

Writing Letters to Let Go of Pain

Letter writing gives people a way to address their hurt from someone else, even if reconciliation is not possible or the relationship is currently severed. The goal of letter writing is to have the person write out their own experiences of this relationship regardless of whether or not the letter will ever be read by the addressee.

The letter they will write helps them work through the three E's of Trauma: the *Event*, the person's *Experience* of the event, and the *Effect*. The way the person experienced the event may leave a lasting impact on the person's view of self and the world, which is important to understand and process. Counselors often find that many Christians want to or are urged by others to speed through the hurts to get to forgiveness. Like putting a Band-Aid on an uncleaned, infected cut, this bypasses the needed steps and time to fully heal the wound. As caregivers, we want to reflect the compassion and comfort of Christ as we take the time needed for the person to do the valuable work of understanding and expressing the three E's of their relational hurts before getting to forgiveness.

A helpful framework to guide the letter writing process is provided. Have people follow this guideline using first-person pronouns to make it personal.

- 1. This is what happened:** We want those we work with to be able to name the factual events of the relationship that hurt them in the past. In working through this process, they may be able to recall specific events or themes they experienced from this particular person. Whether there was some kind of abuse, mistreatment, neglect, favoritism or betrayal, it is important to write these things down.

Keeping it in the first person, the person may want to indicate how old they were when a specific event occurred, or what they saw or experienced directly from one who hurt them.

As they write the letter, they can choose how many specific events to include that impacted them significantly (e.g., "Dad, you left when I was three. Then, you did not even come to my high school graduation.") We are inviting them to name their core hurts, those repeated patterns of hurts that shape their unconscious beliefs.

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- 2. This is how I felt:** After naming the factual events, it is important to help the person name the emotion associated with these experiences. We want those we are working with to label specific emotions, and hopefully to give appropriate color and context to the experience. We can encourage them to write out an emotion for each event that was named in the first section. Instead of saying, “I felt sad,” maybe they say, “I felt hopeless and alone.” If needed, [a feeling chart](#) may be used as a guide to help name emotions that are less common.
 - 3. This is what it meant to me:** This section may be harder for people to name than the other two, which makes sense. Many times, the person can be resistant to acknowledge that a relationship they have cut off or is in the past still affects them or that it ever did. We may need to help them understand why it is important.

In this section, we want to help the person connect with the meaning that they unconsciously gave to these experiences — the *Effect* in the three E’s. How did the person see themselves, others, or even God as a result of this hurt? Did it contribute to not being able to trust? Did it encourage self-sufficiency? Did it reinforce that they were not wanted or not loveable? What did they decide to do as a result? (E.g., “Because you left, I now find it difficult to trust new people in my life. I often just try to work things out on my own.”)

Once the person fully writes the above guidelines, have the person read the letter out loud. Saying the words they have written out loud often elicits the actual emotions they experienced. As these emotions come up, as caregivers, we just want to bear witness, validate and provide space for them to grieve. Take time to process the letter slowly, allowing more than one meeting if needed.

Depending on how far along someone is in the grief journey, we might need to take more time to help them connect with God about their pain and receive his comfort. To help them through this process, [this Tool](#) can be helpful. After they receive the comfort, some may decide they want to write the fourth part of the letter, others may not and either is fine. The letter is designed to help the people we are counseling, so how they want to close it is entirely up to them.

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4. **I need to forgive you for:** Be specific about what they are writing about forgiveness. Some people may be ready to say, 'This is what I'm forgiving you for.' Others may want to write out what they need to forgive while acknowledging that they cannot forgive right now. It is our hope that our clients can eventually let go of what they are holding tightly to, but that may take a while.

Walking people through the process of letter writing allows unspoken and unacknowledged pain to come up, come out, and resettle in a more peaceful place in their heart. While we may not see resolution occur in this particular exercise, it is a tool that can be a gateway to creating a grief experience that facilitates a deeper encounter with the Gospel.