The Health Benefits of Expressive Writing

**Putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, can really pay off.**

By [Stacey Colino](http://health.usnews.com/topics/author/stacey-colino) | Contributor Aug. 31, 2016, at 10:37 a.m.

Whether you put pen to paper or type on a computer, writing about stressful experiences or emotionally charged issues in your life can be good for your health and emotional well-being. In fact, expressive writing, which basically involves pouring your heart and mind into words, without worrying about spelling, punctuation, grammar and other writing conventions, is good medicine: In recent years, research has found that it improves symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome or IBS, asthma and rheumatoid arthritis; helps with recovery from [childhood sexual abuse](http://health.usnews.com/wellness/articles/2016-04-19/the-psychological-impact-of-victim-blaming-and-how-to-stop-it) and [postpartum depression](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2015/01/20/postpartum-anxiety-or-normal-new-mom-fears); and improves the state of mind in those with [Parkinson's](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2014/10/27/do-you-have-parkinsons-disease-or-a-parkinsonism), cancer and many other health conditions.

It can even promote faster wound healing. In a 2013 study, researchers at the University of Auckland in New Zealand had 49 healthy adults, ages 64 to 97, spend 20 minutes a day for three consecutive days writing about upsetting events in their lives (expressive writing) or their daily activities (time management): Two weeks later, the researchers gave participants small puncture wounds on the inside of their upper arms then monitored their healing. Eleven days after the wound infliction, 80 percent more of those in the expressive writing group had fully healed compared with those in the other group.

**The Magic Behind the Act**

"Writing about an emotionally charged subject or an unresolved trauma helps you put the event into perspective and give some structure and organization to those anxious feelings, which ultimately helps you get through it," notes James Pennebaker, a professor of psychology at The University of Texas–Austin and co-author of the new book "Opening Up by Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain." "This can help people sleep better, feel and think better, and have richer social lives, all of which can bolster immune function and improve health."

Not surprisingly, writing about emotionally charged subjects also can improve mental health, including symptoms of [depression](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2014/10/22/the-many-faces-of-depression), [anxiety](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/articles/2016-03-24/could-lots-of-time-spent-on-social-media-be-tied-to-depression), major depressive disorder and even post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans. What's more, in a 2014 study involving 149 women in a residential treatment program for substance abuse disorders, researchers from the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven, Connecticut, found that those who engaged in four 20-minute writing sessions (about emotional topics) on consecutive days had greater reductions in the severity of their post-traumatic symptoms, depression and anxiety after two weeks than participants who wrote about neutral topics.

The mechanisms behind these emotional benefits aren't entirely understood. One theory is that describing your feelings with words may be somewhat cathartic, releasing pent-up feelings that may be dragging you down. Another is that the act of writing can help you organize disorganized thoughts into more cohesive ones that give meaning to an upsetting or traumatic experience. It also may be that the process of writing enables people to learn to better regulate their emotions because they gain a sense of control over upsetting experiences life throws at them.

Meanwhile, a pair of studies published in the April 2016 journal Emotion found that expressive writing helps people distance themselves from a distressing life experience, which in turn makes them less emotionally reactive to it. "We think the process of creating a coherent story out of disorganized emotional memories facilitates self-distancing because this process requires people to adopt other people's perspectives and focus on broader contexts," explains lead author Jiyoung Park, an assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst.

**Feeling Is Believing**

For as long as she can remember, Erin Morris had anxiety that would interfere with her ability to make decisions. In the fall of 2015, she started writing about whatever was on her mind for 15 minutes in the morning. "The important part for me is to not stop and judge myself or my writing but to let it flow and express everything that is in my head," says Morris, 36, a graphic designer who splits her time between Costa Rica and Columbia, South Carolina. Besides easing her anxiety, the writing habit has brought a considerable improvement in her previous [sleep troubles](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2015/10/07/how-sleep-disorders-affect-us-and-how-to-lay-them-to-rest), greater energy and "mental clarity when it comes to making decisions and dealing with complicated relationships," Morris reports.

Clint Evans, who spends up to 15 minutes writing in his journal in the morning and the evening, can relate to these perks. "Expressive writing reduces my stress and helps me sleep better," says Evans, 36, a business consultant and content service provider in Austin, Texas. "I feel release when writing in my journal – my mind stops racing and slows to a calm." The writing practice helps him fall asleep faster and sleep more soundly.

Most of the research has explored the benefits of writing about one's deepest thoughts and feelings about [a stressful event](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2015/06/26/the-emotional-aftermath-of-cancer) using the first-person point of view (the "I" voice). A 2013 study from the University of Iowa suggests that assuming a distant, third-person perspective (using "he" or "she") may be even more beneficial because it's associated with less intrusive thinking and fewer physical symptoms. "Taking an observer's vantage may be vital to maintaining composure and making progress when trying to sort through a distressing or angering event or moment in life," explains lead author Matthew Andersson, now an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "It's a short leap from picturing a difficult personal event from an observer's perspective to actually using a third-person pronoun, as if you're looking at a completely different person going through what you did."

Of course, "these potential pathways aren't mutually exclusive," Andersson notes, and there may be cumulative benefits. Whatever the mechanisms may be and whatever voice you choose to use, engaging in expressive writing can yield major benefits. "The beauty of this intervention is that it's cost-effective, low risk and [offers a] high payoff," notes Katherine Krpan, a psychologist who investigated the effects of expressive writing on major depressive disorder while at the University of Michigan. "People seem to like the idea of a non-pharmacological intervention. You can also do it wherever you are."

**How to Write Yourself Well**

To harness the power of expressive writing, Pennebaker recommends choosing a time and place where you're unlikely to be uninterrupted. Vow to write continuously about something that's upsetting you for at least 15 minutes on four consecutive days. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, verb agreement or other writing conventions; simply pour your deepest, most honest feelings onto paper or a computer screen. "It can be related to something you're dreaming, thinking or worrying about a lot, an issue or memory that's affecting your life in an unhealthy way, or a subject you've been avoiding for days, weeks or years," Pennebaker says.

Try it for at least a few weeks and see if it helps. If it does, stick with it. Ultimately, what you do with your expressive writing is entirely up to you: You can save it for future reference, throw it away, burn it or shred it, Pennebaker says. The important thing to remember is that it's meant to be for your personal benefit and your eyes only.

Source*: U.S. News & World Report*. < <http://health.usnews.com/wellness/articles/2016-08-31/the-health-benefits-of-expressive-writing> >