

## Healing With Poetry

For years poetry was dreaded by millions. Either it meant crushingly long epics that went on and on, putting vast numbers of classrooms to sleep. Or it was so filled with hidden meaning that only lofty professors and a few graduate students could understand it.

No more. Poetry has become more personal, and therefore more popular. It has also become a powerful tool in helping people make lasting changes in their lives.

Language can influence us deeply—not just what we say, read or write—but also what we think. When we put our thoughts on paper and examine them, it’s a first step in finding out what we want. And when we know what we want—whether it’s in our relationships, jobs, financial dealings or life goals—that’s when we are most effective at making change.

Poetry is particularly effective because it’s short and sweet, and gets to the point quickly. It has become such a simple and natural everyday form that even those who don’t consider themselves writers can use it. But it doesn’t have to be written to be effective; reading other people’s poetry can also be a way to shift the way we see our problems and perhaps come up with a different solution. Reading poetry has become so popular that it’s on buses in London and several Canadian and U.S. cities.

Poet Mary Oliver says that this simpler form of poetry is like a “coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases.”

Poetry can be used as meditation, prayer and relaxation, and many understand its potential to entertain, heal and impart wisdom in everyday language. In fact, poetry was one of many treatments used at the Pennsylvania Hospital, founded in 1751 by Benjamin Franklin.

Poetry is accessible to anyone—to entertain, to understand more deeply, to see life in a different light. It has the power to connect us to ourselves and to others so that we know we are not alone. It can result in an “aha!” moment that shifts the direction of our lives.

Take Oliver’s poem “The Journey.” This poem is about re-birth and finding the path in life that truly works for us. It’s about making a decision, regardless of what others say. It doesn’t have to be an earth-shaking decision; reading and writing poetry can help with any decision, no matter how small. Every shift has a ripple effect throughout the rest of our lives. \*

### The Journey

by Mary Oliver

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.*

## 10 Ways to Handle Difficult Conversations

*The fallout from conversations gone wrong is not pretty: trust and intimacy suffer, while resentment and misunderstanding build. But it is possible to improve the way we handle our most difficult personal conversations. Our relationships need to nourish us, not deplete us. Consider the following:*

**1. Set an agenda.** Lay out the problem to be discussed, indicate that you want to hear the other person’s perspective and to speak your own, and that you’d like problem-solving to follow that.

**2. Listen first.** Until people feel heard and safe, they won’t have the mind-space to hear you.

**3. Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity.** The authors of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* found that people typically spend only about 10% of a difficult conversation on inquiry and 90% on advocating a position. A better balance leads to a better outcome.

**4. Strive to understand** what people are thinking, feeling and needing, not just saying.

**5. Keep the focus** on understanding what is happening

between the two of you, not on “winning” or being right.

**6. Don’t ignore feelings.** They are often at the heart of every difficult conversation—and they matter.

**7. Stay centered,** supportive, curious and committed to problem-solving. Your attitude will greatly influence what you say.

**8. Notice when you become off-center.** Breathe. Choose to return to yourself and your purpose.

**9. Return to asking questions** about the other’s point of view if the conversation becomes adversarial.

**10. Be persistent** in your efforts to keep the conversation constructive. \*

## A Letter From FirstStep Counseling, Inc.

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In his poem, "The Guest House," the 13th century poet Jelaluddin Rumi compares our negative traits and sorrows to unexpected house guests. "The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in," he writes. "Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

Reading that, it's not uncommon to experience—even if just for a moment—the sweet and tender peace of acceptance for our own imperfections and difficulties. This is the power of poetry to move our souls and soothe our hearts.

Likewise, as discussed in the page 1 feature, writing our own poetry can also be healing, as we recover from a wounded heart or contemplate a life transition or face death. What verse or prose is your deepest self longing to write?

Here's an idea for a poem: Compare your marriage or partnership to a car. The page 3 feature looks "under the hood" of intimate partnership to suggest ways you might want to "tune up" and maintain your relationship.

As the page 4 article shows, the changes we make in our lives and relationships always start with an intention. When we truly understand this, we can start to live our lives from a place of choice and intention vs. powerlessness.

As always, be well, and don't hesitate to call if you'd like to work on anything that's troubling you.

## How Well Do You Handle Overwhelm?

*When overwhelm strikes, it's easy to feel powerless and immobile. Everything feels too big. It's not just everyday busyness and packed schedules. When we're overwhelmed, just making dinner becomes a monumental effort. Take the Thriving quiz below to see how well you've learned to deal with overwhelm.*



### True False

- 1. I try to remember that I don't have to do everything myself. I ask others for help and gather a support team about me.
- 2. As often as I can remember, I stop for a moment and take several deep, relaxing breaths.
- 3. I say "No" to new requests for my time, and I try to renegotiate previous commitments so that I can regroup.
- 4. I resist the frantic voice inside that yells, "You don't have time!" and take a little break to sit or lie down for a bit, because I know it will make me feel as though I actually have more time.
- 5. I watch a funny video. (Laughter has a very positive effect on brain chemistry.)
- 6. I light a candle and keep it near me.
- 7. I go outdoors for a few moments or even a few hours. Taking time to notice the glorious details of nature—a leaf, a snowflake, a ladybug—is very regenerative.
- 8. Even if for only 10 minutes, I do some form of movement—dancing, jogging, walking, jumping jacks. (Exercise increases adrenaline and endorphins, the body's natural antidepressants.)
- 9. When I need to drown out the negative chatter in my overwhelmed state, I sing quietly or hum to myself. It soothes me and helps me focus on "one step at a time."
- 10. I have a practice of meditating or praying each morning, which keeps me tethered to myself during the times that overwhelm wants to scatter my energy to the wind.
- 11. I write in my journal as fast as I can for 15 minutes without editing or judging; this "brain dump" helps clear my mind and move away from overwhelm.
- 12. On my walks (with the dog or alone), I whisper to myself all the things for which I forgive myself.
- 13. When the pressure of overwhelm feels unbearable, I listen to evocative violin, cello or piano music that helps me to cry. The crying helps wash away the overwhelm and bring me back to my strength.
- 14. I keep a list of all the things that help me re-connect with myself, that help me re-collect and re-focus my energy inside, so that when overwhelm begins to visit, I can remind myself of things that have worked in the past.

*Overcoming overwhelm isn't really about measuring accomplishment. It's about connecting with what has meaning for us, with what feeds and enlivens us. Feeling connected then connects us to the natural fuel for getting things done. If you'd like some help working through overwhelm and aligning better with your values and needs, don't hesitate to call.*

# Give Your Relationship a Tune-Up

**B**uy a car and you get a wonderful machine, ready to go for thousands of miles and, likely, many years. You also get a hefty owner's manual with operating instructions and lots of written reminders for yearly check-ups and tune-ups. Chances are you'll have several years of warranty, and of course, if something is seriously wrong, you can take it back.

Find a partner—and you're on your own. There is no owner's manual. No operating instructions, warranty or guarantees for the road ahead.

"Think about it: the requirements for a driver's license are tenfold the requirements for a marriage license," writes Phil McGraw, Ph.D., in his book *Relationship Rescue*. He adds, "The very society that has taught you that it is good and right and natural to share your life with another person...never bothered to teach you how to do that."

Most of us can do without a car if need be, but few of us want to do without love. Within most of us there is a basic human longing for connection and relationships with others. For many, the backdrop of a loving, committed relationship gives us the space to learn about ourselves and grow deeper as we age.

Like cars, relationships need maintaining and regular tune-ups. But because they don't come with operating instructions, below is a simple maintenance guide to help you keep your love relationship strong, healthy and on the road for years.

## Know What Kind of Driver You Are

Recent research has shown several things strengthen a marriage and other long-term partnerships: communication, honesty and spending time together. Just as important is knowing yourself and what you bring to a relationship. When you connect with yourself, and work on those challenging parts of yourself, you create a stronger and better partner for someone else. That isn't just true in the first flush of falling in love, it's true for the many years that follow. "Being intimate with ourselves is the necessary foundation for being intimate with others," writes John Amodeo in *Being Intimate: A Guide to Successful Relationships*.

## It's Not Always the Other Driver's Fault

Taking responsibility for your feelings and your actions is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to a relationship. You know that "other guy" who's the worst driver on the road? That just might be you. Own up to what's yours, and be clear with your partner

about what you're feeling or needing. Try not to make your problems their fault.

## Watch the Warning Lights

Cars give us little signs that something is wrong—perhaps the wheels are out of alignment or the oil light goes on. Our partners or spouses also send little warning signs that something is not quite right, and it's better to deal with the problems in the early stages, so that everything is in good working order when real crisis hits. After all, when another car pulls out in front of you, that's not the time to wonder if you had the brakes checked.

## A Wash and Wax Doesn't Hurt

Are you a road hog? An impatient and irritable driver? Do you refuse to let someone into line during traffic or lean too heavily on your horn? Try a little tenderness. Sometimes we treat

people we don't know a lot better than the ones we've lived with for years, and we forget simple courtesies: a loving tone, a touch, a word of appreciation.

## Accept the Little Dents and Scratches

Even the "perfect" car turns out to have quirks and challenges. So do our partners—those "perfect" people we fell in love with once upon a time. Before you get angry, decide which issues are worth pursuing, and let the rest go.

## Bless This Car

How many of us are grateful for this metal conglomeration of thousands of parts that somehow work together to take us to where we want to go? The same goes for our love relationships. Stop, turn off the ignition and take a moment to be grateful for your spouse or partner and the love you both share.

## Get Help Before the Engine Fails

Like a car, you can fix many of the small problems in a relationship by yourself. But sometimes that ominous clanking under the hood is a signal that something is seriously wrong and a quick fix won't work. That's when it's time to find a "relationship mechanic"—that is, a counselor or therapist—who will help you diagnose what's wrong, and guide you on getting your relationship back on the road.

A relationship with another human being is so much more complex than owning a car. So, too, is the work required to keep a long-term relationship vibrant, passionate and strong. In the end, maintaining something that enriches us is surely worth the investment. \*



# The Power of Intention

**V**ictoria wants to stay sober. She's quit before, only to relapse. This time, however, she's got a young child counting on Mommie to "get better" and return from rehab.

Travis wants a long-term relationship. Content for years to be a "lady's man," he recently recovered from a life-threatening illness and is now clear that he is ready for a lifelong partner.

Doug wants to feel happy again. Under the weight of a huge personal and marital crisis last summer, Doug attempted suicide. He's not sure whether his marriage will make it, but he knows he wants to live.

The common but invisible thread that connects these three people is this: Each person has actually declared an intention, rather than wistfully wishing for things to be different.

"Conscious change is brought about by the two qualities inherent in consciousness: attention and intention," writes Deepak Chopra in *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*. "Attention energizes, and intention transforms. Whatever you put your attention on will grow stronger in your life....Intention, on the other hand, triggers transformation of energy and information. Intention

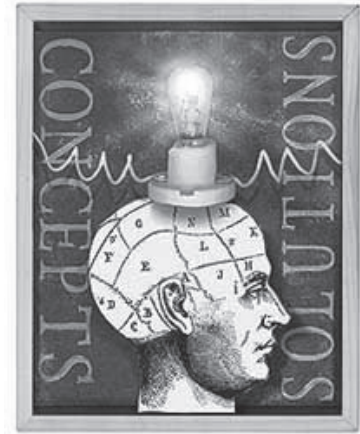
organizes its own fulfillment."

When you declare an intention, you gain the support of your subconscious mind. Here are some suggestions for how to work with intentions in order to bring what you need into your life.

◆ **Get clear on what you want and why.** It's not enough to know what you don't want. You can't get what you want until you know what that is. Steven Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, writes that all things are created twice. "There's a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things."

◆ **Imagine it.** See it as happening. "Your imagination creates the inner picture that allows you to participate in the act of creation," writes Dr. Wayne Dyer in his best-selling book *The Power of Intention*. "Your willpower is much less effective than your imagination, which is your link to the power of intention."

◆ **Keep yourself receptive.** Exercise, eat healthily, play and relax. Stress, exhaustion, anxiety, etc., become "static" that interfere with the "frequencies" of what you're wanting to bring into your life.



◆ **Take action.** Intention isn't about sitting back and waiting for it all to come to you. For example, Victoria enrolled herself in a rehab program; Travis became involved with a social organization and took relationship classes to overcome his fear of dating; Doug began working with a therapist to examine the feelings of emptiness that led to his suicide attempt. When we commit to a thing by taking action, it's often surprising how quickly our intentions are realized.

◆ **Surrender control.** This means to let go and trust. Let go of the particular way in which things will happen. Let go of fear, doubt, worry and disappointment. Let go of the notion of struggle. Trust that the outcome will be just right. \*

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