

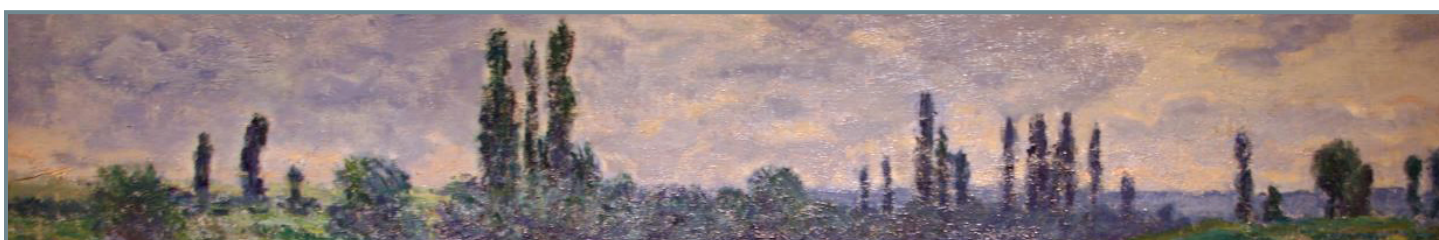
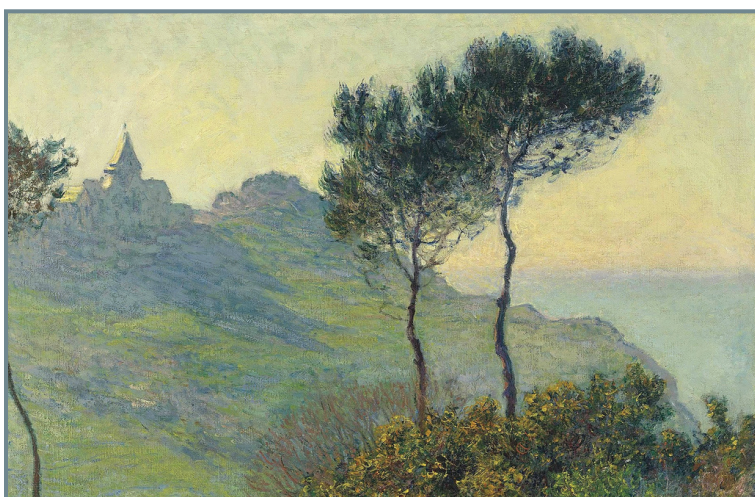
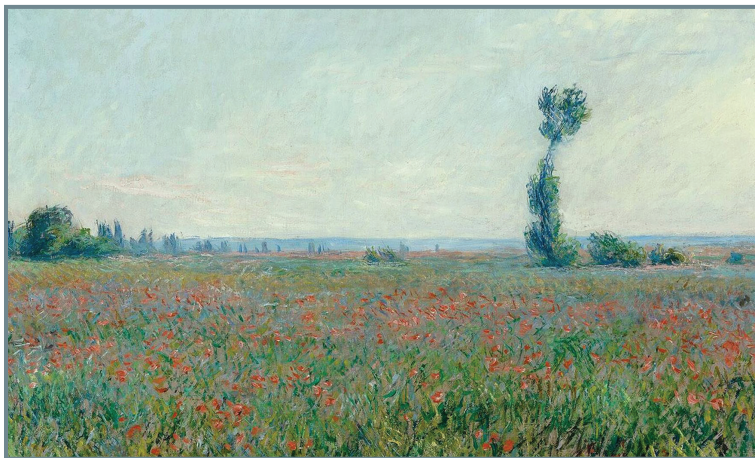
# Reclaiming Yourself



A Writing Tool to Help Older Adults Reclaim  
Themselves after Caregiving for a Partner with  
Dementia



Reclaiming Yourself may be a necessary part of the grieving process; it allows a person to move forward in life, while honouring their past.





## Introduction

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This tool is about *reclaiming yourself*. It is a means to encourage you to reflect on your grief, express your emotions, and encourage personal and creative ways to help reclaim yourself during your bereavement experience. *reclaiming yourself* is important, as you may have lost your feeling of self during your caregiving experience. This does not mean that you did not grow as a person during caregiving, but is an acknowledgement that during the caregiving period you likely focused a considerable amount of your energy on your partner.

You may choose to use different sections of this tool depending on what you feel you need at the moment. Keep in mind that the journey through bereavement is unique to each individual and only you know what feels right during this time of your life.

Helpful tips for working through this tool:

- Feel free to leave the tool in an accessible place so you can write down thoughts as they come to you.
- Find a comfortable place to sit while working through the tool.
- Don't worry about spelling or grammar; the writing process is for yourself.
- If possible, write for 10 to 15 minutes a day.
- Just sit down and start writing whatever comes to mind.
- Arrange for a support person to be available in case of need.
- If it is something that you feel comfortable with, you may wish to share your writing with others.

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“Grieving is a natural process. It is through our losses that we can transform ourselves and find new meaning in life.” – James Van Praagh

## Background Information

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This information provides you with some background to the Reclaiming Yourself Tool. The purpose of this writing tool is to support older adults who are bereaved after caregiving for a partner with dementia. The Reclaiming Yourself Tool is adapted from the Finding Balance Intervention developed by Dr. Holtslander and colleagues.



### Other People's Experiences of Reclaiming Their Self:

Bereaved caregivers have defined reclaiming their self as a process of learning to embrace the difficult emotions, thoughts, and activities of grief while understanding and meeting their new needs and their continuation of life. One spouse describes it as an adaptation: *"I still, I still feel that the grieving started... and I have adapted to it, and I don't expect to get over it. It is just part of my life. And I am a happy person, and I don't feel guilty when I'm happy, but it's just part of my life."*

The goals of *reclaiming yourself* during bereavement are:

- to feel somewhat in control,
- to be able to reconnect with your identity before becoming a caregiver,
- to reconnect with former social circle and valued activities,
- to build self-confidence,
- to feel comfortable with your new life,
- to be able to look forward to the future.

## Background Information...

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### Defining the Issue:

Older adults, after caregiving for a partner, often find challenges in the search to reclaim both their old and new self.

Sometimes older adults experience additional losses along with the loss of their partner. After a long and exhausting caregiving experience individuals may have also lost their own caregiver, support system, independence, or living arrangement. These losses often have direct consequences on health and wellbeing and can make reclaiming one's self even more difficult.

### The Intervention:

This tool is for you to use to encourage reflection, through focused writing, with the overall goal of assisting you to find your own unique way of moving ahead in your grief. There are some exercises to help you reclaim yourself in your life included in this tool.





## Background Information...

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### The 3 Sections:

The writing exercises are separated into 3 sections, which reflect key processes in navigating bereavement that we have discovered in developing the tool: 1. Deep Grieving; 2. Embracing Self; and 3. Moving Forward. At the beginning of each section is a small description provided by others who have experienced bereavement. Just choose one activity to start working on and write for a few minutes each day.



## Section 1: Deep Grieving

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This section consists of activities that address the process of deep grieving (e.g., feeling empty after a death or feeling overwhelmed / consumed by sadness). You have likely experienced grieving in relation to your partner's illness long before their physical death. Some individuals have described this early grief through statements such as: *"So, I had a number of years to*

*know that the end was coming. I didn't know when for sure, but I knew it was coming. So, the bereavement part of it as far as I'm concerned, started I think when he had to go into nursing home care. And that meant that somewhere down the road, I was going to be alone".* Others have expressed a need to make time for self in the period following their partner's death, as it provided important time for reflection and self-restoration.



Each of the activities has a brief guide to give you some ideas about how to begin the activity. Your grief is unique and each strategy must be tailored to fit you as an individual.

To *reclaim yourself* it may be important to address all areas of the grieving process including deep grieving for the partner you provided care to and the person you married.



## Expressing Your Emotions

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Find a way to express your emotions. You can make a daily list of your feelings or you can call a person with whom you feel comfortable. Keep in mind, tears are a natural part of the grieving process. Allow yourself to feel your emotions then ask what you can do with them? Give yourself permission to express these emotions, be they anger, guilt and/or sadness.

My Emotions Today:

My Emotions Today...

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My Emotions Today...

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## Time Out

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Sometimes we need to plan to take a “time out” from all these difficult emotions. What might help to distract yourself? Go for a walk? A movie? Call someone?

What Might Work for You?



# What Might Work For You...

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## Create a Support System

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Write a list of supportive people that you can contact when you need help with something. These can be family, friends, grief groups, counselors, etc. Next to their name write their phone number and how they are most helpful. You may reflect on how those people were helpful during your caregiving. This list will act as a supportive directory for you when you need help with specific things.

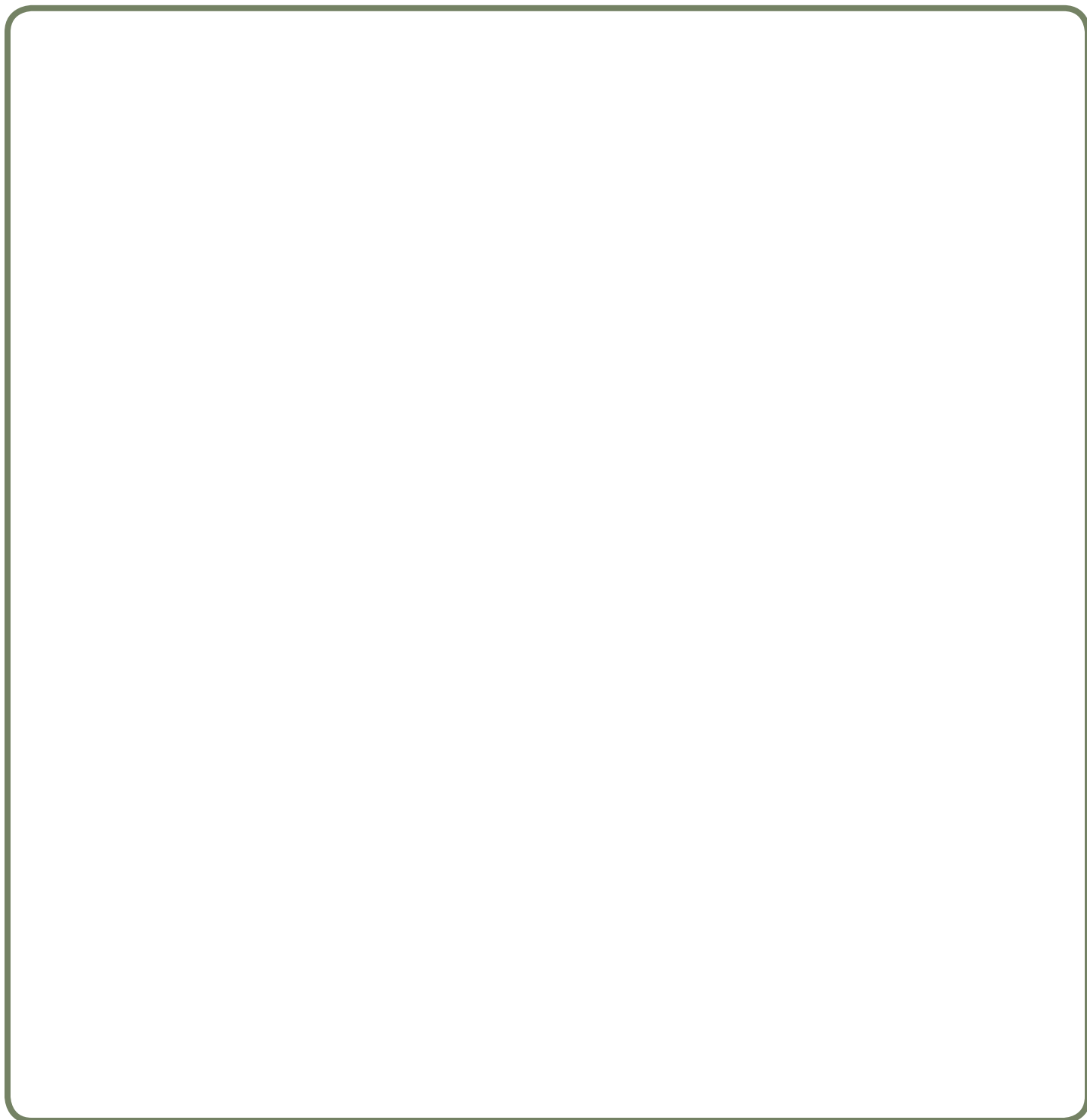
Please record their Name, Phone Number and how they are helpful.  
(ie. good listener, fix things, cheer me up)



## Creative Space to Journal

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Feel free to journal your thoughts, activities and feelings in this section:







## Section 2: Embracing Self

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This section consists of activities that address the process of reclaiming who you were before dementia touched your life. Some individuals have described needing to reconnect with social and leisure activities that were important to them. As one widow explained, *“[I liked] shuffleboard, I had to stop with that too when he got bad, cause I couldn’t leave him alone... But now again I’m back at it.”*



Each activity has a brief guide to give you some ideas about how to begin the activity. Your grief is unique and each strategy must be tailored to fit you as an individual.

To *reclaim yourself* it is important to address all areas of grieving, including remembering your ill-partner and remembering your partner before dementia, as a means to restoring who were before your life involved caregiving.



## Past Enjoyable Activities

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Take this opportunity to reflect on and list activities you engaged in years ago, before caring for your partner became a significant part of your life. Now that you are no longer actively caregiving, what would you like to do with your free time? Did you once play in a band or play cards with a group of friends? What physical activities were important to you (e.g., playing tennis)? Who were the key people in these activities?

Past Enjoyable Activities...

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Past Enjoyable Activities...

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## Recovering Pleasant Activities

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Using a weekly calendar try scheduling 3 activities a week and 3 different ways you will take time for yourself. The activities will keep you connected to the outside world, while the time for yourself will honour your need to rest and relax.



## Getting Creative

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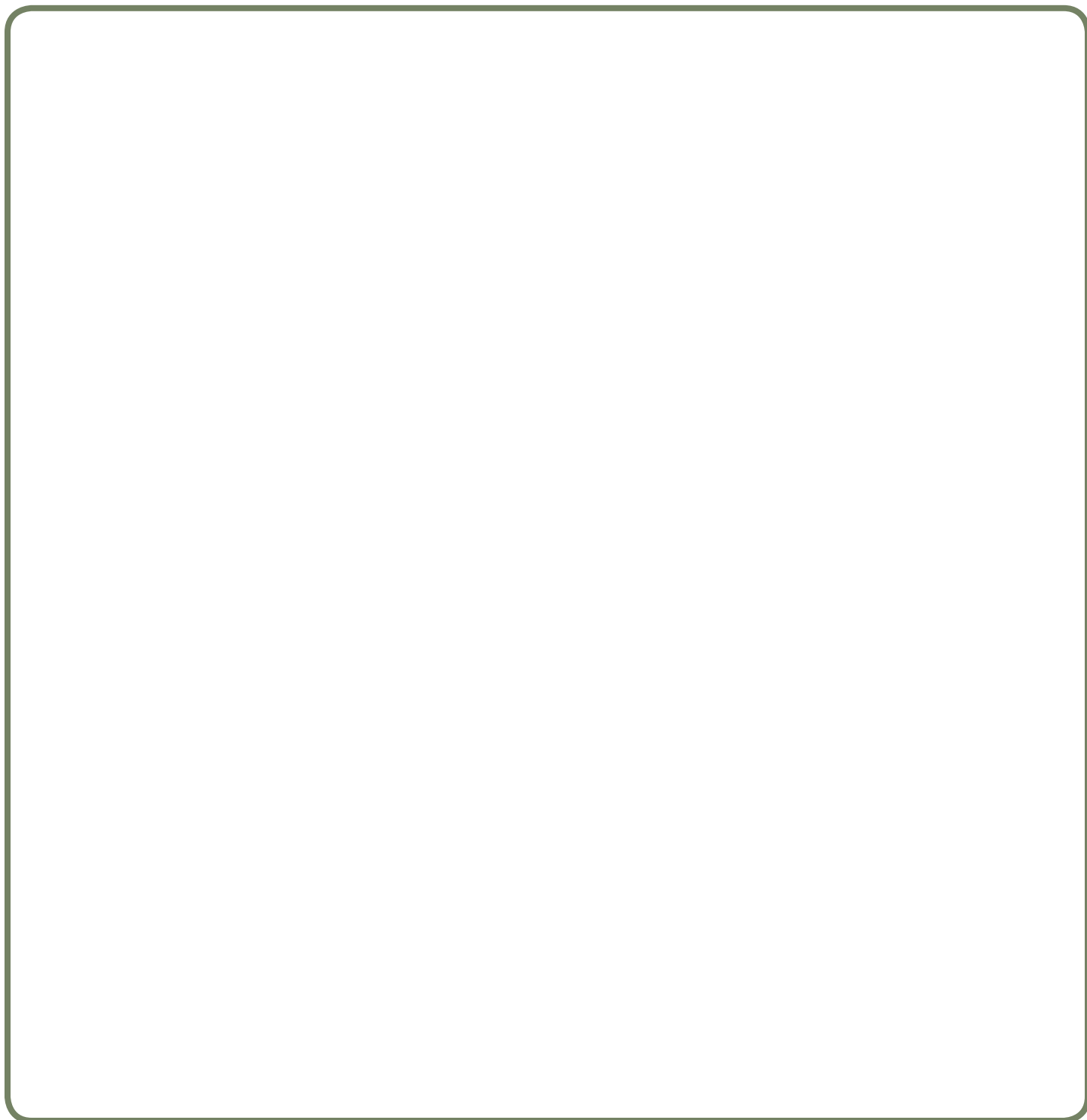
How would you like to keep on remembering your partner? Find a way to create a unique ceremony, service, or special event to help your partner live on through remembering them. i.e.: Planting a tree, creating a scholarship, fundraising event, special memorial event (e.g., Walk for Memories).



## Creative Space to Journal

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Feel free to journal your thoughts, activities and feelings in this section:

A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners and a dark green border, intended for journaling. The box is currently blank, providing a space for the user to write their thoughts, activities, and feelings.







## Section 3: Moving Forward

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This section consists of activities that address the process of moving forward. Some individuals have described the importance of being thankful, planning the day, reaching out to others, and taking the time to care for one's self.

One widower shared: *“There come negative times in your life when oh my goodness, you know will this ever end... But then there comes the days that are good. And then you have a positive outlook again. And with a*

*little bit of help you can be positive.”* Part of moving forward may involve acknowledging any regrets that you may feel about your caregiving journey, and trying to let go of those regrets.

Each of the activities has a brief guide to give you some ideas about how to begin the activity. Your grief is unique and each strategy must be tailored to fit you as an individual.

To *reclaim yourself* it is important to address all areas of the grieving process including the task of moving forward.



## Letting Go of Regrets

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Sometimes we carry regrets related to significant events in our lives. There may be things during your caregiving journey that you wish had been different, or that you wish you had done differently. Accepting that things occurred as they did, and letting go of regrets, can be an important part of moving forward. *“I would have rather hired somebody to come in and look after him, and keep him at home... that would be my only regret. I just say that that would have been a nice thing if I could have done that, had I known [that it was such a short period of time]. But you don’t know these things... Life isn’t perfect, because you are only human.”*

Being able to give voice to your regrets can be a helpful part of letting go. Use the space below and on the following pages to write down any regrets that you have about things that occurred during your caregiving journey. After each regret that you write down, think about something positive related to that regret and write that down as well. For example, someone may regret not being present at their partner’s death, but feel positive about all the time that they did spend visiting and/or taking care of their partner. Acknowledging your regrets, but also the things you feel good about, may help you to let go of these regrets, or make them feel like a smaller part of your caregiving journey. Individuals may find that recalling regrets is a stressful process. If, at any time, you feel upset during this activity, please reach out to someone you trust or a healthcare professional.







## My Story Makes Me Stronger

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It is important to acknowledge that what you have been through has the potential to make you stronger. *“I’m perfectly happy now, with my friends, I have my writing, and my reading, and my sons. I don’t see them all the time, but I talk to them on the phone all the time... I just think probably I’m strong enough to- was strong enough to have gone through this, and I’m probably strong enough to be okay on my own.”*

Make a list of what you feel makes you strong. Here are some things you may wish to reflect on:

What activities give you inner strength?

## My Story Makes Me Stronger...

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What personal spiritual beliefs help you make sense of your loss? Did they change? How?

## My Story Makes Me Stronger...

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Are there ways in which you have grown as a person?

## My Story Makes Me Stronger...

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What has your experience of caregiving and loss taught you about what others may need? How will this help you in your relationships with others:

## My Story Makes Me Stronger...

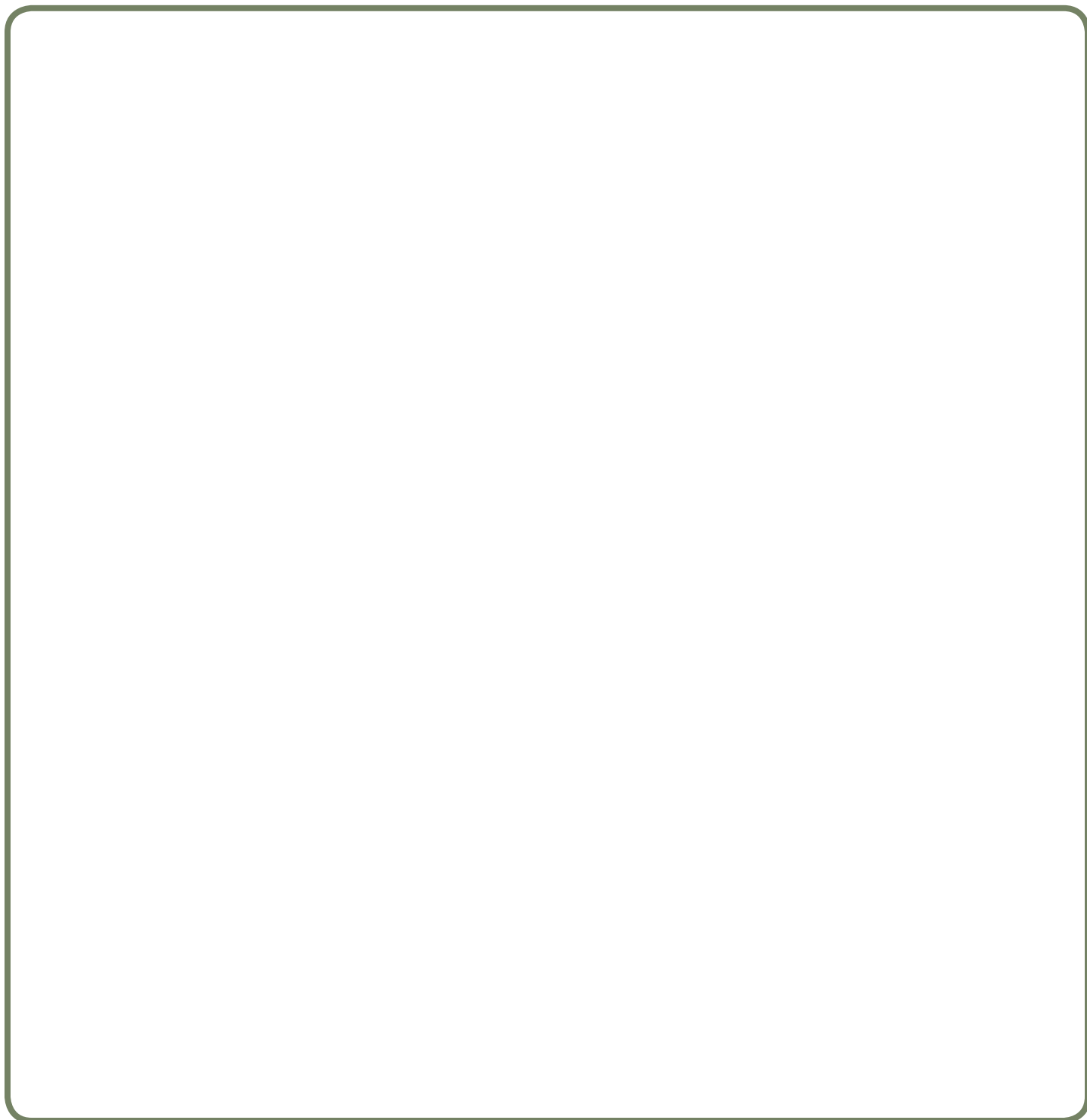
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What is your story of caregiving, and how might this story help others?  
What lessons can you share about your experiences?

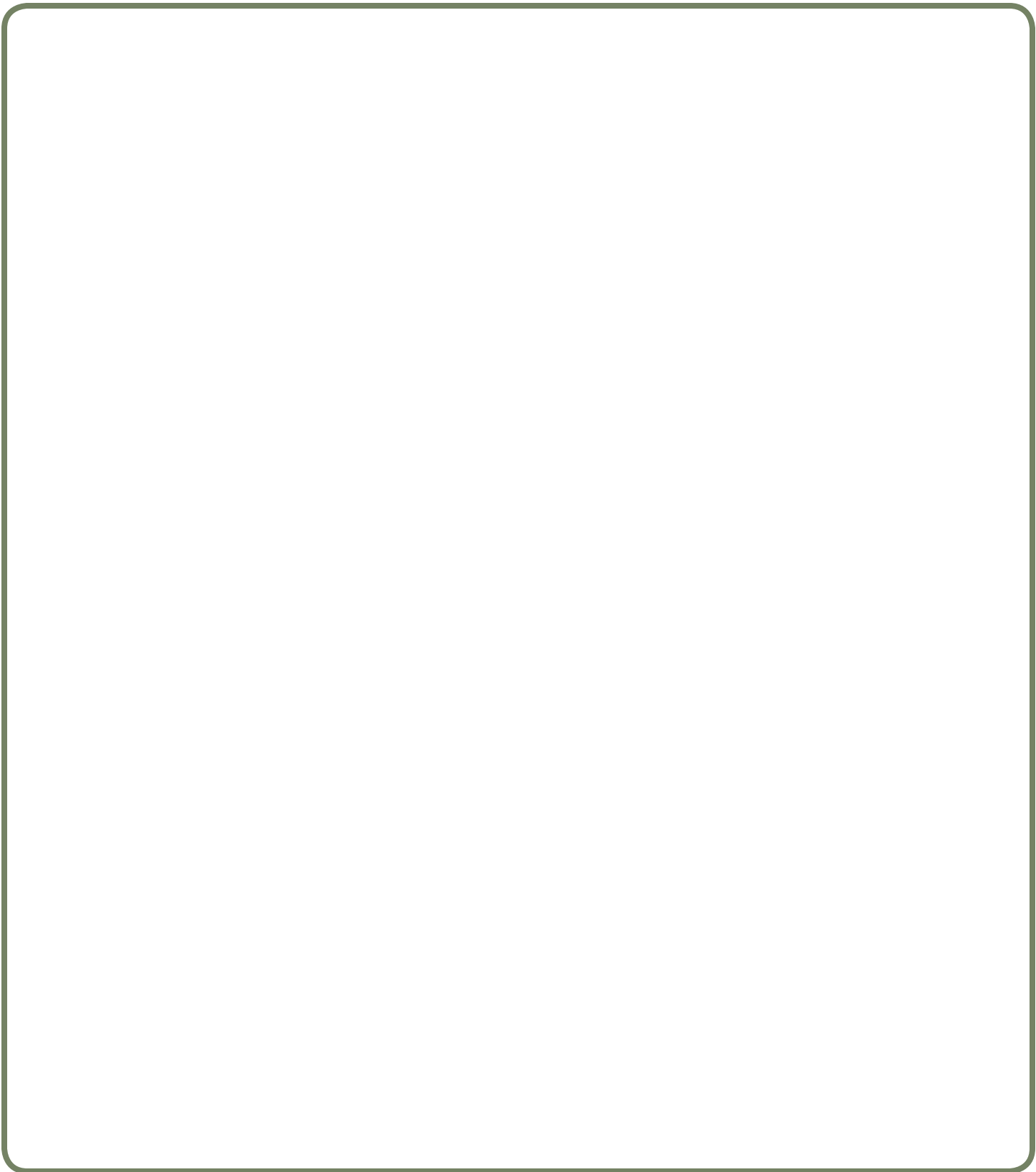
## Creative Space to Journal

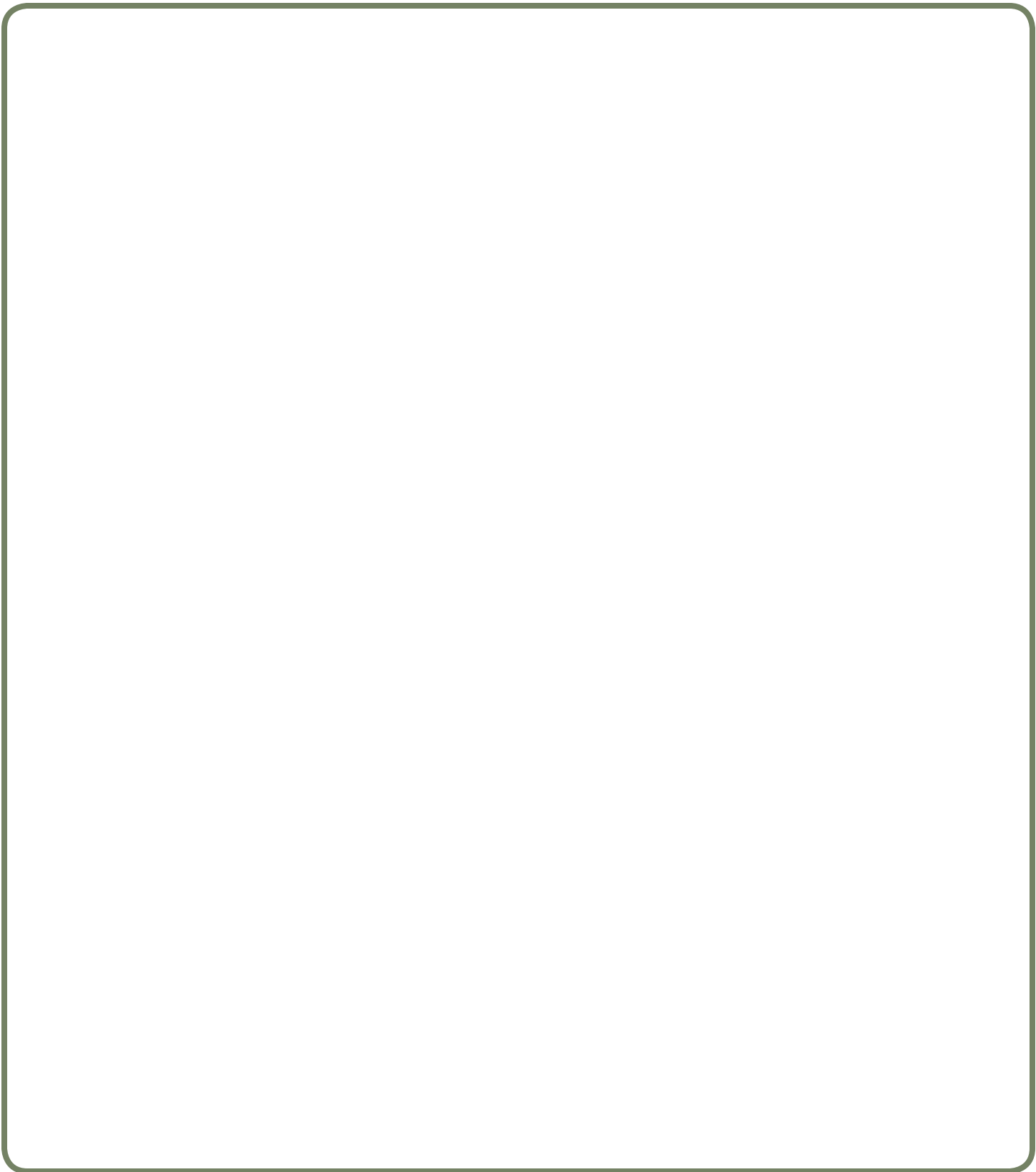
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Feel free to journal your thoughts, activities and feelings in this section:











# Notes

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## Tool Development Details

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### Funding Support

- Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation, *Establishment Grant*, 2014-2018

### Team

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