Healing letters

You may often have thoughts and feelings you can't shake off that are connected to an important person from your past. Your relationship with this person feels like it has never properly ended, or it may feel incomplete in some way. (...)
If you have to rely on the cooperation of someone else, then getting closure with certain situations or experiences can sometimes be complicated. And even if you are ready to take the necessary steps to rid yourself of this emotional burden, the other person may have a very different view of the situation. They might not want to enter into that process with you, or they might not (or no longer) be physically or mentally able to that, or you may not be able to reach them, or perhaps they have already died. (...)
The Healing Letters can provide you with effective help in situations like this. Because you never know how cooperative the person from your past would be, these letters are designed so that you can work with them without needing the cooperation of others. This means that, without requiring an answer from the person who made you suffer, you can still move on psychologically. If the other person is available and also willing to work with you, then these letters can be a good way to prepare yourself for this process with them.

Please read the entire text all the way through before beginning with the exercise

Address your letters to the person(s) towards whom you have unresolved feelings. Don't write your letters with the intent of mailing them, instead free yourself to write whatever you want or need to say. (After completing your Healing Letters, you can mail one of them if you want to. However, anticipating the letter's effect while you are writing it could interfere with its therapeutic effect by inhibiting your self-expression.

This exercise is divided into four parts. Letter 1 can be completed by itself in one sitting. Letters 2 and 3 are to be written at the same time. Letter 3 must be written *immediately* after Letter 2. This is to ensure that this letter is therapeutic rather than traumatic. Letter 4 may be completed at a separate time.

Reserve one hour for Letter 1, two hours for Letters 2 and 3 combined, and one hour for Letter 4. The time writing particular letters will vary depending on your style of processing and the complexity of the past relationship or situation you are addressing in your letter. The letters are commonly completed over three consecutive days, but you are welcome to give yourself more time between sessions.

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Letter 1: Releasing unresolved thoughts and feelings

Address this letter to the person for whom you have unresolved feelings or issues. Describe how this person has affected you, including the impacts of their words or actions. Include a statement of what you would like from this person in response to your letter.

The purpose of this letter is for you to articulate and further acknowledge any thoughts or feelings you have about what happened in the past relationship that still hurt you.

Letter 2: Releasing internalised negative messages

Write an imaginary response from the person you wrote to in Letter 1. Reflect any fears you have about what the person might say back to you, as well as any fears you have about their refusing to listen or trying to understand what you communicated in Letter 1. Once written, it is important that you do not dwell on Letter 2 but move *immediately* to Letter 3.

The purpose of the second letter is to get rid of any negative feelings or messages about yourself that were internalised as a result of what this person did to you.

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Letter 3: Releasing internalised hopes

Write a different imaginary response from the person who wronged you. Unlike in Letter 2, reflect your hopes and wishes about how the other person might respond. Communicate his or her willingness to take responsibility for what they did to you, expressing their remorse in a compassionate response to the resentment you brought up in Letter 1.

The purpose of Letter 3 is to provide the healing resolution that comes with the response you would have liked or once hoped to actually receive.

Letter 4: Releasing yourself

Write a final letter to the person who hurt you. Respond to what they said in Letter 3, reflecting the changes and resolution it afforded you. Include any final business that you left unsaid in Letter 1 or have since thought of.

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You may write this letter immediately after Letter 3, or wait several days, or weeks, or even months.

The best indications of your having written successful Healing Letters are your feelings of peace and comfort afterwards. (And if you need help or support, do not hesitate to get it. This exercise can be very hard work!)

(Yvonne Dolan: *One Small Step: Moving Beyond Trauma and Therapy to a Life of Joy*, Watsonville 1998, with her kind permission)

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