

Reflective Journal Writing for Social Worker Well-Being

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During my first ten years as a social worker, I worked in high stress and often high trauma roles: an intake and after hours child welfare social worker, a crisis response counsellor with at-risk youth, and a medical social worker within the emergency department and intensive care unit of a hospital. I did my best to consistently practice self-care as a way of managing stress and mitigating the effects of exposure to both direct and indirect trauma that were “just part of the job.” I realized that it didn’t matter how many bubble baths I took — I needed something more in my self-care toolkit that would serve as an effective way to process my own emotions, cultivate boundaries, reduce stress, and reframe the sometimes painful impact of witnessing the suffering of others on a near daily basis.

Over time, I began to notice that when I was journaling (a practice that I enjoyed on and off since being a teenager) — my stress levels were lower and I enjoyed my work more. When I stopped journaling, stress seemed to creep up and I often felt overwhelmed by the multiple and often competing demands of life, work, and my studies. I started to get curious about this and began to ask myself; “Is journal writing actually a significant part of my self-care? Is it a tool for my emotional and psychological health as a social worker?” With these questions in mind, I started reading books about the healing power of journal writing and soon noticed there was evidence to support what I was inherently experiencing which was that regular journal writing can help to reduce stress, heal trauma, and enhance well-being.

There is a great deal of research across various fields of study including psychology, education, and healthcare that supports the effectiveness of journaling and expressive writing for healing and well-being, for example:

James Pennebaker, PhD, (2004) a research psychologist and author of *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval* conducted a study in the 1980s with people who were dealing with trauma and emotional upheavals. His research showed that individuals who wrote about their traumas needed less medical attention in the following months than they had previously. His work clearly demonstrated a link between writing and health.

Stephen Lepore and Joshua Smyth edited an entire collection of research within their book *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being* (2002) where they show evidence that expressive journal writing can offer relief from stress and heal the damage that can be done from highly stressful experiences. For example, there is compelling evidence that stressful life events undermine cognitive processes and that expressive writing can restore these processes.

Louise DeSalvo, researcher and author of *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (1999), teaches us that we need to write

in certain ways in order for writing to be a restorative and healing tool. Healing narratives are those that involve writing about not what you already know, but rather writing about something that puzzles, confuses, troubles, or pains us. This is what allows for learning, growth, and healing. *We can engage in the act of creation that energizes and enlarges us. Writing. A gift that comes to us. A gift we give ourselves.*

As social workers, we are often the story keepers of our client’s painful stories (we not only hear difficult stories but we must also keep confidential the details of the stories we hear outside the realm of professional consultation and so forth). We listen with empathy to countless stories of trauma, loss, betrayal, and violation. Of course within these stories are also incredible examples of resiliency and the strength of the human spirit. The bearing witness we do can lead to the occupational hazards of professional burnout (characterized in part by emotional exhaustion), vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. To prevent these hazards, social workers must have a way of processing the emotions relevant to the nature of our work which at its heart can be referred to as “emotional labour.”

William Kahn, author of *Holding Fast: The Struggle to Create Resilient Caregiving Organizations*, suggests:

“They (caregivers) must unpack their emotions and experiences as one might unpack a suitcase, carefully laying out and examining its contents. They must reflect on what they feel as a matter of course; they must dispassionately examine their reactions to certain people and events.” (2005)

Meaningful and consistent self-reflection is important to maintaining the necessary emotional and professional boundaries that are foundational to quality social work practice and also serve us well in all areas of our lives. Self-reflection also facilitates personal growth through fostering new insights, learning and “aha moments” that can improve our lives and inspire our gifts.

WHERE TO START WITH JOURNAL WRITING?

Whether you are an avid journal writer, someone who used to journal and got away from it, or have never written in a journal before...

“There is a Spanish proverb which says: there is no road, we make the road as we walk. I would say the same thing about journal writing: we make the path as we write.”

Christina Baldwin



Simply get a pen, a notebook (there are many styles of journals available in stationery stores, bookstores, etc.), and schedule fifteen minutes a day (or as often as possible) to go to the page to observe, know, grow, and care for yourself through journaling.

Journal writing offers you a pathway into our highest sense of truth, well-being and vitality. It helps you align with your core values, reflect on what really matters, and can support you to stay grounded and centered in the midst of it all. One of my favourite writing teachers, Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*, says: "Don't be tossed away!" In other words, when we stick with our journaling/writing — we give something to it and it gives something back to us. This has been my experience of journaling for over 25 years now — it is relational, a give and take creative process, that allows me to deepen my relationship with myself, and in turn enhance my relationships with others and the world in which I/we live.

We have to accept ourselves in order to write. Now none of us does that fully; few of us do it even halfway. Don't wait for one hundred percent acceptance of yourself before you write, or even eight percent acceptance. Just write. The process of writing is an activity that teaches us about acceptance. Natalie Goldberg

REGULAR JOURNAL WRITING CAN ENHANCE SOCIAL WORKER RESILIENCY

Various research suggests that a resilient social worker must be able to do the following:


1. Balance self-care with caring for others
2. Create and maintain emotional boundaries (attach — involve — separate)
3. Deepen self-awareness through regular self-reflection
4. Process difficult emotions
5. Reduce and/or manage stress effectively
6. Stay connected to meaning and purpose
7. Cultivate optimism, inspiration and hope — within oneself and to be a catalyst for these virtues in the people and missions we serve.

Reflective and expressive journal writing can support and help facilitate all seven areas of resiliency and well-being for social workers.

TEN CREATIVE WAYS TO USE YOUR JOURNAL AS A SOCIAL WORKER

1. Unwind and relax after a busy day — you can show up to the page with the intention of relaxing and renewing
2. Debrief your emotional reactions after challenging client situations
3. Brainstorm your goals both personally and professionally
4. Capture client stories (without identifying information) that inspire, motivate or move you
5. Deepen your reflective practice as a social worker — not just about your work but how the work impacts how you feel, think and live
6. Explore career/life decisions you might be making, discover solutions to challenges you might be having
7. Connect with what is feeling meaningful and rewarding to you within your career and beyond
8. Nourish your mind, body, heart and spirit with words, ideas, poems, images, quotations, and affirmations — the journal can be a playground for all of these things.
9. Set intention for your health, your work with a client, a meeting, or any other aspect of your daily life — tap into the power of intention setting to reach your goals
10. Honour gratitude — list 5 things you are grateful for at the end of each day

Your journal can be a creative, soulful and nourishing space that supports you in every way. A journal will lovingly hold whatever you choose to embrace within it! I have grown to believe that how we show up on the page is how we show up in our lives. When you can allow more gratitude, joy, curiosity, energy, vitality, hope, patience, and whatever else you might want more of in your life — to have consistent residence in your journal — these same values can have a deeper presence in your life and work.

May the transformative power of reflective journal writing nourish your spirit as a social worker and help fill your emotional cup — again and again. 

References available upon request

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