LIFE IN YOUR 50s:

Managing issues around caregiving and relationships with growing children and aging parents (the “sandwich generation”) through therapeutic writing

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A Patient Tool

OVERVIEW

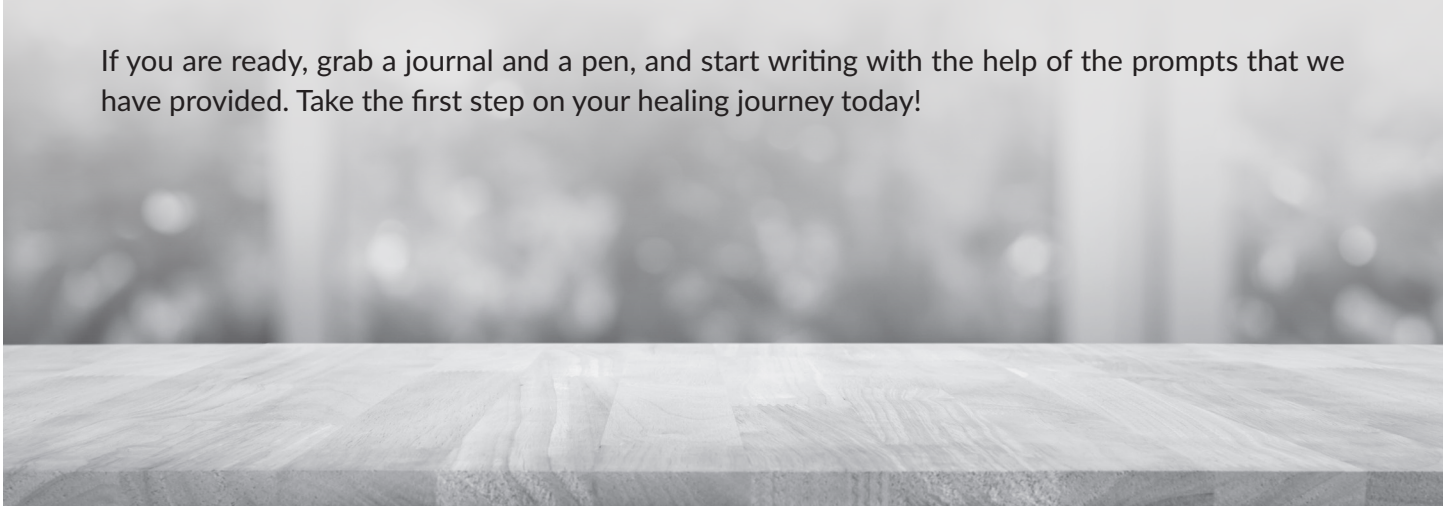
Therapeutic writing is a kind of structured journal writing. It is a self-care tool to encourage deeper and clearer reflection, processing, and discovery. Therapeutic writing can help you heal, grow, and thrive.

- Writing prompts are offered as frames—it's up to you to decide which content is most useful to examine through these frames.
- In therapeutic writing, the ***process*** is more important than the product: it is not about the sentences that you craft on the page, but the ***experience*** of writing.
- You can also refer to your journal entries later, as a resource, to read and reflect on what you've written and track your progress.
- herapeutic writing, like any form of journal writing, is a place where you can have a conversation with the person who knows you best: ***you***.
- Some people find further healing and insight through sharing their reflections with others. But whether you share your work is up to you. Therapeutic writing is a deeply personal process, so for it to be profound and meaningful just to ***you*** is enough.

MANAGING STRESS THROUGH WRITING

Writing has been found in many studies to reduce feelings of depression, anxiety, and the stress of navigating relationships with your maturing children and your aging parents: the demands of taking care of both, the emotions that can arise from these relationships changing, and your own evolving identity in your various roles. Learning to tolerate and decrease these feelings of distress can have physical, psychological, and emotional benefits—including improving sleep, reducing bodily expressions of stress (headaches, stomach pain/digestive issues, rapid heart rate, neck, and shoulder tension, etc.), resisting catastrophic thinking, developing more rational thought reframing, and de-escalating emotional responses to more manageable levels.

If you are ready, grab a journal and a pen, and start writing with the help of the prompts that we have provided. Take the first step on your healing journey today!



THERAPEUTIC WRITING PROMPTS

Caregiving and identity: As a member of the "sandwich generation," your caregiving can take over your sense of self, as though your only identity is in relation to other people and their needs. But there is much more to *who you are* than a parent of maturing children and a child of aging parents. To get back in touch with your fuller, more independent sense of self, make a list of five *other* things that define you in some way—just one word, phrase, or a sentence at most. This defining characteristic could be a role you play (one that is distinct from your caregiving role), a quality of your personality or physical appearance, a particular skill (or a lack of skill); a strong like or dislike; a strength or a weakness; an experience you had that was especially meaningful; a place, or even an object, a meaningful experience or object, or even another person who is meaningful to you. See what rises to the surface, without overthinking. You could do this exercise again in a month and come up with five completely different things. Once you have your list, think about each item, and expand on it, exploring more how it defines your sense of self.

Evolving relationships: Both younger and older adults are in life stages of significant transition. As the parent of the former and the child of the latter, you too are experiencing significant transition in your relationships with your maturing children and your aging parents. For each relationship, write down two negative changes and explore how you can grieve the loss of what was and accept what is now. Then, write down two positive changes to recognize the good in what's new. After that, write down two things that are the same to remind you of what remains constant in these relationships.

Letter to another person: Write to another person what you can't express in real life, whether that's because it's emotionally uncomfortable or logistically challenging—whatever reason. What do you feel you need to express to this person? It's helpful to address the person directly but with the awareness that you have the privacy and freedom to express yourself fully. You're not actually sending this letter (at least not this version) but writing it can help clarify your own thoughts and feelings.

Two points of view: Write two versions of a moment or memory from the past, first from your point of view, then from someone else's, using a first-person narrative style (usually using the pronoun "I") to try to access the head and heart of the other person. The point of this exercise is to increase awareness of the possibility of multiple truths: that our perspectives can be different but both valid.

Write from a photograph: Choose two photographs, one of you with your child(ren) and one of you with your parent(s). Each photograph should be a moment that was meaningful in some way. Write about what the photograph represents. You can start with the concrete context (when it was taken, where you were, etc.), but the point is to delve into the *internal* life of the photograph, what is *unseen*. What are the thoughts and feelings of the people pictured? What was leading up to this moment, and what happened after? How do you feel now, looking at the people in this past moment?

Letting go: What are five things that you could let go of? What can you purge, what do you not need, and what no longer serves you? Try to be figurative as well as literal here—they can be actual objects, but they can also be habits or attitudes that don't serve you (e.g., letting go of people who are toxic or more abstract things). The purpose is to identify your unnecessary burdens, explore how you might unload them, and then set an intention to do so.

Regrets, decisions, paths not traveled: Pick an important decision that you made in the past that you wish you'd made differently. First, imagine making another decision and how things might have played out differently (better, or not necessarily?); then, investigate why you made the decision that you did make and why you thought it was a good decision given what you knew and how you felt at the time. The goal is to empathize with and forgive your former self.

Gratitude writing: This is one of my favorites. It is simple and it works. Each evening, take 5-10 minutes and write down 5 thing you are grateful for that day. They can be even small, simple things like that smile you got in the grocery store. Gratitude writing for a little as 4 weeks improves mood and reduces stress and burnout.

RESOURCES

- *The Midnight Library*, by Matt Haig — a novel exploring regret, decisions, and paths not traveled
- "Putting Your Feelings on Paper," by Sarah Saffian, *Adoptive Families*, Spring 2015: http://bit.ly/1SF7nIr
- "Narrative and Adoption," Sarah Saffian video interview with Barbara Freedgood, LCSW: http://bit.ly/1GTuFXl
- *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*, by James Pennebaker
- *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*, by Timothy Wilson
- *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, by Louise DeSalvo
- *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, by Michael White and David Epston
- "How to Deal with Anxiety, Tragedy, or Heartache—4 Steps From Research," about James Pennebaker, by Eric Barker, Time.com, 11/18/14: http://ti.me/1t7ICVg
- "Writing Your Way to Happiness," by Tara Parker-Pope, *The New York Times*, 1/19/15: http://nyti.ms/1TgKlpJ
- "The Writing Assignment That Changes Lives," by Anya Kamenetz, NPR, 7/10/15: http://n.pr/1GctM5X