

**Writing to Wholeness facilitators and co-authors:
Wendy Brown-Baez and Elena Anderson Eggert**

INTRODUCTION OF WRITING TO WHOLENESS

The mission of the Writing to Wholeness Collective is to improve individual and community well-being by promoting writing as a strategy for personal and social change.

Wendy Brown-Baez has facilitated writing workshops in community spaces for more than 20 years, including shelters, libraries, healing centers, spiritual centers, arts organizations, and prisons. She is a graduate of the Healing Trauma Program led by Dr. Jeffrey Rutstein.

Elena Anderson Eggert has 10 years of experience in the movement to end gender-based violence, working with survivors in hospital outreach, crisis lines, and support groups, as well as organizing survivors for change. She is the program and training specialist at Praxis International.

Both Wendy and Elena have active writing careers.

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Taja Will is a choreographer, activist, and healer with expertise in energy medicine and somatic bodywork. Taja gave us guidance for understanding the way trauma shows up in the body.

Victoria Eidelsztein is an Argentinian screen-printer, muralist, and ceramics artist based in Minneapolis who illustrated and designed graphics for the toolkit.

STEPS TO FACILITATE WRITING WORKSHOPS:

Opening

1. Verbal Check-in
1. Facilitator Intro
2. Introduction of Purpose
3. Explanation of Practice
4. Group Agreements/Acknowledgments
5. Opening Mindfulness Practice

Writing Practice

6. Poem #1 and Prompt #1 Writing Time
7. Share
8. Repeat steps 7 and 8 as time allows
9. Collaborative Found Poem

Closing

10. Closing Somatic Practice
11. Evaluations

CREATING A BRAVE SPACE

- Share something vulnerable in your introduction
- Group agreements
- No workshopping or feedback on the writing
- Facilitator writes with the group and models self-reflective writing
- Trauma-informed means awareness that participants in the group may have experienced trauma or may still be experiencing trauma that is unhealed or unprocessed. Mindful breathing and somatic practices are used in the beginning, at the end, and after a painful or difficult or emotional sharing.
- Remind participants there is no right or wrong way to do the writing exercises.
- Short bursts of spontaneous free writing quiet the inner censor and allow participants to tap into intuition.
- Do not ask that people write about their trauma, rather, use open ended prompts and give permission for participants to write whatever comes up naturally.

WHAT IS THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE AND WHAT ARE STATES OF AROUSAL?

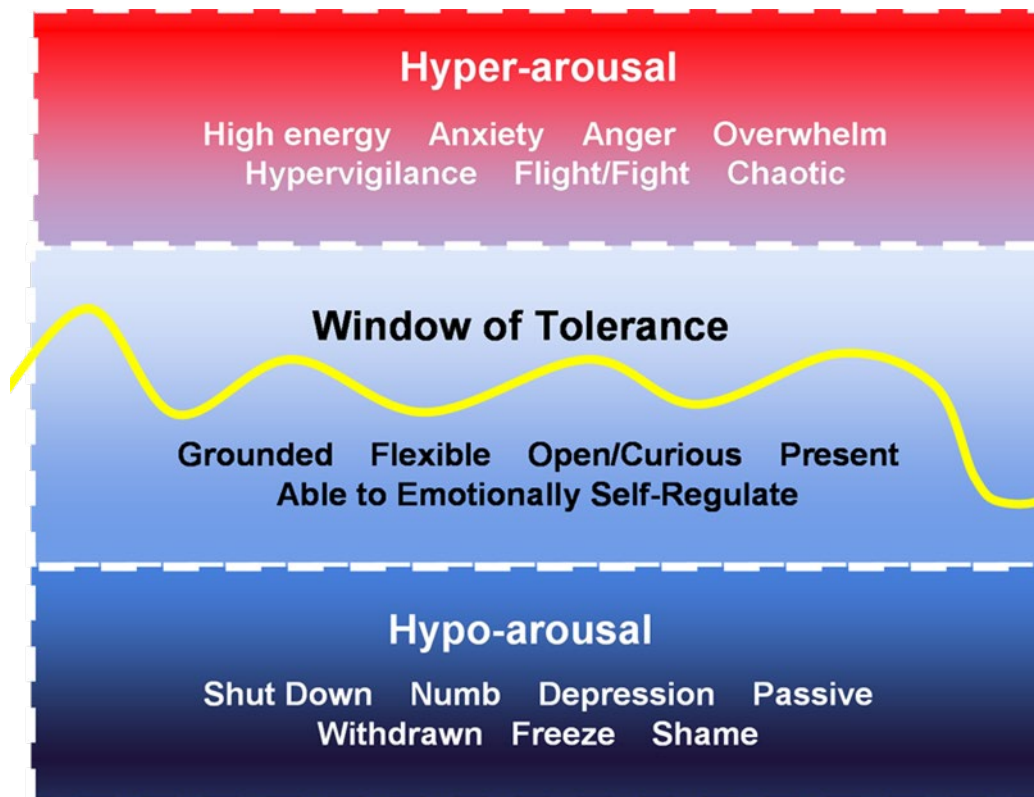
The window of tolerance is a state of feeling calm, centered, creative, curious, caring, and connected. It feels inviting and welcoming.

Hyperarousal: activates fight or flight instinct, is an experience of anger and anxiety

Hypo-arousal: activates freeze instinct, is an experience of depression and overwhelm

We move in and out of these states all day long. If we have unhealed trauma or are in a constant state of heightened arousal due to circumstances, we may need support to get to or come back to the window of tolerance. This is called co-regulation.

Trauma: an event that is perceived to be painful, terrifying, or overwhelming, and causes our bodies and minds to feel stressed or dysregulated and to respond with the instincts of flight, fight, or freeze. It can be caused or triggered by our own experience or witnessing someone else's experience.



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MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: Regulating the breath and paying attention without judgment

Triangle Breath: breathe in to the count of 3, hold for the count of 3, breathe out for the count of 3

Begin with triangle breath and then add as you wish:

- place a hand on your heart
- slowly raising shoulders and slowly releasing
- breathe in with palms cupped to the heart, breathe out with palms opening or unfolding
- visualizations

More mindfulness practices can be found in our toolkit *Writing to Wholeness: workshops to transform lives and communities* and on the internet

The Healing Time

Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
all the places

where I said no
to my life

all the untended wounds
the red and purple scars

those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections

and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.

—Pesha Joyce Gertler

WRITING FOR HEALING AND THE STUDIES BY DR. JAMES PENNEBAKER

It is not enough to write our stories, according to Dr. James Pennebaker who led studies on writing for healing, but we must look back from our present self to the past self in order to find meaning. How do these experiences make us who we are and what did we learn that we can bring into the future?

STORY-TELLING AS RESISTANCE

The group structure of a writing workshop creates space for consciousness-raising and cultural transformation. Storytelling has been an essential tool of social change movements throughout history. Storytelling practices were critical in a multitude of social-political struggles, such as civil rights, women's liberation, queer liberation, labor rights, and HIV/AIDS activism.

In sharing our writing, we find validation, we realize we are not alone, we recognize our resiliency, and we strengthen our courage to make change.

When a story is told, there is a direct challenge to survivors' isolation. Isolation feeds oppression. If the story is told within a collective environment like a workshop, writers unite around shared experiences and new ideas. When we unite, we have more strength to confront and struggle against all forms of violence. In these ways, writing can change not only ourselves but our world. We can imagine new stories capable of pulling us into our ideal future and share knowledge, resources, and power.

In the aftermath of trauma, writing can have a healing effect when a writer is able to find meaning in the experience. Storytelling has long been a tool of resistance in the struggle against oppression. Telling a story can create a bridge that connects a personal experience to a historical lineage, draw lessons for strategies in the present, and serves as an illustration of a better future.

WHAT RESISTANCE LOOKS LIKE:

- sharing our stories
- breaking out of ideas we are told about ourselves by others and our culture
- slowing down and paying attention
- finding commonality
- believing in our ability to heal and grow
- building community
- creativity and out of the box thinking
- love, compassion, kindness, and cooperation

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- joy
- gratitude
- self-empowerment to make choices about our own bodies, minds, and spirits
- demanding accountability from ourselves and others
- forgiveness does not mean forgetting
- cultivating resiliency
- advocating for change in community awareness
- honoring our experiences
- honoring our connections with each other and the earth

Healing is a process. We enhance this process by healing in community.



ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PARTICIPANTS

- Note that it takes courage to write and to share
- Thank individuals for their courage
- Take a pause after difficult or emotional writing: mindful breathing
- After each participant shares, acknowledge with a thank you, which can be hand on heart or a bow, or on Zoom, use applause hands or emoji
 - Ask each participant to write or notice a word or phrase while they are listening, something that resonates or that they appreciate

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- When everyone has shared or passed, open the circle to repeat back these phrases. Model this yourself: “What I heard is:.....”
- You do not have to respond to the writing, you can respond to the emotion and to the writers’ honesty, authenticity, courage, resiliency, and strength or express gratitude to the writer for sharing.
- Use a somatic technique to ground and release energy

SELF CARE FOR FACILITATORS: You might explore:

- Self-reflective writing using a prompt. Examples: what I noticed, what are my strengths, what brings me joy, what fills my soul, what I love, what I am grateful for
- Gratitude Journaling: list three things that you are grateful for. You can simply make a list or write why you are grateful for this thing in your life.
- Qigong, yoga, tai chi
- Massage: hands, face and ears, full body
- Tools/Aids: Weighted blankets, essential oils, herbs, teas, medicinal tinctures
- Speak with a counselor or friend, meditate or pray, sing, create positive affirmations, laugh, read something inspiring, be in nature, enjoy moving water

SOMATIC TECHNIQUES:

Shaking: a vigorous shake of the entire body can interrupt and release the trauma response that happens at the muscular, fascial and organ tissue level. By vigorous shake, we mean intentionally past a point of comfort and through the whole body including the joints, skull/head, and torso/organs/pelvis. Think of how animals do just this after incidents of danger.

Tapping: with a soft open palm, tap along the surface of the limbs and torso as you can reach. Be gentle around the kidneys. (This practice can be helpful to the trauma response Freeze).

Other somatic techniques include dancing, weeping, stomping, and drumming

Grounding: sit with your back flat against the wall or lie flat on your stomach

Self-hug: Place your right hand on your side about 3 inches below your armpit and lightly press. Place your left hand on your right shoulder. Let your head rest on that hand. Squeeze.

Goddess or Goal Post: Place hands together in prayer pose with inbreath. With exhalation, move your arms to form a “goal post” shape, that is, from shoulder to elbow is a 45-degree angle, with hands pointing straight up. When you exhale and move your arms into this position, do it suddenly and make a forceful “huh” sound.