

The Write Way to Well-Being After Brain Injury

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The simple act of writing about your deep thoughts and feelings can help you feel better physically and emotionally—a welcome experience after a brain injury to you or a loved one. Writing for just a few minutes at a time has been proven to help reduce stress, increase happiness, manage difficult experiences, clear up confusion, and even reduce the effects of some medical conditions. This writing is private and you need not share it with anyone—nor keep it—to experience these benefits. In this hands-on session, you will experience this process using basic journaling techniques you can do in ten minutes or less. Journaling even just a few times a week eases stress, provides comfort, builds resilience, and helps restore your own well-being as you continue on your new, post-injury journey.

No writing or journaling experience necessary!

. . *How to Journal* . .

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

~~ Susan Borkin

After a brain injury to you or to someone in your care, writing in your journal with the intention of exploring your inner self and your life is a powerful way of putting back together the "broken pieces." While the journaling techniques offered in this class are not therapy, the writing you do here (and at home later, I hope) can be therapeutic.

Simply put, journaling is the practice of writing about any part of your life to explore your thoughts and feelings about it. You can simply begin writing, or you can use various techniques, such as the ones in this program. A journal is a safe, private sanctuary where you can write in any way you like about what is in your heart and on your mind. Your journal will not judge or criticize you, it doesn't require an appointment, and it won't charge you a fee!

By keeping a journal over time, you create an ongoing record that helps you remember your past, explore your present, and envision your future. Writing in this way is like capturing your thoughts and feelings in a container for safekeeping and remembrance, where they become more manageable. Once on the page, they are yours for further exploration and discovery.

Happily, you do not have to be a "good" writer. And journaling has no rules (yay!), so don't worry about following writing rules like grammar or spelling. Just do your best to let the words flow however they flow, as honestly as you can. You can write whenever you like, although it is best to write with some regularity for best results. (A few times a week is good, if that works for you.) You can also write for as long as you want, be it five minutes or sixty minutes. It's your journal, so you decide. You can also add other items to your journal, such as photos, poems, or quotations you would

like to preserve. You can also sketch or draw on your journal pages. Your journal can be as creative or as straightforward as you like.

A good guideline: Date all your entries so that you have a chronological record, a timeline. This will help keep your entries organized and more quickly available later on.

Journaling is usually private. So put your journal away when you're not using it, or password-protect your electronic journal. Privacy allows you to be as honest as you can be. However, even though your journal is private, you may occasionally write something you *never* want anyone else to see. In those cases, feel free to rip out those few pages and destroy them. You wrote and released what was in your heart, and that's the important part of the process.

You can write by hand in a journal or notebook if you prefer and are able to do so. Or you can use a computer or tablet. If you have voice-recognition software on your computer, you can speak your entries and the computer will write them for you. You can also simply speak your entries into an audio recording device, such as a smart phone or a digital recorder. If none of these are possible, you can ask a trusted person to scribe your entries for you as you speak them, without judging, criticizing, or changing what you say.

Here is one important thing to remember while journaling. If you are writing about something that's very painful or traumatic and you feel yourself becoming overly 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.

If you like, any time before you begin writing, you can take a few minutes for some slow, deep breathing to relax and get centered. Then start writing when you are ready.

So, let's begin!

. . 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. (And please remember that it's fine to write for a shorter time, too.)

A helpful journaling technique is to use a "prompt" to get started. A prompt is a few words or a phrase that form the beginning of your journal entry.

For your first journal entry, try writing from one of the prompts below. Choose one that feels right or catches your interest, and then do your best to keep writing until time is called (but don't worry if you stop early). Continue on to the back of this page if you need to.

- Right now, I feel...
- My heart is telling me...
- If you're a survivor: Having this brain injury means...
- OR if you're a caregiver: Being a caregiver means...
- Something on my mind...

Write your prompt here and then keep writing your journal entry:

(Continue on the other side of the page if necessary.)

• • *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. (And if we're honest with ourselves, we know we all have those emotions from time to time!)

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.

You can write an Unsent Letter to any number of recipients, including people (living or passed on), physical conditions or parts of the body, God or your higher power, your pet or other animal, yourself or some aspect of yourself—the loving self, the tired self, the determined self, etc. In short, you can write an Unsent Letter to anyone or anything you can imagine.

Begin as you would any letter, on the line below. If you can, continue writing until I call the time. When you finish your letter, be sure to sign off—Cordially, Sincerely, Love, or just your name.

Dear _____,

(Continue on the other side of the page if necessary.)

. . *I Still Have This* . .

As a survivor or a caregiver, brain injury left you with losses, some small and some large. These losses changed you and your life. However, some positive aspects remained, and some aspects may have even improved. So it's important to remember the positive parts of your life remaining after the injury. You can record the good parts of your life as often as you like in your journal—and then you have a written record to remind you and boost your spirits on not-so-good days.

It can take some time to realize and appreciate the positives that remain—or happen—after a brain injury. Sometimes, the positive is simply realizing that the injury could have been worse. Other times, you might discover that living with brain injury has given you gifts you might not have realized before.

What are some of the good things about you and your life that you still have after brain injury? Make a list of 5 of them here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now choose one that makes you feel happiest or better than the rest. Write about it beginning with this prompt:

After brain injury I still have.....

(Continue on the other side of the page if necessary.)

. . People Should Know This About Me . .

You are a complete person with all kinds of qualities, quirks, and talents, but some people might not take the time to get to know and appreciate you.

What should people know about you? What kind of great qualities do you have? If you can't do some things you used to do, what other things can you do now? What are some of the traits that make you who you are?

Make a list of 5 qualities, talents, or other things you would like people to know about you. Go ahead—feel free to brag on yourself!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Next, choose one or more of those items and write a 5-Minute Sprint about them. If you like, begin with:

Something people should know about me is...

(Continue on the other side of the page if necessary.)

.. Journaling Resources ..

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Jacobs, Beth, PhD. 2004. *Writing For Emotional Balance*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

.. Presenter ..

Barbara Stahura, certified journal facilitator, for nine years guided people with brain injury and family caregivers in harnessing the power of journaling for healing and well-being, first in Arizona and then in Indiana. Today she presents journaling programs on a variety of topics. She has presented programs for HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospitals in Tucson, Ariz. and Evansville, Ind., nine state Brain Injury Association/ Alliance conferences, the National Guard Bureau and the Arizona National Guard, Ivy Tech Community College, University of Southern Indiana, University of Evansville, and many others. Primary author of the acclaimed *After Brain Injury: Telling Your Story*, the first journaling book for people with brain injury, Barbara is a member of the Therapeutic Writing Institute faculty and the Journal Council of the International Association of Journal Writing. She lives in Indiana with her husband, a survivor of traumatic brain injury.
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