

A vibrant pink lotus flower is in full bloom, surrounded by large, lush green leaves. The background is a soft-focus green, creating a serene and natural atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the image in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

**Three Ways  
to  
Heal  
Your Mind**

**Nita Sweeney**

## THREE WAYS TO HEAL YOUR MIND

*Does your mind need to be healed? Only you can answer that. For me, it depends on the day.*

*There are many ways to heal your mind. I'm sharing three methods I have learned through experience, methods that work best for me. You may find something different. Explore what works for you.*

### WRITING PRACTICE

*"Writing practice" is a term coined by best-selling author **Natalie Goldberg**, whom I studied with and assisted for nearly a decade. Some people call this technique "free writing," "journaling," or "morning pages" (a term coined by **Julia Cameron**, another best-selling author). I'm talking about any method that gets your swirling thoughts out of your mind and onto the page.*

*I especially appreciate "writing practice" because it comes from the meditation tradition, which I'm going to discuss later. Writing practice is a structure for getting the words down within a timed period, so you'll use a timer.*

*Let me explain why this works. There are many "rules" of writing practice (please look at Natalie's books **Writing Down the Bones** and **Wild Mind** for those), but the most important one is to keep your hand moving.*





*You'll set a timer. I recommend starting with 10 minutes because that's a relatively non-terrifying period of time. Set that timer and for the entire 10 minutes, write. Do not cross out. If you're typing, do not backspace. Do not worry about punctuation, grammar, or anything like that. Just keep your hand moving.*

*Why is it important to keep your hand moving? To separate the two parts of the brain.*

*There are two parts of the brain. There is the more logical side: the left-brain. It is the rules, grammar, and punctuation side of the brain. It's the part you use for revising work, organizing things, and plotting. It's not the part you need right now.*

*The other side of the brain, the right side, is more childlike, spontaneous, and creative. It wants to color outside of the lines, wear orange with purple (not necessarily a bad thing,) and ask questions about why we're told to do things a certain way.*

*Often, in our education system and in our lives, those two parts of the mind become intertwined. It locks us up. We become mentally paralyzed. When you sit down to write, anxious feelings arise. You're stuck.*

*Let's say you want to write a story about a magical unicorn barista who's trying to save the planet. You begin to write. The right part of your mind wants to be creative and spontaneous. But the left part—the part that remembers what they taught you about outlining in school—turns critical. It is concerned with what people think, as well as what's marketable, what will sell. And the creative part of the brain will hear that.*

*The creative part starts writing about the magical unicorn, and before you get two or three words down, the logical part says, "Nope, we're not going there! Have you looked in the bookstores lately? Do you have any idea how many books about unicorns there are already? What will your mother think? People are going to think you're a tree hugger!" Being a tree hugger is also not a bad thing, but the logical part says (or yells) "Tree hugger books don't sell" (Actually, they do.) So, you need to untangle these parts.*

*When you keep your hand moving, here's what happens. The right side writes about the magical unicorn and the left side chatters away about all the reasons this won't work. But if you keep your hand moving, the logical/critical side will never catch the creative part. That critical voice might be chattering away the whole time you're writing, but if you keep your hand moving, it will not make you stop.*

*Over time, you create a new pattern in your brain. You're reprogramming your neural pathways. That's a fabulous recent brain science discovery: neuroplasticity. Our brains are quite malleable. It's not a tremendous surprise given the learning we do all of our lives. But because we can retrain ourselves, if you continue to write without stopping, that's what's happening. Despite the fearful, critical voice rambling on and on, you retrain your mind to believe writing is safe.*

*After all, we're really fighting anxiety. Mental health issues can be divided into depression and anxiety. [Disclaimer: I'm a lawyer, not a mental health professional, so if you have a major mental health issue you can't crawl out of, please seek professional help for that.] I'm talking about everyday problems that most people face. I face them too.*

*When I do “writing practice,” I find out things I didn't even know I thought. I come to conclusions or I find interests that wouldn't bubble up if I were locked in logic. This practice of keeping the hand moving helps me discover myself in a fresh way, and that also helps heal my mind.*

*Over the years, I've found that I'm so much larger than I thought I was. We can get in these little boxes “Oh, I'm this. Oh, I'm that.” But by sitting down with a pen (I prefer writing by hand and there's a lot of science behind that) and pouring out onto the page, we have this expansive freedom. It blows the doors off of things. We can go deeper, wider, higher, broader on that page. I really urge you to find some kind of practice in writing.*

*Some people love bullet journals or guided journals. The journal I coauthored, [You Should Be Writing](#), is a guided journal. Each person must find the practice that works for them. You have nearly limitless options.*

*When it comes to really finding myself, I like the wildness of writing practice in a blank notebook. I need that freedom. I need that space to open up. The blank page allows me to go to all those places.*

*If I feel stuck, I'll turn the notebook sideways and write against the lines just to break out of that “A, B, C,  $1 + 1 = 2$ ” logic. I'm not denying that logic comes in handy in a lot of areas in life—especially in revision, and other activities, like following health and safety guidelines. But here, we set it aside.*

*Sometimes scary things come up. Natalie tells us “Go for the jugular.” I say “Blow up the boundaries; blow out the walls.” When I'm writing, if I come upon something scary or shameful, or something that makes me angry, I might not want to go there. Some days I won't. But it's best if I dive in and put those words down. I can burn them later. Doesn't everybody have a fire pit in the backyard? Burn them later, but get them out, because if you don't, they're in the mind, swirling around on top of the other things. They block what really wants to percolate up.*

*Writing—it's so simple, but it's a powerful, healing practice.*

## MEDITATION

*Now, let's talk about meditation, a second way to heal your mind.*

*Meditation is the structure on which writing practice is based. I discuss them in this order, because as a writer, writing practice is closest to my heart.*

*How does meditation help heal your mind? Again, we go to neuroplasticity. You can retrain your mind.*

*There are a thousand of forms of meditation. I have found mindfulness and Zen most effective. I'm not going to get into all the methods or differences. You don't need a specific philosophy. I'm simply speaking of bringing your mind back to now. I'll use a writing example first, because that too is a meditation.*

*Let's say you're doing writing practice with the topic, "My mother's jewelry." I sometimes use a topic so the blank page isn't as terrifying. The topic is the "object" of meditation. If I get lost, I write the topic "My mother's jewelry" over and over until the mind kicks in. The mind always kicks in. Minds generate thoughts. That's what they do. I'll talk more about that in a minute.*



*When I teach meditation practice, I suggest using the breath or other body sensation as the focus. Everyone breathes. I ask, “Where do you notice your breath?” That’s where we start. Is it at your nose? Is it across your lips? Maybe your chest? Is it all the way down in your belly?*

*We’re developing concentration. That’s part of how this heals the mind. We get distracted and can’t accomplish the things we want. We have difficulty in relationships because we can’t focus. We can’t listen. Distraction creates many problems we don’t even realize.*

*Have you ever gone through your day and thought, “Where did I get off track and how did that happen?” Have you ever driven home from some place and not remembered it—gone on autopilot? We have to live on autopilot some of the time, but the ability to bring ourselves back again and again helps heal the mind.*

*When I meditate, I sit in a chair or on a cushion. Either is fine. I try to maintain an upright, but relaxed posture. I sometimes keep my eyes open but focused down, and just notice where I’m breathing. I just sit and keep returning to my breath.*

*People are often confused about the activity of the mind. There’s a misconception that you’re supposed to be able to calm the mind—that you can control it. But the mind’s job is to think thoughts. When you sit, your mind will do its job. When you sit still, it might think, “Hey! She closed her eyes. She’s sitting still. Time to go to sleep!”*



*The goal in meditation is to gently, without judgment, bring the mind back to the breath. Your mind will wander or it will dull—those are the two things that happen often. You'll get swirling thoughts or be off making the grocery store list, or the next writing project, and before you know it, you're lost. The practice is to hold your attention with equanimity — gentle, gentle, like training a puppy. You're not going to be mean. You're not going to yell. My history is to criticize myself. Instead, when I notice my mind wandering, I gently bring it back to the breath and I think, "Oh isn't that interesting? My mind is doing its job. It's generating thoughts."*

*Over time, the mind gradually quiets, but you can't force it to quiet. You create conditions for it to become quiet on its own by sitting still, by returning your attention to the breath again and again, and by bringing an attitude of curiosity to the sitting meditation.*

*Meditation practice can heal your mind.*

## MOVEMENT

*The third way I work with healing my mind is through movement. For me, that's running. Not everyone wants to be a marathoner or should be a marathoner. I happen to be a marathoner, and for me, it's a very special time—time I take for myself—Nita time.*

*Activity does so many things! On the physical level, we often hear about endorphins. But endocannabinoids—the neurotransmitters found in medical marijuana, play a role. That physical activity generates the runner's high. You get a sense of calm and peace, but you have to get your heart rate up a little to gain it.*





*But you don't have to sprint. You don't even have to run. You can walk. You can dance. Some people say they get that high from singing. Others do aerobics or lift weights. It only needs to be something that raises your heart rate enough that your body generates those neurotransmitters.*

*There's a benefit to having a training plan. I like structure. The training plan tells me, "Today. You're going to run this many miles." When I check that off on the plan, I get a little dopamine hit. Such simple little things are often overlooked. It doesn't even need to be a big deal. Any training plan will do. Experience the pleasant body sensations from checking off whatever you promised to do.*

*When I trained for my first 5k, it was such a pleasure to have that training plan taped to the end of a bookcase. I was almost 50 when I started and 51 when I ran my first full marathon. I watched the progress, amazed myself.*

*Take the opportunity to look for some form of movement strenuous enough to raise your heart rate a little. Ask, "What do I need that's different? What can I try that's a change?"*

*As I age, I watch things like cortisol levels. I do low heart rate training, trying to keep my heart rate in a certain window. You don't have to be that nerdy—crunching numbers. Ask yourself the day after a workout, "Do I feel better? Do I feel exhausted?" For me, if I'm running too far, too fast, too hard, the benefit decreases. I have to find a balance.*

*How does exercise help the mind? You're bathing the mind in those lovely neurotransmitters. There are both anti-aging benefits and mental health benefits. At one point in my life, I was on six medications. I was still on four when I started running. Now, I take one, and the dose has been reduced so much that I have to take a liquid because they don't make a small enough pill! My medical professionals attribute this to the running.*

*I encourage you to explore. Is yoga for you? Dance? You need to find something fun. If it's not fun, it's just not worth doing.*

*I've stayed with running longer than anything else I've tried. I won't bore you with the list, but I've tried a lot of things, including the mini trampoline. Nothing against mini trampolines—some people enjoy them—but running is my thing.*

*I've also found a community though my “movement practice.” Whether it's an online group or (conditions allowing) in-person, when you find people that get joy from the same thing that brings you happiness, it creates a fellowship. That sense of belonging is another way you heal your mind. We're not really alone. Even if we're isolating, or sheltering in place, or just trying to maintain distance, we need community. We need fellowship.*

*Community is another common denominator to all three of the tools I've offered. Writing? So many writing groups. Meditation? All kinds of meditation groups. With so much online, you can dabble. Find a group to support you in the way you need. For example, I have one friend that needs a challenge—a goal. She's very competitive. She's found a group of semi-elite runners that offers that intense stimulus. It feeds her.*

*I'm a much calmer personality type. I run for mental health and peace. I still like to win my age group once in a while, but I'm looking for calmness and camaraderie. There's overlap, but you have to find what works for you.*

*Just as with writing practice and formal meditation, movement can be a meditation. Pick a focus before each movement session. It could be a body part, a technique, a visual thing, or a sound. As you move, bring your mind back to that “object of meditation” again and again. That makes it meditation.*



In all three forms of practice, drop the judgment. While you're writing, notice, "Oh, isn't that interesting? My mind wants to criticize." In meditation, the same thing: "My mind is doing its job. It's thinking thoughts. Let's bring it back." With running, I might have decided I'm going to run in the woods. As I listen for sounds, I'll think, "Be open to them without grabbing." Notice if they arise. Notice the space. If there aren't any sounds, just notice that. Be where you are. Bring your mind back. When you start thinking about the grocery list, bring your mind back again, and again, and again. Maybe it's not the grocery list. Maybe you're the CEO of a huge corporation and you've got 600 employees and a multi-million-dollar budget on the line. Whatever your thing is, it may distract you. Bring your mind back.

## SUMMARY

I've offered you the three tools I find most beneficial: writing, meditation, and movement. One size does not fit all. And sometimes I want to take the wrong medicine. But I urge you to try something. I would never have thought of myself as a marathoner. Running is the last tool I would have chosen. Yet I believe it (along with writing and meditation) saved my life.

**Nita Sweeney** is the award-winning wellness author of the running and mental health memoir, [Depression Hates a Moving Target: How Running with My Dog Brought Me Back from the Brink](#) and co-creator of the writing journal, [You Should Be Writing: A Journal of Inspiration & Instruction to Keep Your Pen Moving](#). A long-time meditator, three-time marathoner, and former assistant to writing practice originator [Natalie Goldberg](#), Nita founded the Facebook group [Mind, Mood, and Movement](#) to support mental well-being through meditation, exercise, and writing practice. Nita also publishes Write Now Columbus. She lives in central Ohio with her husband, Ed, and their yellow Labrador retriever, Scarlet. **[Sign up for wellness tips and information about Nita's activities.](#)**

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