

CANCER:

Using therapeutic writing to manage issues both during and after treatment, around physical and emotional distress tolerance, identity, and shifting priorities

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: not 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 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 stress that can come when you're facing the challenge of cancer. This includes managing thought patterns and emotions prompted by uncertainty, and grappling with your identity both during treatment and afterward: "what ifs," fear, anger, sadness, helplessness, loss of your full sense of self. 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.), managing the physical toll of treatment, 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!



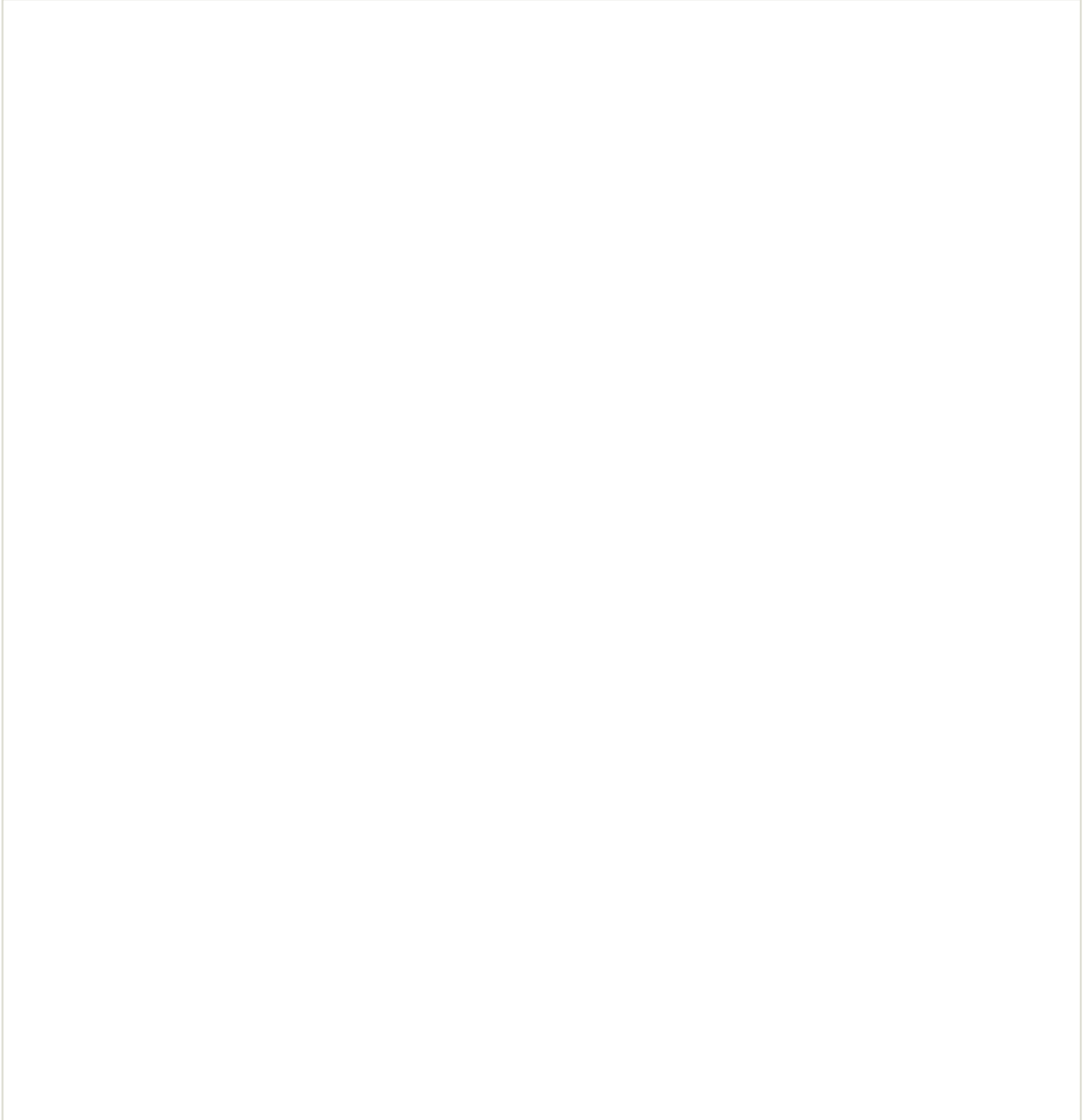
THERAPEUTIC WRITING PROMPTS

Cancer and identity: Facing a cancer diagnosis and undergoing treatment can overwhelm your mental and emotional bandwidth. It can even take over your entire identity. During this experience, you might feel like you are “Cancer Patient” and nothing else. To get back in touch with who *else* you are and your fuller sense of yourself, make a list of five OTHER things that define you somehow—just one word, phrase, or a sentence at most. Could be a role (mother, doctor, daughter) you play, a quality of your personality or physical appearance, a skill or strength or weakness, a meaningful experience or object, or even another person who is meaningful to you. See what rises to the surface, without spending too much time overthinking. Once you have your list, think about each item and expand on it, exploring more how it defines your sense of self.

Loss and gain: When you're challenged by cancer, you might sometimes focus only on what you've lost. Try to shift that focus in two ways: First, what about your life *hasn't* been lost/affected by cancer? Second, what have you in fact *gained* from it—not just maintained despite this challenge but actually gained because of it? This could be in any area of your life—physical, mental, emotional, world outlook, relationships, activities, etc.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their reflections on loss and gain.

Letter to yourself: Address the letter to a former self—perhaps before your cancer diagnosis or right after it, if that’s far enough in the past. What does this particular self need to hear from you now? And why do you, now, need to reach out to them? The letter could take the form of a warning, a reassurance, or a yearning for when things were better. Note your voice, the tone in which you address yourself. Keep in mind that your thoughts and feelings now are likely different from your thoughts and feelings then, which is the point of the exercise—to gain perspective on your experience and your own evolution.



Expectation/reality: Write about an event or incident (e.g. your first chemotherapy infusion, when you first told a significant loved one about your diagnosis, or someone offering or denying support) where your expectation of it was different from how it actually turned out. You can write two pieces—one expectation, one reality—or one piece comparing and contrasting the two. The expectation versus reality may be around your own behavior, emotional state, etc.

Emotion made external: Reflect on a moment when you felt a strong emotion or combination of emotions—for example, when you first received your diagnosis—writing in the *present tense* for maximum immediacy. Explore the emotion through its *external, physical* manifestations—that is, what was happening in your body (palms sweating, heart racing, head throbbing)—and/or how you experienced and interacted with your environment through all your senses (e.g., shadowy or sunny, stuffy or breezy, sounds and smells, tactile sensations, etc.). Use all the senses to express the emotion as vividly as possible. You don't need context/plot/explanation of what was happening; just get right to the emotion in the moment and describe it physically. By expressing our emotional state through our physical experience of it, we're able to delve into the heart of it.

Shifting priorities: Identify three to five formerly “small” things that have become “big” and “big” things that have become “small” for you, emotionally, as you’ve embarked on this cancer experience. More specifically, you could investigate three to five things that used to be emotionally challenging that no longer are and things that have become challenging that weren’t before. In any case, try to resist judgment in your exploration and simply remain open and curious to these changes.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their reflections on shifting priorities.

Safe place visualization: Think of a real or imaginary place (or real place that you improve upon however you like) where you feel safe and at peace. Create that place in your mind using all your senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Similar to “Emotion Made External,” this exercise draws upon that connection between the external/physical and the internal/emotional. You may also find that you conjure a specific time in your life, as well as a place, when you felt utterly safe and at peace.

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Good enough/self-forgiveness: When you are undergoing sometimes physically debilitating treatment for cancer, *guilt* feelings can arise if your current physical condition sometimes limits your ability to engage in relationships in certain ways or means that you depend on others more. Perhaps you can't be as involved in your children's activities as you used to and worry about their disappointment. Perhaps you struggle with asking for and accepting help, feeling undeserving. Identify three situations in your life where you feel this guilt arising, and for each, explore what feels "imperfect" due to cancer, investigating—without judgment—the very real reasons for this limitation or your need. Can you allow for the possibility that your engagement is enough and that your requests for help aren't a burden? Can you accept what you cannot change—cancer and its effect on your life—to let go and forgive yourself?