

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a fountain pen, poised to write on a piece of paper. The background is a soft, warm gradient of yellow and orange, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The pen is black with gold accents. The hand is in the upper left, and the pen tip is pointing towards the lower right.

\$1 Therapy

Achieving Emotional
Well-Being through
Reflective Writing
Therapy

By Chandra McGill

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SPECIAL THANKS

I would like to offer a special thanks to the pioneers of therapeutic writing. The people who have taught, practiced, researched, and most importantly, wrote about the health benefits of writing. Without this guidance, I would have never written myself well nor had the means to help others do the same.

This e-book is a special gift granted through divine inspiration. Thank you and I am eternally grateful.

CHAUNDRA
McGill

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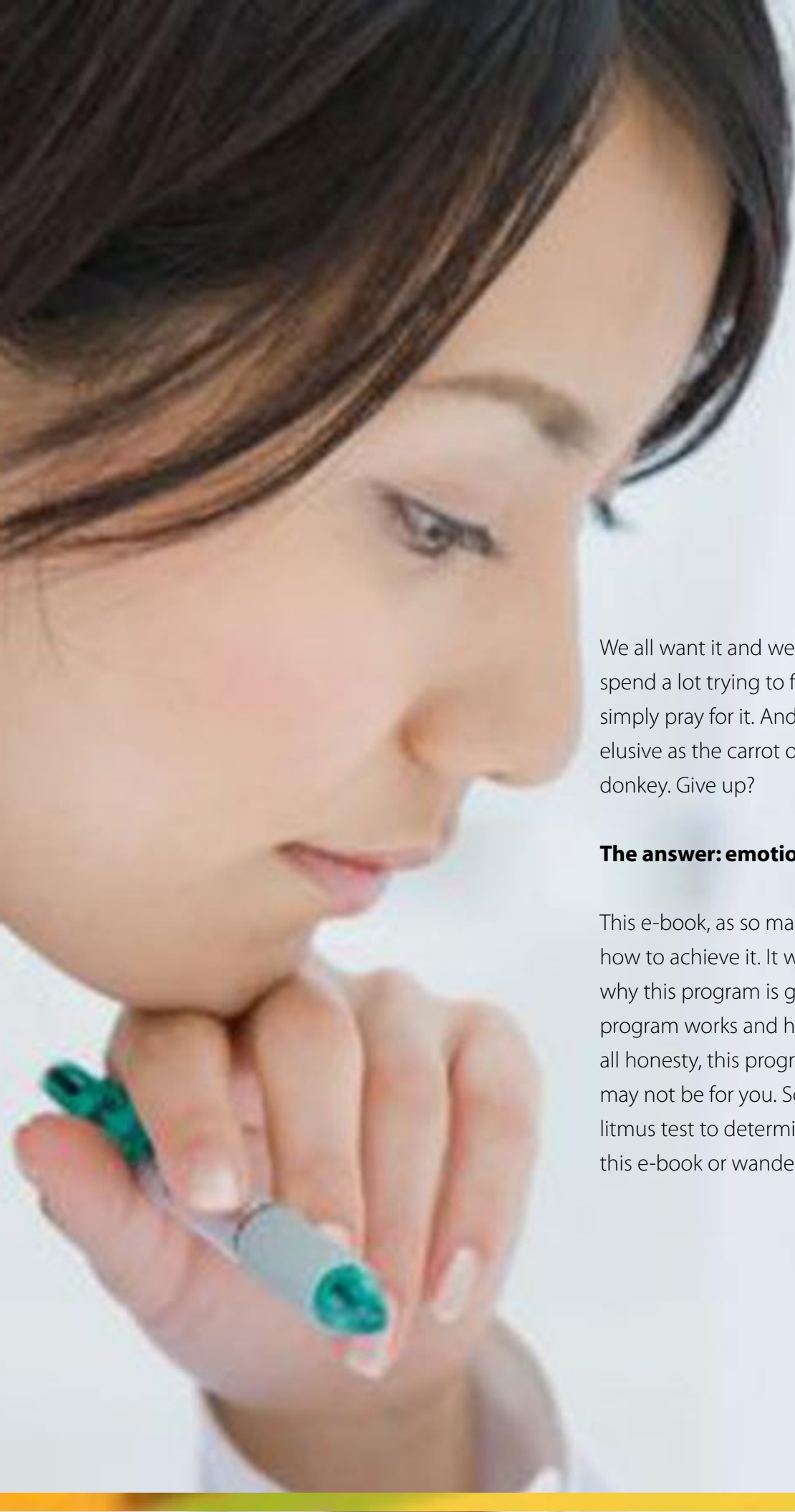
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At Writing Reflections, we believe in the whole writing process, not just the finished product. We see writing as a tool for self-discovery, emotional well-being, self-expression and inspiration. Writing Reflections help you cultivate the stories that helped you grow.

www.WritingReflections.com





We all want it and we all seek it. Sometimes we spend a lot trying to find it, but other times we simply pray for it. And for some of us, it seems as elusive as the carrot on a stick chased by a starved donkey. Give up?

The answer: emotional well-being.

This e-book, as so many others do, will tell you how to achieve it. It will list the benefits explaining why this program is great. It will explain how this program works and how it could work for you. But in all honesty, this program is not for everyone. And it may not be for you. So why don't you take this quick litmus test to determine if you should keep reading this e-book or wander back off into cyberspace.

LITMUS TEST

Question 1:

Have you sought out self-help literature to cure a particular mood or behavior?

Yes

No

If yes, did you revert back to the same mood or behavior shortly after reading?

Yes

No

If you answered yes to both, keep reading this e-book.

Question 2:

Have you practiced daily affirmations to correct your mood, behavior, or circumstances?

Yes

No

If yes, then as a result of the daily affirmations, did you experience a long-lasting change to your mood, behavior, or circumstances?

Yes

No

If you answered yes, then no, keep reading this e-book.

Question 3:

Have you visited or considered visiting a psychiatrist seeking a prescription for happiness?

Yes

No

If you answered yes, keep reading this e-book.

Question 4:

Do you like to write?

Yes

No

If you answered yes, can you afford a \$1 notebook?

Yes

No

If you answered yes to both, keep reading this e-book.

Question 5:

Are you still reading?

Yes

Keep reading this e-book.



INTRODUCTION

I, for one, have spent countless hours – and not to mention money – in therapist offices and bookstores chasing self-help remedies. For most of my adult life, I have suffered from long-bouts of depression, dizzying anxiety, chaotic and abusive intimate relationships, and just an overall dissatisfaction with life. Even worse, I was progressively losing hope of my life getting better.

I repeatedly sought long-term solutions, but my library of self-help books only gave me a temporary high. Whatever advice a book offered, I eagerly followed. I was reciting daily affirmations, offering myself kind words in the mirror and visualizing my perfect life.

But by the time I read the last chapter, my can-do attitude was all but gone. So I would buy another book, hoping for better results. Yet, I experienced few changes, and I was even slightly more depressed – I couldn't even help myself with these self-help books.

Frustrated, I decided to seek professional help. I made an appointment with one of the top psychiatrists in Chicago. At \$300 an hour, I figured he would be able to tell me what was wrong with me and how to fix it. I was half right.

After an initial consultation, he diagnosed me with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). I'd heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but not *Complex* Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is most commonly known as a condition developed by wartime soldiers and rape victims. Well, CPTSD victims also develop the disorder as a result of traumatic experiences, but the trauma occurs more frequently and over an extended period of time, rather than one major event as with PTSD.

I always knew that I had a hard childhood – extreme poverty, exposure to violence, fatherlessness, etc. – but I had no idea that it was having such a negative impact on my adult life. I was instantly relieved by the diagnosis and eager for the doctor to offer a remedy. He immediately prescribed me anti-depression, anti-anxiety, and insomnia medication.

In the beginning of my treatment, I was in a delightful haze. The anti-depression and anti-anxiety drugs kicked in almost immediately; I felt more carefree and less stressed out. However, within a month, the meds leveled off and I felt the same as I had before I started them.

I was also still seeing my therapist weekly. My appointments were like venting sessions. I would unload all of the stress I accumulated in the course of the week and felt much better by the time I left. But by the next day, the stress started slowly mounting again. And it would continue to build in the course of the week, giving me enough fuel for my next vent session.

The cycle of temporary highs just to return to devastating lows were happening again, this time with a therapist and not self-help books. At least the books were cheaper. A few months into my therapy, I quit. One reason was financial and the other was because I did not feel myself getting much better.



I realized that my emotional wellness would not simply come in the form of a self-help book or regular rant sessions with a psychiatrist. I was tired of the quick fixes that really didn't fix anything. So I began doing my own research on CPTSD. To my disappointment, there was not a wealth of information on how to "cure" CPTSD, but I did find information describing how war veterans suffering from PTSD used writing to effectively deal with their past trauma.

As a writer, I have always known the pleasures of writing: the immediate relief of jotting an urgent idea onto paper or the exhilarating sense of accomplishment upon completing a piece. But I have also known the frustrations of writing: the struggle of translating your thoughts eloquently and accurately on paper as well as the irritation of randomly wandering on the page when you haven't a clue what to write about.

I had always written for magazines and newspapers, but could I write just for myself? Could I write without the pressure of a looming deadline? Could I write without an assignment? Well, it was worth a shot. At least it was a lot cheaper than buying self-help books and therapists. So I began to write.

Loosely and aimlessly on the page my words formed, I often wrote about frivolous events and daily annoyances with a "woe-is-me" attitude. After a few weeks, my writings read like a broken record. I sounded like a whiny, needy friend. Even I was getting bored with me.

The next time I sat down to write, I decided to write about my uncle who was murdered 15 years ago. As I delved into the story of how he was brutally gunned down and the subsequent trial of his two killers, the strokes of my pen were getting faster and tears began pouring down my face. I was surprised at how much this still affected me.

My first inclination was to stop writing and calm down, but I pushed through the overwhelming emotion and continued my story. The more I wrote, the harder I sobbed. By the end of my story, I was crying the hardest I had in years. I was still crying after I put my pen down. But once I emerged from the tears, the most miraculous thing happened: I physically felt lighter. Despite the swollen and tired eyes, I felt immensely better.

I was so moved by this writing experience, I wrote about it. In chronicling the steps of my emotional breakthrough, I discovered that I cried harder while writing about my uncle's murder than when he was actually murdered. Fifteen years after his death, I had never fully mourned this loss. I had stuffed my hurt deep inside and never attempted to address it. But this was no different than how I addressed other difficult emotions. I had to admit it: I was an emotional stuffer.

I continued to write about all of the times I tried to talk about him, but would be too overwhelmed with emotion. I could never speak his name without fighting back tears. I could tell people that my uncle was murdered, but I could never utter his name. And only until I mourned his death on paper, was I then able to talk about him freely. Little did I know, I was actually practicing Reflective Writing Therapy.





WHAT IS REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY?

Reflective Writing Therapy integrates reflective writing and writing therapy to enable self-discovery, emotional well-being, self-expression and inspiration.

Reflective writing is the practice of describing a scene, event, interaction, observance, etc. and adding personal reflection. Mostly used in the healthcare profession, practitioners are encouraged and sometimes assigned the task of reflecting about patient interactions in a journal. This enables them to think critically and evaluate their patient interaction with insight to make them better healthcare professionals.

Writing therapy is a form of expressive therapy that uses the act of writing and processing the written word as therapy. Used in a variety of settings, writing group leaders work in hospitals with patients dealing with their mental and physical illnesses, as well as in university settings aiding students in self-awareness and self-development. ¹

By merging these two writing practices, Reflective Writing Therapy helps you to do the following:

- Release negative emotions through the act of writing
- Evaluate past experiences by writing in vivid detail and with thoughtful narration
- Prepare for your future with new insight about past experiences
- Establish the foundation for powerful creative nonfiction writing (personal essays, memoirs, radio essays, biographical works, etc.)

“It is only by expressing all that is inside that
purer and purer streams come.”

-Brenda Ueland



REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY HELPS YOU RELEASE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

How many times have you phoned a friend because you needed to vent? A nice rant can work wonders. Retelling a frustrating situation is an instantaneous stress reliever because it serves as a direct outlet for negativity. The only other option is to allow the negative emotion to build up inside you and stir about, causing you great agitation until you release it. Reflective Writing Therapy helps you write it out.

The act of writing puts a powerful brake on the torment of endlessly repeating troubled thoughts to which everyone is prone. ²

The Catholic Church encourages parishioners to unburden their souls in confessionals. Detectives play on a criminal's need to 'get something off of their chest' in the midst of an intense interrogation. Therapists depend on a patient's willingness to divulge deeply buried secrets. The priest, therapist and detective all encourage you to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," but this is not always the case in face-to-face interactions.

Have you ever told a little white lie to avoid judgment or embarrassment? Some people exaggerate details in a story to appear more important, while others minimize their actions to seem more innocent. People tend to color the truth to gain sympathy or avoid judgment. But one space that lessens a person's propensity to lie is on the page of a trusty journal.

Writing in a journal is like a solid form of truth serum. There is a better chance that you will be more honest with the page than with a friend, priest, detective or therapist. Why is this? Because the page won't ridicule you, judge you, punish you or diagnose you. The page will just patiently await the story to unfold, recording details that the most avid listener might miss.

Your story is securely held and will not be carried off into the wind like spoken words. Your story takes a physical form and is more tangible. You can put it aside and revisit it, but most importantly, you have released these words from your mind and are free to focus on something else.

Writing is also more deliberate than talking. Words flow out of your mouth much easier with a lot less thought. However when you write, your words are more intentional, raising your level of accountability, and adding a deeper level of thought. This extra consideration or thought is the foundation of the art of reflection.

"[Writing is] more concrete than just talking, and you can do it on your own, anywhere."

- Miriam Kuznets, Texas-based psychotherapist³



REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY HELPS YOU RESOLVE EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE

“As we began to study the ways people wrote, it was clear that the act of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experience and themselves. This process allows one to organize and remember events in a coherent fashion, while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives.”

—James Pennebaker, a psychology professor

When practicing Reflective Writing Therapy, you are not simply retelling a story. You revisit a particular experience, illustrating scenes in vivid detail, while infusing emotions you felt at that time. Attention to detail and description is important because it immerses you back into the experience. This immersion will help you accurately attach words to your emotions and feelings. Once you have been able to recapture the essence of an event, you can begin to explore its significance.

As I wrote about my uncle’s murder, I expressed how much I loved him, how devastated I was at the time of his death and seeing him in the casket for the first time.

I first blamed him, why did he have to go and get himself killed? But the hardest part for me was the funeral. I knew I was sad and I would miss my uncle. The moment I dreaded the most was seeing him in his casket for the first time. Walking into the funeral home presented the greatest amount of anxiety for me. I was really going through the motions in the days leading up to the funeral. This was really the first time in my life that someone significant and that I really cared about died. Death was no stranger to me, but death had never been this intimate. We entered the room with Peco’s body; I apprehensively gazed across the room. I knew this would make it all too real for me. I knew that this would be the final nail in his coffin to confirm that he was dead. I really saw him only periodically, so there would be no daily reminders of him being gone. No frequent visits, no empty bedroom to look into, no daily phone calls. The first glimpse in his coffin sent a wave of relief over me. It didn’t even look like Peco. It actually looked like my other uncle. In a bizarre way this made me feel so much better. I had not had deep emotional ties to my other uncle and I had secretly wished that he was the one who died. He was expendable to me. I had barely known this man and had not spent my younger years bonding with him. I walked to the casket with ease. That was the first time also I ever thought that my two uncles looked alike. They never bore a family resemblance in life.



Just as raw and intense as when Peco died, I felt the pain of his death and the guilt of preferring that my other uncle take his place. Seeing this experience on paper allowed me to take a step back and better understand the significance of Peco's death in my life. For the first time in 15 years, I was able to attach words to my aching emotions.

The writing experience was painfully rewarding for me. I expected to feel some sadness while writing about Peco, but I was surprised by the intensity of my emotions. However, this experience is not wholly uncommon when practicing Reflective Writing Therapy.

James Pennebaker, a psychology professor who observed the healing qualities of writing noted that, "even though a large number of participants report crying or being deeply upset about the experience, the overwhelming majority report that the writing experience was valuable and meaningful in their lives."⁴

Facing your past can be very painful, especially when you have not effectively dealt with it. But in order to put the past behind you, you must face it and come to terms with it. Doing so will release the power the past has over you presently. If you do not leave the past in the past, then you will carry it around with you, affecting your very livelihood.

My inability to productively deal with my life experiences is what caused my Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As stressful or traumatic situations arose rather than dealing with them, I just buried them deep inside. I was too afraid to face the pain. But eventually years of stuffing the past caught up to me and spewed out in the form of depression and anxiety. Writing became my method of coping with my past.

The act of writing became a form of active meditation for me. This is the whole premise of reflection – deeply considering or meditating on a topic. Writing forced me to focus on the next words that would be written on the page. In the midst of writing, I rarely had random and wandering thoughts. I now had control over what mind was thinking, which boosted my mental clarity.

“Instead of turning our heads from pain, merge with it, neither holding onto it nor pushing it away, becoming instead an instrument of transformation.”

– Charlotte Kasl, Ph.D.⁵



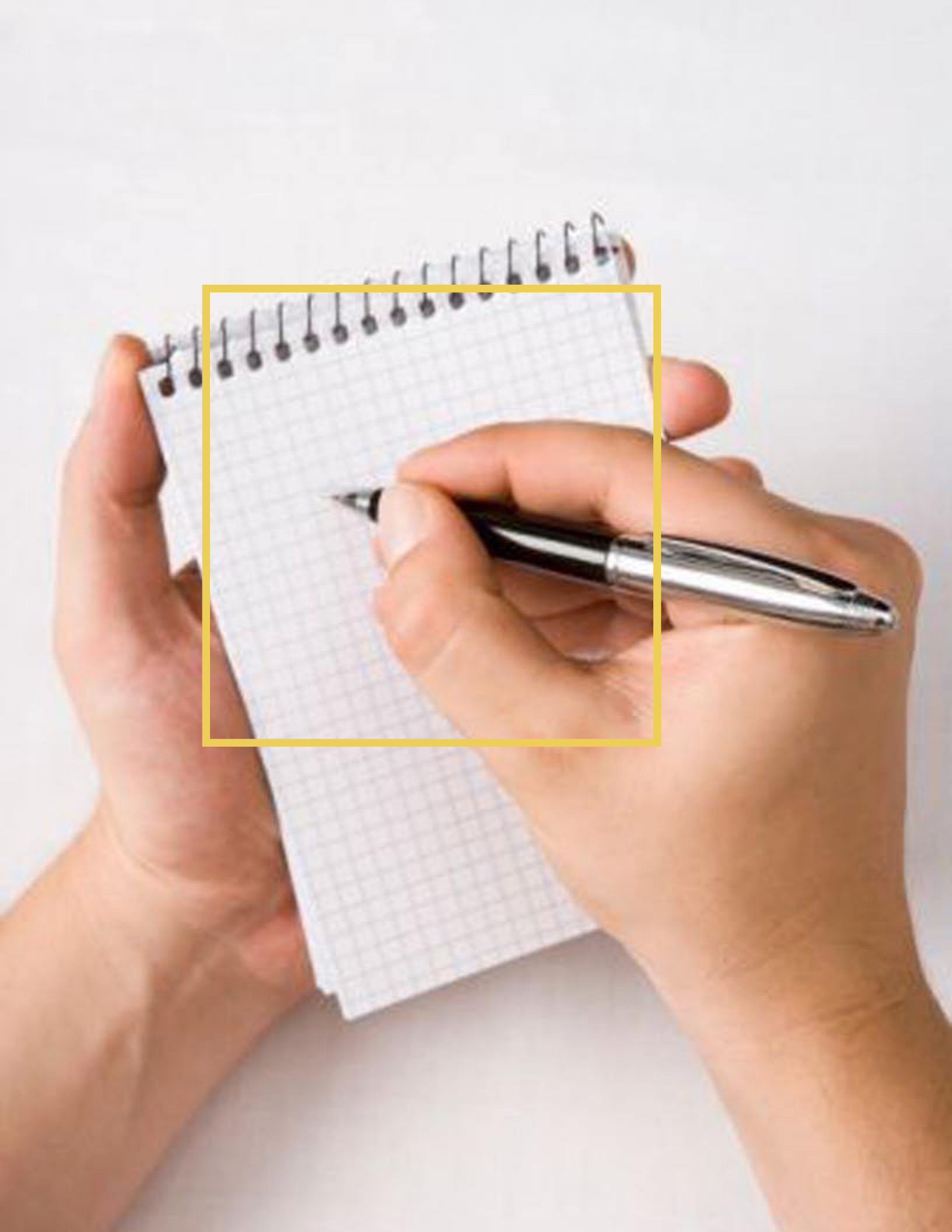
Reflective Writing Therapy requires a combination of calm and quiet concentration with retrospective focus. You must look back over a period of time and consider its significance in connection with your experience. This requires to you sort through the disconnected fragments of knowledge, assumptions, ideas, feelings and behaviors.

The process of piecing together and organizing my past experiences elevated my self-awareness. After my words were committed to paper, I began rereading my journal entries. The act of rereading allowed me to approach my experiences from a removed perspective, which led me to understand myself better. I began to see things more objectively and clearly. Seeing my story on paper helped to accept them and make peace with them, which is the cornerstone of personal development. You can't change what you don't acknowledge or accept.

“The first rule is to keep an untroubled spirit. The second is to look things in the face and know them for what they are.”

-Marcus Aurelius





REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY HELPS YOU PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE

Though Reflective Writing Therapy primarily focuses on evaluating past experiences, it also helps emotionally arm you for future events. After a string of unsuccessful, emotionally draining intimate relationships, I decided to write about my ex-boyfriends. As Reflective Writing Therapy taught me, it is not only about capturing the superficial descriptors of where we met and how long we were together, but to detail even the worst of times.

As I examined the inner workings of my last three relationships, I discovered something very disturbing: I was attracted to emotionally unavailable men. I never noticed this before; all I ever seemed to notice was the pain and emptiness I felt in these relationships.

In each relationship, I would act as a chameleon, transforming myself into the perfect woman in their eyes, all in an effort to win their love. I was exhilarated by this chase of acceptance, but was devastated when I could not get them to love me the way I wanted them to love me.

In my mind, I had always seen these three men as very different. One was in his twenties when we met, one in his thirties, and the other in his forties. They bore no physical resemblance to each other. They all worked in different industries. They all had very distinct personalities. In my mind, I thought these men were so different, but on paper, they were more alike than I ever thought.

To gain a better understanding of why my adult male relationships were so dysfunctional, I began to write about my childhood male relationships, which included no father, two rarely-there uncles, and a distant grandfather. And then it suddenly dawned on me – I had no male role models growing up.

I had no benchmark, no standard for how a man should treat me. I had subconsciously convinced myself that if I showed them enough love and was perfect, my boyfriends would stay around and love me. This was obviously not the case because they are all EX-boyfriends.

I discovered my pattern of dysfunctional relationships on the page. I always knew that my fatherlessness was the reason for my dysfunctional relationships, but I never bothered to spell it out. By digging deeper, I was able to get to the root of my issues, evaluate why I accepted certain behaviors from myself and others, and then isolate the specific behaviors I no longer would tolerate in my life. Knowing what you don't want makes it easy to identify what you do want.

I then committed to the page exactly what I wanted in a man, which is wholly not uncommon. Most women have at least a mental checklist of what they want in a man, but my list included much more than tall, dark and handsome. I described the physical attributes, emotional qualities, character traits and values I wanted in a mate.

Taking it even another step further, I challenged each of these characteristics on the page. I asked myself why I wanted them and how did these traits reflect on me. This honest assessment now equips me with an accurate barometer for my present and future interactions with men.



REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY HELPS YOU BECOME A BETTER WRITER

Reflective Writing Therapy is by no means for writers only. Anyone can benefit from it. But if you are a professional writer, would like to become one, or would just like to strengthen your writing skills, practicing Reflective Writing Therapy can help your craft.

The sheer practice of writing makes you a better writer. Practice makes perfect, right? But this is a free form of writing – encouraging no standards, disregarding proper punctuation, glorifying fragments – so how could this strengthen your writing?

Reflective Writing Therapy requires vibrant scene description infused with thought-provoking narrative. I have become keener at describing not only past events, but my surroundings. I am better able to guide readers through the story using thoughtful narration. The ability to capture the emotions of a scene made my writing more relatable. I found that the more I wrote, the more I was able to capture the emotion and details of my experiences. I was breathing new life into my writings.

Though the emotions and writings are raw, these are the baseline elements of great creative nonfiction pieces. Whether you want to write personal essays, radio essays, memoirs, autobiographies, and so forth, Reflective Writing Therapy exercises your creative muscles in description and narration. This skill can be translated into fiction writing as well. The emotions felt in a past experience can be applied to fictional characters, making them all the more real.

Perhaps the most important writing element that Reflective Writing Therapy enables is the discovery of your voice. Writing about your life is the best way to discover and develop your writing voice. Only you can tell your true story. You are the only person who has your perspective. Writing your life is a gift that only you can offer to the world.



WHY REFLECTIVE WRITING WORKS

When we are able to find tranquility within ourselves, it is useless to seek it elsewhere.”

-Francois de la Rochefoucauld

The self-help industry is saturated with how-to guides for improving some facet of your life. Have it be anger management, divorce, or dealing with coworkers, there are a plethora of self-help books, DVDs, CDs, etc. offering foolproof solutions. Reflective Writing Therapy makes no promises on eradicating anger, thwarting divorce, changing work dynamics, or anything of the sort. It does not offer a step-by-step formula on how to achieve happiness.

What Reflective Writing Therapy offers you are tools for evaluating your life experiences and discovering more about yourself, which will enable you to see things clearly. For without clarity, no matter what type of change you seek, it will be based upon a fractured foundation. Only until you can peel back the layers of how you feel, think, and act, can you ever make an attempt at long-lasting improvements to your life.

Reflective Writing Therapy does not diagnose you nor will it tell you that something is wrong with you. It does not attempt to offer you a magic pill or a quick fix. In all honesty, it is the furthest thing from a quick fix. It requires hard work. Period.

“If you focus on results, you will never change. If you focus on change, you will get results.”

-Jack Dixon

You must have the courage to look at your whole self openly and honestly, despite how painful it may be. This deep evaluation is necessary for healing. Many self-help books offer solutions on symptoms without ever getting to the root cause. They offer band-aids in the form of affirmations or positive-thinking hype, but in order to never experience the symptoms again, you must find the cause. This is not to say that self-help resources are not valuable, but should be looked upon as a tool rather than a cure.

For example, you go to the doctor because you have been suffering from a mind-numbing headache for the past week. Instead of the doctor evaluating you and trying to figure out what is causing the headache, he prescribes a powerful narcotic to ease the pain. You begin taking the prescription immediately and start to feel better, but a few hours later your headache returns. So you take more narcotics to ease the pain, but the headache still returns. If you continued this quick fix cycle, you are at risk for 1) the cause of the headache to become progressively worse, and 2) becoming addicted to the narcotic. Wouldn't it be better to find the cause and focus on the cure rather than just easing the pain temporarily and allowing the problem to fester?





“Tell me and I’ll forget, Show me and I might remember, Involve me and I’ll understand.”

-Benjamin Franklin

Reflective Writing Therapy places you in the driver’s seat of your emotional well-being. It gives you ultimate control and involvement in your personal development. You are not restricted to words printed in a self-help book. You are not confined to a 45-minute weekly therapist appointment in your hometown discussing topics you may not want to discuss. You can use Reflective Writing Therapy at any time, any place and at your own pace.

REDEFINE YOUR JOURNAL

What do you think of when you hear the word “journal”? Do the words “Dear Diary” instantly spring to mind?

Actually, as I was writing the very words of this e-book at a park bench, I was approached by a couple of acquaintances who teasingly said to me, “Dear Diary, today is such a beautiful day and Billy is soooo cute...” This notion of journaling severely limits its possibilities.

Journaling is simply not a blank book protected with a lock to record the minutia of everyday life. If used correctly, it can be a mirror of lessons learned and great insight. You may have heard that it is good to keep a journal. But have you honestly asked yourself why you should keep it and how you will go about doing it?

Without a good reason to maintain a journal, you may find yourself writing aimlessly about superficial topics. Use your journal as a form of personal therapy. Use your journal as a road to self discovery. Use your journal to heighten self-awareness. Change your attitude about journaling.

And I'll let you in on another little secret: you don't have to write in it everyday. You are only required to write in it when you feel compelled.



HOW TO START REFLECTIVE WRITING THERAPY

What you'll need:

- Pen
- Paper
- An open mind

There are a few ground rules for Reflective Writing Therapy.

- 1) Always write in the first person. This probably goes against everything you were taught in your English classes, but how else can you adequately write about yourself or your life experiences without using "I", "my", and "mine"?
- 2) Always write truthfully. At this stage of the process, you are only writing for yourself. Knowing that your words are for your eyes only helps you to be completely honest on the page.
- 3) No proper grammar allowed. Ok, this is not wholly the truth, but do not focus on whether you've used a word correctly or placed a comma in the appropriate place. Just get the words out of your head and onto the page.

The two major components in Reflective Writing Therapy are description and narration. Description helps you paint the scene all over again. The more detailed you are in describing your experience; the more you are reliving the experience. Narration enables you to reflect on the experience while you are painting the scene. As a narrator, you can offer insight and perspective that could not be revealed by simply retelling the scene.

While using Reflective Writing Therapy, you may want to consider answering the following questions for adding description and narration into your writing:

Questions for Descriptive Writing:

- What is the incident, event, situation, etc.?
- What were your feelings around the event?
- So what were the consequences?

Questions for Narrative Writing:

- What is the significance of this event now?
- What does this tell me/teach me?
- And now what can I do in the future?



WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO GAIN?

Purpose Strength Emotional Knowledge Well-Being
Self-Discovery Positive Self-Expression Self-Awareness
Motivation Inspiration Happiness Emotional
Self-Actualization Release Healing Change Positive
Emotions Personal Development Better Writing Creative
Development Clarity Compassion Peace of Mind Insight Calm
Freedom Perspective Emotional
Awakening

Appendix

1 Writing Therapy, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writing_therapy

2 Nathan Field, Introducing Writing Therapy

3 Jim Pollard, "As Easy as ABC" in The Observer, July 28, 2002

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5 Charlotte Kasl, Ph.D., If the Buddha Dated: A Handbook for Finding Love on a Spiritual Path (New York: Penguin Group, 1999)





Chaundra McGill is the owner of Writing Reflections and a reflective writing coach, whose programs have helped people use writing as not only a means of self-expression and profit, but a method of healing.

Chaundra has dedicated her career to the power of words. She served as Editor-In-Chief of the national online publication TheUrbanFlavor and has provided editorial services for publications and companies, such as Metro Exposure Magazine, HowStuffWorks, Road & Travel Magazine, the Mirror Newspapers, RSM McGladrey, The Children's Center and Grade Check.

To hire Chaundra as a reflective writing coach or to book her to speak at your next event, please contact her at www.WritingReflections.com.

