

Tool: Writing and Journaling

We come to COSA having been affected by compulsive sexual behavior. Our experiences of living with addiction are fraught with confusion and pain. Especially when we first come to COSA, we may feel emotionally and physically drained. Many of us have experienced trauma, and starting our recovery work can seem overwhelming.

Writing or recording our experiences helps us make sense of our lives and find clarity. We may use writing in many different ways in our journey of healing and recovery. We do not have to consider ourselves a writer to benefit from using this tool to record our thoughts and experiences, nor do we need to compare our writing to what we think a good writer would produce. If we are not initially comfortable with writing, we start where we can with the help of our Higher Power, our sponsors, and our COSA community.

We remember to begin by taking things one day at a time. Writing out lists helps us clarify what we have control over and what we do not. For example, to manage our day-to-day responsibilities, we can use lists of what we want to accomplish for the day. When we think through changes in our lives, lists of pros and cons help us sort through situations. We discover that making lists also helps us focus directly on what's in front of us. It helps us to process what is going on and reassures us that our experiences are real and valid, especially for those of us who have been manipulated by others.

In early recovery, our thoughts may be scattered. We've got so much on our mind. Being new to the program, we may worry so much about "doing it right" that we end up saying and doing things that feel inauthentic or that are not right for us. Writing is one way of working through the confusion. We connect and get to know the truth about who we are, rather than who we think we have to be or how we want people to perceive us. Healing begins when we can show up authentically. So we must take the time to get to know ourselves well. The more we get to know ourselves through writing, the more clarity we gain.

As we work through our Steps, we see how much our recovery benefits from writing. In Step One, some members write at length, perhaps creating a personal narrative of their COSA story; others may compile lists of what they are powerless over and how their life has become unmanageable. Step Four asks us to create a moral inventory of ourselves. Step Eight suggests we write a list of all persons we have harmed. We look deep within ourselves, become aware of our patterns, and thus are better prepared for amends work in Step Nine. In Step Ten, many use written lists as a way to take daily personal inventories. Writing regularly is a practical way of putting our Step work into action. It helps us work toward clarity around what has happened, how we feel about it, and what our part has been in any given situation. Our writing may even gently point us toward additional recovery work we have yet to do.

As we grow in self-awareness on our recovery journeys, there may still be times when we aren't sure what we need or how we feel. All we know is that something is bothering us and we need an outlet. If it concerns another person, writing is a way to express ourselves without directly confronting them when we aren't ready or if that is not the right move. Expressive writing such as poems, stories, or stream-of-consciousness writing can help us when we are confused. Our writing doesn't need to have an end goal. We can use it to air out our grievances or cleanse the built-up hurt and resentment we feel. Expressive writing isn't limited to negative feelings but may include joyful expression as well. With expressive writing, we find our authentic voice as we process our thoughts and feelings in a safe space. Ultimately, this can help us remove blocks to our healing process.

Sometimes life can feel overwhelming, and we may find ourselves occasionally slipping into a victim mentality by blaming our challenges on the actions of others. This can blind us from acknowledging our true power over our situation and seeing the good things in our lives. We may end up in a downward spiral that can harm our mental and physical health, as well as our relationships with others. In these situations, gratitude writing—recording things for which we are grateful—can energize us and transform our thinking. This can be as simple as a list we carry in our pocket to pull out when we need a positive reminder of all the great things going on. It can also be a daily practice of journaling or meditating on what we appreciate in our lives. We may even choose to share our gratitude with our fellow COSA members and bring a hopeful message to our meetings.

Some of us write letters to others, with no intention of sending them, as a way of working through our feelings and confusion. We may even write letters to our future or past selves, acting as a loving best friend. Thinking of the encouragement and comfort we extend to our friends, we are reminded to extend that same level of kindness to ourselves as well. By acting as our own best friend, we can get in touch with parts of ourselves that need healing the most. We are more able to make sense of past traumas, develop self-compassion, and gain clarity.

In Step work, letter writing helps us address situations where we cannot directly make amends, such as when a person has died or when direct amends would be unsafe or otherwise inappropriate. Our intention is to write a letter from a genuine and authentic place, even though we cannot send it to them. This provides a form of cleansing as well. Some read the letter at the gravesite or create a healing ritual at home, such as lighting a candle and reading the letter as a prayer.

Reflective writing, such as journaling, gives us the opportunity to write out our thoughts and feelings and also allows us to examine our experiences with more depth and inquiry. These discoveries about ourselves are keys to opening new doors in our recovery. For example, once we know where we are struggling (whether that be with fear of abandonment, anger or bitterness, self-will, or maybe even denial and dishonesty), writing helps us gain the clarity we need to move forward. We can overcome denial and face difficult truths in our lives or relationships that we didn't wish to see before or were not able to see. Many of us find that a daily journal entry is a beneficial start or end to our day or a great way to take our Step Ten inventory. We find the most healing and empowerment when we keep our writing focused on our sobriety and sanity and when we abstain from obsessing over what others are doing.

Sometimes we run into challenges with writing about our experiences, especially if our boundaries have been violated in the past. We may fear having our writing seen or feel shame about what we've been through. If we have been betrayed in the past, or our privacy and confidentiality have been breached, we may fear writing down our thoughts. One way to overcome this is to find a place or writing technique that makes us feel comfortable and safe, such as writing on a protected electronic device. Or we may find a private, safe space to keep paper journals. We can ask fellow members how they choose to protect their writing. Sometimes writing with the intention of destroying the document later can symbolize surrender and promote healing.

We are careful that we don't use our writing in a way that could be harmful to our recovery or the addicts around us. While we want to see others around us doing well in their lives and making healthy choices, if we use our writing to focus on another person's behaviors or their own program work, this may be a form of control. Writing in this way can take us further away

from our own sobriety and sanity. However, when we keep the focus on ourselves, we are free to write about our feelings, thoughts, and reactions to others' behaviors as we further explore our own recovery process.

There may be times when we aren't inspired to write or feel we have nothing to write about. The focus of our writing depends on what we want to accomplish at that moment. We may seek inspiration and guidance from our sponsors or other COSA members, from reciting the Serenity Prayer, or from reading recovery literature that invites us to reflect on specific topics.

Because patterns may emerge over time, writing serves as a way of tracking our progress. We no longer need to rely on our old broken coping skills. We can look back at how we approached conflicts or challenges in the past and observe how far we've come. We can address our defects and have gratitude for our assets.

Our lives transform as writing enables us not only to express what's going on inside ourselves but also to communicate with others and connect with them authentically, as well. Our courage increases as writing takes us on an enlightening and rewarding journey inside our hearts and minds and out into the world.