

## Managing Grief through Journal Writing

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*A poet can take all the grief from her heart  
(the pain that can swell and break a heart)  
and write it in fine black lines  
on starchy white paper. . . .*  
--from *Fine Black Lines*, Lois Tschetter Hjelmstad

*I'm sick of it! I'm sick of sadness and pain. And I hate this journal for pointing it out to me all the time. I hate you, journal!*  
--from the grief journal of Rachel

Conventional wisdom tells us that writing a journal in times of catastrophic trauma is a good and helpful thing to do. The "fine black lines/ on starchy white paper" are kind and patient. They witness without judgment, contain without confinement, fill up and become more in the process of catharsis. As a psychotherapist who has specialized for 15 years in the power of writing to heal body, psyche and soul, I know this to be true.

Imagine my surprise to learn, many years ago, that two-thirds of my clients who experienced traumatic stress, such as the death of a loved one, related to Rachel, above! They described writing in a journal as difficult, frightening, overwhelming or counterproductive.

This seeming paradox gave me pause, and I immediately set out to learn two things: Why is this so? And what can be done about it?

This is what I discovered: Most people, in the absence of a different idea, will open themselves up and pour themselves out onto the page. This unstructured, open-ended, non-directed flow of thoughts and feelings (sometimes called free writing, or flow writing, or stream of consciousness writing) uncannily parallels the process of catastrophic grief, which is in itself oceanic, endless and formless. What helps? Writing techniques that imbed structure, boundaries and form.

I've always been an advocate for choices and options in the journal. But my work with traumatic stress and catastrophic grief convinced me that for people who are in deep emotional pain, having choices is essential for feelings of mastery, comfort and manageability.

Here, then, is a cornucopia of 12 ideas and suggestions for writing your way through grief. Most of these can be accomplished in 15 minutes or less, which is helpful for two main reasons. First, when grief is new, feelings are so close to the surface and pain is so raw that short writes are less likely to pitch you into overwhelm. Second, our culture doesn't really support us in grieving, and we are expected to return to work and resume the mantle of everyday life almost immediately after even a catastrophic loss. For many people, shorter writes are friendlier and more adaptable to daily realities.

Incidentally, shorter writes don't necessarily mean you're sacrificing outcome or results. Scientific research shows that brief, intense bursts of emotional release writing -- only 15 minutes a day, for only four consecutive days -- is correlated with increased immune system functioning that can last for several weeks. Since grief often compromises the immune system and leaves you more vulnerable to colds, flu and infection, these writes can help your physical as well as your emotional health.

**1. First things first: There aren't any rules.** Journal writing isn't like flossing; you don't have to do it every day. And it isn't school: You don't have to spell the words right, or punctuate them, or worry about grammar. Give yourself permission to write whatever comes. You're not being judged or graded by anyone else, so please don't judge or grade yourself.

2. Choose a journal that fits your lifestyle and feels comfy and nurturing. Some people treasure lovely blank bound books. Others favor spiral notebooks that can be chucked into a backpack. If you think at your keyboard, keep your journal on computer. There is excellent journal software available; I like LifeJournal, available at major bookstores, or on the internet ([www.lifejournal.com](http://www.lifejournal.com)). Or write your journal via e-mail to a support group or mailing list of chosen friends and family.

3. Time can feel like an enemy when you're adjusting to a loss, so it's comforting and reassuring to document your movement through it. You can do this by numbering the pages of your journal and only writing on one side of the page. Or try writing in a one-year diary with pre-printed pages.

4. Get in the habit of writing three words that describe your feelings at the beginning and end of every journal entry. This helps you track your feelings over time and gives you an opportunity to notice that emotions shift with time and process.

5. Set the timer and write fast and furious for a predetermined number of minutes -- 5, 10, 15 (more, if you have time, energy and desire). When the timer buzzes, close your book or file and move on. Come back as often as you wish.

6. Because it is common for memory to be affected with acute grief, make to-do lists, and keep them right in your journal or day planner.

7. Make other lists, as well. Lists are great for organizing and categorizing, and their structure is comforting when things feel like they are spinning out of control. Write lists of your emotions, memories, plans, ideas, fantasies and more.

8. Before you go to bed, choose something you'd like to experience the following day -- a feeling of hope or pleasure; an item crossed off a to-do list; an experience such as a productive meeting or a gym workout. Write this "Choice du Jour" in your journal. As you go to sleep, reflect on your choice. How would you recognize success? What can you do to arrange your day to increase the likelihood that your choice will manifest? At night, write for five minutes reflecting on outcomes.

9. When you are aching with longing for your loved one, write "Captured Moments" --brief vignettes written quickly, like impressionistic sketches, of instants of time. Make them intense with vivid descriptions. Reach for sensory details -- the sight, smell, touch, taste, feel of things. Include the emotional senses, too, finding precise words for feelings. A collection of Captured Moments becomes like a written photo album, preserving precious memories for all time.

10. AlphaPoems are an easy and structured way to get started with poetic expression. Write the alphabet, or the letters of any word or phrase, vertically down the side of your page. Then write a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter on the page. (It's perfectly xceptable to make xceptions for xtra hard letters.) Try this even if you think you're not a poet, or that the process sounds silly. You'll likely be amazed at how easily the poem comes, and how much like a poem it actually sounds. Here's an AlphaPoem called "Grief," from Taylor's journal:

*A crushing  
bellow  
calls from deep inside  
driving to be heard  
ever so  
frightening, ever so demanding,  
grief  
hits with a tornado's force,  
igniting the fire,  
jarring the senses,  
kicking the safety and comfort away.*

*Lamenting the loss, the pain  
mere words cannot begin to describe.  
No, words cannot do justice to the  
once-held, once-loved, always-remembered  
passion. 'Tis  
queer this experience  
required in life.  
Solace can be found  
tonight, tomorrow--  
until once again the  
vine of death crawls in my  
window, playing the  
xylophone of harmony lost.  
Yes, I will go on. You will never be  
zero.*

11. Unsent Letters are an excellent way to maintain a sense of communication with your loved one and can offer deep opportunities for soothing and comfort.

12. Sometimes the only way to get through devastation is to imagine a time when it might not hurt so much. Write a "One Year from Today" entry in which you fast-forward yourself to the healing side of the grief. Allow yourself a glimpse into the future. Imagine your life as if you have wheeled around through four seasons, and you are one year distant from the losses you are experiencing today.

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