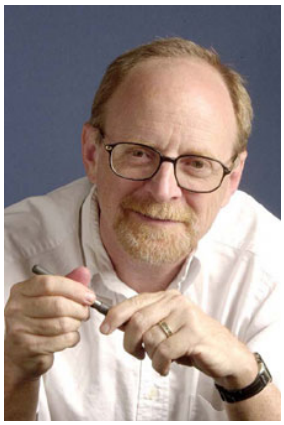
Writing as Healing: A Pen is Mightier than a Pill

I always suspected that I wrote to stay sane and whole. Poems sprouted from conflicted feelings, short stories from odd or traumatic events and novels emerged more slowly out of deeper stuff, what *The Lovely Bones* author, Alice Sebold, calls 'the subconscious stew.' Writing has always been not just the artistic arrangement of words, but something vital to my psycho-physiology. Only when I discovered there was substantial research to underscore these intuitions did I realise that you really can write your way out of any mood, be it depression or disease, back to health. What adds to the buzz of writing is that we now know that laboratory tests prove it all, thanks to the work of James W. Pennebaker.

Writing as Healing Pioneer



James W. Pennebaker PhD. (Univ of Austin, Texas) is a pioneer in linking the effects of writing about traumatic events to improved immune system function. He's been saying this for two decades now, hoping the message has sunk in. Writing out your trauma gives you a handle on your mental health. Like many great innovations, it was borne out of a personal depression. He began writing about it and then noticed the beneficial effects. Pennebaker was a 'private, even inhibited individual' and was 'too proud to admit he had personal issues.' This might sound familiar to many of us. It does to me, making writing ever more crucial it my personal development.

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The Writing Experiments

It started out quite simply. He tested the effects of writing about traumas, using a control group which wrote only about trivial things. They all wrote daily for four days. Those writing about traumas were split into three groups:

Group 1 just wrote about emotions
Group 2 wrote the facts only, and
Group 3 wrote about the emotions and the facts.

The health of all the participants was then evaluated. They were checked again four months later. The group which wrote fully about their innermost problems which they had never told anyone, wrote out their worst, most tragic experiences: loss, rape, illness, depression, suicide attempts, abuse, or grief. They reported that they began to experience a greater sense of control over their lives, and, amazingly, compared to the other groups, made fewer trips to the doctor. It showed that writing the facts and the emotions meant a 50% drop in visits to a clinic. The group that wrote only about the facts of a trauma, or about superficial topics averaged a smaller drop in visits to the doctor.

"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

Pennebaker said he would never forget the initial thrill of the discovery that writing affected physical health. Writing was the missing link to restore balance. That it is such a vital tool should not surprise us, as the act of writing with a pen engages both hemispheres of the brain simultaneously, making it a 'holistic' activity.

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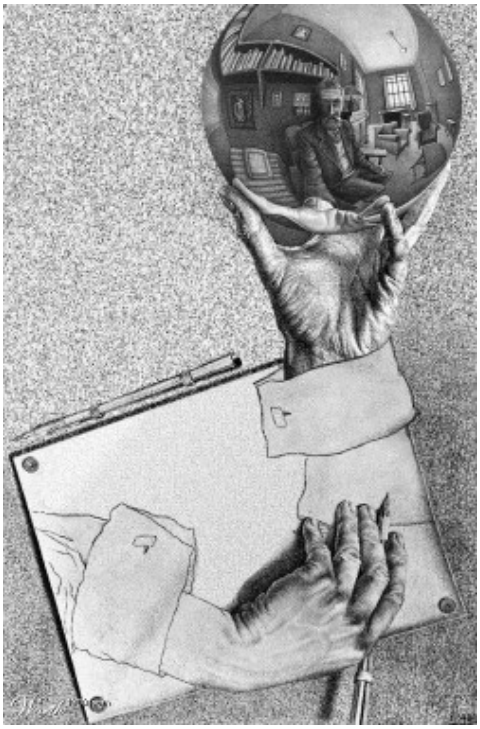
Psycho-Immunology

What Pennebaker discovered when he tested his theory under scientific conditions was a breakthrough, but then it became even more interesting when he enlisted the help of Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, a clinical psychologist, and Ron Glaser, an immunologist from Ohio State University. We know today that events like divorce, exams, and loneliness adversely affect the immune system largely because of the Glasers. They have also shown that relaxation therapy can improve immune system function among the elderly.

Pennebaker and the Glasers conducted a further experiment with writing in Dallas. This had even more exciting results. They collected blood lymphocyte samples and measured the immune function of the writing participants. A link was established between writing and improved immune function.

The Importance of Stories



What really adds interest is that Pennebaker's tests also showed that people who are able to construct a narrative out of their feelings, do much better than people who cannot. This matches other research into how stories help us join the dots of life. The will to create narrative is a basic cognitive building block that makes sense of the universe. Being able to live and tell the tale has been mankind's method of lending meaning to apparently nonsensical events. Then we are able to acquiesce with whatever crisis befell us, and let go.

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Make Lasting Changes Through Writing

Most people recognize that purging of emotion, known down the ages as catharsis, may have some ultimate purpose. The original Greek word combines the meanings purification and clarification. Catharsis has been used in psychotherapy as the antidote to inhibition, or repression, particularly by Sigmund Freud. It has even been taken to extremes in some therapies. Inhibition, however, when tested by scientists apparently reduces skin conductivity – another reason for loosening up and writing it all out.

Results from writing are subtle, but also dramatic. It is also important not to force any revelation where people are not ready to absorb the lesson, but to respect the stage you are at in your life. On paper you can feel free to say things you would never say to anyone else. It allows you to let go in a way not possible with other methods. Some like to talk their problems out, but for me writing them out is a way of unravelling and feeling at ease with often complex, contradictory and conflicted emotions.

Pennebaker's experiments provide compelling evidence to demonstrate the link between the act of writing which is cathartic, and improved health. To have this added measurable evidence is a bonus to anyone contemplating this mode of healing that it is not just imagined or coincidental. The people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding crisis events stated that they felt they 'understood themselves better.' Attaining this insight into psychological problems allows us to adapt and change with greater flexibility.

Art versus Health

While I still maintain that writing for an artistic goal is the ultimate transformation of the raw material of your life, writing out your crisis as a healing tool is a thoroughly effective way to beat the odds. Pennebaker stops short of recommending keeping a daily diary. For writers, and regular diarists, this may not go far enough. It depends why you are

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writing: for health and personal development, or for deeper artistic and personal satisfaction. I believe there are ways you can combine the two.

A Pen better than a Pill

Writing is one of many trance states- just staying still for more than an hour to write is a form of meditation. The slow brain wave mental processing required for writing can help access the inaccessible. The tool of writing should not be underestimated alongside other effective tools for healing and change such as hypnosis, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and Emotional Freedom Technique. It is freely available to all who can hold a pen to paper, and costs way less than the pills doctors habitually prescribe for our ailments.

Writing helps us adapt to crises, and develop a more accommodating outlook on life. Combined with knowledge of hypnosis, NLP and EFT, the ability to free yourself from limiting, negative emotions, is almost limitless. Together, they add up to a powerful combination of techniques for coming to terms with major difficulties and having a solution-oriented frame of mind.

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