

Making Sense of a Significant Experience

A guided writing exercise for understanding the past and its place in the present

Some experiences stay with us in fragments: a particular memory, an image, a feeling, a bodily sensation, or a belief about ourselves that seems difficult to explain.

Writing can sometimes help bring these pieces into a more understandable story.

This exercise invites you to look back at one significant experience from your adult perspective. The purpose is not to produce a perfect account or to force yourself to remember details that are unclear. Instead, it is to explore what you remember, how the experience affected you, what you learned from it, and whether any part of that learning continues to influence you today.

You can write as much or as little as feels manageable.

SECTION 1

Begin With the Experience

Choose one significant experience that you would like to understand more clearly. It does not have to be the most difficult experience in your life. Choose something that feels meaningful and manageable enough to explore at this time.

What do I remember?

- Describe the experience in your own words.
- What was happening? Who was involved? Where were you?
- What do you remember happening before, during and afterwards?

If some details are uncertain, simply acknowledge that. You do not need to fill gaps in your memory.

SECTION 2

Notice Your Experience From the Inside

Now shift your attention from what happened to what the experience was like for you.

- What emotions do you remember? What did you notice in your body?
- What thoughts or images came to mind?
- What did you want, need, fear or hope for at the time?

Emotion

Body sensations

Thoughts or images

What I needed

SECTION 3

What Did You Learn From It?

Significant experiences can influence the conclusions we draw about ourselves, other people and relationships. At the time, you may have developed beliefs or expectations that helped you make sense of what was happening. Complete any of these that feel relevant:

I began to think that I was...

I began to expect other people to...

I began to expect relationships to...

I learned that I needed to...

I felt safest when I...

These conclusions may have made sense in the circumstances in which they developed. They may also be worth reconsidering from your perspective today.

SECTION 4

How Did I Adapt?

People find different ways of managing experiences that feel painful, uncertain or overwhelming. Perhaps you became highly independent. Perhaps you learned to keep the peace, anticipate other people’s needs, avoid conflict, stay in control, hide your feelings, withdraw, work harder, or expect less from others.

There is no need to judge the way you adapted. Instead, consider what the response may have been doing for you at the time.

What did I learn to do to cope?

How did this help me then?

Is this response still useful to me now?

What might it cost me today?

SECTION 5

Look at the Story From Where I Am Now

You have more information and perspective today than you did at the time. Without dismissing what happened, consider what you understand differently now.

What was outside my control?

What responsibility was mine?

What responsibility belonged to someone else?

What do I know now that I could not have known then?

What would I want the person I was then to understand?

SECTION 6

Notice What May Still Be Active

Sometimes an old experience becomes relevant again when something in the present feels familiar. You might notice a strong emotional response, a familiar fear, an urge to withdraw, a need to please, a tendency to take control, or an expectation that something will go wrong.

Think of a situation in your current life that brings up something familiar.

What happened?

What did I feel?

What happened in my body?

What did I automatically expect?

What does this remind me of?

What is different about the present?

The purpose is not to tell yourself that your feelings are wrong. It is to notice when an old expectation may be meeting a new situation.

SECTION 7

What Do I Want to Understand Now?

Look back over what you have written. Rather than asking, "Why am I like this?", try asking, "What happened that might help me understand this response?" Complete any of the following:

I understand myself differently when I recognise that...

A pattern I can now see more clearly is...

Something I used to believe that I want to reconsider is...

Something I want to respond to differently in the future is...

Something I need more of in my life now is...

Something I can offer myself today is...

SECTION 8

Bring the Story Into the Present

Your history is part of your story, but it is not the whole of your story. You can acknowledge what happened without assuming that the past will always determine what happens next.

This happened then...

Today, I understand...

Today, I have choices that I did not have then, including...

A NOTE TO YOURSELF

Before You Close This Page

If this exercise brings up strong emotions, pause. Look around you. Notice where you are. Feel your feet on the floor. Take a few slow breaths. Remind yourself that you are reflecting on something that happened in the past, and that you are here, in the present.

You do not have to complete this exercise in one sitting.

Some experiences are better explored with the support of a psychologist or other appropriately qualified mental health professional.

You do not need to change what happened in order to change your relationship with the story of what happened.