



## Practice Writing for Better Health

by Julie Mariouw

**O**n the health and healing effects of writing in a group: "Writing has been practiced for thousands of years as a mode of communication, yet the healing effects of writing have only recently been documented," states Genevieve Chandler in her study. Here, she observed a group of low-income youth and college students writing in a 10-week workshop. In weekly, two-hour sessions, using the Amherst Writers & Artists workshop method developed by Pat Schneider, the participants wrote their stories in their own voices in response to prompts, followed by reading the stories aloud and positive feedback. About the results of Chandler's study, she says, "Writing in a group with reading aloud and positive feedback intensifies the emotional release offered by writing alone, facilitates the development of coping strategies, creates a network of social support and adds the benefit of understanding and relating to the lives of others."

James Pennebaker, Ph.D., a nationally recognized researcher on the connection between writing and better health, found, "Emotional writing—or what is often described in research studies as expressive writing—can positively affect people's sleeping habits, work efficiency and their connections to others." In his book *Expressive Writing, Words that Heal*, Pennebaker states, "People tend to benefit most from expressive writing if they openly acknowledge emotions; work to construct a coherent story; switch perspectives; and express themselves honestly. Write to learn where you need to go. Trust where your writing takes you."

But, as Louise DeSalvo points out in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing*, "Writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail and how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health. Both thinking and feeling are involved. Linking them is critical." As DeSalvo describes her early experience with writing, "When I was first writing about my recollections of the sexual abuse I had experienced as a girl, I believed that I was using my writing as a kind of scalpel to cut out the growth festering inside me—my story—which was making me sick. It was an instrument that I had to wield with great care and skill for the excision to be successful, for the wound to heal. Without telling my story, I thought, I would stay sick; I even might die."

If we do not participate in a writing group or are not authors, Pennebaker recommends a technique for beginning to write safely about what is inside of us: "1) Write for 20 minutes

a day. 2) Writing topic - You can write about the same event or about different events each day. 3) Write continuously - Once you begin writing, write without stopping. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. 4) Write only for yourself - You are writing for yourself and no one else. 5) The Flip-Out Rule - If you feel as though you cannot write about a particular event because it will push you over the edge, then don't write about it. Deal only with those events or situations that you can handle now. 6) What to expect after writing - Many people often feel somewhat sad or depressed after writing, especially on the first day or two. If this happens to you, it is completely normal. These feelings usually last only a few minutes and, in some cases, hours—much like the way you feel after seeing a sad movie."

Literary giant Henry Miller describes the writer's experience this way: "The work which was begun as a refuge and escape from the terrors of reality leads the author back into life, not adapted to the reality, but superior to it... He sees that it was not life, but himself from which he had been fleeing... The whole past life resumes its place in the balance and creates a vital, stable equilibrium which would never have resulted without the pain and the suffering... [Writing] lifts the sufferer out of his obsessions and frees him for the rhythm and movement of life by joining him to the great universal stream in which we all have our being."

Whatever our method for getting words down onto the page, know that it will take us to a different place in our lives. Pennebaker states, "Expressive writing is a self-reflective tool with tremendous power. By exploring the emotional upheavals in our lives, we are forced to look inward and examine who we are. This occasional self-examination can serve as a life-course correction... Try to see your writing as a practice, much like a yoga or meditation practice, or like regularly going to the gym. Use your writing to reframe your experiences, write about events from a perspective of compassion and empathy, write about everyday events with great attention to details and a spirit of mindfulness and write about your appreciation and gratitude for what many may call the little things—things we know are the only things needful." All it takes is daily commitment, a pen and a sheet of paper.

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