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DCADV 2025

# ***Therapeutic Writing***

## Giving Voice & Healing Trauma

Robbin Loonan, LPC  
Samantha Dooley, LCSW



# ***Introductions & Welcome***



**Robbin Loonan, LPC, DVS**

she/her

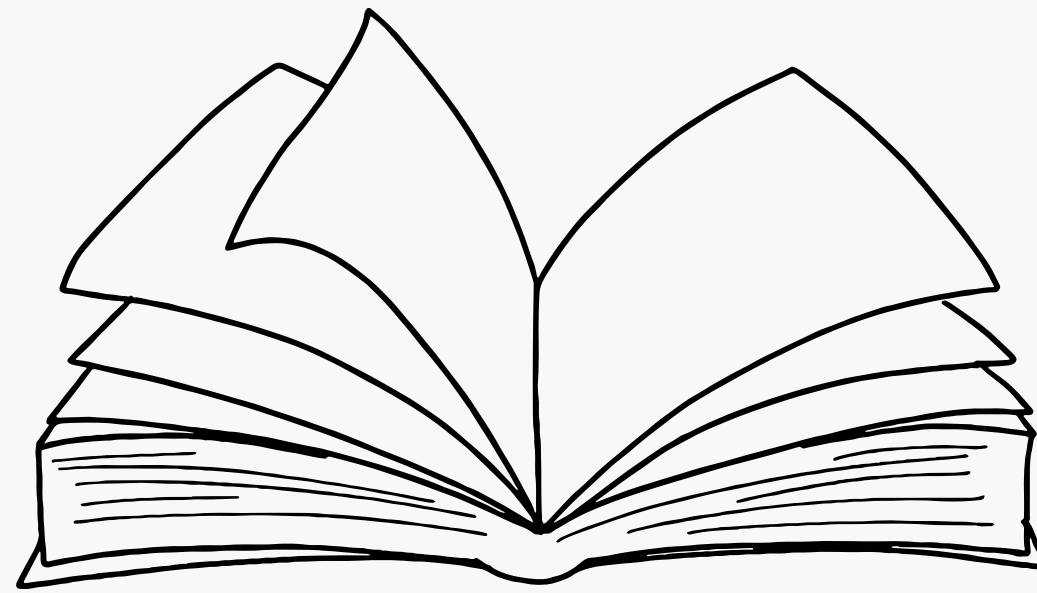


**Samantha Dooley, LCSW, CSVA**

she/her



# *Activity*



Who has kept a journal?

Was it helpful? If so, how? If not, why not?

When I think about writing/journaling I....

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# ***Why Journal?***

- “I don’t want to talk about it”/ I can’t talk about it
- Process trauma
- Gives client a sense of control & Empowerment
- Allows for containment
- Express feelings & Organize thoughts
- Enhances Self- discovery/ Self- awareness/ Self- acceptance
- Helps discover and define our values, purpose, and dreams
- Provides a safe & private outlet for self-expression: “Just let it rip”



# *Why journal?*

“Writing enables me to collect organize and express my thoughts. By writing them down I am able to detach from them and let them go.”.

**Zachary Phillips , Author**

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"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

**Tony Morrison**

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“By writing you are basically shining a light on your inner demons that are running around in the dark recesses of your mind.”

**On Writing, Therapy for Mental Health**

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“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”

**Maya Angelou**

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# Research

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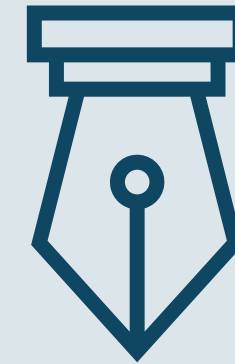
People who write about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding traumatic events have stronger immunity and visit their doctors half as often as those who write only about trivial events.

(James W. Pennebaker, M.D. professor of psychology, University of Texas)



Participants of the Transform Your Life: Write to Heal program (clinical study), who had experienced recent trauma, significantly improved their resilience, depression symptoms, perceived stress and rumination.

(Duke Integrative Medicine & Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Vanderbilt 2019)



The act of taking pen to paper can help you relax, manage anxiety, & cope with depression.

(University of Rochester Medical Center, “Journaling for Mental Health”)

# Research

A study published in the Journal of Nursing Education (2016) noted that both students and faculty found reflective journaling to be helpful for developing critical thinking skills.



Improved emotional and physical health: Regular journaling enhances mood and emotional awareness and reduces stress levels (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005).

Boosted immunity: Writing about traumatic experiences can improve immune function by boosting lymphocyte activity, a key component of the immune system (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Stanton et al., 2008).

Writing a journal is a great way to channel your creative energy into expressing yourself, reducing anxiety, and solving problems.

-TeachThought, Nov. 15, 2019



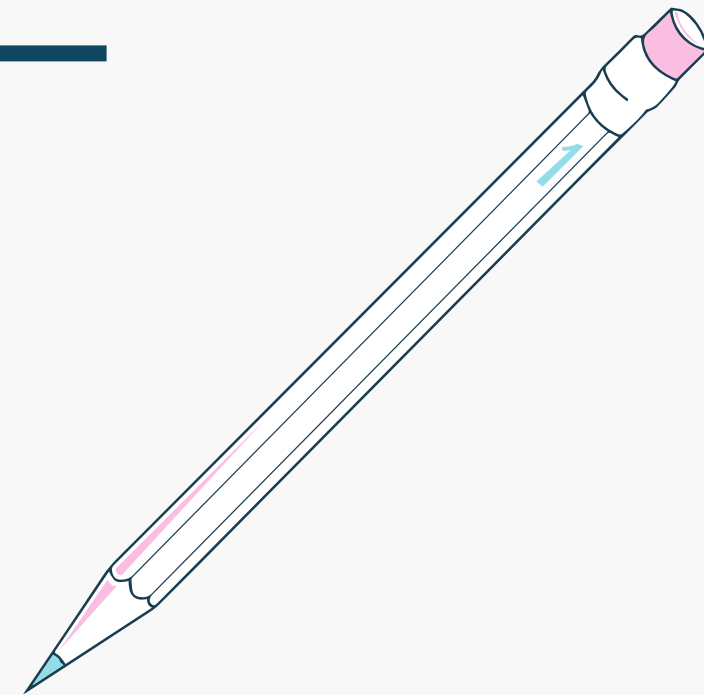
# *Activity*

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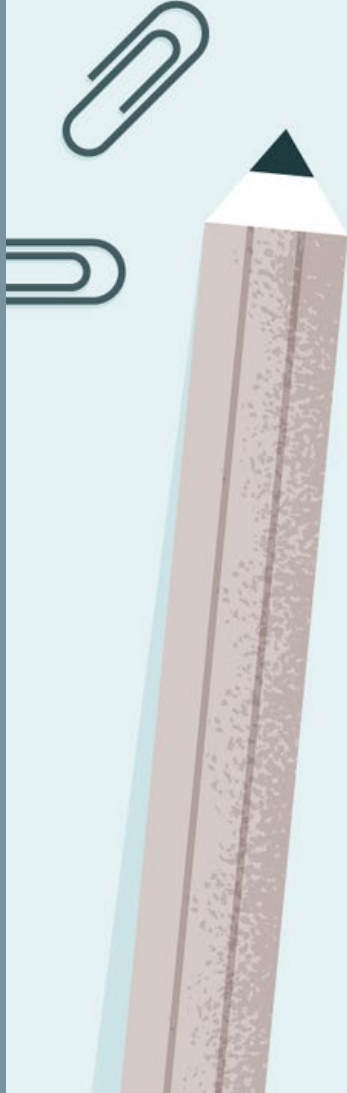
Writing exercise

Sentence Completion...

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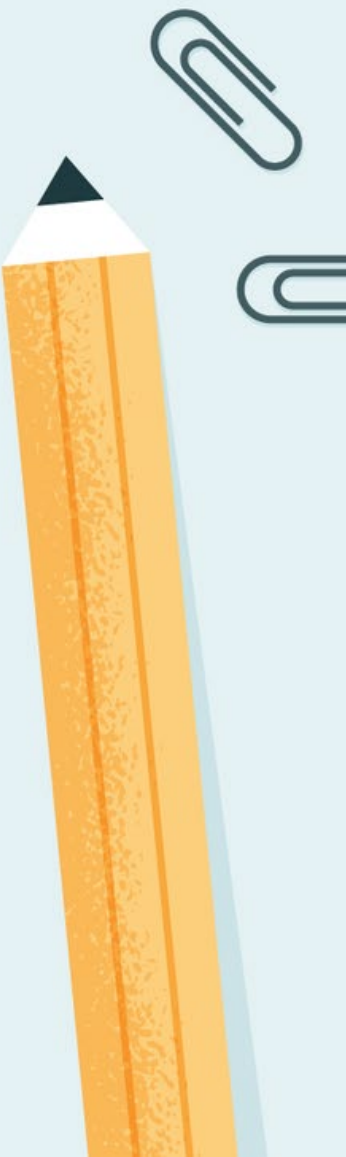






"Journal writing  
gives us insights  
into who we are,  
who we were, and  
who we can become."

-Sandra Marinella,  
Author



"I write entirely to find  
out what I am thinking,  
what I am looking at,  
what I see and what it  
means. What I want  
and what I fear."

-Joan Didion, Writer

# *Trauma-informed Writing*

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## **Processing vs. Content**

- Asking about experience of writing
- “bottom up” approach / three part healing (Malchodi, 2019)
- Consider trauma treatment stages (Herman, 2015).
- Avoiding retraumatization

## **Empowerment**

- Strengths based approach vs. telling or assigning writing
- Helping clients set limits
- What to do with finished work
- Trauma informed care guidelines (NSVRC, 2017)

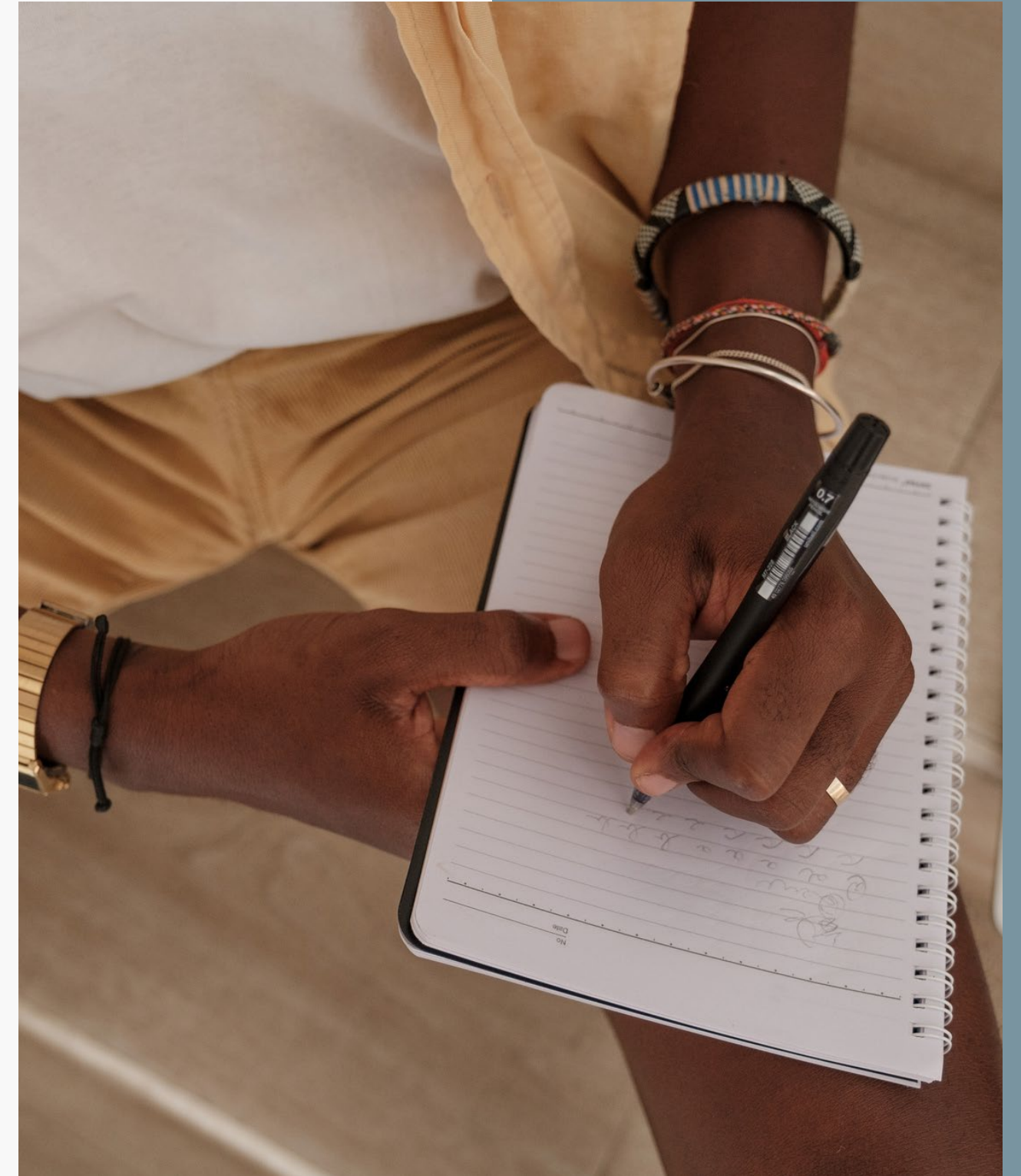
## **Flexibility/Accessibility**

- Timing
  - Language / visuals (NSVRC, 2017)
  - Managing self-criticism
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# *Obstacles*

- Readiness
- Don't know where to start/ Don't know what to write
- “Not good enough”/ Self judgement/ criticism
- Judgement from others
- Insecurities about penmanship, spelling, grammar
- Fear- Writing about abuse/ trauma will trigger me
- Not enough time



# *Safety considerations*

- Storing journals
- Technology
- Safety plans/ safe place writing
- Sharing work



# *Activity*

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Take 10-20 minutes right now to brainstorm your favorite self care activities.

Don't stop until you have at least 20 items on your list.

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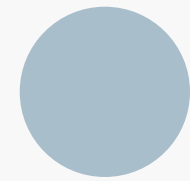
# *Setting up a writing group*

- Screening for groups
- Creating safety in the group setting
- Establishing group cohesion
- Exploring goals
- Identifying obstacles
- Tips for therapeutic writing
- Group progression
- Virtual vs. in person formats

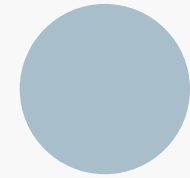




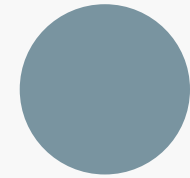
# *Session outline*



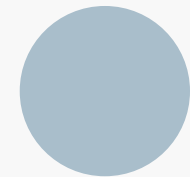
Warm-up



Psycho-education/main writing activity



Sharing/discussion



Check out



# Writing Groups

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## Session 1:

- Welcome, introductions, past experience with writing
- Group rules/ Structure
- Individual goals & fears- building group cohesion
- Benefits of writing; Identify obstacles/common concerns
- Writing Exercise: Fill in the blanks

## Session 2:

- Theme: Self Care/ Affirmations
- Discuss what is meant by self care, why it's important, etc
- Address coping with triggers
- Writing Exercises: Brainstorm self care activities; Affirmations

## Session 3:

- Theme: Safety & Containment
  - Writing Exercises: Guided imagery & write about your safe place; Create emotional safety plan
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# *Writing Groups cont...*

## **Session 4:**

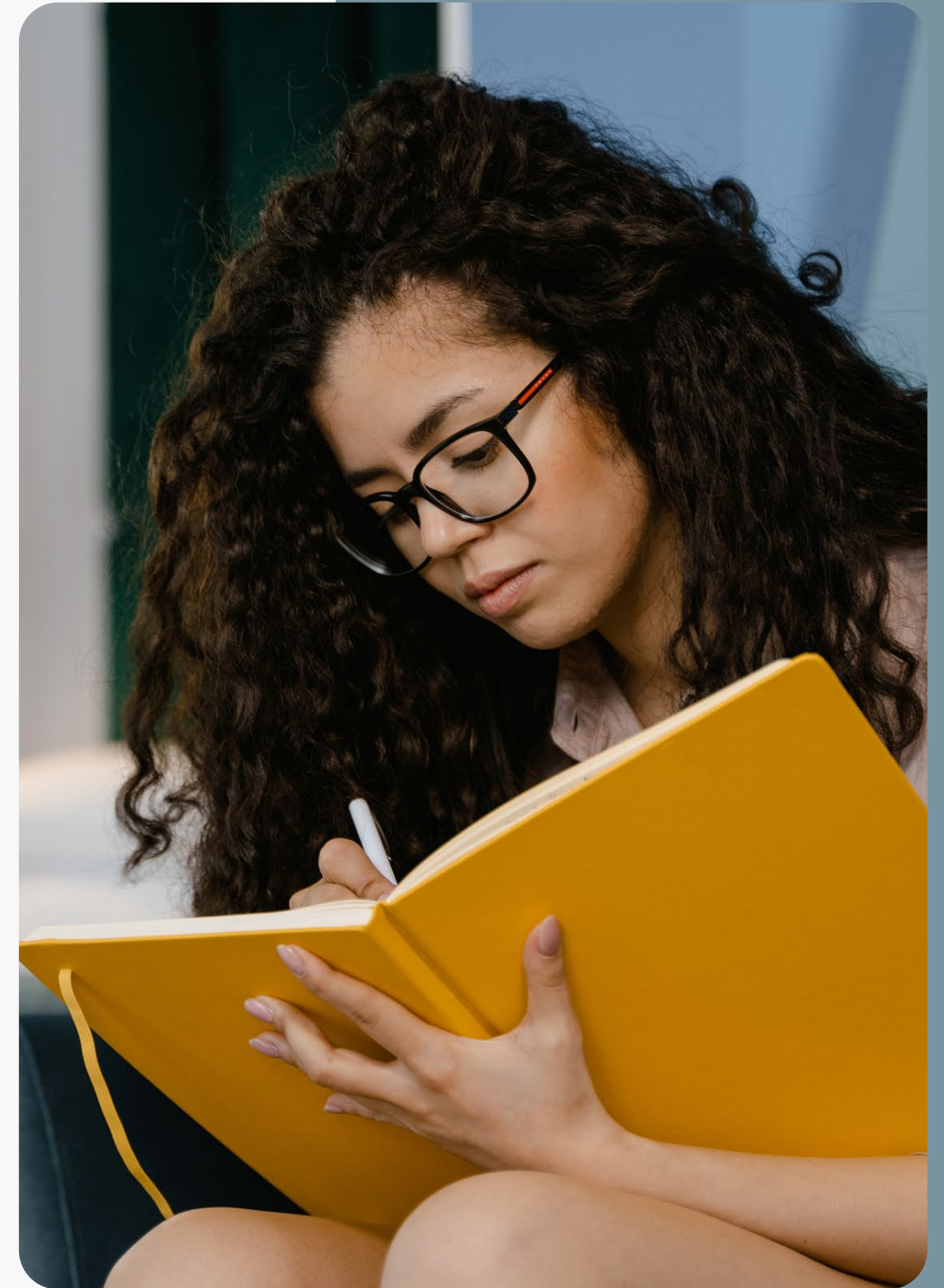
- Theme: Poetry
- Discuss & read poetry
- Offer prompts: What do I want to write about? What thoughts & feelings do I want to express? Themes/ ideas? What inspires me?
- Exercise: Write & Share poetry

## **Session 5:**

- Theme: Letter writing
- Warm up: Thank you note to someone who has had a positive influence
- Writing Exercise: Letter to your past self; letter to your future self
- Closing: Letters to each other

## **Session 6:**

- Theme: Telling Your Story
- Stress self care & safety/ Timing & goals; Discuss benefits
- Offer prompts: What do I need/ want to say? Who am I? How did I get here, where am I now & where am I going? Challenges overcome?





# ***Writing Groups cont...***

## **Session 7:**

- Theme: Art Journaling
- Materials: paper, magazines, tissue paper, markers, paint, ink & stamps, glue sticks, etc.
- Offer prompts: Hope, Strength, Courage, Change, Growth, My Healing Journey, Things that bring me joy

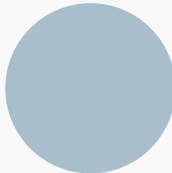
## **Session 8:**

- Theme: Miscellaneous/ Group Choice
- Other ideas:
  - Group poetry (pass a paper & everyone adds)
  - Notecard activity: everyone gets 3 notecards & writes a character, a setting, and an obstacle
  - Write about future goals/ hopes/ dreams

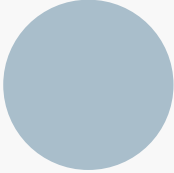


# Common prompts

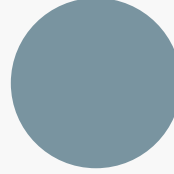
I strongly believe that the moment you decide better at your chosen men, you'll become more to learn. My journey on frustration fail



What scares you?  
What are you most proud of?



Write about a difficult time in your life when you showed strength. - When have you felt strong? What would help you to feel strong?



What does safety feel like?  
What do you imagine safety might feel like?

# *Warm Up Exercises*

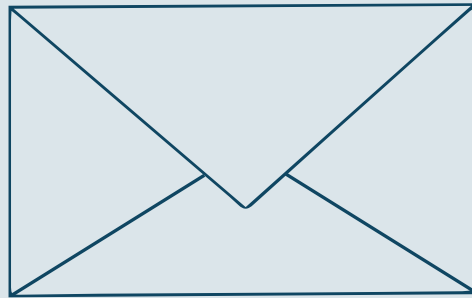


- Sentence completion
- Lists
- Quotes
- Affirmations
- Open writing (what's on your mind, how are you feeling; check in with yourself)



# *Letter writing*

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Gratitude letters  
Thank you notes

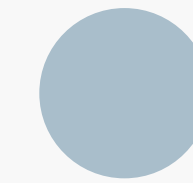


- Someone who hurt you
- Someone with whom you have unfinished business
- Someone you are angry with
- Your mother, father, child

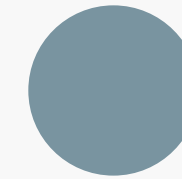


- Past, present, and future self
- Yourself as a child
- Love letter to yourself

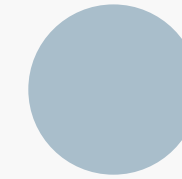
# *Types of Journals*



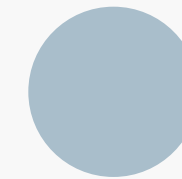
Process Journal



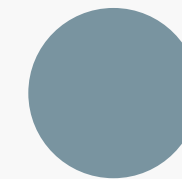
Journal of goals / lists



Journal of quotes/lyrics



Trauma narrative



Art Journal



Gratitude Journal



Comfort Journal

# *Activity*

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Pick your prompt...

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# Quotes from clients...

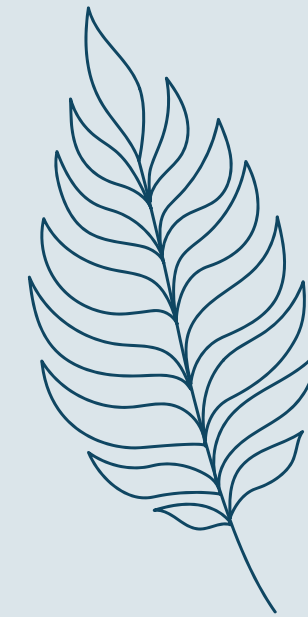
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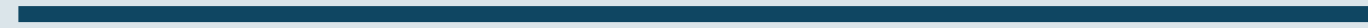
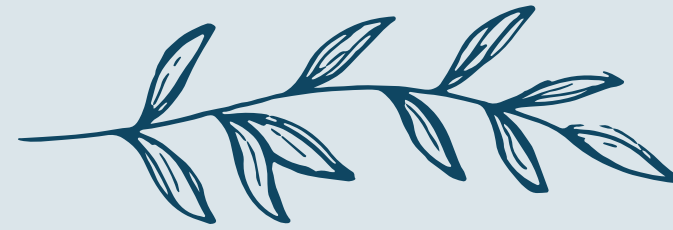
“Truly was surprised how this let me speak through my own words in other ways than talking about my experience. I learned I can do more than I ever thought possible.”



“Loved the opportunity to explore writing in different forms to express feelings and thoughts. Being provided with some guidance was very helpful.”



“Provided a space to tap into and write my thoughts in a safe space.”



*Thank you*



# *Starting a group*

## **Grant Writing**

Local arts grants

Private funding

Free opportunities

Community networking

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## **Community engagement**

Finding creative/expressive groups in your  
area

Partnering for mutual benefits

Engaging in mutual planning

Working with local artists

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## **Budgeting**

Supplies

Space

Consultants

Training

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## **Event planning**

Gallery shows

Art walks

Coffee shops

Community connection

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## **Evaluation**

Pre/post tests

Client Surveys

Focus Groups

Ongoing Client involvement

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## References

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