JOURNALING THROUGH PAIN & TRAUMA:
WRITING ABOUT A PAST TRAUMA EXPERIENCE

A COMPANION PIECE TO

Women and Pain: Taking Control and Finding Relief

- *Journaling is a self-care technique that can help you heal, grow and thrive.*
- *Journaling helps bring order to your deepest thoughts and fears. It creates order out of chaos.*
- *Journaling acts as free therapy. It helps you have a conversation with the person who knows you best: you.*
- *You can go back and track your progress. Read what you've written and see how much progress you've made on your journey.*
- *Some find joy in knowing their words help others, so they share their healing. But whether or not you share your work is up to you.*

Writing prompts developed by therapeutic writing expert
Sarah Saffian, LMSW, MFA

Download companion piece at drwaynejonas.com/women

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT YOU

Make a list of five things that defined you in some way during the time of the trauma — just one word, one phrase, or a sentence at most. Could be a role or label (mother, doctor, daughter); a quality of your personality, outlook, physicality; a particular skill (or a lack of skill); a strong like or dislike; an experience you had that was especially meaningful, perhaps one that somehow divided your life into a Before and an After (for instance, the traumatic event); a place, an object, or even another person especially meaningful to your sense of self. See what rises to the surface organically, without spending too much time over-thinking; you could do this exercise again in a month and come up with five completely different things. Once you have your list, think about each item and expand on it, writing what you mean that it defines your sense of self, coming up with examples of you showcasing that aspect. Make the details clear. Does the trauma define you? Explore how to defuse the power of the trauma, downgrading it from a key aspect of your identity to something that happened to you. What *else* are you, besides the trauma, to get back to your true, whole self? Imagine what you would be like if the trauma was part of but did not define or control you.

CREATIVE LICENSE

Write about something that actually happened, but that you don't have a full, first-hand account of, or have limited information about — either because you weren't there for it, or you were there, but can't remember/ your memory is spotty. This isn't fabrication or fiction, because you're drawing from factual information that you do have, extrapolating from that to imagine the rest. Often when we have limited information, it's hard to reach a place of understanding, healing, and peace; so this exercise in filling in those gaps can help with that, and can help you move on.

LETTER TO YOURSELF

Write a letter to your former self, either immediately before, during, or in the aftermath of the traumatic event. The letter could take the form of warning, reassurance, a yearning for when things were better. Note your voice, too, the tone in which you address yourself. Why does this particular self need to hear from you now? And why do you, now, need to reach out to her? 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.

PAST/PRESENT

Write two versions of the traumatic event, one in the past tense (remembering it from your current perspective), the other in the present tense (entering back into the immediate moment). Ideally take time in between the versions, and don't look at the past tense version when you begin writing the present tense one; the point here is not to have two identical versions with the verb tenses changed, but rather, to examine and learn from the differences in how you remember, and how to transform that memory: Do you reflect more in the past tense? Do you have greater access to physical and emotional details in the present tense? Do you cover more ground in the past tense version, and go deeper and narrower in the present tense? Is your narrative voice different in the two versions (this may come up especially if the moment is in childhood)?

WRITE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

Choose a photograph that is especially meaningful to you, ideally with you in it, either alone or with other people. Then use the photograph to prompt your writing — you can start with concrete context (date, location, etc.), but ultimately the point is to delve into the *internal* life of the photograph: the thoughts and feelings of the person/people pictured (whether you or someone else), especially if in contrast to external appearances; something that just happened or is about to happen, etc. What is *unseen*? The photograph is a frozen moment in time, but on a continuum that's always evolving; what was leading up to this moment? And what progresses from it?