

# Using Journaling During Grief

by Eunie Alsaker

Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.

– Shakespeare, Macbeth Act 4, Scene 3

Grieving is an active process which requires our attention. We pay attention in a host of ways, but journaling (also referred to as reflective, therapeutic, or creative writing) can be particularly helpful in promoting reflection. It is an approach I often use with clients as well as in my own life.

After a profound loss, it seems the world should stop. Most often, all too soon, the tasks of daily life demand action. Intentionally setting aside time to reflect is a way to stop and honor grief. Writing can bring greater understanding to our emotions, can help us focus on hope and meaning, and can promote exploration of how to reinvest in life. When we are numb, it can help us connect with our thoughts. For some it is grounding and a way to contain thoughts or feelings. Journaling highlights the uniqueness of the grief process and can help track change and healing. It provides a safe place to be honest and allows for the illogical side of grief. It offers a way to tell and retell our story without fear of judgement. Ultimately the honest self-reflection gained through this type of writing can enhance a deeper connection with not only oneself, but with others as well.



This is not to say that reflective writing is helpful for everyone or that someone should start at any time and in any way. Without structure and limits, it can be overwhelming, much like the grief experience itself. Because focusing in on loss can increase anxiety, rumination, or general distress, it is important that a person has the ability to self-calm and to turn away from the intensity of grief (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, 2012). Clinicians must assess and discuss with their clients if they have and actively use self-regulation skills.

Some clients, such as those who like to write or have journaled previously and those who have some distance from their loss, have success writing spontaneously without boundaries. Others will benefit from the pacing of some form of tailored journaling with specifically planned topics or questions.

## Creating A Safe Structure

Creating a safe structure for yourself or with a client is important. Choose the best time of day or week, location, approximate length of time, and activity to do after writing. Writing immediately before bed is not typically advised, as it is harder to contain thoughts while trying to fall asleep. Doing something after writing helps shift thoughts to a place of action. It gives the message, “I am done writing for today and now I am going to...” (take a shower, make dinner, watch a video, walk the dog). Creativity is encouraged! Quotes, song lyrics, pic-

tures, doodles, poems— anything goes. Grammar and spelling do not matter. The writing is not an assignment and will not be judged. It will not be shared without permission. And the writer can stop or change direction at any time (Humphrey, 2009).

Immediately prior to writing, it can be helpful to pause for a moment, focus on breath, and orient self to time, place and activity. Kathleen Adams recommends first writing three words which reflect one’s primary feelings. Looking back on these words can highlight the scope of emotions during grief and how things have changed over time.

## Endless Topics

The potential topics are endless and could include: What helped me get through this day? How did I care for myself today? What is getting in the way of healing? What is my foundation? What do others not understand about what I am going through? I want the world to know this about my loved one. Things I miss. Things which anger or surprise me. Things that have not changed. Things I believe. Personal strengths. Family strengths. Bad advice I choose to ignore. Helpful advice I choose to remember. Favorite memories. Difficult memories. People I can turn to.

Letters are another common way to journal. It might be one letter written over time. The letter can be back and forth between the bereaved and their loved one. It can be to their future self.



Eunie Alsaker

Journaling continued on page 5

**Journaling** continued from page 4

It can be to an anonymous person going through the same situation.

Fear of losing memories of one's loved one is a common concern. As memories surface, writing them down in a specific place offers reassurance that they will not disappear. One can prompt memories by choosing a photo and reflecting. Where are we and what are we doing? What do I see and smell? What was I feeling at the time? How do I feel now as I look back? How did this experience deepen my connection with my loved one? Try ending this exercise with, "Thank you for this memory."

### Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is a helpful tool in fostering an ongoing connection with one's loved one, a connection that many fear they have lost (Neimeyer, 2014). What did Dad teach me about relationships? How does this impact my current relationships? What were Mom's strengths? How do I carry those in my life? How do my mannerisms, habits, or speech mirror my parent? What did my sister teach me about life/love/loss? What stories represent these teachings? What did my husband most appreciate about me? How can I share these qualities with others? What is getting in the way of being connected with my wife? Is there something I need to forgive in order to stay connected? What would my loved one say to me now? How can I respond? Who needs to know my loved one's stories? Who can help me keep these stories alive?

In Lichtenthal and Neimeyer's research on journaling, they conclude that it is particularly helpful when clients are struggling to find meaning following a loss. "...reflective writing can help us make sense of a world that doesn't." (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, p. 168) Some questions suggested by

this team include: How did you make sense of the death at the time and how do you make sense of it now? What beliefs helped with your adjustment to your loss? How were your beliefs impacted by your loss? How has your loss influenced the direction of your life? How might you one day give this loss meaning? Have you found any unsought gifts in your grief? Has your loss impacted your priorities or sense of self? What lessons has your loss taught you? How has your loss impacted the gratitude you feel in your life? (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, p. 166)

### Setting An Intention

One approach I like to use is to have clients write an intention for themselves. Some I have heard include: I will notice the light (metaphorical and literal); I will find something of meaning today; I am connected to others; There is hope. Then, at the end of each day, they write about how they experienced this intention during the day. This is an active exercise because it encourages clients to be on the lookout for something of value in each day.

Another writing tool I encourage with my clients is a monthly self-assessment, particularly after we no longer meet. It can be as simple as: Where am I at with my grief? What do I need and how can I bring this into my life? How did I use my support system this month?

Some choose to have a uniform way to end each writing session. Ending on something positive or hopeful helps contain distress and promote resilience. I like the "name three things" exercise. If finding three things to be grateful for feels like too much of a stretch at this time, it can also be three things of beauty, three things which get me out of bed each day, three things that aren't changing, or three ways I cared for myself today, just to name a few.

Journaling is an unusually flexible tool and examples of how to use it to create a meaningful experience for the griever are limitless.

### References

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