**. By doing so, we can gain new perspective, gain insight, and move toward healing.



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Key Features of Healing Narratives:

- **Specificity**
 - Details
 - Grounded in time and place
- **Balanced:**
 - Includes thoughts and feelings
 - Includes positive and negative
- **Reveals insights achieved:**
 - Reflects upon the significance of what happened
 - Makes connections to other experiences in our lives
 - Makes connections to the experiences of other people
- **Tells a complete, coherent story:**
 - Clear beginning middle and end

Resources for creating a personal healing narrative:

DeSalvo, L. (1999). Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling our Stories Transforms Our Lives. Beacon Press.

Pennebaker, J. (1997). Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions. Guilford Press.

Pennebaker, J. (2004) Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering From Trauma & Emotional Upheaval. New Harbinger Publications.

Pennebaker, J. & Evans, J. (2014). Expressive Writing: Words that Heal. Idyll Arbor.

Healing Story Alliance: <http://healingstory.org/journey-down-the-healing-path-through-story-2/>

Story Center: <http://www.storycenter.org/about/>

Contact horton@coloradocollege.edu for information on our workshops on creating a personal healing narrative and storytelling for social change.