



## Therapeutic Writing

by Don Lasell, M.A., R.C.C.

As the counselling session was winding up, Jack's counsellor discussed recommendations for Jack to follow up with before their next scheduled session together.

"Jack, please read this handout, it relates to a number of the points we talked about in our session." "Also, I would like you to do some writing."

"Writing?" said Jack.

"I want you to do something called 'stream of consciousness journaling'" replied his counsellor. "It's a form of writing we often use in therapy to give clients an opportunity to practice expressing their thoughts and feelings."

"I thought that's what counselling is for" said Jack.

"It is", said the counsellor, "but there are additional benefits to journaling."

"Like what?" said Jack.

"As we've already discussed, it gives people an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings, but at any time of day or night, in nearly any situation, and provides many of the same benefits as talking: it helps to relieve tension, and often provides insight into our issues." "In fact, there are studies to show significant mental, emotional and physical health benefits related to journaling."

"What's involved?" asked Jack.

"It's pretty straight forward. First you need a blank journal to write in, though typing on a computer is okay too." "It's important that however you do your writing that you keep your writing secure – a lot of private stuff goes in there."

"What kind of stuff?" asked Jack.

"Uncensored thoughts and feelings" replied Jack's counsellor.

"Do I need to show you what I write?" asked Jack, looking a little apprehensive.

"Only if you want to." "The focus is more on the process of doing the writing than on what is actually written - though looking over what you have written after a few days of writing may help to provide some interesting insights."

"What kind of insights?" asked Jack.

"You may find a few themes emerging in what you write; stuff that's in the back of your mind, in the subconscious part of the brain." These are things about which you are concerned, but are not immediately aware of due to the distractions and overall business of everyday life." "Done right, journaling will lead to self-reflection and insight."

"How do I do it?" asked Jack.

"Since it is only for you, spelling and grammar aren't important." "The only real rule is that once you start, you need to try to keep going for a full 15 to 20 minutes without stopping." "Also, it's important to be consistent; many people

find it helpful to begin their day with journaling."

"What do I write about?" asked Jack.

"Whatever comes to mind" said his counsellor. "But whatever it is, the main focus should be on the expression of thoughts and feelings."

"What if I don't 'do feelings'?" said Jack, with a slight smile and a twinkle in his eye.

"Maybe you could start by writing about how you feel about your not 'doing feelings,'" replied the counsellor, also smiling.

\* For more information on the process and benefits of stream of consciousness journaling, see Julia Cameron's book The Artist's Way.

### Welcome Back...

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# PSYCHEALTH

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## Cultivating Our Best Relationships

by Joan Schultz, Ph.D., R.Psych.

How we communicate on a daily basis with the significant people in our lives is more predictive of a strong relationship than anything other single factor. We likely underestimate the potential our daily interactions hold for helping us create great relationships with the people we care most about. When others tell us about positive happenings in their lives, our response can either be a step in building our relationship with them, or a step in undermining it. Although we may not see immediate differences, the impact small interactions makes is immense over time. Our typical responses create not only our reputation but the expectations others have of us, which in turn create a desire to connect with us, or not.

Maya Angelo, the beloved American poet, stated "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". How we react to others over time creates deep and lasting feelings that are remembered indefinitely. Martin Seligman describes **four different types of reactions** we give to others in conversation which engender strong feelings towards us. These reactions can be "**Active or Passive**, as well as **Constructive or Destructive**" (2011). Let's look at the relationship between Tom and Sally. Married 6 years, they are generally supportive of each other and each other's interests. Tom recently came home and informed Sally that he had been accepted into a training program that his work was sponsoring in his area of technology. Sally's response was "*That's fantastic! I'm so proud of you. I know*

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## Forgiveness: An Act of the Will

by Tena Colton, Psy.D., R.Psych. (Ltd.Reg.)

What is forgiveness? Why is it important to forgive? Being able to forgive is essential to our psychological well being. C.R. Strahan said, "Forgiveness has nothing to do with absolving a criminal of his crime. It has everything to do with relieving oneself of the burden of being a victim - letting go of the pain and transforming oneself from victim to survivor." When we hold onto the lack of forgiveness, we put a barrier in our way that prevents us from healing and moving forward in our life. It has been said that holding on to the determination to not forgive is like taking a dose of poison everyday and expecting the other person to die! Our lack of forgiveness doesn't necessarily hurt the other person but it always hurts us.

How can we begin the process of healing? One of the reasons that forgiving can be such an arduous process is that we really don't understand what it is and what it isn't.

Forgiveness is not about forgetting. We don't "forgive and forget". We can forgive and move forward in our life but anything that we have ever experienced is in our memory so we are not going to forget what happened to us; the memory will never be completely gone. For example, if someone has broken trust with us and we decide to forgive, it does not mean that we trust that person again. Trust has to be rebuilt. What forgiveness does mean is that we are not going to let a past event govern our life any longer. We realize that the situation is over and we are going to move forward with our life.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you will have a continued relationship with the person who hurt you. You do not have to like him or her or continue to be friends.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. Many think that they can't forgive until they feel forgiving toward a certain person. They think that forgiving is a matter of feelings. This is not the case. Forgiveness is a choice - something we decide to do with our mind. It is an act of our will. We can choose to let go of the past and no longer let it dominate our life. When we make this decision, we become changed.

Some think that if they forgive a person, they are implying that what they did is okay. That what they did

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how much you had been hoping for that opportunity! Tell me all about it – how did you find out? Did you tell your colleagues? We should go out and celebrate!” Not only were her verbal responses enthusiastic and caring but her nonverbal responses demonstrated this too – with genuine smiling, hugs, touching and laughing. In this way, Sally's response was both **Active and Constructive**. Tom felt wholeheartedly supported which further increased his enthusiasm for the upcoming challenge, and engendered loving feelings towards his wife.

Had Sally's response been **Passive and Constructive**, she might have said “That is good news, you deserve it” – with little to no active nonverbal expression. Tom's feelings in response may have been confused, and hesitant about sharing more.

Had Sally's response been **Active and Destructive**, she might have said “That sounds like a lot of extra work. Are you going to spend even more evenings away now? You always put your work before me”. Her nonverbal expressions would have been displays of negative emotion, such as frowning, or slamming a cupboard door. Typically this type of response would create hurt feelings and resentment, and Tom would most likely build defensive walls over time.

Had Sally's response been **Passive and Destructive**, she would not even have acknowledged Tom's news at all, and instead might have said “Burgers for dinner” with minimal nonverbal expression. She most likely would have given little to no eye contact, and turned away, or left the room. Here Tom would learn over time not to share things of importance with Sally, but instead find other avenues of interest and support.

As we connect with significant people in our lives, there is another interesting phenomenon in communication. The “**Losada ratio**” is named after Marcel Losada, a researcher who discovered that the ratio of positive statements to negative statements could predict whether or not certain companies would “flourish” economically. Companies with a rating greater than 2.9: 1 for positive to negative statements had high performance ratings. John Gottman also found that the same principle holds true with his research on marriage and family relationships, but the “magic number” which creates optimistic and emotional connectedness in couple and family relationships is 5: 1. That is, five positive statements are needed for every critical statement to keep a relationship in optimum health. Generally the reaction I get when I talk about this with people in relationship counselling is one of genuine surprise, as most people find this ratio a challenge to maintain.

If you have read this far, I would ask you to consider a personal challenge this next week: Each time someone you care about tells you about a positive happening in their life, go out of your way to respond actively and constructively. Ask the other to tell you about the event. Spend lots of time responding. Use nonverbal communication too. And if you really like a challenge, attempt the 5:1 Losada ratio for at least one of the days in your week. Will it make a difference? You won't know until you try.

*Suggested Reading:*

Gottman, John & Silver, Nan. (1999). The seven principles for Making Marriage work. Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, NY.

Seligman, Martin. (2011). Flourish. Free Press. New York, NY.



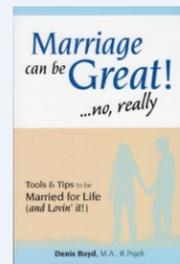
**Books**

Marriage can be Great!... *no really*

by Denis Boyd, R.Psych.

Parenting Teens Without Power and Strings

by Rick Hancock, R.Psych.



**Rules for a Happy Married Life**

by Joan Schultz, Ph.D., R.Psych.

1. Never both be angry at once.
2. Never yell at each other unless the house is on fire.
3. Yield to the wishes of the other as an exercise in self-discipline if you can't think of a better reason.
4. If you have any criticism, make it lovingly.
5. If you have a choice between making yourself or your mate look good, choose your mate.
6. Never bring up a mistake of the past.
7. Neglect the whole world rather than each other.
8. Never let the day end without saying at least one kind or complimentary thing to your partner.
9. Never meet without an affectionate welcome.
10. Never let the sun go down on an argument unresolved.
11. When you do wrong, make sure you have talked it out and asked for forgiveness.
12. Remember, it takes two to make a quarrel. The one with the least sense is the one who will be most adamant about being right.

doesn't matter or isn't important. This is not the case. The morality of the action remains the same and it is unfortunate that you experienced, it but now you can decide to leave the past behind and begin to heal.

If we decide to forgive, gradually, our feelings will fall into line and we will begin to feel what we have chosen. It may take years for our feelings to follow but we first have to make the choice to forgive.

How do we know if we have forgiven? Changing some of our thoughts is what actually begins to heal the wounds. We know we have forgiven if we are no longer emotionally upset by the memory of the event. We no longer feel as if it is happening again. The level of healing we will attain is directly related to the degree of forgiveness we are willing to offer.

Forgiveness doesn't change the past but it does change the future. When we forgive, we become stronger and more resilient. Research shows that developing a habit of gratitude and letting go of past hurts are two important ingredients to longevity and a happy life. The person who hurt you may not deserve to be forgiven for the pain, suffering and sadness inflicted on you but you deserve to be free of the power that person has over you, the power to continue to cause you pain.

Forgiving, deciding that you no longer want to be ruled by the abuse or broken trust you experienced in the past can be one of the most difficult things you do. It is difficult but not impossible and one of the kindest things you can do for yourself.



**Face Fears: Walk toward the lion's roar!**

by Simon Hearn, Ph.D., R.Psych.

Freud said anxiety is the most frequent psychological symptom, and it's true: not only are there disorders where anxiety is the main symptom, but virtually all other mental health syndromes include anxiety somehow. Only psychopaths, we're told, don't experience normal fears.

Cognitive therapy for depression, a widely used approach, is based on the notion that depressive symptoms—sadness, loss of enjoyment, fatigue—are actually products of fear. That is, the person has allowed anxieties and doubts to take over, and to become the only “truths.” S/he starts to believe the fears are the total

story, whereas they really represent just one, pessimistic, scared point of view.

How to manage fears? Two choices: You can confront them, or avoid them. Over and over, people avoid stuff that frightens them, thinking they will not have the courage or knowhow to cope. They imagine the fear will flood and overwhelm them, they will not be able to think straight, their strength will be sapped. They expect to lose the showdown, so they avoid it.

But procrastinating this way gives fear more power. After all, you've always run away when it showed up: you decide to go back to your safe zone, you aren't ready to face that! You postpone in the safe zone, knowing you've probably given power to an overdramatized boogiemaster or an old, outworn, automatically-playing mental fear tape. Seeing yourself procrastinate on facing the fears further lowers self-esteem.

It's true that in working with traumatic memories, it is essential to keep from getting overwhelmed; ideally, client and therapist address a small hunk of scary stuff at a time, put away the material, then reestablish security until the next meeting. While working on that piece of fear, the client is helped to confront its truths straightforwardly, realizing that they can't kill you. This turns that fear into a melting ice cube.

When you tear off the Band-aid, when you look at your fear straight in the eye and take charge of the facts of the matter, that fear will lose power. Master therapist Carl Rogers said, “The facts are our friends.”

Confronting your fear may bring on grief for however long you let it control you, but that's healthy sadness, and you'll also feel relief and liberation: you've dropped a deadening piece of luggage for good and for all.

Treatment for panic attacks, the most intense type of anxiety, involves the client shifting in outlook from cowering and fearing fear, to accepting and managing the symptoms. Where before he ran from panic, and avoided places where it might surface, in therapy he's asked to be OK with the truth that panic is there and might be for a while: the idea is take it on, ride it out, and each time it shows up, practice your skills at managing it. Don't panic over panicking; walk toward the lion's roar with a curious, neutral, learner's attitude. (Credit to Dr Reid Wilson, expert and author of Don't Panic: Take Control of Panic Attacks!)

Whether your fear is major or minor, take a head-on, accepting attitude toward it; decide to be the boss and not to carry this anxiety around anymore. At some point, you believed it constituted major danger, but running away from it has not helped. As they say at Lululemon, do something every day that scares you. Walk toward the lion's roar, and find out: was it an over hyped insecurity, or a need for soothing and reassurance, or a situation that needed realistic problem solving. It wants to come home and be your pet.

