

Writing to Heal

By Vivé Griffith

For nearly 20 years, Dr. James W. Pennebaker has been giving people an assignment: write down your deepest feelings about an emotional upheaval in your life for 15 or 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days. Many of those who followed his simple instructions have found their immune systems strengthened. Others have seen their grades improved. Sometimes entire lives have changed.

Pennebaker, a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of several books, including “Opening Up” and “Writing to Heal,” is a pioneer in the study of using expressive writing as a route to healing. His research has shown that short-term focused writing can have a beneficial effect on everyone from those dealing with a terminal illness to victims of violent crime to college students facing first-year transitions.

“When people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experience improved health,” Pennebaker says. “They go to the doctor less. They have changes in immune function. If they are first-year college students, their grades tend to go up. People will tell us months afterward that it’s been a very beneficial experience for them.”

In his early research Pennebaker was interested in how people who have powerful secrets are more prone to a variety of health problems. If you could find a way for people to share those secrets, would their health problems improve?

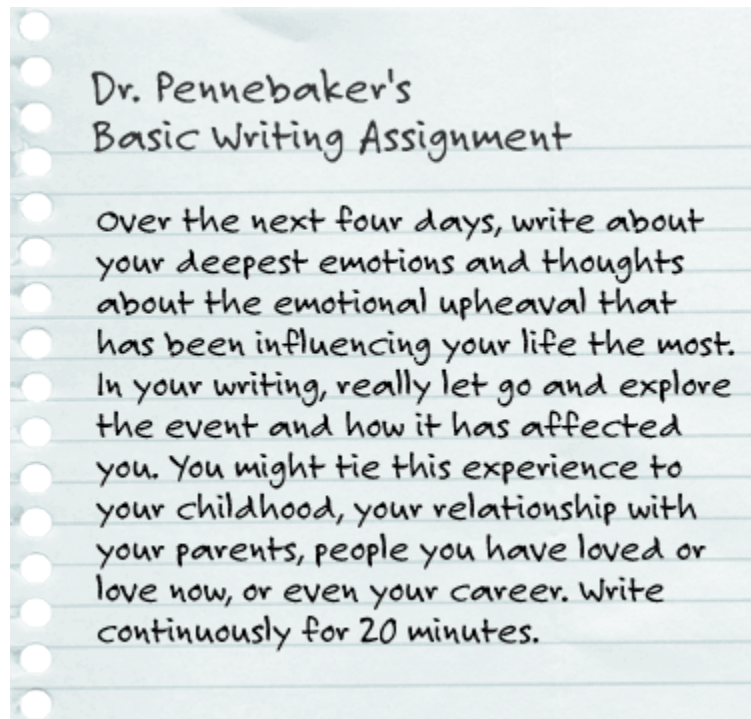
It turned out that often they would, and that it wasn’t even necessary for people to tell their secrets to someone else. The act of simply writing about those secrets, even if they destroyed the writing immediately afterward, had a positive effect on health. Further studies showed that the benefits weren’t just for those who had dramatic secrets, but could also accrue to those who were dealing with divorces, job rejections or even a difficult commute to work.

“Emotional upheavals touch every part of our lives,” Pennebaker explains. “You don’t just lose a job, you don’t just get divorced. These things affect all aspects of who we are—our financial situation, our relationships with others, our views of ourselves, our issues of life and death. Writing helps us focus and organize the experience.”

Our minds are designed to try to understand things that happen to us. When a traumatic event occurs or we undergo a major life transition, our minds have to work overtime to try to process the experience. Thoughts about the event may keep us awake at night, distract us at work and even make us less connected with other people.

When we translate an experience into language we essentially make the experience graspable. Individuals may see improvements in what is called “working memory,” essentially our ability to think about more than one thing at a time. They may also find they’re better able to sleep.

Their social connections may improve, partly because they have a greater ability to focus on someone besides themselves.



If writing can have such a dramatic effect on our lives, does that mean that we would all be best off keeping a daily diary? Not necessarily, Pennebaker says. While his work is not inconsistent with diary keeping, it acts more as a kind of life course correction. It allows people to step back for a moment and evaluate their lives.

“I’m not convinced that having people write every day is a good idea,” Pennebaker says. “I’m not even convinced that people should write about a horrible event for more than a couple of weeks. You risk getting into a sort of navel gazing or cycle of self-pity.”

“But standing back every now and then and evaluating where you are in life is really important.”

Pennebaker’s research is benefiting people outside of those who participate in his studies. In 2004 he published “Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval.” The book is aimed at a general audience and offers a primer on writing and healing and numerous exercises that anyone who is capable of putting pen to paper can undertake. People across the country are giving it a try.

The Charlotte, N.C.-based company WordPlay recently offered a workshop titled “Writing to Heal” that borrows heavily from Pennebaker’s work. The participants were not necessarily people who came to writing with an intention to publish. But they each brought a life event they hoped to work through, whether it was a childhood trauma or a recent battle with cancer. Instructor Maureen Ryan Griffin said that each of the students came away feeling the writing had made a difference in their experience.

“They left with a new sense of the power of words,” she says. “They actually got access to using language as a healing tool in a way they had never used it before. Through writing they become active creators of their life stories. They are not simply people something bad or painful has happened to.”

Pennebaker has been looking at specifically how people use language in their writings and whether certain approaches to language translate into greater benefits from writing. To do so, he and his colleagues developed a text analysis program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). Using LIWC they can look at the types of words people use in their writings. They are discovering some interesting patterns.

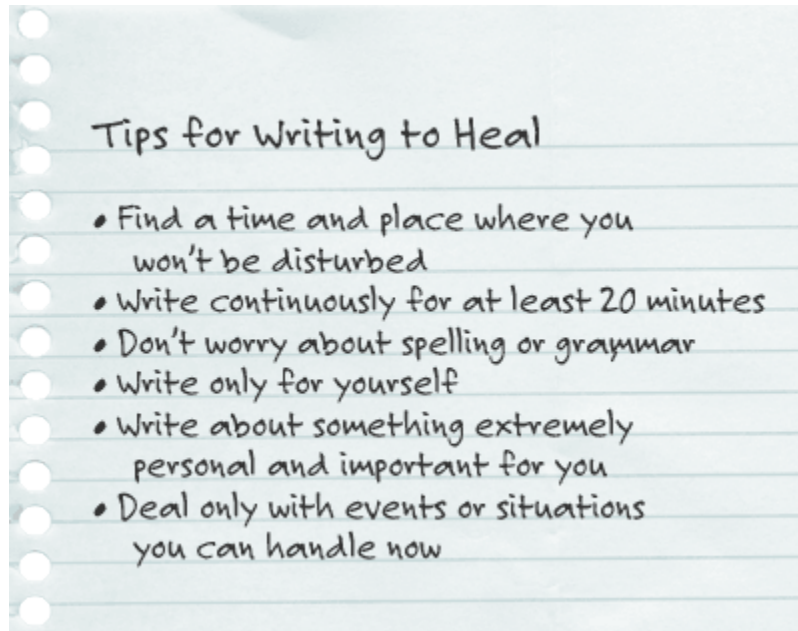
“People who are able to construct a story, to build some kind of narrative over the course of their writing seem to benefit more than those who don’t,” Pennebaker says. “In other words, if on the first day of writing, people’s stories are not very structured or coherent, but over the three or four days they are able to come up with a more structured story, they seem to benefit the most.”

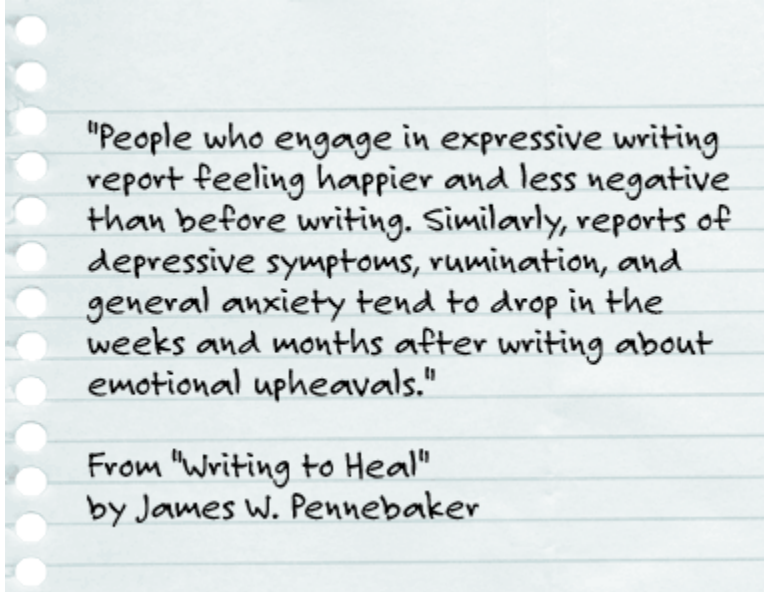
Making a story out of a messy, complicated experience may make the experience more manageable. Linguistically, Pennebaker looks for words that are associated with more complex thinking, including certain prepositions such as “except,” “without” and “exclude” and causal words such as “cause,” “effect” and “rationale.” An increase in these types of words over the writing process suggests that the experience is becoming clearer and more narrative.

Pennebaker has also found that the ability to change perspectives during the course of writing is also a potent indicator of how well the act of writing will benefit an individual. Using LIWC, he can analyze the types of pronouns an individual uses. A shift in pronouns means a shift in perspective.

“So one day they may be talking about how they feel and how they see it,” he says, “but the next day they may talk about what’s going on with others, whether it’s their family or a perpetrator or someone else. Being able to switch back and forth is a very powerful indicator of how they progress.”

It’s not clear whether people who are able to construct narratives and change perspectives can be guided to do so in their writing, or whether doing so is simply a reflection of an emergent healing process for them. In “Writing to Heal,” however, Pennebaker offers exercises to help people experiment with both skills. After their four days of writing, individuals can analyze their own writing and try writing from different perspectives.





"People who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing. Similarly, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination, and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheavals."

From "Writing to Heal"
by James W. Pennebaker

Griffin used Pennebaker's exercise in changing perspectives in her class and found that it was one of the most profound things her students did.

"I was really struck by how amazed everyone was after writing about an event from more than one perspective," she says. "It made a huge difference for them and their sense of the story to do this, and they were surprised by the power that had."

Pennebaker is quick to point out that the act of confessing or

expressing trauma has been part of healing for virtually all cultures, ranging from Native American indigenous cultures to those based on both Western and Eastern religious beliefs. He also notes that writing should be used cautiously. He doesn't recommend trying to write about a trauma too soon after it happens and says that if a topic seems like it's too much to handle, don't try to tackle it before you're ready. The effects of writing can be subtle, but sometimes they can be dramatic.

As an example, Pennebaker speaks of a young woman he worked with who had lost her husband very suddenly in an accident. The woman was praised by her colleagues in graduate school for how courageously and smoothly she had handled her husband's death. She came to Pennebaker because she felt she needed to write about her loss. By the last day of writing she said she was transformed.

Within two months the woman had quit graduate school and moved back to her hometown. The writing experience had made her realize she was on a life path she no longer wanted and that she had been putting on a false, cheerful front with her friends.

"As a researcher, I could say, 'Well here I have a technique that made an individual drop out of school, stop pursuing an advanced degree and return home,'" Pennebaker says. "It was a dramatic change, and it sounds like a failure. But from her perspective, it wasn't."

In fact, the woman felt that those four days of writing had saved her life.