LIFE IN YOUR 20s: MANAGING ISSUES AROUND LIFE TRANSITIONS AND IDENTITY 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: 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 AND ANXIETY THROUGH WRITING

Writing has been found in many studies to reduce feelings of depression, anxiety, and the stress of transitioning into adulthood, grappling with your sense of identity, comparing yourself to others, and considering your many options. 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

Transition and identity: When you feel ungrounded in a period of transition, overwhelmed by options, and are comparing yourself to others, the *who am I*? question can loom large. To get back in touch with your true identity, make a list of five things that define you in some way—just one word, phrase, or a sentence at most. This defining characteristic could be a role (daughter, friend, student) 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 overthinking. Once you have your list, think about each item and expand on it, exploring more how it defines your idea of who you are.

A reflection on the **randomness and unpredictability of life:** We wake up each day and have no idea what will happen. Process something (past or current) that took you by surprise and what followed from it. This thing could be good or bad. It may also be interesting to reflect on what you didn't know before the surprise occurred. Examples include: "I left my house and had no idea" or "when I looked at that picture of myself, I didn't know what was coming."

Yes/No: List two things that you tend to say *yes* to or have said *yes* to recently, and two things that you tend to say *no* to or have said *no* to recently. For each pair, choose one *yes* and one *no* that demonstrate good self-care, and one *yes* and one *no* that perhaps do not.

For example, saying yes can be a way of embracing an opportunity and engaging with the world (good self-care), but it can also be a way of spreading yourself too thin and prioritizing others' needs and desires over your own. Saying no can help you maintain healthy boundaries and manage your time (good self-care), but it can also isolate you and cause you to miss opportunities for connection and discovery.

Also keep in mind that saying yes to one thing usually means saying no to something else and vice versa. This awareness can help you prioritize and determine the value of what's truly important to you. Expand on each, exploring what motivates you to say yes or no, if it is good self-care (or not), and how you could create healthier decision patterns for yourself.

Strengths/weaknesses: Make a list of three qualities that you consider personal weaknesses. Then explore how these so-called weaknesses might be recast as strengths. For instance, if you believe one of your weaknesses is micromanaging, that could also mean that you're organized and responsible. Once you recast your weakness as a strength, write about a time you used that quality in a positive way. If you can't think of a recent example, write something aspirational, such how you might positively use this quality in the future.

Essence: Write a piece about yourself but only by describing an inanimate object that is somehow imbued with your essence. You don't need to use first person, and you don't want to simply describe an actual object that you own—a favorite shirt, say. Instead, start with the qualities that you think define you, and then let that lead you to *imagine* an object that's imbued with those qualities in some way. For instance, you could choose to describe an imagined burgundy wine in an ornate silver goblet or a threadbare, faded blue T-shirt, or a sturdy oak table, which is, somehow, YOU. Think of the object as a metaphor for your true self.

Thoughts, emotions, behaviors: There's an intrinsic relationship among our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Chart your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors over the past month, listing two predominant examples for each. What effect did your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors have on one another? And how did your changes in each category affect the other two?