



**CARE FOR
YOURSELF, TOO:
JOURNALING FOR
FAMILY CAREGIVERS**

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Why Journal?

The simple act of writing about your deep thoughts and feelings can help you feel better physically and emotionally—a welcome experience while caring for a loved one with a serious illness or injury. Writing for just a few minutes a day or a few times a week has been shown to:

- reduce stress
- increase happiness
- clear up confusion
- provide comfort
- build resilience
- restore well-being
- reduce effects of some medical conditions

Journaling = Self-Care

*“... somehow, in the process of writing,
something happens that makes broken pieces come together.”*

~~ Susan Borkin

In this hands-on session, you will experience a powerful method of self-care, using three journaling techniques you can do in ten minutes or less. This writing is private, and you need not share it with anyone—nor save it—to experience these benefits.

No writing or journaling experience necessary!

Basic Journaling Guidelines

- Journaling has no rules (yay!). You can write in your journal (paper or electronic) in whatever way you like. Simply do your best to write about what is in your heart or on your mind. Keep your journal private so you can feel free to write as honestly as you can. Do your best to explore your thoughts and emotions on the page.
- One important thing to remember: If you are writing about something that's very painful or traumatic and you feel yourself becoming way too angry or sad, please stop writing. Wait until you feel stronger and calmer before continuing. If you are working with a therapist or counselor, please discuss this issue at your next appointment.

5-Minute Sprint

- This basic technique is useful when you're overwhelmed, don't have much time, or need clarity and focus. If you can keep your pen moving the whole time, you'll be surprised how much you can write in five minutes.
- Using a “prompt” can help you get started. A prompt is a few words, a phrase, or a question that becomes the beginning of your journal entry.
- Like these:

Right now, I feel...

Some days, caregiving is...

If I could...

My heart is telling me...

I am grateful for...

What's on my mind today?

Choose one to write about for 5 minutes.

Unsent Letter

- Writing a letter you know you will *never* send is a great tool for catharsis, completion, and clarity. The Unsent Letter is one of the most popular and widely used journal techniques, probably because it is an excellent way of expressing deep emotion such as grief or anger in a safe, nonthreatening atmosphere.
- This technique is also a great method of exploring various aspects of yourself or your relationships, communicating with someone no longer in your life, or untangling painful or confusing issues. Of course, it can also be used to write about positive feelings and situations.

Unsent Letter

- You can write an unsent letter to any person, living or not, or any thing, real or imagined. For example, in my journaling group for people with brain injury, I invite people to write a letter to their brains.
- To whom would you like to write a letter you will never send? Some possibilities: your loved one, their illness or condition—or yours, your Higher Power or religious/spiritual figure, some aspect of yourself—the caregiving self, the loving self, the angry self, the exhausted self. Or any person or thing with whom you would like to communicate.
- Begin with “Dear _____” and sign your name at the end.

Intensely Positive Experiences

- Journaling over time only about the painful or negative experiences will reinforce them in your psyche and leave you feeling worse. For a more healing journaling practice, be sure to include life's positive aspects as well.
- Research has shown that writing about intensely positive experiences (IPE) induces positive emotions. It is a way to create a more positive mood and better psychological well-being, which can last several weeks after the writing.

Intensely Positive Experiences

- One study described IPE this way: *“Think of the most wonderful experience or experiences in your life, happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music, or suddenly ‘being hit’ by a book or painting or from some great creative moment.”* [Burton, C. M. and L. A. King (2004). "The health benefits of writing about intensely positive experiences." *Journal of Research in Personality* 38(2): 150-163.]
- What intensely positive experience do you want to write about? Do your best to re-experience this time, with all the emotions, thoughts and feelings involved. Include as much detail as possible.

Journaling Resources

- Adams, Kathleen. 1990. *Journal to the Self: Twenty-two Paths to Personal Growth*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
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- DeSalvo, Louise. 1999. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Jacobs, Beth, PhD. 2004. *Writing For Emotional Balance*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Stahura, Barbara and Susan B. Schuster, M.A., CCC-SLP. 2009. *After Brain Injury: Telling Your Story*. Wake Forest, NC: Lash & Associates Publishing/ Training.