

GROWING FORWARD JOURNAL

Your companion during challenging times, with daily exercises to help you mindfully build resilience and grow through anything.

Written by

STACY THOMAS

Ph.D., C.Psych

We are all stars Who fell from the heavens, Shining so bright.

Who at some point decided To dim the light.

To get along, to fit in, We let the darkness of doubt win.

Then spend a lifetime

Searching

For the light That is our birthright

So we can return home.

- Dr. Stacy Thomas





Dr. Stacy Thomas is a Clinical Psychologist whose private practice in Toronto was inspired by her desire to assist those ready to truly Design their Lives.

With close to 20 years of experience helping people navigate significant life challenges, Dr. Thomas' strength is in her ability to recognize resilience and teach people how to apply proven psychological strategies in order to move past mere survival and thrive in the face of adversity.

As a health psychologist, she has worked in several multidisciplinary rehabilitation and health care teams in the treatment of trauma survivors, as well as with people with chronic and serious physical illnesses. Her passion for using psychological tools to further human potential also inspired her training in Sport and Performance Psychology and her work with a range of professionals and performers who have sought her out to learn how to achieve their best performance when it counts.

Her optimism and activism to make this world a better place is fuelled by her belief in the power of the human spirit. This journal was inspired by a desire to make effective psychological tools accessible. Because when people are better, they do better, and we all benefit. She hopes you use it well.

"Every challenge we face has the potential to elevate us into a higher version of our being."

HELLO & WELCOME

The GROWING FORWARD journal you have purchased was inspired by people just like you. People faced with a significant life challenge, who are stronger than they realize and have a tremendous capacity to adapt.

They, like you, could not fully appreciate their strength because they were so focused on the struggle. But trust me, as a witness to thousands of journeys through significant challenges, the resilience of the human spirit is tremendous. I see it all the time, and it never ceases to amaze and astound me.

All that I have seen and learned as a result of decades of clinical practice and the research on post traumatic growth has led me to understand one important and simple truth:

This life is for us.

This journal was designed with the intention of helping you GROW FORWARD on this noble journey. Inside, you will find space to express your feelings authentically as well as questions and suggested practices to support and increase your awareness to your process of growth and healing.

Everything in this journal has been informed by decades of research on resilience, positive psychology, and post traumatic growth.

My hope is that you will make space in your life, to engage with this journal as often as you need in order to get full benefit from it. I hope that you will regard the pages that you fill with your voice, as your special place. A place of acceptance and understanding; a place where you can just be.

I hope that as you engage in this practice of journaling that you will also learn to

cherish your own voice as the most important guiding voice in your life. Because the answer for what you need to do, to heal and grow ultimately resides within you.

And in the future, should you decide to look back upon this part of your life, I also hope that it will serve as a reminder of your ability to benefit from your own wisdom and grow through anything.

Ready to get started? Let's begin.

Dr. Stacy

PS: Interested in connecting with other people who have also made the decision to grow forward? I invite you to join me at www.growingforwardjournal.com to receive stories of inspiration, the opportunity to participate in live webinars and events, and connect with your tribe.

I look forward to meeting you soon.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT

OF YOUR GROWING FORWARD JOURNAL

Journaling, also known as Expressive Writing is a therapeutic tool that has benefits for emotional and physical health. Researchers believe that the benefits are related primarily to the way writing helps us process our emotions and make sense of our experiences.

Here are a few guidelines to help you get the most out of your Growing Forward Journal:

- 1. Try to set aside 15-20 minutes/day to write. You might not choose to use the journal every day. But the more frequently you do use it, the more natural it will feel, and the more likely you are to benefit.
- 2. Ideally, journal in the same place everyday; a place where you feel cozy and comfortable.
- 3 Keep your journal safe and secure. This is a place just for you to write your most intimate thoughts and feelings; things you might not even want your partner to know. You need to be confident that this is a private place, otherwise it is not as likely to be effective.

- 4. Let your words flow. The idea here is to capture a stream of consciousness, not to write the next great novel. There is no need to worry about spelling, or grammar.
- 5 Let it all hang out. Allow yourself to express your true feelings, without any form of judgement, or censorship.
- The tools and prompts provided throughout the journal were designed to help you improve your awareness of all aspects of your experience as a way of helping you find balance and grow consciously through the challenge you are facing.
- 7 I have allotted 2 pages/day. You will notice prompts on the second page of each day to note moments of accomplishment, joy and gratitude. These practices have been found to contribute to a sense of well-being and can be particularly impactful at times when challenges can blind us to this part of our experience. That said, you will likely find days when it is hard to enter anything under these headings. That's OK. Just starting a practice of trying to notice these aspects of your day is helpful in itself. And know that finding these moments will get easier over time.
- There are times when expressing your feelings will stir up your emotions and you might feel worse afterwards. As with any process of healing or growth, there can be some initial discomfort. But if you stick with the process, this initial discomfort will decrease as your resilience increases. Nevertheless, on difficult days, do allow yourself an additional 5-15 minutes to help you return to a relative state of calm. In order to help you do this, I invite you to visit www.growingforwardjournal. com for exercises and guided meditations you might want to integrate both before and after your writing

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REFLECTIONS

As I reflect on the entirety of my experience this week (the challenges, the difficult thoughts & feelings, the wins, the moments of joy, and the events for which I am grateful), I am struck by:
Even though it is uncomfortable, I can see evidence that I am growing forward in the following important ways:

I see room for further growth in the following ways:
In order to support my growth and resilience, I need to:

ACTION PLAN

For next week

"There is nothing that you could say, think, or feel, that would ever compromise my love for you."

This is the attitude that is at the heart of all healing: Radical Acceptance. It is indeed, the ultimate expression of love.

When we feel blocked or restricted when attempting to express our inner most experiences, it is often because we are not used to adopting this loving attitude toward ourselves. The pages of this journal are an invitation to practice this ultimate expression of love for yourself.

It might feel awkward at first. But, as with all new behaviours, it gets easier with practice.

In the days and weeks ahead, you might choose to remind yourself of this loving attitude by repeating this simple phrase above just before you go to write. Take a deep breath, repeat the phrase, and observe how the process unfolds.

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"Cultivating Mindful Presence."

The experience of stress is of being disconnected from the present moment. This is why practicing mindful presence is essential for helping us reconnect with being in the NOW.

This week, I invite you to start a practice of taking at least 5 minutes out of your day, to intentionally pay attention to what is happening in the present moment. You might choose to do this by focusing on silently counting your breaths (e.g., inhale, exhale, count "1"; inhale, exhale, count "2") up to 10, and then starting again at 1, continuing in this way until the end of the 5 minutes.

OR you might practice engaging in another activity in a mindful way. My favourite is eating. Pay attention to how each morsel of food, looks, smells, and feels, before you take a bite. Move it around in your mouth before you chew noticing the texture, and taste in different parts of your palate. Chew slowly, paying attention to how taste and texture changes before swallowing. Repeat.

You can do the same thing with walking or even doing chores around the house. Slow the process down, paying keen attention to every movement. Notice whatever you notice, and enjoy the process of being right here, right now wherever you are.

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ACTION PLAN

For next week

"Growth is Uncomfortable."

There is no way around this. A challenge to any system creates chaos. My years of work with trauma survivors has taught me that the ability to accept this truth makes all the difference between pain and suffering.

When we stop rallying against what shouldn't be and recognize what is, a funny thing happens. We start to actually do what is needed to cope effectively. Rather than judge ourselves for struggling emotionally, we accept that we are going through a difficult time and seek out support. Rather than trying to go about business as usual, we make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the change.

When we start to align ourselves with how things are vs. how they should be, we slowly start to emerge from the chaos. This is how we start to grow forward in our healing process. By making conscious choices with full awareness, we take back control of the journey.

As difficult as it might be to fully acknowledge the reality of your circumstances, I encourage you to try. In the coming week, simply acknowledge the objective truth of the challenge you are facing. Acknowledge, and allow yourself to feel the feelings, ask what you need to do, and follow through.

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For next week

"Our Experience of the Struggle Blinds us to Our Strength."

As you can probably tell by now, I am obsessed with understanding how people manage to navigate challeng es. My genuine curiosity about how people managed to do whatever was necessary in spite of the challenges they faced (and I am talking some seriously epic stuff here) the response is typically something like: "I just did what had to do". Utterly, underwhelming.

The fact that you manage to do whatever you did in spite of the fear, uncertainty, pain, and/or grief that comes along with most significant challenges does say something about you. In fact, the strengths that you have developed throughout your life and that you take for granted likely came to the forefront to help you through.

Understanding our strengths is important for building confidence and trust in our ability to cope. If you agree, I encourage you to go to http://www.viacharacter.org/www/ to complete the questionnaire to obtain an objective assessment of your Signature Strengths.

When you obtain your results, think about how you have been making use of your top 3 Signature Strengths to cope with your current challenges. If you have not been making optimal use of your strengths, focus on trying to do so in the week ahead. If you have been using them, consider how you might use them in a new way to help you grow even further.

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For next week

"Visualizing Optimal Coping -Your Guiding Light Through the Darkness."

In the depths of despair, it is often impossible to imagine ever again seeing the light. Yet we know from research on resilience, that most people do indeed go on to fee happy again even after the worst has happened.

Whether you have suffered a loss or are living under the threat of losing the future you assumed you would have, know that you can and will feel better than this. The entire purpose of this journal is to give you a better than average chance at making this a reality.

Developing a vision of yourself coping well with this challenge is a way of fostering the light to help lead yourself out of the tunnel.

During the week ahead, take some time to create this vision yourself coping well. What are you doing? How are you caring for yourself? How are you relating to others? What are you doing to bring back a sense of purpose and meaning to your life?

I invite you to go to www.growingforwardjournal.com to access the guided meditation I have created to help you access this vision. As the vision of your best self starts to emerge, write it down. You will find a place to document this vision on page 224. Let it be your guiding light.

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For next week

"Learning to Let the Heart Lead."

As someone who has been guided by the head for much of my life, I have learned that allowing myself to be guided by the heart is the most efficient path to living with flow and fulfillment

As a psychologist, I have also witnessed countless others wake up to listening to their own inner wisdom and start to honour it with action. As they start to operate in this way, they without fail, come to our session in a state of joyous wonder and exclaim, "It was so easy!" Yes it is!

When we learn to dim the noise of the head, and start to really listen to our own inner voice, a sense of clarity emerges. When we honour the message by acting on it and experience what unfolds, our confidence in our ability to quide ourselves along the right path grows.

As you continue to amplify your authentic voice through your practice of expressive writing, you might start to notice a recurring thought, an urge to go in a certain direction or express yourself in some way.

Rather than just observing the pull, challenge yourself to honour the message with action and see where it leads. You might be surprised to see yourself guided towards exactly what you need.

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For next week

"Becoming Clear."

The gift of significant life challenges is that they force us to become clear about the things in life that are of ultimate importance.

They also help us appreciate the impermanence of all things, and in turn, how we prioritize our time.

How has the challenge you are facing helped to clarify your values? To what extent have you allowed your values to influence how you prioritize your time?

In the coming week, make a point of honouring your priorities by taking care of them in whatever way possible. Notice the impact this has on your sense of control over your life.

(PS: and be sure to make note of your success at following through when you reflect on your moments of COMPETENCE each day)

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For next week

"The Healing Effects of Kindness."

There is some preliminary evidence suggesting that performing random acts of kindness can help us fee better during times of stress.

Researchers have yet to identify why being kind to others helps us. Here are my best guesses:

- Being kind helps us feel competent, giving us a break from the weight of our struggles.
- It helps us feel connected to others at a time when our feelings of stress can cause us to feel isolated and lonely.
- It also helps us shift from focusing on ourselves, a mindset that goes hand in hand with stress, giving us the opportunity to notice that others might be struggling as well

I would not be surprised if you have been demonstrating kindness to others all along. But you might not be doing so with intention or recognition of the impact of your actions. If this is the case, you are likely not benefiting to the greatest extent possible from your own good deeds.

In the coming week, I invite you to start the day with a goal of completing 3 acts of kindness per day, no matter how small and give yourself the gift of experiencing your ability to continue to have a positive impact on others.

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For next week

"Connecting with Purpose."

When the unthinkable happens, most of us feel compelled to try to mentally undo the event by thinking about the decisions that could have been different that might have prevented it from happening. Unfortunately, we can stay stuck in the torture of "if only..." for a long time, a process that only serves to prolong our suffering.

But when we do eventually come to terms with what has happened, many of us choose to transform our grief and distress by focusing productively on doing what we can to make sure that others do not suffer the same fate.

Making things better for others can take many forms It can be as big as starting a movement or as small as connecting with one other person dealing with similar circumstances to ensure that they do not feel alone.

As we use our talents in this way, we transcend what hap pened, and in the process, make the world a better place. This is one of the potential gifts contained within every life challenge.

As you reflect on your challenges, what are the things that would have made a difference? How might this challenge inspire you to connect with your strengths and make things better for others? Over the next week, consider acting on the answers to these questions, and reconnect with your sense of purpose. You might discover that it has never been stronger.

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For next week

"This life is for you... but it's not about you."

We seem to have a bias in this culture towards believing that we can determine everything that happens in our lives. Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, right? Well, as a good person who has experienced some 'bad' things, you are a living example of how this theory just does not add up.

The reality is that while we can have a lot of say over how we deal with life events, we do not have complete control over what happens to us. As meaning making creatures, finding a reason for why things happened, particularly those events that are unwanted, is a natural thing to do.

But let me be clear. This challenge did not happen in order to teach you something. You did not bring this on yourself. It is not a punishment. It is not your fault.

If any part of you is holding onto any of these false and limiting beliefs, I implore you to let them go now.

It happened, and you have chosen to take a lesson from it in order to help you Grow Forward.

Got it? Enough said.

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For next week

"Connecting with Your Tribe."

After weeks of processing and reflecting as you grow through this challenge, I hope that you have come to appreciate that support from others is essential for healing.

The fact is, no one successfully navigates this journey alone. As humans, our attachments are essential to survival. Even as we learn to independently care for our basic needs, we continue to need to feel connected to others in order to thrive both physically and psychologically.

Support might take different forms, at different times, with different people. It all helps. But when we are going through unique challenges, it becomes even more important to connect with others who really understand what you are going through because they have been through the same thing.

The comfort that comes from experiencing genuine empathy with a shared lived experience behind it, also allows us to be more open to learning from what others on the same journey have to teach.

This is why I have organized Growing Forward communities around specific life challenges. If you would like to connect with others who have walked this walk and are also focused on Growing Forward in the process, I encourage you to go www.growingforwardjournal.com to find your tribe, connect and continue the healing conversation.

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VISION

Of my Resilient Self

"The Power of Having a Vision."

Life is full of curve balls. And when they are coming at us from numerous directions we can certainly feel.... lost. This feeling of being disoriented and without a clear sense of direction is part and parcel of the experience of stress

The fact is, we cannot control the world around us. We can have an impact, but complete control is impossible.

But we can control our response. So although you might feel like you are in the midst of chaos, taking a moment to vision yourself coping well with this very challenge you are facing can reveal a new way of being that you can create for yourself. As you vision it, indeed you give yourself the opportunity to feel it. You also open yourself up to the possibility of making this more of your reality in your day to day life. This is part of growing forward on your terms, to Design Your Life.



Description of my Actual Resilient Self

It has been at least three months since you started this process of Growing Forward through this significant life challenge. It is now time to take stock of the positive changes you have mobilized for yourself.
To do this, I invite you to look back on all of those pges, where you noted your reflections on growth. What do you notice? What stands out most about how you have grown?

What strengths did you make most use of?
What new abilities emerged?

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You have made it this far, now what?

TIME TO MOVE FORWARD

I always believed you could grow through this experience. I believe in you because growing and evolving is what you are designed to do.

This practice you have developed of regularly expressing your genuine thoughts and feelings through writing has facilitated this process. The benefits you have experienced as a result of learning how to listen to your own voice with compassion, and honouring the message with action, prove once again, that you had the answers all along.

All you need to do now, is to keep doing what you have been doing. Continuing to dim the noise and follow your own lead will put you on the path of becoming unstoppable. This journal is your reminder that you can do it and grow through anything.

I would love to hear from you directly about your experience using the Growing Forward Journal. It is through your feedback that this journal will continue to evolve and serve you better.

Please do join me in the Growing Forward Community at:

www.growingforwardjournal.com

for ongoing stories of inspiration, and to connect with others who are also interested in Designing Their Lives, regardless of what life brings.

I would encourage you to share your story too. Your example of evolving through this challenge helps to elevate us all.

With much love and respect,



To all of the divine beings I have had the opportunity to meet, who entrusted me to help them be

To all those who saw the divine in me And guided me towards living a life without limits

I offer my deepest thanks

In humble service,

Always

- Dr. Stacy Thomas

