



The Power of the Page: Coping with Chronic Illness Through Writing

Presented by:
Lynda Monk, MSW, RSW, CPCC

Yahaira Rivera:

Hi everyone. Welcome and thank you for joining MSAA's live webinar: The Power of the Page - Coping with Chronic Illness through Writing. We are so glad that you're here with us tonight, and alongside journaling expert, Lynda Monk, we'll be exploring the topic of journaling and how expressive writing can be a powerful tool to support your wellbeing. My name is Yahaira Rivera. I'm Senior Director of Health Education here at MSAA, and I'm honored to be your host. Before we dive-in into tonight's topic, we'd like to share a moment to introduce MSAA, just in case you're new to our network.

We are a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving lives today through vital services and support for the MS community nationwide. Our programs include a national helpline, an MRI access program, equipment and cooling distribution, educational programs, publications, and opportunities for community connection. To learn more about MSAA, our programs and services, please visit our website, mysaa.org. And we want to make sure that you stay connected with MSAA - you can visit our website and sign up to receive email updates. You can follow us on all the social media platforms, or you can text "MSAA" to the number that you see on the screen, 75101, and you will get MS-related news and updates about our programs and events. So now you know how to stay connected with MSAA.

And this is just a friendly reminder or disclaimer that this program is for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute formal recommendations. Please speak with your doctor about specific questions or concerns.

And now please join me in welcoming our guest speaker, Lynda Monk. Lynda is the Director of the International Association for Journal Writing, and she is a well known expert in therapeutic journaling. She has over 30 years of experience as a social worker, life coach, speaker, author, and educator. Her work focuses on preventing burnout, supporting self-care, and using writing to help with healing. She is the author of *Life Source Writing*, and she has written and edited several journaling books, including *The Great Book of Journaling and Affirmations for Self-love*. Lynda is well known for her warm and inspiring presentations, and the way she helps people

use journaling to grow and improve their well-being. Lynda, we are honored to have you here with us tonight. Our community is looking forward to learning with you. Thank you for being here.

Lynda Monk:

Thank you for that beautiful introduction, Yahaira, and for having me. And I'm so glad everyone's here, thanks for joining us. I am going to just take a moment to share my slides to guide us through our time together. This will be an experiential time, so if you have a journal or notebook handy, it would be great, even just a piece of paper. And if you're experiencing any kind of symptoms with your MS right now, and you're unable to write, please know that you can sit quietly and reflect when we do some of the guided writing in the session.

So, as Yahaira said, this session is *The Power of the Page: Coping with Chronic Illness through Writing*. And I'm very passionate about the healing power of journaling. I've been an avid journal writer since I was a young girl. I actually have my, this is my first journal. It's like the size of a postage stamp with Snoopy on the front with a little pencil down the side. I've always been very drawn to the power of stories, of writing down my thoughts and feelings and brainstorming and setting goals, and my journal is just a truly treasured practice in my daily life.

So I will, in our time together, I want to talk a little bit about coping with chronic illness and the writing and wellness connection, and share a bit with you about some of the research, some of the studies that help us know that journaling can, in fact, help us alleviate stress, alleviate different symptoms, improve our overall health and well-being. And I'm going to guide you through a five step journaling experience called Life Source Writing. It's something that is holistic. It brings a very mindfulness approach to journaling to help really activate all of the relaxing and healing qualities that we can benefit from when we go to the page. And at the end, I want to speak a bit about journaling your way.

There's no way to get journaling wrong. You are always the expert of your own experience, and that includes how you navigate your own health and wellness. So please know that I'm going to share some ideas and tips and prompts to really help you get engaged with journaling, whether you're already an avid journal writer or maybe you've journaled, but you got away from it. Maybe you only journal when it's really stressful times and when things level out, you stop writing. Or maybe you've never journaled before and you're just curious about this topic. What's true about journaling is we always start where we're at. We always start in the present moment, and we always, in a way, begin anew, just like the blank page. So, please know that everyone's welcome. There's no prior journaling experience needed to benefit from what we're doing together.

I will leave some time at the end for questions, so I'm going to proceed just to make sure we pace ourselves with what I'd like to share in the time we have. And, at the end, I'll leave some time for questions. And if they exceed what we can answer in the time we have together, please know that I will make another recording or do something in writing that Yahaira can share through the website, and she'll make sure you know how to access those resources.

So I want to just start by saying a few things about chronic illness. And as you all know here, it's a unique and personal journey to live with a chronic illness and cope and also aspire to thrive while dealing with a chronic illness. And it can really feel like carrying a heavy load. And what's true is everyone carries that load in your own unique way. And it takes extra energy to cope. It takes... it's a draw on emotions, on your physical energy, your mental energy and your spiritual resources; that part of you, your essence, that sense of replenishment. And a lot is being drawn

upon when you're living with a chronic illness. And I don't need to tell you that because you experience that each day in your life and the ebbs and flows of that and the realities of that.

But I think it's always important to remember that living with a chronic illness is not just a medical experience. And, while I personally don't have MS, I have supported friends and family, I have witnessed firsthand what MS, the experience of MS that people can deal with and the many symptoms. And I also have experienced my own, times and chapters in my life where I've dealt with chronic pain. I had a... I broke a vertebrae when I was, a child, when I was 11 years old in a tobogganing accident. And not long after I was in quite a serious car accident. And so, I've had chapters in my life where I know the experience of pain and symptoms that become all consuming, that have to be coped with. And I know from those experiences how much journaling was a soft place to land, a place where I could tell the truth of what I was experiencing without feeling any judgment or having to explain. And it really just gave some breathing space, which is, as we know, so important.

You sometimes might feel like you need to have a superpower to cope with chronic illness. And in many ways, you're a superhero as you cope and be resilient and do your best to thrive while living with a chronic illness. And living with a chronic illness like MS can impact your energy, your relationships, your daily routines and rhythms, and also your overall sense of identity and sense of self, and integrating all that's real about having a chronic illness into who you are, into how you live, into how you love, how you get support, how you care for yourself. There's many layers, and journaling is a practice that can help be with the many aspects that are unique for you as you walk your own path with chronic illness. So journaling, we want to just pause and think about, well, what is it? In its simplest forms, it's a piece of paper, a pen, or a computer, or a journaling app. There's many ways we can journal, but it's a practice that is many things. It's a storytelling practice, a self-care practice, a mindfulness practice, a resilience practice. It's what you need and want it to be. But it's all those things at once.

And I really love this definition by Kate Thompson. She's written a book on journaling for helping professionals. It's an older book. She says, "Journal writing is a way of finding narrative, constructing story, and of depicting experience in relationships in our lives. Narrative is a way of making sense of experience." And this is really important because when we journal, we write about our thoughts, our feelings, our fears, our hopes, our dreams, our days, our ordinary moments. And this is all a narrative. This is a story. It's the story we capture on the page. It's the story we tell ourselves. We live our stories, and those stories, that narrative, all that putting down on the page that we might do, it's essentially a meaning-making practice; we're making sense of what we're going through, how we're feeling, how it's impacting us.

And as we do that deep, reflective work, we activate many healing opportunities in our minds, in our physical bodies, in our emotions, in our spirit, our essence. And a lot is happening. There's a true alchemy of goodness that's happening when we engage in journaling. It's something that is mostly done on our own. It's a personal, private practice, and it also can be done in community with others. And I have facilitated over 250 Writing Alone Together circles, and just in the last nine years and more before that. It's part of our, journaling community. And, I wrote a book, coauthored a book, called Writing Alone Together. So I'm quite passionate about the power of journaling with others as well, and still honoring it as a personal, private practice while we do that. And you'll have a little experience of that briefly when you go to the page at the same time.

So how can journaling help? Journaling gives you a place and a practice, something you can actually do to tell the truth of your experience. You don't have to say what maybe someone else

needs you to say, or protect the listener or censor what you want to say or how you feel. You can tell the truth, you could talk about how you really feel, you can vent, you can swear, you can do anything you want while you're journaling. We don't want the venting to be the only thing we do in our journal, because we also want to activate positive feelings. We want to activate our inner strength, our resilience, what we feel proud of, what's going well, How are we... how do you want to acknowledge yourself for coping with the chronic illness. There's lots of good, rich, positive psychology we want to activate through journaling, too. Something like gratitude journaling, what we focus on grows, being able to cultivate more of what we want to experience in our journals, too. So what helps you feel relaxed? You can write about that. What brings you comfort? You can write about that. And all of that helps to create a healing energy with your focus in those places.

You can express your true feelings. It can be a space where you don't have to be fine. You can be with how you really feel at any given moment and allow that to be expressed. You can get what's on the inside out. You can regain a sense of control, that sense that you are the author of your own experience. You have that pen in your hand. My colleague and friend Kay Adams says journaling is like having a friend at the end of the pen. I really love that. You can reconnect with the wholeness of who you are, because you are more than MS you are more than your illness. You're a whole person with whole identities and many different experiences and roles. And that gets to be reflected as you write and remembered and honored and cherished. And in doing so, you remember your resilience. You can see in your journal the things you've coped with, where you've had to be strong, what helped you, who helped you, what types of beliefs do you have? What types of values are operating in your life? And all of this becomes part of what happens in the pages of our journals. So there's a lot that can be helpful.

And I think of journaling as a constant companion. It's something that we can turn to to express our thoughts and feelings and also to even know what they are. Sometimes we might not even really know how we're feeling. We might not even really know how we think about something. And through journaling, we can actually start to connect with that. How am I feeling right now? What am I thinking about? Are these thoughts serving me? Are they supportive thoughts? Is there anything I want to change about how I'm thinking? So we can get very curious and begin to be in this dialogue with ourselves through the act of journaling.

I've already mentioned about venting and getting what's on the inside out, which can be an unburdening. It can be a big stress relief to kind of just get things out, see them more clearly, be self expressed. This can really help regulate our nervous system overwhelm, because we start to unpack it, we start to see it, acknowledge it, and in doing so, it can help reduce stress and bring about a calmer inner-state. It's a way to care for yourself, to pause and replenish. Journaling by nature, is a very mindful practice, because while we're on the page in whatever way we might be, by hand or computer, we're in the moment. While we're writing, we're not doing the laundry or doing this or doing that. We are focused, we are present. We are breathing, writing, reflecting. We're doing something very intentional. There's a willingness - we're willing to know and grow and care for ourselves through journaling, and that's special. Not everyone has a practice that supports them to do that.

There are many practices, as we all know, that we can do for our well-being. Maybe we meditate or engage in yoga or spend time in nature, etc. Practices are those things we turn to over and over again because there's something that, through the repetitive showing up for them, we gain benefits from them, including health benefits and personal growth benefits and so forth. So journaling is a practice like that. It's like going to the mat to do yoga or sitting on the cushion

to meditate. That, the showing up to the page, to be present, to be with what is in a compassionate and non-judgmental way.

So let's try it. This is just a little warm up. This would be like the stretch part of a yoga class at the very beginning. So I just invite you to connect with your breath. Just want to notice your breath entering and leaving your body, giving you life. Just notice the surface beneath you. Let that surface support you. And when you're ready to pick up your pen, have your paper. If you're not able to write right now, you can just quietly give this some thought and pick from one of these prompts: Right now, I notice..., Right now, I'm thinking..., Right now, I feel... Right now, I want to say... These are called sentence starter prompts. You just write one down and then see where the writing takes you. You will not be asked to share this writing. It is for your own, reflective benefits. And I'm going to set a timer for two minutes. This is just a quick timed writing. I'm actually going to just set this for one minute, actually, kind of one one minute, one and a half. We'll see here. But you're just meeting the page meeting yourself and see where the prompt takes you. Enjoy.

Okay. Just begin to wrap that up. You can always come back to it later. We're going to be doing some longer writing in just a moment. So I invite you to notice what that was like. Was it easy? Was it hard? Were the prompts helpful? What came in just a minute and a half of going to the page? just meeting yourself, meeting the page, making that contact. I hope you enjoyed that. It's very brief and we'll be doing some more. Again, it was just a little warm up, a little first tap, first making of your mark.

I want to share briefly that there is a vast body of work over the past 40 plus years that has been exploring the connection between personal expressive writing, expressive writing that involves writing about our thoughts and feelings, and doing that in as uncensored a way as we can, in the most honest way that we can, in the least controlling way that we can. So we show up, we write. We write what we see, what we hear, what's going on, how we feel, how we think. And we do it as freely and openly as we can. It's the nature of expressive writing and writing to heal. And over the past many decades, there's been many people who do research about the healing power of writing, research in different fields, oncology and all kinds of different health areas and education and leadership and cognitive functioning, memory. There's lots of different explorations about how writing and journaling narrative can help.

And there's lots of books that you can find that are filled with journaling prompts and information about the healing power of writing. One of the early researchers was Dr. James Pennebaker. He wrote this book in the middle here called *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*. And he did some of the early research on the healing benefits of writing, where he had people write for 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days, writing about sort of the worst stressful experience that they experienced or the worst trauma they'd experienced, and writing about it in as much, you know, detail as they could, and then moving on to the next day and doing the same, and by the end, moving into their resilience story. What did they learn from these experiences? Who did they become? You know, sort of finding the wisdom in their own experience. And his research showed that there were many health benefits that happened because of this. People had things like reduced blood pressure, there was health benefits. This isn't just from his findings.

This is sort of a sampling of some of the various research projects and what they show about some of the proven health benefits of journaling. And you can see here that there are emotional benefits, physical health benefits, psychological, spiritual. This isn't all inclusive. I'm just trying to show the vast types of health benefits that can come from this type of writing. And you don't

even have to write for long to get some of these benefits. And you don't have to write every day to get these benefits. The act of writing at any time, can, can bring some benefits and of course, writing more and writing often and so forth, the accumulative impact. Just like you could go to one yoga class and get benefit, but if you go to them regularly, it's going to accumulate and you will get more. The same is true of writing, journaling.

But some of the studies show that there's reduced stress, there's more feelings of calm and inner peace, improved relationships, in part because I think people become more self-regulated, they become less reactive, more clear through the act of journaling. There could be reduced blood pressure, improved immune function, which is positive for all health conditions, including chronic illness. People report better sleep and improved rest. Being able to get deeper sleep. Psychologically, there's more clarity. People have an easier time making decisions. There's more self-awareness, improved cognitive functioning. There's studies specific to memory, and other... and decision making functions. So there's lots happening around... it can help, for example, it can really help with brain fog, because you're really tuning into the present moment when you write and you're being with what's there. It's okay if we can't remember this or we might not be clear on that, we can be with what is and begin to write. And that can have a clearing. It can help give us time. We're thinking then we're writing. There's some processing time, which is different than talking, where we get a thought and have to speak. Writing slows us down, helps us access some things we might not be able to get in a more rushed state.

Spiritually, there's feelings of vitality. There's a deep sense of connection with ourselves, but also with the world, with nature, with our physical environments. And there could be more feelings of purpose and meaning. And we can all probably look at this list and feel encouraged and feel inspired and look at it and say, well, what parts of this would we like more of? And maybe all of it we would like like more of. But just so you can see that journaling is an evidence based practice. There's a whole field of journaling. There are therapeutic journalers, there's journal coaches, there's people in health care. There's lots of different ways that journaling and writing is used to help activate resilience and well-being.

So that's a quick look at that. But I want you to know, in terms of speaking about the power of the page for coping with chronic illness, not only can it help cope with chronic illness, it can help in some cases have symptoms be alleviated. There are studies done in mental health, around mood, for example, there's some work done out at the Mayo Clinic with Sandra Marinella. I'll just go back a couple slides. She has a beautiful book called *The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness, Or Loss*. And she has a great body of work that shows how people who are writing, writing about your stories, your experiences, can reduce anxiety symptoms, reduce symptoms of depression, have overall mood elevation.

So there's some incredible outcomes and benefits that can come from this practice. Doesn't mean that will happen, but it means that it can. And, many I work with take people to the page, my life's work. And I've seen so many people... just this week I facilitated a writing circle. I always pick a theme for it, and our theme this week was *The Magic in You*. And I get themes from daily life. And, this was from listening to someone talk about health and fitness, and he was speaking about how gyms are very busy in January, but by the third week, they're more like what they were before the beginning of January. And he said that the magic isn't in January, the magic is in you.

And I often... so I was giving some prompts about journaling, experiences of when they have experienced magic in their life and the magic in themselves. And one by one, when we opened up for sharing, a few people said that they had come to the call feeling, sort of, it's gray, it's

winter where they are, where I am as well. And, they just didn't really have a lot of energy. And just writing for a few minutes, focused in such a direction, they felt uplifted, they felt less stressed, they felt hopeful. And so these things can happen in moments when we go to the page, it doesn't have to take years of journaling to shift our mood, to be encouraged, to be inspired, to be unburdened. It can happen in moments and then it can happen again the next time you journal. And sometimes it might stir things and not feel good. If it stirs difficult feelings, difficult emotions, maybe writing about some of the consequences and hard things about having a chronic illness can be discouraging. But then you can write about, well, what do I know about doing hard things? What helps me get through? What do I know about my inner strength? And that can have a resiliency building quality to it.

So I want to once again give you an opportunity to go to the page, and this time you'll be writing a little bit longer than the warm up. And I'm going to teach you the five steps of Life Source Writing™. And also... I'm just looking for something here. I'll share what these are, and then I'll take you through them, because the best way to learn is to actually experience it. So Life Source Writing™ is something I created because I wanted there to be some sort of pathway we could take with our writing practice. So if we think of a yoga practice, for example, we don't just walk in a yoga studio and go into warrior one or take some position. We go in, we get our mat, we settle in, you connect with your breath, and then you go more deeply in the practice and come out the end in a still position. And I wanted a similar pathway for our journaling. How do we arrive and relax and then go into our writing? And then what's the work we do flowing from that writing, that insight building? And how do we come out the other side and bring a completion and end to any writing time? You certainly don't have to do this every time you journal, but it's nice to kind of think of a structure that you can settle into, to give your journaling a container or a way to meet yourself and meet the journaling practice.

So step one is to arrive, and that is noticing I'm here now, I'm here to write. Step two is to relax - that mind-body connection. Easiest way to do that is to do some intentional breaths. Just let your breath help you arrive, slow down, relax. And then step three is to write. I'll be giving you some prompts to pick from to help with that expressive writing. Step four is to reflect. This is a feedback loop or an inquiry, they're sometimes called reflective rites, where you pause to look at what did you get from the writing? What do you notice? You're not judging it in any way. You're just getting curious. It's like pulling a thread - you've written and now you're just taking a look at it. What do you notice about it? How do you feel about it? What did it give you? Any new insights? And you're just taking a couple minutes to do a little bit more reflective writing. And then step five is to affirm - it's that bringing completion to what you just did. It's a way of bringing gratitude to yourself, to the practice, to the moment. And it gives a sense of completion. And you move from your journal out into the rest of your day or your evening or your sleep, whatever time of day you might be doing your writing.

So I'm going to combine step one and step two with a brief, mindful guided meditation. Nothing will happen, I'll just be sharing a guided meditation to help you relax, settle in, and we'll go right from that to the page. I love combining meditation or just present moment awareness breathing exercises with the opening to my journaling so that I just... kind of like a cleansing before you go in or relaxing before you go to the page.

So I invite you just to, if you're comfortable to close your eyes or lower your gaze. And just begin by settling into where you are adjusting your physical body in any way you might need to to be more comfortable, as comfortable as you can be, whatever that might mean for your body in this moment. You might soften your shoulders or adjust your posture. Just notice the surface beneath you. Let your physical weight drop a little more fully into that surface. Just noticing it

supporting you. Let's take a slow, easy breath in and a soft breath out. There's nothing to force. There's nothing to change. Just sitting, breathing in and breathing out. Just allow your awareness to gently land in this moment, like a feather settling on to the ground. You've arrived, you're here right now. If you feel pain or discomfort, imagine giving it just a little more space, not to make it bigger, but to loosen the grip of it around you. You don't have to fight anything in this moment. You can simply let your breath meet you where you are.

On your next inhale, invite in a sense of calm, even a small drop of it. Just let that drop of calm fill you. And on your exhale, release a tiny bit of tension or stress you might be carrying. Just feel that exhale. Feel what that release is like. You might even drop your shoulders a bit. Just in your own rhythm. Inhale calm. And on the exhale, soften. Now gently bring your attention to your heart area. You might even bring your hands to your chest, your heart area, and imagine a warm light there. This light is steady and quiet and supportive. This light is this part of you that knows how to care for yourself. It's that part of you that's strong, carried you through so much already. And let this warm light spread through your chest, down your arms, into your hands, and even imagine it touching the page you're about to write on.

You might say something silently to yourself - I'm safe to be here, I'm safe to write, I can meet myself gently on the page. Just take one more soft breath, breathing in and breathing out. Feel your feet. Feel your surface beneath you, your support. Feel that you're grounded and present. Even if your body doesn't feel perfect, you're here and that is enough. When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes, raise your gaze. Just bring this calm, this warmth, this steadiness, just bring what's ever here now with you as you begin to journal. You might want to wiggle your toes, wiggle your fingers. You might want to just physically move a little bit beyond the meditation.

And now we're moving on to step three, which is your time to write, remembering whatever you write is right. There's some journaling prompts to pick from: Today, what feels heavy is... It's okay to give that voice. The next one: Dear pain (if you have any pain), what do you want me to know right now... Just give pain a voice. The next one: I feel at my best when... You might write about what you're doing or who you're with, what you're allowing. I feel at my best when... For the last one: I feel grateful for... Just see which prompt speaks to you right now, what you'd like to explore. And I'm going to set a timer for two minutes. And I'll sit quietly while you write.

Okay. Just begin to wrap that up, take about 30 more seconds.

We're going to move forward to step four. I know that's a brief time to write. Just giving you an experience of this in our time together. Step four of Life Source Writing is to reflect. Once again, there's two prompts you can pick from here: What I notice about what I wrote is... or: What I feel about what I wrote is... You're just bringing compassion, non-judgment. You're just getting curious. It's a chance to see what gift your writing's giving you, what insights. Tends to find the wisdom in your own words. Let's keep writing for another couple minutes.

Okay? Just bring that to a close. Again, you can always come back to this. You also will have the recording. You can listen again and write with these for a longer period of time on your own. I just want to give you a feel for this.

And the last step of Life Source Writing is to affirm. It's a way of bringing gratitude and completion to what you just did. So you might quietly say something to yourself like, "I'm grateful for this time to write and take time for myself and my well-being." Anything at all. Just something that brings completion.

And great. So that's Life Source Writing, that's going to the page to express yourself, to be present, to see what comes. Feel welcome, I know not everyone can see the chat, but if you would like to, you're welcome to just share what was it like for you to do this activity. Maybe what gift did it give you? And there's no pressure to share, but the chat, I know not everyone can see it, but I can. And, Cathy shared, "This was an incredible exercise. I'm flabbergasted. Kimberly. shared, "It's very relaxing." Wonderful. Margie, I'll make sure that you'll know where to get the recording. I won't make sure, but I know that the staff here are awesome at what they do and you'll know what you need to know to get it, and Yahaira will also, at the end, share that with people as well.

"Thank you." "Good experience." "Thank you. I really like this." "Commitment to the craft." "Good to try journaling again. I used to always do it." "I got such an insight about tension versus relaxation." Wonderful. Thank you, Martha. "Thank you so much." You're welcome. "Grateful time." And there's lots coming in here. "I'm thankful for learning about journaling. I need to do more." "Felt great." That's wonderful. Tamara, I am going back to show slide two that you asked for. I'm just going to zip back here, everyone. That was what was on that slide. And there's lots of comments. I know you can't see them, but: "Gratitude." "Great learning experience." "Forgot how good journaling was for my soul."

Book would I recommend for a book club? Well, if the book club likes nonfiction and would like to explore journaling together, I would recommend either Sandra Marinella's book, *The Story You Need to Tell* is a beautiful book. And, I would recommend a book that myself and Eric Maisel co-edited with 41 contributing authors, including ourselves, called *The Great Book of Journaling*. And you can find it on Amazon and you can come in to local bookstores. It's called *The Great Book of Journaling*, and it's filled with journaling prompts, all kinds of different journaling. It's really... yeah, it could be a wonderful discussion. And you could do some journaling in your book club together.

"Even a small amount of journaling helps correct?" Absolutely. You were just journaling there for about 4.5 minutes. So just to get a sense of, you know, what can come with just 4.5 minutes. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Paul. Wonderful. "So grateful. I love to write. This is so therapeutic. I'm kind of proud, as I've been really sick. But I made myself attend this and really dove in. Just wonderful." Thank you for that willingness and thank you for being here. And I know it takes a lot to show up and attend these things. I'm glad you got value from it. I'll help you, Martha. I'll send you a link. Thanks. I'm going to move us forward here, and I hope, Tamara, that you got the slide you wanted and that I was understanding that correctly.

So I just want to share some journaling tips, and we'll leave some moments for some questions. But just to kind of summarize and ground us down into some of the nuggets here, please just remember that whatever you write is right. You are always the expert of your own experience. The benefit comes from the actual taking the time to reflect and express yourself. It can keep your intentions in mind. Why do you want to journal? That can help motivate us. Maybe it's for some of those health benefits, for clarity, for some time for yourself. Just keep writing about your thoughts and feelings and trust yourself and really bring curiosity. I often will sit and make a list of what questions I have in my life right now, about any part of my life, my marriage, my parenting, my work in the world, whatever... my own health. And I just make a list of questions and then I write them on cue cards and I'll just grab a cue card sometimes, and that becomes my journaling prompt. It's like my own little prompt box, are the questions I have in my own life. And we never run out of things to write about. And really bringing self-compassion and non-

judgment to your journaling and of course, to your life, because that's when we really are free to express ourselves, because we feel more safe to do so when it's a compassionate container.

So, the real bottom line is to invite you to do journaling your way. You don't need any rules. I always suggest, and others in the journaling field will suggest, to date your entry, because it is nice to kind of situated in time. To protect your privacy. Just know that it's about the process and not perfection. And if you're in pain or you're dealing with MS symptoms that make it hard to write or any other chronic illness, you can also dictate, you can do collaging, you can do some drawing. You can even just sit and reflect if you can't go to the page. You can pace yourself. You can do some nice self-care with massaging your hands or maybe putting them in some warm water. There's this engaging of self-care as you write, caring for yourself as you write, and part of caring for ourselves is accepting when we can't write. And that's okay. One of the things I'll do, I have arthritis in my hands and they can get quite sore with my journaling practice. Sometimes I'll just dictate into my phone, I'll just stop writing. But I'm still in sort of verbally journaling, and that's one thing I found helpful.

Just letting it be easy. Do what's right for you and acknowledge yourself that you're doing something helpful for your health when you're journaling, just really reinforce that, like, yay, you! You're doing it and you're taking the time to do something valuable. Tending to your own needs as you write, and also just remembering that there's no one size fits all for self-care or coping with chronic illness. You might like journaling, and you might not like journaling. And there may be times where it works for you and times it doesn't. There may be times meditation works for someone and times it doesn't. It's really about having that toolkit, having things that you know you trust that when you turn to them, they give you something positive in return.

So, I'm going to jump ahead here and just say that the pages of your journal are also a very rich place. That's my dear dog, Sadie. And she's rolling in the grass in a field I walk her in, and she's just in true bliss rolling in that field. And I often think about her rolling in that field when I journal, and how do I capture my joy on the page, my gratitude and hope and love and possibilities and peace or joy. Your journal is a place to be with all of that good stuff, too.

So I'm going to pause there. I know we're at time, but I am going to welcome your questions in the chat, and I will be sure to answer them. I think I'll probably make a short video to answer them, and then it can be shared with the recording. So feel welcome to share them. And I really hope that you can really hold the energy, that expressive writing or journaling is really good medicine. It's good medicine when living with chronic illness. It's good medicine in the whole of our lives. It's good medicine for challenging times. And it really is that place you can ground, pause, listen within, really replenish from your own inner resources. And I truly hope that it can be a soft place for you to land in the fullness of these lives for living. So thank you for being here. And I'm just going to put the question slide up. I can... Yahaira, you can tell me if I can answer a question or two or if we need to like hard stop. I know we're on the dot.

Yahaira Rivera:

Absolutely Lynda. We can stay a couple of minutes, if that's okay with the audience, whoever is able to stay with us. And I think you have covered the majority of the questions anyways throughout your presentation. So thank you so much, Lynda, for all the information and all the practice. And I love that it was interactive, hands on, and you gave our audience the opportunity to practice what they learned. So I think we can summarize if you could give an advice for someone out there who's listening today and maybe experiencing some symptoms, maybe cognitive challenges or physical symptoms related to MS, and I know that you gave them ideas

on how to deal with that, but any advice so that they can feel motivated to start journaling and use it as a wellness practice?

Lynda Monk:

Yeah, I think it's really important to honor what brings you some relief and comfort, and to think of how you care for yourself as you write. So, you know, being in a comfortable place you're sitting or maybe even lying in bed. If you know there's a time of day when symptoms may be a little less than other times, position you're journaling at that time. Being able to really think of the journaling itself as a self caring act. So what ways do you need to journal with any symptoms you might be dealing with that can allow you to do it? So maybe handwriting and holding the pen is too much, it's just too... might really activate like hand cramps or tremors and so forth. But maybe it's easier to go to the keyboard and take five minutes to just express your thoughts and feelings there and have a document, you can even password protect documents, and do some online journaling. It doesn't really matter what medium we use. The magic or the healing is in the actual self-expression. Getting connected to your thoughts, your feelings, your your own narrative, your own story, is what really is the healing properties. There are some studies around the benefits of handwriting. But ultimately we want to do what allows us to do it, is the most important thing.

Yahaira Rivera:

Definitely. Thank you for that great advice. And like you said, there are no rules. Journaling is going to look different for all of us. And, there's always flexibility in how you do it. What about the negative emotions? Can they write about that if they feel it?

Lynda Monk:

Absolutely. And not only can you, you should, because that's how we process our emotions, is by naming them. I love this quote by Carrie Fisher. She says, "take your broken heart and turn it into art." And while we're not taking our broken hearts, the point is, we can take what hurts us, what our suffering is, what's difficult, and we digest it through the writing, we're literally processing our emotions by writing them down, and we can really vent, we can just in whatever ways you're getting your honest emotions out. What I would say it's not the only thing we want to write about, because let's say we have a journal and, you know, we look back on it, we don't want it just to be filled with all of our hard emotions. We also want to have a counterpoint.

You know, I might vent about something... you know, my mom has Alzheimer's disease, and I was recently writing about my my true... well, my heartbreak, my broken heart was turning into art. And I had just come off a video call with her, and I was just so sad. She won't be... well, she doesn't know who I am anymore. Just stirring the emotion. And as I was writing, I was crying. At first I wasn't crying, but the more I wrote about how I was really feeling, I started to cry. And I just stuck with it because it's processing that emotion versus keeping it stuck inside where it really can bog us down and make us sick and causes stress. You get to get it out. But then I turn to what I'm grateful for - that she has good caregivers, that she's in a safe place, that I get to see her, you know, that my brother sees her every week. I went from those feelings of sadness and to, okay, now how am I going to make a positive? You know, I don't always have to turn it to a positive, but how can I anchor into something more grounding and not just distressing? That's just an example.

Yahaira Rivera:

Thank you for sharing that with us. We appreciate that. And thank you for the free gift. So, here Lynda is sharing with all of us. You can scan the QR code, and there's 20 Journal Prompts and

Affirmations to Cultivate Gratitude. Lynda, this has been an amazing program. Thank you for all the information that you shared with our community and, again, for making it interactive. I personally enjoyed the exercises and I think we are all inspired and motivated to continue journaling, if you have started in the past. But if this is the first time, we hope that you feel inspired and maybe now, during the holidays, as you think about the New Year resolutions, new habits, new strategies and tools to help you with your well-being in your MS journey, we hope that you feel inspired to get started.

So with that said, we appreciate you for participating. And again, thank you, Lynda, for this amazing program. And everyone at home, don't forget to fill out the brief survey that is going to be on your screen and is also in the chat. We appreciate your participation, and on behalf of everyone at MSAA, have a beautiful evening and happy holidays!