

The Healing Power of Writing From Life

Psychotherapist Jennifer Johnson shares how getting our stories down on paper can help us get through difficult times.

Because everyone 'has' a memoir, we all have a stake in how such stories are told. For we do not, after all, simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing.

—Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

Suffering is an inherent part of being human. The capacity to be resilient during times of suffering depends upon the meaning we make of where we are and what is happening in our worlds. Simply saying to ourselves, "This is my situation right now," and asking, "What meaning can I make of this? How can I deal with this?" can reduce our feelings of suffering and allow transformation to begin. Writing about our lives and experiences can also be a way to cope with these times of suffering, whether times of transition, loss or grief, that we all experience at one time or another. Writing down the details of these losses, traumas, illnesses and deaths, along with writing about our feelings related to these events, can transform our stories and create meaning and order from the chaos. As our stories become transformed, so do we. There's promising research by James Pennebaker, Department of Psychology Chair at the University of Texas in Austin, that suggests while writing about traumatic experiences may cause us to feel worse immediately following the writing, the process can lead to long-term improvements in health and emotional functioning.

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Therapeutic writing can occur in many shapes and forms. Some people prefer writing prose, while others prefer writing poetry. If the idea of writing prose without limits or poetry without structure makes you feel uncomfortable, then you may want to begin with more structured writing activities. If you're already feeling overwhelmed by a loss, engaging in writing activities that are structured and contained may actually bring some comfort and predictability to your day. If it feels too scary to write about difficult events, start with writing about a pleasant experience or memory. Write about your favorite place, or write about a place that soothes your spirit and nurtures your soul. If you choose to write about challenging events or feelings, trust yourself and your current level of tolerance. Start with writing for only five or 10 minutes and notice how you feel. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, stop writing or write about something else. Writing our stories requires listening deeply to ourselves and trusting what we hear. If writing about a particular topic or event feels too overwhelming or results in self-destructive thoughts or behavior, you may need the support of a licensed mental health professional to assist you.

We encounter these difficult times at different stages and ages in our life, and writing activities can be tweaked for those stages. Children may respond to sentence completions such as "Today I feel..." or "I wish..." Some adolescents may also respond to sentence completions, while others may prefer to write an unsent letter or to write more freely in a journal without adhering to a structured format. Older adults may benefit from writing captured moments about specific memories they would like to preserve or writing an unsent letter. (See the sidebar on page 15 for a list of suggested writing activities.) If a person of any age is unable to talk about or write about their grief and/or experiences significant changes in behavior, it's a good idea to consult with a mental health professional.

Not all writing that is done for therapeutic purposes becomes shaped into literature or published in traditional literary venues, but all creative writing, when pursued freely and passionately, has the potential to be healing. When we write about our lives, we're providing ourselves the potential to decrease feelings of social isolation, shame and fear that have kept us silent. If we reach at least one other person through our writing, we may decrease their sense of aloneness, too. Thus, writing about our lives not only results in our own healing, it also has the potential to create social change. I like to imagine a world in which we each take responsibility for telling our own stories in the interest of healing ourselves and others. Perhaps we could heal this planet one story at a time.

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