

WRITING FOR EMOTIONAL BALANCE

A Guided Journal to Help You Manage Overwhelming Emotions

By Beth Jacobs, Ph.D.

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FEELING OVERWHELMED? TRY KEEPING A JOURNAL...

Expressive writing can lead to increased physical and emotional well-being

The need to write things down, to make a record of our thoughts and feelings, is a strong one. In the U.S. alone 12million blank journals are bought each year. The act of processing our feelings through journal writing can help us understand and deal with emotions that would otherwise be overwhelming.

Writing for Emotional Balance guides readers through exercises designed to help them develop the skills necessary to manage these overwhelming emotions, which can include mood swings, anger, depression, anxiety, or mania. Readers learn to identify the emotions, use expressive writing to explore the roots of them, track their emotional states, and in general express their feelings in appropriate and healthy ways.

“Writing for Emotional Balance is a great workbook that is well suited for people who need to get a better understanding of their own emotional lives. Jacobs is a smart and compassionate writer who provides a wide array of exercises that can help people to reach and maintain optimal emotional and mental health.”

—**James W. Pennebaker**, professor of psychology,
University of Texas at Austin; author, *Opening Up* and *Writing to Heal*

“The ability to regulate one’s emotions is a necessary component of a productive, happy life. Unfortunately, far too many people are unable to manage their reactions to the difficulties that are an inevitable part of human existence. Jacobs has written a very practical guide to help those who are unaware of and/or unable to cope with their emotions.”

—**Frank Summers, Ph.D.**, training and supervising analyst at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, associate professor of clinical psychiatry and the behavioral sciences at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University

THE BENEFITS OF JOURNALING

- * psychological
- * well-being
- * sleep improvement
- * Increased immune functioning
- * better blood pressure

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Jacobs, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who has worked in private practice for 20 years, and is also on the faculty of the Northwestern University Medical center. Dr. Jacobs has a special interest in journal-assisted therapy, and has designed and run workshops for the public on journal writing skills. She uses journal-assisted therapy extensively in her own practice.

SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How did the concept of *Writing for Emotional Balance* come about?
- Why is the focus of this Guided Journal on building emotion management skills?
- There is documentation that expressive writing is beneficial to people's psychological and physical health. Could you discuss some of it?
- Why aren't people able to deal with overwhelming emotions on their own?
- As a clinician, how do you compare using journals to develop emotion management skills to traditional psychotherapy?

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EXCERPT, *WRITING FOR EMOTIONAL BALANCE*

A TRUE STORY

One interesting event concerning journaling occurred when a client was struggling to perceive and believe something about her own motivations in relationships. I tried to express a particular point one way and another, but my communication wasn't effective. Then, one day, my client found an old journal that she had written at the age of sixteen. She was amazed to discover that she had written about the identical motivations as an adolescent with a clarity that still rang perfectly. From that point on, she was able to really comprehend and work on her relationships. She had to read it from the outside, but the message had to come from within her own self.

Journaling takes place inside and outside ourselves

The story above illustrates an important principle of how journals work. Journals exist in a halfway space between ourselves and the outside world. The concept of this kind of "transitional" zone was expressed by the brilliant pediatrician-turned-analyst D. W. Winnicott (1965). Some objects or make-believe activities help children to develop by giving them a space in which to experiment. The unique quality of that space is that it is outside of their bodies but within their own imaginative realm. Journals play with that same space. When we write, our thoughts and feelings are moved outside of our minds and onto paper, but we, ourselves, are our primary audience. When we keep a journal, we can experience ourselves or parts of ourselves from the outside and the inside simultaneously.

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OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS: TWO VIEWS

Sara got on the train to go to work and an amazing thing happened. At the next stop, a handsome man sat down beside her and started reading exactly the same book that she was reading. He was so engrossed that he didn't even notice this strange coincidence. She glanced at him sideways. There was something sweet about him. Her heart started pounding and she wanted to say something to him, but she felt paralyzed. The train ride was over so quickly that she lost her chance. He got off the train and disappeared in the commuter rush.

Now she can't stop thinking about him and the possible meaning of their reading the same book while sitting side by side on the train. She's started getting up early and walking to the stop where he boarded the train. She keeps carrying the book although she finished it the very night she saw him. At work, her thoughts drift off as she imagines talking to him and she sometimes snaps at coworkers if they interrupt her. She longs for one more chance to make contact with him.

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EXCERPT, WRITING FOR EMOTIONAL BALANCE

It's been eight months since Ray's father died. He's doing fine but he's not doing much of anything. At first, his friends complimented him on his courage and strength in dealing with his loss, but now no one seems to even remember that his father is gone. For a while, having to handle all of the details of the funeral arrangements, the will, death certificates, and estate taxes kept him very busy. Everyone knows that Ray is the most responsible person in the family. One sister left town two days after the funeral and the other has been drinking a fair amount. His mother is still taking lots of medicine to help her sleep.

Everything has settled down, but to Ray it feels as if he's not entirely living his life anymore. It's too much bother trying to schedule getting together with other people, and he really doesn't feel involved in his work so much lately. He's going through the motions. It feels as if something important is missing, but Ray would feel so ungrateful if he were to complain. His father led a long, full life and Ray knows that he himself is healthy and doing well. He believes that people should be appreciative and count their blessings, but even that feels like too much effort.

These two stories seem to have little in common. They are about two very different people having different reactions to different types of events. But both people are overwhelmed by their emotions. Their feelings are poorly defined, interfering with their activities and dominating all of their perceptions. Their emotions are running their lives.

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Sara & Ray Revisited

To illustrate the basic concepts of emotion management and the applications of journaling, consider Sara's and Ray's problems, which were described in the introduction. Sara's unresolved emotions had swept her into a realm of obsessive fantasy, and Ray, stuck in a pervasive sadness, was ignoring many signs that he might be depressed. If each of them kept a journal and knew some of the skills of emotion management, how would their stories change?

Sara's Story

Sara got on the train to go to work and an amazing thing happened. At the next stop, a handsome man sat down beside her and started reading exactly the same book that she was reading. She immediately felt funny and recognized that her heart was pounding, which she knew was usually a symptom of anxiety. She took three deep breaths to calm down and looked out the window for a moment to refocus herself. Although she felt calmer, she didn't feel comfortable enough to try speaking to the man. She recognized her limits but stayed flexible, realizing that any self-criticism about her inability to start a conversation would only compound her disappointment.

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Still, when she got to work, she found herself fantasizing about the man. She recognized this as an indirect expression of some unrecognized feeling. So she closed the door to her office and got out her journal. She was tempted to write a short story about her romantic possibilities with this man. But she had filled reams of paper with stories of romantic possibilities and she knew this only fueled her feelings instead of resolving them. So she started writing freely about anything else that came to mind.

The overcast sky outside her window reminded her of a day when she was much younger, shortly after her parents' divorce. She found herself becoming tearful as she described the gap she had felt in her life after her father left. She had never even had a chance to get to know him. This memory suddenly matched the longing the stranger on the train had evoked in her. She understood the connection. It was all about how lonely she felt, and she sighed. She put down her pen, hid her journal, and called her best friend. They made plans to have dinner together that night and Sara knew that dinner with her friend would be a reliable comfort. Then she got to work on the report her supervisor needed.

Ray's Story

It's been eight months since Ray's father died. He's doing fine but he's not doing much of anything. He feels that his grief about losing his father is constant and relentless. It seems to have infiltrated his whole life and he feels lethargic, withdrawn, and doesn't sleep well. Ray's family tends not to talk about feelings and they certainly don't use words like "depression," but Ray is aware that some of his feelings might be symptoms of something more than a normal reaction to a profound loss.

He's even thought of getting some professional help and has looked up the names of some therapists in the yellow pages. But each time he looked, he closed the book and thought maybe he was a little better than he had been last week or maybe he would be a little better next week.

Ray has a good friend who works in a bookstore, and sometimes his friend has good ideas about how to handle hard situations. So he dropped by the bookstore and went out for coffee with his friend. It actually helped to confide to someone how worried he was about himself. His friend didn't think his worry was unwarranted. His friend had also been wondering about what was going on with Ray. His friend also gave Ray some advice. He told Ray to write in a journal every day and to notice what themes emerged in his writing over time and how he felt as he made his journal entries. He told Ray that was how he kept track of his own feelings.

EXCERPT, *WRITING FOR EMOTIONAL BALANCE*

pressure he'd always felt to be responsible and unemotional, holding it together while the others in his family went their separate ways. He'd been worried that if he allowed himself to feel anything at all, he would completely lose his composure. But the journal seemed to contain his feelings and allowed him to express how he felt a little at a time. Ray made a plan to write every day for a month and see if his feelings changed. After a month, he could make a more informed decision about what kind of help he might need with his feelings.

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