

## 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.



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## 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



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