

**The Coral Valley Journaling Series:
*Productive Rumination***

Structured Journaling to Problem Solve

Journaling can be an effective tool for *letting go* in a manner that is similar to verbally talking through our problems. That said, journaling in such a way that involves obsessing over or perseverating about a problem, a distressing emotion, or unhelpful and erroneous beliefs about ourselves and others can simply intensify the distressing emotions we are experiencing, which ultimately leads us into deeper emotional distress.

As such, a cognitive behavioral approach to journaling involves responding to various prompts in a structured, linear fashion. See below to practice structured journaling to solve a problem.

Structured Prompts to Problem Solve

1. Describe the problem you are facing. What happened? Who is/was involved? Where did this occur? Did this happen one time, or is this an ongoing problem? Be as specific and elaborate as you can.



2. Identify the thoughts and emotions that come up for you in response to the above problem. It may be helpful to draw a line connecting the thoughts to the related emotions. Remember that thoughts are often phrases or sentences, and emotions are one-word adjectives to describe the feelings that come up for you. Remember, we can hold many thoughts and emotions simultaneously!

<i>Thoughts (phrases or sentences)</i>	<i>Emotions (one-word adjectives)</i>

3. Conduct a deeper analysis of what prior experiences the above thoughts and emotions may be linked to. Are you remembering another event that happened that also left you feeling similar emotions? Did this event trigger a distressing memory from childhood from which you have yet to fully heal? Do the people involved remind you of people who have hurt you in the past? Did your response to the situation remind you of past, unhelpful coping responses in which you used to engage?



4. Dive deeper: What is your interpretation of the meaning of the event you described in Step 1? For example, what does the event mean about you? About your ability to cope? About your character? About your relationships with those involved? About your relationships with others, in general?

What does your interpretation signal to you about the future?

...about the past?

...about the present?



Are the thoughts/interpretations of the above events accurate? Remember that challenging our unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts and interpretations of our circumstances can help us come up with more balanced perspectives and helpful solutions, which can ultimately yield a reduction in emotional distress.

5. Consider the below questions to challenge your interpretation and see if it continues to hold true for you:

Challenging Questions

What evidence do you have for and against this interpretation?

In what ways is your interpretation not including all of the information?

Does your interpretation include all-or-none terms?

Is your interpretation confusing something that is possible with something that is likely?



Is your interpretation based on feelings rather than facts?

After challenging your interpretation, how accurate does it seem to you now? Is there another possible interpretation that may seem more accurate? List other possibilities below.

Mood Check

What thoughts/feelings do you have NOW about the event? Mentally and emotionally note any significant shifts from the beginning of this exercise.



6. Brainstorming Next Steps

When we take time to process the comprehensive meaning of an event, we can take more intentional steps towards helpful solutions. Make a list of some possible next steps or actions you can take in order to remedy the problem described above, repair any relationship ruptures, or prevent similar situations from reoccurring in the future. Remember: When we brainstorm, we are not committing to an action step; we are simply making a list of possibilities. Anything goes!

7. Committing to The Next Right Thing

From the list above, choose one or two next steps that feel right to you at this time. You might choose to simply wait for the time being; while often perceived as inaction, waiting can be a wise, powerful, and effective decision. Again, practice trusting yourself to choose what is right for you right now.

