

LIFE IN YOUR 30s AND 40s: Managing issues around fertility, parenting, career, and stress through therapeutic writing

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.
- Therapeutic 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 trying to prioritize what's truly important in the face of multiple demands, such as juggling family and career responsibilities while trying to work in some self-care. 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!

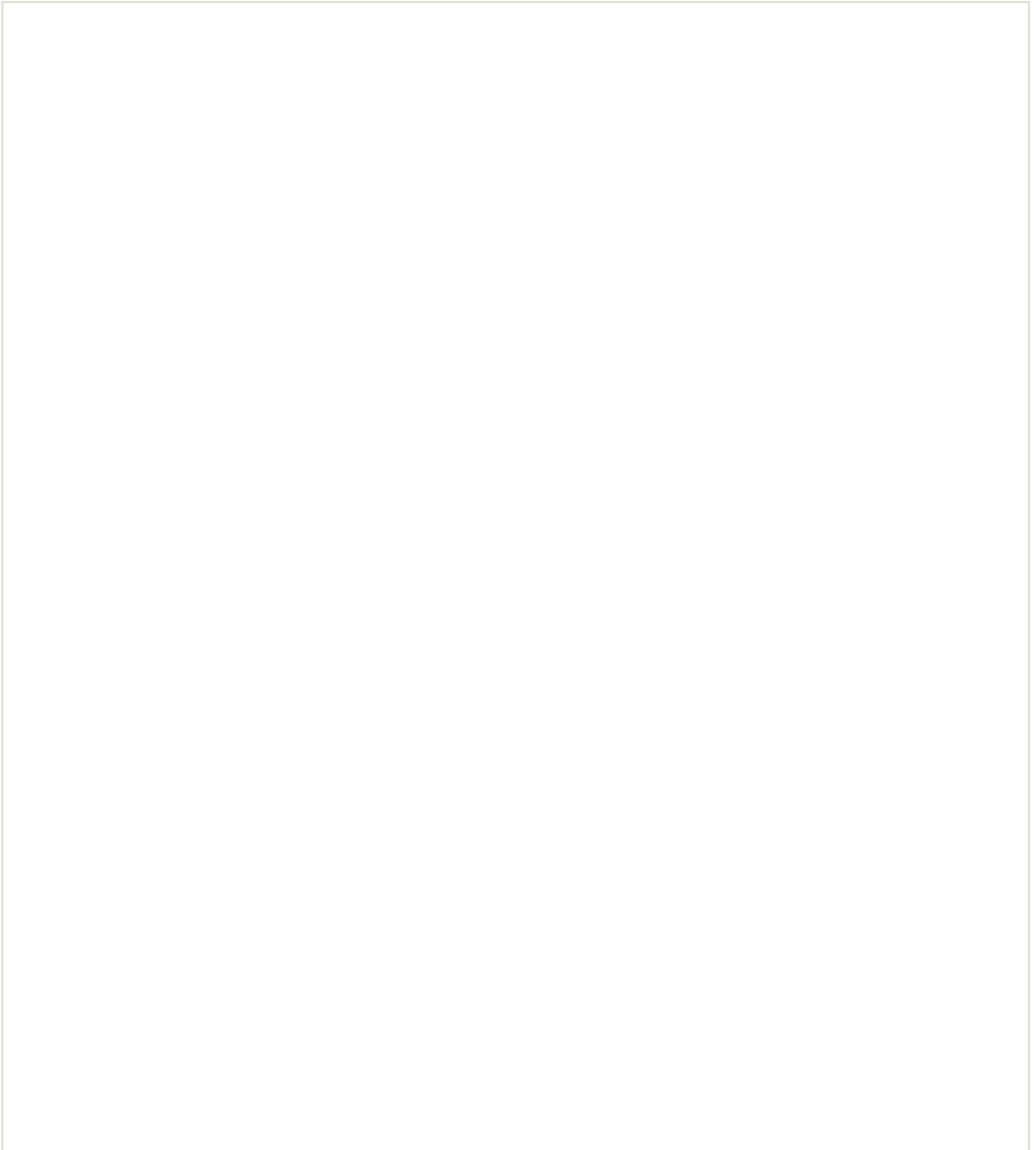


THERAPEUTIC WRITING PROMPTS

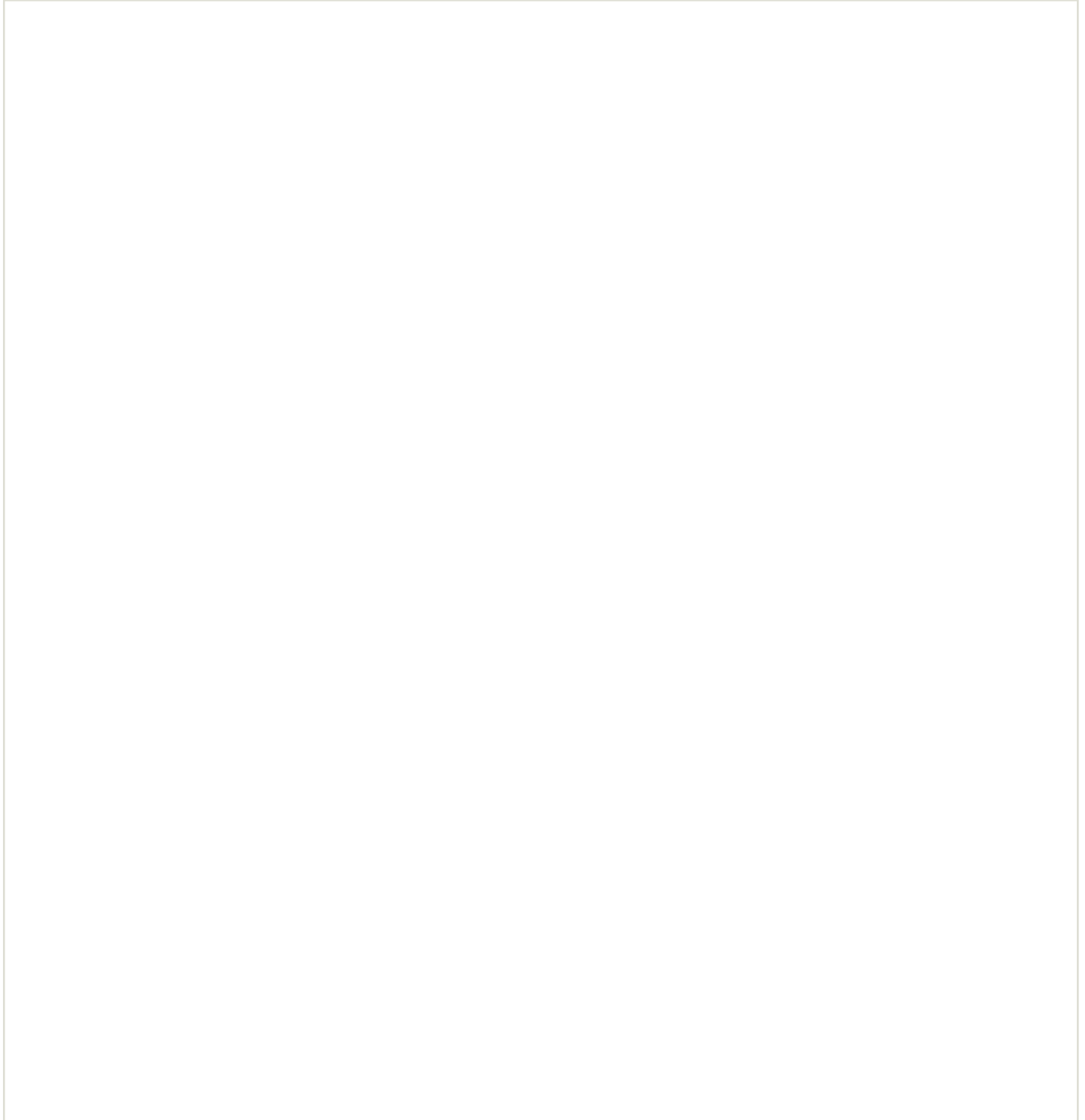
Success: How do you define true success? Has that definition changed since your 20s, as you've navigated your career, perhaps started a family, and reassessed your personal and professional goals? Explore some specific ways, large or small, that you can be "successful," whether giving yourself credit for what you're already doing or as aspirations.

Anti-resolutions: Identify one or two “imperfect” situations in your life and explore the possibility that perhaps you *don’t* need to make a change there, that you can instead let go and *accept the mess*, trusting that it’s *good enough*. Perfection is the enemy of good. Keep in mind that acceptance here is an *active*, intentional choice (not passive—failure, giving up, inertia, etc.).

Instead of or in addition to your to-do list, keep a daily or weekly **Done List** to intentionally acknowledge what you *have* accomplished; no achievement is too small! The purpose of this prompt is to remind us that when we feel like a whole day was a waste, a failure, or that we didn't get anything done, that's not the case.



Urgent versus important: Sometimes we mistake *urgent* tasks for *important* tasks. Urgent can be a real bully, insisting on being addressed first and taking up a lot of space. If we made a to-do list in four quadrants, one axis going from urgent to not-urgent and the other from important to not-important, **self-care** often resides in the not-urgent/important quadrant and, thus, is often neglected. Make a to-do list of not necessarily urgent but genuinely important things to you—more sleep, a date night, a yoga class or writing project—and then determine how you can prioritize and make more space for them in your life.

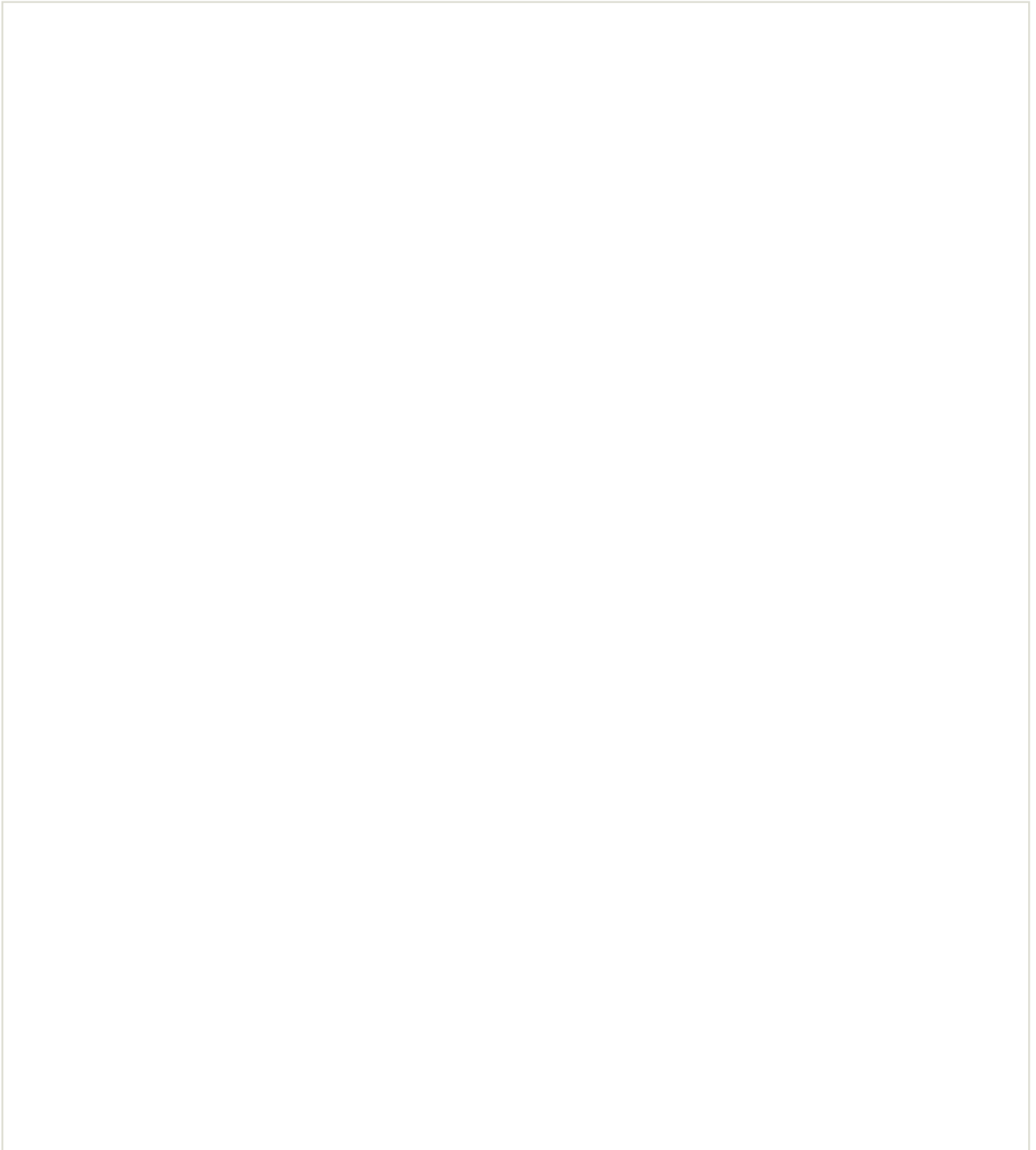


Macro and micro anxiety: Identify one to three current *macro* stressors—stressors from the larger community/country/world—and one to three current *micro* stressors in your own life. Explore how they affect one another: Do the macro stressors compound your anxiety, making you less able to manage your micro concerns? Or do the macro stressors put the micro ones in perspective, making them more manageable? Does one distract from the other, helping you to cope? How do you cope with each differently?

Long-term values, short-term goals: Make a list of three to five general values (priorities, principles, things you consider important, qualities you're proud of or aspire to) that you hold. Then make a list of specific, concrete goals that can help you achieve and maintain those long-term values.

Inherent self: Like all of us, you contain multiple selves that come out in different situations or with different people, either to assimilate or to complement. You may be more adventurous with your free-spirited friend and more mature and competent with your timid little sister. With some people, perhaps your partner, you may feel most like your true, full self who is most seen and understood. But even the people closest to you don't know the entirety of you—only you do. Make a list of three aspects of yourself that would surprise people and feel fundamental to your sense of identity but that may not be apparent to others. You can then explore why they strike you as fundamental qualities, why you don't tend to express them, and how you might let them out more.

Gratitude writing: This is one of my favorites. It is simple and it works. Each evening, take 5-10 minutes and write down 5 things 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 as little as 4 weeks improves mood and reduces stress and burnout.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their gratitude list.

RESOURCES

- “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/1GTuFXI>
- *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>