SECTION 3

Understanding the Stages of Writing, Healing, and Compassionate Reframing

We are all storytellers. We make sense of the world we live in, we create meaning, and we explain things that happened to us and others. We largely do this in an informal manner, like when we are chatting with friends, sending a text, writing a letter, or posting on social media. This section will help you understand the benefits of writing or telling your story and will guide you through exploring your experience.

What can writing do for survivors?

All forms of sexual violence can be deeply traumatic and can impact a survivor's physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being. Trauma is complex in its impacts, and recovery from it is equally as complex. Each survivor reacts to forms of sexual violence in their own unique way and needs to find their own path to healing. Recovery from sexual trauma is a gradual, ongoing process, but there are steps you can take to reclaim and reframe your experience to enhance your healing by incorporating the injury, loss, pain, and changes caused by trauma and its aftermath.

Expressive writing and storytelling have been found to offer real psychological and physical benefits and aids in transforming pain and suffering into resilience. Research* shows that writing about troubling issues improves our mental and physical health by giving us a space to channel, process and release negative emotions. Some benefits you may experience are:

- * Improved mood
- * Enhanced immune system functioning
- * Reduced high blood pressure and cholesterol
- * Reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorder (PTSD)

What transformation can come from writing and telling your story?

- * Confidence that you can survive anything and a new awareness of your inner strength.
- * A better understanding of your life's complexities.
- * Acceptance of what was once too frightening to even think about.
- * A deeper connection with your emotional and spiritual self.
- * Respect and compassion for others who survived a trauma.

While healing and transformation is possible, it's important to also acknowledge that it can be a difficult journey at times. Any time you delve into something deep or uncomfortable, it

*Studies by those in the forefront of this research -James Pennebaker, Ph.D of the University of Texas at Austin, and Joshua Smyth, Ph.D of Syracuse University - suggest that writing about emotions and stress can help improve functioning.

may lead you to tap into emotions that might be emotional and exhausting. It is important to know that when you tap into something really heavy, in the immediate it might feel really uncomfortable. But, when you work through something, the long-term gains can be quite positive. Allow yourself to sit in your discomfort – accepting it as a part of the process of healing and transformation. It might be helpful, too, to recognize that your feelings of discomfort or exhaustion can be a sign of progress.

Let's get started on some deeper work!

FIVE STAGES OF WRITING YOUR STORY ON YOUR TERMS

Sandra Marinella, MS MEd, is an award winning writing teacher and the author of, "The Story You Need to Tell," which she wrote to help people cope with trauma, illness or loss through the art of writing. We have adapted her five stages of writing to help survivors of sexual violence develop strategies to write through difficult times in order to find their voice. We'll guide you through these stages. Take your time with each stage. You can do just one per sitting or day and come back to the next one whenever you're ready.

STAGE 1

Experiencing Pain and Grief

Reliving painful memories and experiences are a large part of the healing process. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts when it comes to feeling grief. Getting in touch with your grief will be important as you start to write your story. Take some time now to reflect on what you have lost as a result of the sexual violence you experienced and write down those losses (if applicable). If you need assistance in identifying some of your losses and getting in touch with your grief, consider answering some of the following questions.

For example, Did you lose have to chang	your sense any relation ge a dream d	of safety, you ships with sp or goal that y	ır confidence, pecial people ou had as a re	your desire to as a result of esult of your ex	o be intimate, o your experient xperience? Wer exual violence?	or your trust? ce? Did you e you robbed

STAGE 2

Breaking the Silence

For some survivors, this stage begins with writing down all of their painful emotions and details of their experiences. It can serve as a helpful release of the pain and grief, especially if these emotions have been buried deep inside for a long time. Keep in mind that every emotion has a charge, and the positive or negative energy an emotion generates has a real and measurable impact on our bodies. The act of writing allows us to physically release some of that emotional charge. A release of emotions allows you to utilize your voice. Take time now to write down the details of your experience and the painful emotions that may come to mind that may be disturbing your peace. This should be a continuation to your writing exercises in the last section.

Expressive writing comes from your core, so write this part only for yourself. It is personal and emotional writing without regard to form or the other writing conventions like spelling, punctuation or verb agreement. It is best that you don't overthink it – just start. Write for 15 minutes on page 21 and then stop.

STAGE 3

Accepting and Piecing Your Story Together

Reaching acceptance about the pain you experienced as a result of sexual violence comes when you acknowledge the experience that occurred, express anger and grief about what was done to you, share what you lost as a result, start talking to others about the experience, and begin to understand your feelings about the experience.

At this stage, you can begin to move your emotions into a logical framework. Writing is profoundly helpful in doing this. Here are a few sentence starters that you can use to begin accepting and piecing your story together:

- * What comes to mind when I think of my experience...
- * What bothers me most about my experience(s) of sexual violence is/ are:...
- * What I would like to understand is...
- * I am hopeful that...
- * What I have learned is...
- * Perhaps it would help if...
- * I knew I was faced with the biggest challenge when...
- * The secret I still harbor about this experience is...
- * The scars that I hide from this experience are...

JUST WRITE

STAGE 4

Finding Meaning or Making Sense of Your Story

This is a multi-step stage that requires you to zoom out and stand outside of your experience to see the complete picture. To do this, it is important to understand that your reactions to your experience of sexual violence – your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – are a result of not only the details of the experience, but the lessons you draw from them. Keep in mind, there is usually more than one meaning for any experience.

Healing from trauma often involves gaining a new perspective that allows you to see the details of your experience differently. There are steps you can take to help you look at the details of your experience of sexual violence, examine your reactions and meanings, understand how the experience might have disrupted your deep beliefs about yourself, others, and the world around you, and what you can do to reframe that disruption.

To help you with this stage, we will utilize an adapted exercise written by Dr. Rosenbloom and Dr. Williams, authors of "Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing," to provide you suggestions for thinking through your experiences and finding meaning.

Steps for Thinking Through Your Experience and Finding Meaning

STEP ONE

Sort Out the Meaning the Experience has for You

Meanings are the way we interpret what happened to us. There is no right or wrong meaning. It is possible to have many different meanings that fit the same experience.

To help you examine the way you are interpreting the details of your experience, ask yourself:

* How did I interpret this experience of sexual violence?

STEP THREE Some of our beliefs may even be unconscious, and we may not be aware of how these belied affect our actions. When we identify these underlying beliefs, we can discover which one may limit or hold us back and which ones can be empowering and help drive us toward the life we want to live.
What are the beliefs about your experience that you believe protect or help you?
What are underlying beliefs you may have that hold you back or get in your way of healing
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STAGE 5

Imagine an Alternative Meaning for Your Experience

This is about healing and it is about you determining what the experience means to you in your life now - no one else. Although the reality of what happened to you cannot be changed, the way you view and process it can. To help you with this stage, look back at the writing exercises you completed in the previous steps.

Are there other ways to reinterpret how you view yourself during and after your experience? What else did the situation mean? Is there an alternative meaning that would fit your experience? If so, what is it?

Here are some sentence starters to help you answer those questions:

- * Tuning into my body now....
- * I can honestly say now...
- * These were things that used to get in my way of healing, but today...
- * I know I am not responsible for...
- * Three things that give me hope...
- * Something I can now celebrate is...
- * Although it feels like I can never get back _____, today I know...
- * I know it is okay to...
- * I learned that these are the qualities that I admire in myself...
- * The ways I cope are....
- * It feeds my soul when...
- * I know I am not alone because...* A major obstacle I overcame was

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Explore

- * Step out of Your Story: Writing Exercises to Reframe and Transform Your Life by K Schneiderman
- * Writing Ourselves Whole: Using the Power of Your Own Creativity to Recover and Heal from Sexual Trauma by Jen Cross
- * The Year After Journal: Your Guide to Reclaiming Personal Power After Rape by Ashley Warner
- * The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness or Loss by Sandra Marinella
- * Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing by Dr. Rosenbloom and Dr. Williams
- * Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within by Natalie Goldberg
- * The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity by Julia Cameron
- * Online resources to help you write your own story: @ blurb.com/blog/10-story-writing-websites/