#### **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

<sup>\*</sup>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.

Do you feel that someone has stolen something from you as a result of your experience? For example, your sense of safety, your confidence, your desire to be intimate, or your trust? Did you lose any relationships with special people as a result of your experience? Did you have to change a dream or goal that you had as a result of your experience? Were you robbed from having a special experience or opportunity because of the sexual violence?

#### 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...





#### **STAGE 4**

#### Shifting Your Perspective and How You View Yourself

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 itself, but what happened afterwards. This may include how others may have reacted to what happened, how you coped, or how this experience may have shaped how you feel, act, or view yourself – consciously or subconsciously.

Healing from trauma often involves gaining a new perspective that allows you to view yourself after the experience differently – identifying who you are outside of this experience can help to decrease any power it may hold over you and your life. There are steps you can take to help reframe your perspective of yourself to support your healing. This includes looking at the details of your experience of sexual violence, examining your reactions, and understanding how the experience might have changed, shaped, or disrupted any deep beliefs about yourself, others, and the world around you.

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 a perspective of yourself that will support your healing and well-being moving forward.

### Steps for Thinking Through Your Experience

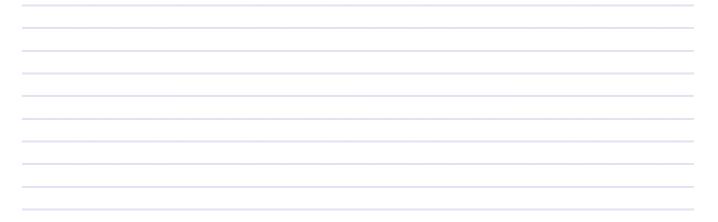
### **STEP ONE**

#### Sort Out Your Experience

There is no right or wrong way to understand your experience.

Think about your own reactions to your experience first and then the reactions you may have received and ask yourself:

\* What ideas or beliefs did I make up about myself because of what happened?



#### **STEP TWO**

#### Identify Any Changes to Your Beliefs

Beliefs are meanings we hold about ourselves, other people, and the world around us. There are five basic needs that all people have that shape our core beliefs:

- 1. Safety
- 2. Trust
- 3. Control
- 4. Self-Esteem
- 5. Intimacy and Connectedness with Others

We develop beliefs from what has happened to us, from watching what happens to people around us and from what we have been told to believe from people in our lives. These beliefs become part of who we are and how we function. It is possible for beliefs to change. When we are traumatized, our basic beliefs can be impacted dramatically.

Has your traumatic experience changed your beliefs about some things? In which situations have you noticed this?

What lessons did you draw about yourself? About other people? The world?

#### **STEP THREE**

#### **Identify Your Underlying Beliefs**

Some of our beliefs may even be unconscious, and we may not be aware of how these beliefs affect our actions. When we identify these underlying beliefs, we can discover which ones may limit or hold us back and which ones can be empowering and help drive us toward the life we want to live.

Are there any beliefs you may now hold about yourself after your experience that you believe protect or help you? For example, "What happened to me was a trauma, and it did affect me; ignoring it wasn't helpful anymore," or "I am not alone. The difficulties I'm facing and the feelings I am going through are very common among survivors of sexual assault," or "I know this was not my fault."

What are underlying beliefs you may have that hold you back or get in your way of healing? For example, "I should have responded differently," or "I will never be the same again," or "It must have been my fault."

#### **STAGE 5**

#### Redefine How You View Yourself Today

This stage is not asking you to reimagine your assault or to find any "silver lining" in your trauma. This stage asks you to reimagine how you view yourself during and after your trauma and to release any possible self-blame you've given or interpretations you've made about yourself that do not serve your healing.

Are there other ways to reinterpret how you view yourself during and after your experience?

#### 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 about myself 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