Directed Journaling

Guidelines for Therapeutic Journals (Pennebaker)

- Find a private place where you will not be interrupted
- Focus on one of the more traumatic experiences of your life
- Write about those aspects that are most difficult to acknowledge
- Shift between external event and your deepest thoughts and feelings
- Abandon a concern with grammar and syntax: Write only for yourself
- Write 20 minutes a day, for at least four days
- Schedule a "transitional activity" to return to life as usual
- Have a support person or professional available in case of need

Guidelines for Directed Journaling (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer)

Consider tailoring questions addressed to client's need:

Emotional exploration:

- What do you recall about how you responded to the event at the time? Put yourself back there, now.
- How did your feelings about it change over time?
- What was the most emotionally significant part of the experience to you?

Sense making:

- How did you make sense of the death or loss at the time? How do you interpret the loss now?
- What philosophical or spiritual beliefs contributed to your coping? How were they affected by it, in turn?
- Are there ways in which this loss has affected your direction in life? How, across time, have you dealt with this?
- How, in the long run, do you imagine that you will give this loss meaning in your life?

Benefit finding:

- In your view, have you found any unsought gifts in grief? If so, what?
- How has this experience affected your sense of priorities?
- What qualities in yourself have you drawn on that have contributed to your resilience? What qualities of a supportive kind have you discovered in others?
- What lessons about loving has this person or this loss taught you?
- Has this difficult transition deepened your gratitude for anything you've been given? If so, to whom might you express it?

Variations:

- Dream journals
- Dialogues with self
- Letters to a "friend" with a similar loss
- Gratitude letters

Notes:
If used as an adjunct to therapy, integrate into session through reading selected passages aloud, rather than as material for therapist to read between sessions. The client's perspective on the journaling may shift depending on whether client or therapist does the reading.