

INNER CANVAS

— WHERE CREATIVITY AND HEALING MEET —

Journaling as a Resource for Metabolizing
Cancer Stories

Presented by
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Words from the Field of Expressing Writing

“You must remember that your story matters. What you write has the power to save a life, sometimes that life is your own.” Stalina Goodwin

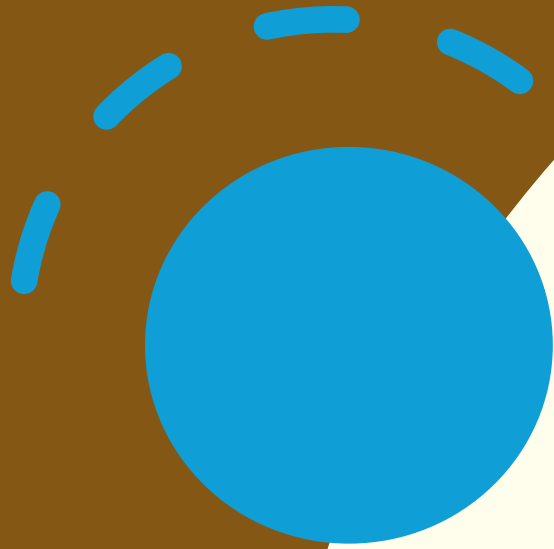
“Journal writing gives us insights into who we are, who we were, and who we can become.” Sandra Marinella

“[E]motional disclosure and expressive writing very likely work as the result of a cascade of multiple processes that plays out over time.... [including to] begin the process of talking about and working through [challenging experiences and] trauma.” James Pennebaker & Joshua Smyth

A little about me...

- Co-created fee-free counseling program at Cancer Lifeline over a period of 6 years, with expressive arts therapy – including writing – as part of the backbone of therapeutic process and creative expression programming
- Supported individuals of all ages, and also couples and families, in the cancer context, through the many ways that “art” is healing
- Continuing to support people whose lives are touched by cancer in my private counseling practice in Seattle & Issaquah





So How Does Writing
Help Us?

A summary of some of the findings...

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- The mere acknowledgement that the event or series of events occurred – just labeling the actions and emotions -- starts to produce structure that creates order and helps organize or “make sense of” what happened.
 - The process of writing forces additional structure on the experience to allow one to investigate the impacts of what happened.
 - Multiple perspectives and additional complexities of the experiences can be added to the narrative and connect the writer to the way that cancer experiences fit into one’s life narrative.
 - Writing can allow for a more self-distanced perspective that supports the emergence of a coherent narrative.

Cont'd summary of some of the findings...

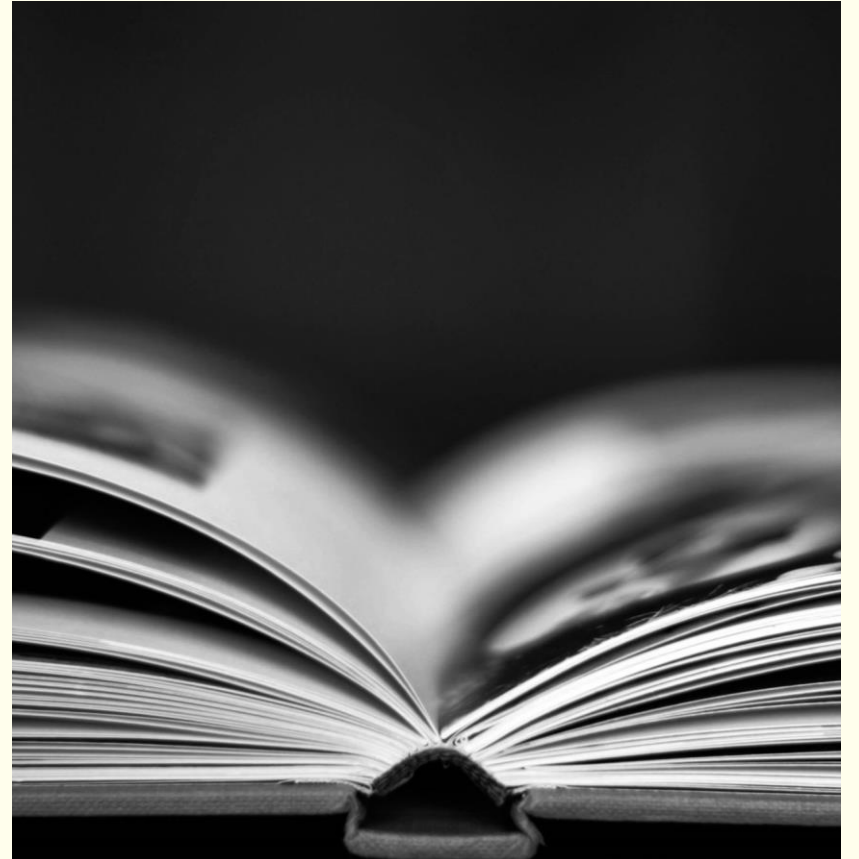
- With repeated telling, some aspects of one's understanding of one's own story can become simpler, more understandable as to the integration with one's life as a whole.
- When finding a more understandable or manageable story, the felt sense of a need to continue to process it can recede, freeing up working memory.
- With some consistent amount of engagement, one can begin to “move through” the upheaval of all that cancer has brought, potentially improving sleep and reducing biological and psychological markers of long-term and persistent stress.

Pennebaker, J. & Smyth, J. (2016). Opening up by writing it down: how expressive writing improves health and eases emotional pain, pps. 154-57.

Journal Writing Practice #1: Responding to Poetry

Simply listening to a poem and responding to it aesthetically by writing down any ways that the poem impacts the reader, e.g., the emotions it brings up, any images the poem surfaces, any associations that the poem generates, and any connections made by the listener can support a reduction in anxiety and anger, as well as other forms of dysregulation.

Tegner, I., Fox, J., Phillip, R. & Thorne, P. (2009). Evaluating the use of poetry to improve well-being and emotional resilience in cancer patients, *J. of Poetry Therapy*, 22:3, 121-131.



Poet: Louise Glick

- After listening, please respond to this poem in your journal, for about 7 minutes, starting to write the first thing that pops into your head and then continuing with pen on paper the full 7 minutes, with any and all emotions, thoughts, images, associations, connections, etc. that come to you with free writing.

Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring--

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.



Optional Sharing

- What did you notice?
- Do you want to share any part of what you wrote?
- Did you find this challenging or easy?
- Did anything surprise you?

Journal Writing Practice #2: Expressive Writing

Focus Areas

- Typical Approach: Write about deepest feelings and thoughts about a traumatic or stressful event or series of events.
- Cognitive Processing Approach: Focus writing about thoughts and feelings about a traumatic or stressful event or series of events with an attempt to derive more understanding and insight.
- Exposure Approach: Write about deepest feelings and thoughts about the same traumatic or stressful event across several consecutive writing sessions.
- Benefit Finding Approach: Identify a traumatic or stressful event or series of events and focus writing on the positive aspects of the experience (e.g., how you've changed or grown as a result).
- Best Possible Future Self Approach: Imagine your future life as if evolving exactly as you'd hope and capture this in your writing.

Optional Sharing

- Take a look at what you've written and circle any words or phrases that really stand out to you
- Take a moment and see if you can detect any themes or patterns in what you have written
- Reflect on the way the writing process made you feel

Share about any of the above





Thank you for your
participation and attention!

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