

Healing Through the Written Word

By Karen Cangialosi, MFA, MA

Writing is not only a salve but often a tool that opens our minds and hearts to things that are deep inside us. The famous American poet, EE Cummings, said, “To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight”¹ I agree with EE Cummings that people need help to fight the battles of their lives, but first people must be aware of and accept these

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battles before they can move on to conquer them. As David Spiegel, MD, said in the April 14, 1999 issue of *JAMA*, “... Smyth and colleagues demonstrate that merely writing about past stressful life experiences results in symptom reduction among patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis.”^{2:1329} Reporting in *The MedServ Medical News* on the same study by Smyth and colleagues, Mara Bovsun concluded that “The simple act of writing about bad times can be a potent, and low cost, method of relieving pain and symptoms of chronic illnesses”³ This research points out and supports the idea that emotions left unattended can

change into symptoms that cause confusion when they present in physicians’ offices. Through a weekly writing workshop offered by Kaiser Permanente’s Positive Choice Wellness Center in San Diego, people become aware of their battles or issues, how to accept them, and how to move more fully into a personal healing process.

Writing has the Power to Heal

In his book, *Opening Up*,⁴ James W Pennebaker, PhD, documented his decades-long research into the healing effects of writing. Pennebaker proved what many people have found incidentally through keeping a journal or diary: If we can create a cohesive personal narrative of our lives and if we can link up our emotions with specific events, then we have the power to take control of how those emotions and events affect our lives.

Although many of us might be drawn to simply eliminate the pain in our lives, those who constructively learn how to use that pain are often far healthier than those who don’t.^{4,5} Pennebaker noted that the number of doctor office visits are reduced through the process of writing. In her *Medserv Medical News* article, Bovsun quoted Smyth and colleagues, “[a]lthough it may be difficult to believe that a brief writing exercise can meaningfully affect health, this study replicates what a burgeoning literature indicates in healthy individuals,” and then points out that “[t]he scientists do not know why writing appears to help, but other research suggests that it may bolster immune function and enhance ... ability to cope with painful incidents.”³

May Sarton said that “... the only way through pain ... is to go through it, to absorb, probe, understand exactly what it is and what it means Nothing that happens to us, even the most terrible shock, is unusable, and everything has somehow to be built into the fabric of the personality”⁶ By using the different writing forms—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, journaling, list-making, and others—we can use the pain in our lives to further develop the “fabric of our personality.”⁶ Through writing, we try to find order in the things that have happened to us; to use our writing as a form of self-analysis; or to give form and sense to what has affected us. Whichever form our writing takes, it has the power to heal us and to help us grow.

Often we form destructive attachments by putting energy into certain activities that seem to give us either pleasure or relief. Writing helps us to understand who we are and where and why we have formed such attachments. Writing can then help us redirect our energy. Writing allows us to get in touch with what is often hidden from us—whether it be the reason behind our weight gain, a hard-to-understand addiction, a compulsion we fight daily, or a pain we wish would go away. Writing helps us to form connections with what is going on inside us and with others.



Karen Cangialosi, MFA, MA, works at Kaiser Permanente’s Positive Choice Wellness Center in San Diego and runs a group called “Healing Through the Written Word” through the Creative Arts Therapy program. She uses writing in therapy with individual clients. Ms Cangialosi is a published poet. E-mail: Karen.A.Cangialosi@kp.org.

How Does Writing Heal?

People simply start by writing about a specific event or situation or relationship that affected them. For example, a woman can begin by writing a letter to her mother or father (that does not get sent) telling the parent about the best and worst things the parent did for her. Or a man can begin by writing about how he experiences the emotion of anger or where in his body he actually feels the emotion of bitterness. People must write freely; ideally, the writing is continued for at least 20 minutes without stopping. People should not edit what they are writing; they shouldn't worry about grammar or punctuation or how things might sound. They simply need to write and see what comes out; and, according to Pennebaker, they must write about both the event and the emotions surrounding that event.⁴

Although the simple exercise of writing has actually been proven to decrease blood pressure and improve immune functioning,⁴ reading the work aloud and processing it with others can itself further enhance the overall healing effects of writing. The ability to tell their own story often gives people the first chance to really understand that story. Many people have said that they didn't know what they were going to write until it was written; another way of describing this phenomenon is to say that the writing taps into their unconscious. Healing through the written word happens when people learn about themselves and open themselves to the healing power within.

For example, here are pieces written during the "Healing Through the Written Word" group at Positive Choice:

Frozen In Time

By Diana Medlin^a

When I was quite small I entered battle.
I did not have any weapons nor armor
To shield me.
All I had were my toys and my stuffed bear.
We created our own foxhole and waited
Out the night.
We did not dare sleep until it had stayed quiet
For a long time.
We held our breath together and looked out the window
Into the frozen midnight.
And when it was safe to breathe we would
Press our faces up against the glass and
Marvel at the fading impression.

Emptiness

By Santo Messina^b

Emptiness stands,
Great breeze that tickles the skin,
Sounds give music harmony.
Seeing green that transforms into yellow
and bursting in red
tranquilized by orange,
then storming clouded haze gives way to
bright shining streaks of rays that cut the clouds
and warm the skin.
Calmed by water dropping over soft melted stones
bleached by sun and coming slow
then fast
then big
then slow again
and gone
and quiet
and lull
and not
and fragrance breaks the quiet spell.

I meet tranquility and love breaks through
And wetness strikes from nowhere known
without a signal, without knowing
and flood my eyes with sadness-joy
and quiet want
as no one knows
my heart is deep and mended not
without a chance to consider why
as sudden chirp as feathers fly
and land on foot to sobbing heaves
as though the flying friend knew, what lies within
as I do not.

The shriek of voices that comes outside
to violently thrust my pain aside
and dew drops must be hid or else
creatures know and floods will flow.
I cannot stop this flowing yet
I need to hide
so again I smile and brush my hair and know not where to shroud my care.
I cannot stop
and still I hear the voice that comes outside
and is still afar.
I cannot stop
I will not stop.
The voice is louder and louder
not caring, it is slicing parts within me bleeding
and so I hear
and so I hear
I do not want to stop but still
I hear
and hear.....

Each of these people has used writing as a way to get in touch with, understand, and begin to heal from painful events. Specifically, by writing about these experiences, these individuals are able to shift the power of the event from the event or experience itself into their own hands. As they write, they recreate the situation or event mentally and begin to work with it. They gain access to their own feelings, sometimes discovering feelings they didn't even know were there. People who discover or uncover these feelings can begin to work through them.

Positive Choice Wellness Center Includes Writing Workshops

In the weekly writing group at KP's Positive Choice Wellness Center, each person has an opportunity to share her or his writing with others. Through empathetic listening and response, participants help each other gain "... sufficient honesty to look at the inner self ... [and] enough objectivity to view a feeling or behavior pattern from another perspective"^{7-p58} From this experience of sharing and reflection, people often gain the self-confidence to accept and understand their difficult issues and to process them more thoroughly than ever before.

Research Shows Efficacy of Writing

In his 1990 book, *Opening Up*, James W Pennebaker, PhD, first published his findings about how expressing emotions through writing affects the immune system.⁴ On the basis of what was to become years of research and study, Pennebaker showed that "... actively holding back or inhibiting our thoughts and feelings can be hard work. Over time, the work of inhibition gradually undermines the body's defenses. Like other stressors, inhibition can affect immune function, the action of the heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous systems. In short, excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place people at risk for both major and minor diseases."^{4:p2}

Before psychoneuroimmunology commanded the attention it does today, Pennebaker worked with the research team of Janice K Kiecolt-Glaser (a clinical psychologist) and Ronald Glaser (an immunologist) to use "... precise, state-of-the-art techniques to measure the action of T-lymphocytes, natural killer cells, and other immune markers in the blood."^{4:p35} By taking blood samples before, immediately after, and six weeks after the writing experience, Pennebaker made inroads into measuring the effects of self-expressive writing on the immune system.

Pennebaker has conducted numerous studies to corroborate his original findings: "When disclosing deeply personal experiences, there are immediate changes in brainwave patterns, skin conductance levels ... after confessions, significant drops in blood pressure and heart rate, as well as improvements in immune function, occur. In the weeks and months afterward, people's physical and psychological health is improved."^{4:p56} Others (eg, Joshua M Smyth⁵ at North Dakota State University) have expanded on Pennebaker's research to show that writing helps people who have chronic diseases, such as asthma and arthritis.

As a group facilitator, I take the lead in listening with empathy and understanding to help guide people through the often-difficult process of recognizing important emotions and events that have long been left unattended. By working with images and specific language that individuals use, I can often identify behavioral patterns and issues that surface. By gently probing into what their own writing uncovers, people often come to believe that change is possible. Although neither the group nor I try to tell people how they might change, we do create an environment in which change is possible. Emotional change in these groups has led to stress reduction and weight loss, both of which affect a person's health and well-being. In this way, writing about events and emotions and sharing these with others in a supportive environment is an example of how powerful the healing effects of writing can be.

For those not able to participate in the writing workshop facilitated by the KP Positive Choice Wellness Center in San Diego, the Web site www.journalingmagazine.com offers exercises, suggestions, and inspiration to those who want to write. In addition, many books are available, such as *Writing Your Way to Healing and Wholeness* by Robin B Dilley,⁸ which invites people to write in a journal on a variety of topics; or *Writing as a Way of Healing* by Louise DeSalvo,⁹ which shows how effective a tool writing has been and continues to be for people. ❖

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