

Shadow Work

The deep-writing room — a quiet place to look at what you usually turn away from.

This is a quiet place to look at the parts of yourself you usually turn away from — and to do it with more kindness than you're probably used to.

Everything you write here stays on your device. Nothing is sent to us or to anyone. No account, no email, no cost. You can copy or download your work to keep it, or clear it all with one tap.

This is the deepest room in the house. If you don't have it in you today, that's not failure — the 5-Minute Reset and Letters Never Sent are gentler doors, and they count just as much.

A few honest things before you begin:

This is self-reflection, not therapy. Writing like this has helped many people, but it isn't treatment, and it isn't a substitute for a therapist if you're carrying something heavy.

You may feel worse before you feel better. That's a known, common part of this kind of writing — in studies of expressive writing, the stirred-up feelings tend to be short-lived, settling for most people within hours. If they don't, or if what comes up feels bigger than you expected, that's not failure. It's information that this piece of your story deserves more support than a page can give.

Choose what you work with. Don't start with the worst thing that ever happened to you. Start with something that has a charge you can hold — an irritation, a pattern, a moment of shame that stings but doesn't drown. The deep water will still be there when you're steadier.

Stop whenever you want. Mid-sentence is fine. Closing the page is fine. Nothing here is owed. If you need to settle, the way back down is here, and one tap away at all times.

If you're in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, please don't work through it alone here. In the US, call or text 988 (the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or chat at 988lifeline.org — available 24/7. Outside the US, findahelpline.com lists helplines around the world.

EXERCISE ONE

Arriving

Before you look inward, land where you are. About ten minutes.

1. Name five things you can see right now, four you can hear, three you can physically feel. Write them down — plainly, no poetry required.

I can see...

2. Complete this sentence honestly: *"Right now, I have enough room inside me for ____."* A small thing is a true answer. So is "not much today." If the honest answer is "nothing," stop here — come back another day. That is doing the work.

Right now, I have enough room inside me for...

3. Now choose what you'll work with. Not the heaviest thing — something with a manageable charge. Complete one of these: *"Something that keeps happening in my life is ____."* *"A reaction I have that I don't fully understand is ____."* Or, only if it feels holdable: *"Something I'd rather no one knew about me is ____."*

Something that keeps happening...

4. On a scale of 1–10, how charged does this feel? If it's above a 7, pick something smaller. You can always come back.

It feels like a...

CLOSE

Write one sentence to yourself before you go further, as if leaving a note for the person about to do this work.

Dear one...

EXERCISE TWO

The Mirror

What we judge in others often points at what we've exiled in ourselves. About fifteen minutes.

Think of someone who irritates you out of proportion — not someone who harmed you, just someone who gets under your skin more than the situation explains.

1. Describe what they do. Be unfair. Be petty. No one will ever read this.

They always...

2. Name the trait underneath the behavior in one or two words. (Arrogant. Needy. Fake. Loud. Lazy.)

The trait is...

3. Now the harder question, and take it slowly: where does this trait live in you? Not "am I exactly like them" — but: Where have I done a quieter version of this? Where do I *wish* I could do this and won't let myself? Where was this trait punished out of me?

Take your time...

4. Write about the earliest time you remember being told — in words or in consequences — that this trait was not allowed.

I remember...

5. Finish with: "The part of me that is _____ has been trying to _____. " (Protect me. Get me love. Keep me safe. Be seen.)

The part of me that is...

CLOSE

You don't have to like this trait. You only have to stop pretending it isn't yours. Write one sentence acknowledging it without judgment — just "I see you."

I see you...

EXERCISE THREE

Saying the Whole Truth

Fifteen to twenty minutes of continuous writing. It tends to work best repeated on three or four different days — that's close to how it's usually done in the research.

Take the thing you chose in Arriving — or whatever The Mirror surfaced — and write about it continuously for fifteen to twenty minutes. Set a timer and let it run.

The only rules:

Write your deepest thoughts and feelings about it — not just what happened, but what it meant, what it cost, what it still touches. Don't fix your grammar, spelling, or sentences. Don't perform. This is for no one.

Let whatever comes be allowed to come. If anger arrives, let it be anger. If grief, grief. If nothing, write "nothing is coming" until something does or the time ends. You're not trying to feel better right now — you're trying to feel *honestly*. The feelings don't need editing to be acceptable.

If it connects to your childhood, your relationships, who you were, who you are, who you're afraid of being — follow it.

If at any point it becomes more than you can hold, stop. Put both feet on the floor, name five things you can see, and let that be enough for today.

If you feel flooded while writing, some people find it easier to describe the scene in third person — using their own name, as if watching it happen to someone they care about. Try it if the first-person version is too hot to touch.

Begin anywhere. Keep the pen moving...

CLOSE

Before you stop, write one sentence that begins "*What I understand now that I didn't before is _____*" — even if the honest ending is "...nothing yet."

What I understand now that I didn't before is...

EXERCISE FOUR

The Kind Witness

Where shame is actually worked with. About fifteen minutes.

Imagine someone you love wrote Exercise Three and handed it to you. Same history, same shame, same 3 a.m. thoughts. They're sitting across from you, waiting to see if you'll still look at them.

Write them a letter. In it:

Tell them what you actually see when you read their words — not the flaw they see, but the person underneath it. Remind them they are not the only one: whatever they're carrying, they are one of millions of humans who have carried it. Say that in your own words. Speak to the pain without drowning in it — name what hurt without arguing that it should hurt more or less than it does. And tell them what you'd want for them next. Not a fix. A direction.

Dear...

Now read the letter back — and let it be addressed to you. Because it is.

CLOSE

Copy out the single kindest true sentence from your letter. Keep it somewhere you'll see it.

The kindest true sentence...

EXERCISE FIVE

Taking It With You

Shadow work that ends at insight leaves you open. This turns it toward living. About ten minutes.

1. Name the part of yourself you met in this work — the trait, the wound, the exiled thing. Give it a plain name, not a diagnosis. ("The part that needs to be needed." "The angry one." "The one who hides.")

I met...

2. Answer, briefly: what has this part been protecting you from? Every shadow was once a strategy.

It's been protecting me from...

3. What does it actually need — that it's been trying to get in the only way it knew?

What it actually needs is...

4. Choose one small, concrete act for the next seven days that gives that need a healthier channel. Small enough to actually do. Write it as a plain commitment: *"This week I will _____."*

This week I will...

5. Last: write a short closing to this piece of work — a few sentences that end it *for now*. Not "I'm healed." More like a door closed gently, that you know how to open again.

For now...

CLOSE

If it helped, come back to Saying the Whole Truth with the same material on another day. In the research on this kind of writing, the usual format is fifteen to twenty minutes on three to five separate days — several sittings, not one.

Coming Back Down

For anyone who feels stirred up, anxious, or flooded — during or after any of this.

Stirred-up feelings after this kind of writing are normal and usually settle. While they settle, here are three ways to help your body come back down. None of them require you to think about what you wrote.

1. The double breath (start here)

In a month-long randomized study at Stanford, five minutes a day of this breathing improved mood and slowed resting breathing more than an equal dose of mindfulness meditation. It's one study, not a settled fact — but it's simple, safe, and easy to try.

Inhale slowly through your nose. When your lungs feel full, sip in one more short breath on top. Then exhale slowly and completely through your mouth — longer than the inhale, all the way empty. Repeat for five minutes. Not five breaths — five minutes. Set a timer and let it be boring.

If the double inhale feels awkward, skip it: just breathe in for a count of 4 and out for a count of 8. The long exhale is what tells your nervous system the danger has passed.

2. Squeeze and release (for when it's living in your body)

If you've come out of the writing clenched — jaw tight, shoulders up, stomach knotted — work through your body instead of your breath. This is progressive muscle relaxation, a technique studied for decades — reviews of clinical trials find it reduces anxiety for many people.

Starting with your feet: squeeze the muscles hard for five seconds, then let go completely and notice the difference for ten. Move up — calves, thighs, belly, hands, arms, shoulders, jaw, face. Don't rush the release. The letting-go is the exercise.

3. Come back to the room (for when your mind is somewhere else)

If the writing pulled you into the past and you're having trouble getting back: name five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch, two you can smell, one you can taste. Say them out loud if you're alone. This one is widely used in clinical practice, though it has less formal research behind it than the other two — the idea is simply to give your senses a present-tense job.

About the research. Studies describe averages, not any one person, and nothing on this page is medical advice. The main sources behind the claims here: an overview of expressive-writing research by Baikié & Wilhelm (2005); the Stanford breathing study, Balban et al. (2023); and a meta-analysis of relaxation training for anxiety (Manzoni et al., 2008).

If none of this is enough, that's not failure — it's information. It may mean what you touched deserves more support than a page can offer. Reach out to someone you trust, or to a professional. And if you're in crisis: in the US, call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org, available 24/7. Outside the US, findahelpline.com lists helplines around the world.

A BLESSING ON THIS WORK

This work is a gift. Share it freely with anyone who needs it — print it, copy it, pass it on whole. It is not for sale, by us or by anyone, and it shouldn't be changed. Above all, keep the crisis lines and the words about seeking professional help exactly as they are — for someone, those may be the lines that matter most. It exists to help people heal, and to raise the vibration of the world. That will never cost anything here.

— Aether & Root · aetherandroot.com/inner-work