

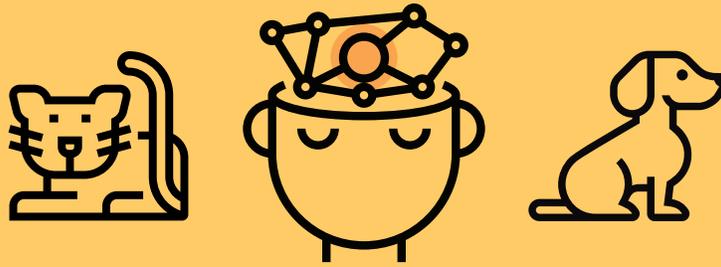


WHERE DO YOUR **STORIES GO?**

by Jessica Dolce

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Have you ever noticed that long after your body comes home from helping animals, your mind is still there with them, working through what you experienced that day? Or maybe you feel anxious or sad, but you can't put your finger on why exactly.

The answer, in part, is tied to the stories you've absorbed during your shift at the shelter or clinic.

As a helper, you're soaking up the literal stories of the animals and people all around you. Like, what happened to them in the past, what do they need now, and which character from Star Wars would they be (for their bio, of course!)?

You're also soaking up the energetic stories that are communicated to you nonverbally. The crying family at the front desk. The frantic dog circling in the kennels. The trembling body that falls asleep in your warm lap.



HUMANS ARE STORY SPONGES.

We're not always aware of it in the moment, but we're absorbing all the details and emotions swirling around us as we help.

If we want to be well and do good work, then we need to ask ourselves: **where do my stories go?** In other words: At the end of the day, **how will I wring out my sponge?**

Our sponges need to be wrung out on a regular basis. If not, we become fully saturated. We find ourselves at capacity, shutting down to protect ourselves. We may become desensitized or start numbing out. We may lose our ability to access empathy.

If we want to keep showing up with compassion, empathy, and hope, we need to make room for the new stories that are always coming. Fortunately, there are lots of great ways to release your stories and create internal space for the new ones: peer support groups, debriefing with your manager or mentor, talking with supportive friends or family, and/or meeting with a therapist. But these folks aren't always available or able to listen to all the gory details.

Thankfully, we always have access to a reliable, safe way to share our stories: writing.

Expressive writing isn't like writing papers for school. When we write in our journals, it's personal. Spelling and punctuation don't matter. It's just for us.

There are decades of research showing that expressive writing can lead to positive outcomes in physical and mental health. For helping professionals, research has shown that expressive writing can help decrease compassion fatigue and burnout, and increase resilience. Writing addresses the intense stressors of caregiving work in a few ways.

The process of writing helps us think differently about what we've experienced, allowing us to make sense and meaning out of difficult events. It lets us to experience our painful feelings in a safe way, which makes those tough emotions less scary and more manageable. Writing helps us to cope better and calm down. And it gives us a consistent way to release what we've accumulated, so our minds can take a break from worrying and our hearts can heal.

Here's how to get started:





THE DAILY DOWNLOAD

1. *Make a date with yourself.*

Set aside 10 minutes (or more) to write at the end of your shift or when you get home. This daily ritual can help you transition between your work and home life. If you only have 2 minutes or you need to write at a different time, go for it! It's ok to write with a pen or keyboard. The important thing is that you write.



2. *Turn your attention inward.*

Take a deep breath as you reflect on the stressful events of your day. Notice how you're feeling. You've been paying attention to everyone else all day. Now it's time to refocus on your needs and emotions.

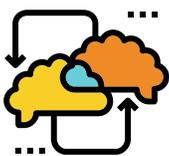
3. *Wring out your sponge.*

Here are some simple prompts you can use to process and release the events of the day and reestablish your equilibrium. Answer one, some, or all of them.

- What stories and feelings do I need to release to feel okay about going home?

Research shows that in order to reap the therapeutic benefits of writing, we have to go beyond just venting about stressful events. Try to write a detailed account of the event AND how you felt at the time or are feeling now. It's important to link your emotions with the details of what happened.

- What do I need to do when I get home in order to cope with my day in a healthy way?
- What do I need to do to prepare for tomorrow?



In addition to releasing our stories so we can heal, we can also write to build positive emotions:

- What difference did I make today?
- What or who am I grateful for?

These last two questions can be powerful resilience builders. They shift our perspective from the problems of the day to what we appreciate, what went well, and how we contributed to making that happen. Try them at night, before you go to sleep.





There are many other ways to use writing to build resilience and reduce compassion fatigue, including writing unsent letters to animals or people and nighttime worry journals. Keep exploring!

A regular practice of expressive writing is empowering. Through writing, we always have a healthy outlet to express, process, and release what we absorb each day. We know exactly how and when we'll wring out our sponge. Then we can show up for the next shift, ready to serve and take on the next round of stories.

“Writing ADDRESSES THE INTENSE STRESSORS OF caregiving work.”



About Jessica

Jessica Dolce is a dog walker, writer, and teacher living in Maine. She's the creator of Dogs in Need of Space and author of the popular blog 'Notes from a Dog Walker'. Jessica teaches classes on compassion fatigue and self-care for people who work with animals. Information on her classes can be found at jessicadolce.com.

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