Healing the Authoritarian Wound Through Writing

by Eric Maisel

**Exercise 1. This really went on (you weren’t crazy)**
We can almost believe that what happened to us didn’t happen to us, maybe because we did a lot of dissociating, because other people saw the authoritarian in a different light, because we wished so hard that it wasn’t true or that bad, or for some other reason. But it did happen. Please pick one of the following three prompts to write on (they are written from your point of view):

1. What exactly went on? Let me pick one experience that still deeply affects me and try to describe it as carefully as I can. I do want to know for certain that what I believe went on actually did go on!

2. I want to think a little bit about how it might be to remember some of those terrible experiences without having to re-experience them and without having to be flooded with bad feelings. Can I see a way to do that?

3. I have long thought that I must be a little crazy to believe that such awful things could possibly have gone on. But they did go on. So how can I completely let go of that feeling that I was “a little crazy” for believing what, it turns out, was completely appropriate to believe?

**Exercise 2. You didn’t have a choice (you didn’t choose it)**

If your experience of dealing with an authoritarian happened in childhood, it should be clear to you that you didn’t choose to experience that wounding. But as clear as that truth may be, it’s still easy to feel complicit or as if you deserved what happened to you, maybe because you weren’t “perfect.” Now is a good moment to get clear on the fact that you didn’t choose to be abused by that authoritarian. Please pick one of the following prompts to write on:

1. Is there some part of me that still thinks that I did choose my situation? How can I still be thinking that? And what can I do to stop thinking that?

2. If I’m still dealing with an authoritarian today, do I have new choices to make? Different choices to make? After all, I’m not that child any longer!

3. Because I didn’t really have a choice in the matter, I think I may have gotten it into my head that I’m not entitled to make strong choices or maybe that I’m not equal to choosing. I think I’d like to do some reflecting on that possibility.

**Exercise 3. You didn’t have allies (you had to go it alone)**
It is hard to overestimate the extent to which you had to go it alone. Authoritarians can’t function if everyone around them says “No!” For the authoritarian to bully others, those others must be staying silent, not fighting back, tacitly accepting the situation, or even defending the authoritarian. Maybe you were lucky to have an ally in an aunt, a sibling, or someone else, but basically you had to go it alone—the proof is that no one ever successfully stopped the bully’s behavior. Please pick one of the following prompts to write on:

1. Did I or didn’t I have any real allies during those bad times? What was the exact nature of my situation with respect to allies and/or a lack of allies?

2. If I did have a real ally during those times and he or she is still living, do I want to reach out and say something to him or her? Or maybe say something to him or her even if he or she is deceased?

3. I wonder, what are the consequences of having had to go it alone? Did that make me independent or dependent? Did it make me love solitude or recoil from solitude? Let me do a little writing and tease out those consequences.

**Exercise 4. You didn’t have power (you couldn’t fight back)**

Grown-ups possess all the power. Children can dream about being powerful, fantasize about being powerful, and engage in small acts of strength, but they are essentially powerless in the face of adult abuse. This true powerlessness can produce lifelong feelings of powerlessness, even though you are now an adult with all the powers of an adult. Please pick one of the following prompts to write on:

1. I want to think clearly about the ways in which I was powerless in those terrible times, primarily for the sake of making absolutely certain that I do not blame myself for not taking actions that were just not available to me.

2. How would I describe the power I now possess? Surely, I do possess some adult powers! How would I describe them? And how do I use them?

3. What would it take to transform myself into a “real life superhero?” And what would I be able to accomplish then?

**Exercise 5. You couldn’t possibly understand (how could you?)**
You may blame yourself for not understanding what was going on, for being too innocent, for missing what was right in front of your nose. But how could you possibly have understood? Feeling that something was seriously wrong and fully understanding the complicated dynamics of the authoritarian personality are two different things. Really, how could you have understood? Please pick one of the following prompts to write on:

1. What do I understand now that I couldn’t possibly have understood back then?

2. What intuitions that I had back then about my situation and about what was going were actually accurate? Did I maybe have some understanding of the situation that I couldn’t quite access then?

3. What additional understanding is available to me now? Is there more for me to understand?

**Exercise 6. You were genuinely afraid (of course you felt scared)**
Authoritarians scare us. You may have spent much of your childhood terrified. Of course you were afraid. The question to grapple with now is, do you still have to be afraid today? Please pick one of the following three prompts to write on:

I want to remember what it was like to be frightened as a child, to validate that experience. I am going to go back in memory, remember what I felt, and honor that I had those terrible experiences. But I am going to go back very carefully.

2. I know that I’ve lived in a fearful way and that I’ve been scared a lot in life. What can I do to feel safer now?

3. I want to live differently. How can I live more bravely? What would such a life look like?

**Exercise 7. You were truly harmed (there were real consequences)**

To say that you were wounded isn’t to speak metaphorically. Something in you got seriously injured. Maybe it was your willingness or your ability to deal with conflict. Maybe it was your self-image, your self-esteem, or your self-trust. Maybe it was your ability to trust others or to deeply care about others. The list of possible injuries is long. Please pick one of the following three prompts to write on:

1. I want to calmly and patiently identify the consequences of that wounding. That’s the important writing I’m going to undertake.

2. I think it might pay off to describe some of the ways that those consequences played themselves out. This won’t be easy, but I think that drawing a direct line between the wounding and the things I’ve done in life might prove eye-opening—and maybe I can forgive myself a little in the process.

3. I want to write about my strengths, too. I think it might be a good idea to spend as much time writing about my strengths as my injuries.

**Exercise 8. Healing is possible (in part, through writing)**
You may have gotten into the habit of thinking that nothing can really change in life, including, and maybe especially, your own personality. But healing, change, and growth are possible. Use your reflective writing practice to help you make the changes you identify ought to be made. Please pick one of the following three prompts to write on:

1. I think I’d like to describe some daily practice that will serve me as I try to shed the psychological and emotional baggage of the past.

2. I want to create some firm-but-gentle action plans that support my intention to heal, grow, and live well.

3. I want to write about a better, brighter future, one where I feel less burdened by the past and more optimistic and passionate about the future. Let me write about that.

*Tips from the author*

* *I let clients know that if a given exercise doesn’t speak to them, they can write on a prompt of their own choosing or, of course, not write at all. It’s wise to give clients who’ve been wounded by an authoritarian this sort of instruction and permission, since they will have had a long, difficult history with rules and especially with the consequences of violating or ignoring rules.*
* *I explain to clients that perfect knowing isn’t the goal. If they increase their awareness a little bit or heal a little bit, that is a victory and a blessing. We all have the wishful hope that we can get from a muddy understanding of something to a crystal-clear understanding of it, but perfect understanding is more than elusive, it is unattainable. I remind clients that if they get even just a little something of benefit from the exercise, that is a welcome outcome.*
* *I warn clients that the exercises may well prove provocative and emotionally difficult, and I give them real permission to stop if the going gets too hard or painful. You can tie this instruction to several of the tips in the tip box provided below, for instance to the ideas of creating a support system and staying alert for triggers. Clients should be helped to understand that this work is not easy and that stopping should be viewed as a self-care strategy and not a defeat.*

<https://www.psychotherapy.net/article/healing-the-authoritarian-wound-8-writing-exercises>