

Writing for Wellbeing



A letter to you

Hi, my name is **Ruth**, I have lived experience of mental health difficulties and illness and am currently a patient of AWP and Second Step.

Corona Virus has made things really difficult for people with mental health problems. I've personally felt quite isolated, struggled with the changing rules and guidance and loss of things that helped and supported me to stay well. I wanted to find a way of connecting with people who were struggling with their mental health and decided to create a writing workbook which could be given to patients on mental health wards. When the workbook was finished I started to think about people in the community, who I know must be really struggling too. So I have made this version of the booklet for you. Before Corona Virus I used to attend groups in the community and I miss those groups. In the future there may be creative writing groups in the community or on the internet which you could access. In the meantime I hope this can help in some small way. You could always share this booklet with others that you know and share some of your work online together.

I have had the privilege in the past to read the writing of people who struggle with mental illness and have been amazed by their wonderful writing. I sometimes don't share my writing at all, but found that by writing things down it can get some of the difficult thoughts or feelings out of my head. I am autistic and sometimes I find it hard to say exactly what I want to say, writing for me helps me to feel heard and is an easier way of communicating with others.

I know how hard it can be to write when you are unwell, but I also know that sometimes when I do write it can help me to cope. I've asked other mental health patients what types of things have helped them to write when they have been unwell and some of these ideas have come from them (and myself)

From

Ruth

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Here are some ideas for getting started with your writing:

- It can be hard to find a quiet place to write. When I was a patient at Callington Road I would sometimes sit in the ward garden or sometimes in the communal area early in the morning or late in the evening when it was quieter. When writing in the community I sometimes take my notebook to the woods or at home I use my headphones to block out outside noise.
- Try not to think badly of what you write, sometimes it can be difficult to write even a few words. Sometimes I find I'm not able to write anything at all. That is okay, you can just try another day. There is no right or wrong way of doing any of these things, so what you create will never be wrong.
- You do not have to share what you write with anyone. If you do want to share what you have written though you could share with your mental health worker (if you currently have support) a good friend or on social media. Be mindful that sharing on social media can sometimes make you feel exposed, so choose where you share carefully.
- Sometimes writing can bring up difficult feelings, if anything makes you feel uncomfortable please seek support.
- I have created 6 weeks of exercises, which means you could try one exercise a week. You do not have to stick to this though and can try them whenever you like. If there's an exercise which you enjoy it's okay to just keep repeating that if it feels easier.

Week 1: Free writing

Free writing is where you just pick up a pen and write about whatever comes into your mind. There are different ways of trying free writing. You could try:

- Setting a timer and writing for that length of time (or asking someone else to time you)
- Picking 4 words and using them to write about (or you can ask someone else to pick the words)
- Choosing a picture and writing about it. You could write about what's in the picture, write about how the picture makes you feel or what the picture reminds you of.

Ruth's example

I decided to pick 4 words to write about. I chose to give myself 3 minutes to write about my words. You do not need to set a time limit if you prefer not to.

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My words are Sand/Sea/Shell/Waves

I stand barefoot on the sand and feel it sink beneath my feet. I like the feeling of my feet sinking and the coolness of the water on my toes. Along the sea shore there are razor clam shells, which are long straight shells. When I was a child I used to use them to decorate sandcastles with. Now I just try to dodge them so I don't scrape my feet on their sharp edges. The sea is quite rough today and I hear the sound of the pebbles scraping on the bottom as the waves push and pull them around. The smell of the sea is salty and sharp in my nose. The waves almost hypnotise me with their regular pattern of in and out. One slightly larger one catches me by surprise and wets the bottom of my trouser leg. 'Never mind, it will dry in the sun I think'.

Extension task

If you would like to try something extra you could try keeping a daily journal. People write their daily journals differently, you could try one of the following, or just choose your own way to write it:

- Free write your thoughts at the end of each day.
- Write about how you are feeling.
- Write about the things that have happened in the day.
- Write about things that are happening in the future.
- Some people like to write '3 good things' which have happened during the day. This isn't always easy when you are unwell. You could write down 3 things you have noticed or three facts about the day.

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Ruth's Examples

Today I am feeling anxious. I struggle with noise and there was a loud party nearby which kept me awake last night. I went shopping for the first time since lock down began, I've been nervous about going into shops, so this was a big challenge. I wasn't sure how I would cope with wearing a mask. It was a garden centre that we went to. It was well organised for social distancing, so I felt safe. I was able to wear my face mask and although it felt uncomfortable it wasn't for too long, I was glad I practised first at home. I bought some vegetable plants for the garden which I am looking forward to planting next week. I ate my lunch in the sunshine, which helped me to calm down. I've spent my day catching up with lots of chores which I've neglected to do lately, it always feels better when they are done, but it's hard to motivate myself when there is so much going on in the world. I have enjoyed my afternoon thinking about creating this writing project.

Or 3 things

- This morning it is sunny outside, but the breeze is making it feel not too hot.*
- I managed to chop up all my green beans from the garden today, which I am going to freeze. It's a boring job, so I am glad it's done.*
- Someone was really kind to me on the telephone today which made me feel a bit better after a bad experience yesterday.*

Week 2: Short writing

Sometimes when unwell I wouldn't want to spend very long writing as I was tired or my illness was all consuming. It helped me sometimes to do really short writing exercises for 5-10 minutes a day or when I felt well enough to pick up my pen. Here are some ideas which you could try.

- If you were a place, what place would you be? Write as if you are the place.
- Notice something in the room, write for 5 minutes about the thing that you have noticed. Try to describe it for someone who may have never seen it before.
- Describe the weather today. If you were a type of weather describe which you would be and why?
- Can you write a poem using the letters of your name? You could use one word per letter or write lots of words with the same letter.

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Ruth's example

*Rebellious, Ruth, Runs
Under unbelievable underground underworlds
Treacherous tumbling torrents,
Hazardous happiness.*

- Write down the name of someone you would like to be for the day and explain why you chose that person.
- Write down 7 things that you associate with this time of year.

Ruth's example

Summer: Beaches, home grown vegetables, sun cream, cowboy hat, butterflies, blackberries and meadows.

- If you are able to sit outside or look out of a window see if you can write down and describe everything that you can see. Can you write a story about what you have seen?

Week 3: Comfort

When putting together this booklet I was thinking about what I really want when I am unwell. One of things I really need is to feel comforted. It can be hard to allow myself comfort when I am at my most unwell as I feel like I don't deserve it, but we all deserve to feel comfort. It's essential.

Sometimes when I think about memories or thoughts of things that can comfort me it can help. Here are some things to try writing about:

- Write down some words which make you think of comfort. You could also draw a picture to go with the word if you feel like it.
- What item comforts you or has comforted you in the past? Describe the item, write about how it has comforted you, what it looks/feels/smells like and any memories associated with that item.
- Is there a place where you feel comforted and safe? Can you write about the place, describing it for someone who has never been there before? Imagine you are writing about it for someone who can't see or who can't hear.
- Is there anything on the ward which comforts you?

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Ruth's example

I have chosen to write about what has comforted me when I have been an inpatient in the past.

When I am feeling overwhelmed I like to be in the dark with a blanket around me. When I was an inpatient I had an extra blanket so I could sit under my blankets. I like to drink hot drinks and found a cup of tea helped. Sometimes I made them for other people, this helped to comfort me as helping others helps me to feel better about myself. I remember hearing the birds in the morning helped to comfort me, I learned how to identify different bird songs and would name each bird in my head as I heard it sing. I am autistic and like having a routine. When I was less unwell I would write down a daily routine, it comforted me to have a structure to follow. I had to ask staff for help with this sometimes. Sometimes other's comforted me by writing me notes or drawing me pictures. Music always help me to feel comforted, but when unwell I found it hard to choose music, I would sometimes listen to the radio or playlists. I remember an art therapist showing me how drawing lines could help me feel calm and it would comfort me to draw pictures made up of lots of small lines. I was often really frightened to go to activities or groups taking place on the ward, but I did feel comforted by others in the groups when I felt well enough to go, their words helped.

Week 4: Haiku

This week's task is Haiku poetry. Poetry can sometimes feel scary and overwhelming. I know that when I've been really unwell if someone asked me to write a poem it would feel impossible. When I was an inpatient I went to a writing group where we learnt how to write Haiku's. I enjoyed writing them as they were short. They helped me to express how I was feeling and after the group I would write them in my notebook on the ward.

What is a Haiku?

A haiku is an unrhymed three-line poem. It is based on a traditional Japanese poetic form. Though there are different ways to write haiku, the traditional pattern in English is to write the first and last lines with five syllables each, and the middle line with seven syllables. In other words, the pattern of syllables looks like this:

Line 1: 5 syllables

Line 2: 7 syllables

Line 3: 5 syllables

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If you aren't sure what a syllable is you could try counting words instead using this pattern:

Line 1: 5 words

Line 2: 7 words

Line 3: 5 words

You can use a Haiku to write about anything you want. If you are stuck for ideas, you could try one of the following themes:

- Weather
- Season (choose a season e.g. Summer/Spring/Autumn/Winter)
- How you are feeling
- What you can see from the window
- One of your favourite things or people
- An animal
- Nature

Ruth's examples

(nature theme)

*Tickling meadow grass,
Swaying to a beat not heard,
Never ending ripples.*

(feelings)

*I spoke, your ears closed,
I long for them to reveal,
and see what is me.*

Week 5: A Good Day

When I've been unwell, I've found it hard to think that there could be better days, sometimes I'd need to remind myself of them, to give myself hope. This poem by Rupert Brooke is called 'Day that I have loved' You can read the poem if you feel like it, or you could keep it for another

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day. If you don't feel like reading it, that is okay too, you can miss it out and try the writing exercise if you prefer.

TENDERLY, day that I have loved, I close your eyes,
And smooth your quiet brow, and fold your thin dead hands.
The grey veils of the half-light deepen; colour dies.
I bear you, a light burden, to the shrouded sands,

Where lies your waiting boat, by wreaths of the sea's making
Mist-garlanded, with all grey weeds of the water crowned.
There you'll be laid, past fear of sleep or hope of waking;
And over the unmoving sea, without a sound,

Faint hands will row you outward, out beyond our sight,
Us with stretched arms and empty eyes on the fargleaming
And marble sand.... Beyond the shifting cold twilight,
Further than laughter goes, or tears, further than dreaming,
There'll be no port, no dawn-lit islands! But the drear
Waste darkening, and, at length, flame ultimate on the deep.
Oh, the last fire—and you, unkissed, unfriended there!
Oh, the lone way's red ending, and we not there to weep!

(We found you pale and quiet, and strangely crowned with flowers,
Lovely and secret as a child. You came with us,
Come happily, hand in hand with the young dancing hours,
High on the downs at dawn!) Void now and tenebrous,

The grey sands curve before me.... From the inland meadows,
Fragrant of June and clover, floats the dark, and fills
The hollow sea's dead face with little creeping shadows,
And the white silence brims the hollow of the hills.

Close in the nest is folded every weary wing,
Hushed all the joyful voices; and we, who held you dear,
Eastward we turn and homeward, alone, remembering...
Day that I loved, day that I loved, the Night is here

Short exercise

Write down some of the following

- Your favourite place
- Your favourite music
- Your favourite company
- Your favourite food

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- Your favourite drink

Ruth's example

Your favourite place – the mountains

Your favourite music – the sound of skylark singing

Your favourite company – my own

Your favourite drink – flask of tea

Longer exercise

You are planning your perfect day, which can include some, or all of the above.

1. Where are you?
2. What season is it? What is the weather like?
3. What can you hear?
4. Is anyone with you?
5. What would you like to eat and drink?
6. How does the day end?

And finally, is there anything else about the day that made it special?

Ruth's example is on the following pages.

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Ruth's example

I open my eyes and I am at the bottom of a mountain, there has been no long journey along the motorway to get here, somehow I have been transported in my sleep. It's bitterly cold and I can see my breath, there's snow on the ground which has formed a hard crust due to the overnight frost. I am wrapped up warm, in my own cocoon. The air is still and quiet and I am alone. There is a woodland leading up the mountain, which is filled with Scotts Pine trees, laden down with snow. It looks like Narnia. I can see deer prints leading through the forest, but there's no sign that any human has been here before me today. It's a perfect blue sky day, no clouds to interrupt the sun. My boots make satisfying crunching sounds as they break through the snow crust. As I walk through the forest I come upon a series of frozen waterfalls, frozen icicles all around, the sun glinting off them as droplets slide down, as if they are silently crying. I spend a long time photographing the ice formations, each one so different from the last. I finally manage to pull myself away from the forest and head up the mountain slope. It's sheet white, interspersed with a sprinkling of rock and marsh reeds.

As the slope steepens I stop to put my crampons onto my boots. They are spiky and help my boots grip the ice. A mountain hare (like a giant rabbit) suddenly appears, dashing across the slope. It has a white coat as it changes its coat in the winter to blend in with the snow. It briefly stops and we have a magical moment where we stop and stare at each other before it bounds off into the distance. As I get higher up I get my ice axes out of my bag and use them to climb up the slope. I enjoy the satisfying sound of the axe hitting the ice and gripping in. I can see for miles, nothing but snowy hills on the horizon and a very distant blue loch. When I reach the top someone has previously built a stone shelter, where I sit down and take out my lunch and flask. The steam from the flask warms my cold cheeks. I've got a pasty to eat, which feels like a treat compared to my normal sandwich lunch. In the bottom of my bag I find a long-forgotten chocolate bar and savour every mouthful.

Continues on the next page

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Ruth's example continued

I make a little snowman to leave for the next visitor to the top of the hill. As I start to head down the mountain I spot the reindeer herd which roam the Cairngorm Mountains, I almost expect to see a sleigh and father Christmas behind them! As they walk you can hear their heels clicking, their bodies do this so they can still follow each other when they are in a blizzard and can't see. Up ahead I see a slope of snow which looks perfect for sledging on. I have no sledge, but the case I use for my map is just big enough to sit on. I slide my way down the mountain on slope after slope of snow, whooping with joy and remembering childhood snow days long since past. As I reach a frozen lake close to the car the sun is just starting to set, changing the colour of the sky to vivid reds and oranges, I toss a stone across the lake and listen to the echoing sounds it makes as it skims over the frozen surface. Someone has left me a tent at the lake, so I snuggle into my sleeping bag, with the tent door open, to watch the daylight slowly fade out my perfect day.

Week 6: Hope

Short exercise

What makes you think of the word Hope?

Are there any colours that make you feel hopeful? Or particular sounds or smells?

Ruth's example

Yellow and orange make me feel hopeful.

Seeing the sun rise or sunset

When a friend reaches out to me

Seeing a robin or a kingfisher

Longer exercise

This exercise might be more challenging. I know when feeling unwell it can be hard to find hope or to see a way forwards. I have written you a letter which I would write to someone who had lost hope. You can just read the letter if you like, but if you would like to try

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something more challenging you could try writing some sentences of what you would say to someone who had lost hope or was struggling or you could try a letter like I have written. All of this may feel too overwhelming, it is okay to not give it a try or to save it for another time.

Ruth's example

If I could take your despair, sadness, confusion or whatever difficult feelings you may be having then I would put them on a paper boat and send them out to sea. We'd stand together on the shore and wave them away. I'd stand by your side and wouldn't leave. I'd sit quietly whilst you spoke and would understand if you couldn't find the words. If you couldn't speak, I would still stay. I would hold your hope in a safe place. Whilst I look after your hope I would try to help you find it again. We would look at old photos together, of better memories. I would remind you of everything that I like about you. I like to notice things and would tell you about what I've noticed about you. Your strengths that you have forgotten, that are still there somewhere. I would take you to the woods and we would stand quietly amongst the tall trees, which do not judge us. I have a collection of pebbles and I would find one which reminded me of you. I would give it to you as a reminder that I hold your hope. Each day I would check on you to see if you would like your hope back. I would tell you to trust me when I say that things can change. Together we would watch things changing in nature each day, I would tell you about the things in nature which I find help me when I'm in despair. I would take you to watch the sunset and we would share a flask of tea. I would tell you about the times when I've lost hope, but found it again with the help of others. I would write down words for you to look at when things get too much. The words will remind you to hold on, they will remind you that a stranger holds hope for you.

A goodbye note from Ruth

Thank you taking the time to read this booklet. I hope that it's helped you to think about giving a writing a try. I want to thank you for helping me, as writing this booklet has helped me when I have been feeling anxious and struggling.