



THE WILDCAT WAY TO WELLNESS

Writing for Insight and Well-Being

If you can jot down a grocery list, you are ready to write for wellness. Polished writing skills, although helpful, are definitely not required. You will find that writing about your experiences can be fun as well as educational and fulfilling. Keeping a journal also stimulates insight, aids problem solving, and promotes emotional well-being.

Prepared by **Sam Quick**, Ph.D., Extension Specialist in Human Development and Family Relations, and **Peter Hesseldenz**, M.A., Department of Family Studies Staff Associate, Department of Family Studies, College of Human Environmental Sciences

You probably never imagined, however, that writing could help you physically as well. It can—and we're not just talking about exercising your fingers and wrist. Researchers have found that doing a certain kind of writing about painful personal experiences can actually improve your physical health.

James W. Pennebaker, professor of psychology at the University of Texas, conducted a series of experiments, chronicled in his book, *Opening Up*, which show that people are healthier and have improved moods and outlooks when they confront traumatic experiences by writing about them. Our bodies, the findings seem to say, have a need for expression. When we don't have an outlet, whether it be good friends we can confide in or a journal that we write in, bottled-up emotions will manifest themselves as health problems. A weakened immune system often results, leaving the body open to all sorts of troubles.

Dr. Pennebaker's studies centered on cases of great trauma—death, abuse, rape, illness, and separation. He found people who had never talked about their ordeals or had talked about them very little. He had half of the participants in his experiments write about their most traumatic experiences in an honest and revealing way. The other half wrote about trivial subjects.

He then charted the health of the subjects over an extended period of time. The ones who wrote about their traumas were healthier. This basic experiment was repeated in a number of different variations over a 10-year period, and each time the results were essentially the same. Dr. Pennebaker concluded that writing helps us to understand, organize, and process the complicated circumstances and emotions that surround the challenges of life.

The physical health benefits that people enjoyed usually were proportional to the seriousness of the past traumas that they discussed in writing.

What Kind of Writing Helps You Heal?

The type of writing needed to produce improved mental and physical health is quite specific. For this writing to help you, you must dig deep into yourself. Remember, the participants in Dr. Pennebaker's study who wrote about trivial things experienced no health benefits.

You can't simply vent your feelings, although that might make you feel better in the short run. To feel the healing effects, you must write about your difficulty in detail, linking how you feel about the incident today to how you felt when it happened. You have to examine how unfinished past trauma can stay with you and influence your present.

Dr. Pennebaker found that immediately after writing down their most significant traumas, the participants usually felt worse. It's only natural that dredging up all that unpleasant subject matter would be depressing. However, soon after this initial period, the participants began to bounce back and feel better, happier, and more in touch with themselves than before their disclosure.

The physical health benefits that people enjoyed usually were proportional to the seriousness of the past traumas that they discussed in writing. The health benefits tend to last a few months after the writing is done. A few people, Pennebaker says, simply aren't receptive to this sort of therapy and don't receive any health benefits.

Everyone Has the Necessary Skills

Dr. Pennebaker told those participating in his studies not to worry about spelling or grammar. They are not relevant to putting your feelings down on paper. In fact, the less you worry about them, the better you tend to write. Many writing theorists believe that we all have an intuitive ability to write that just needs to be unlocked. Writers must find their own "voice," their own unique way of expressing themselves in words. Doing this goes beyond a set of rules for spelling or grammar. Besides, the type of writing we are describing is not for public consumption anyway. It's for your eyes only unless you choose to show it to others.

Writing beyond Traumatic Experiences

On a day-to-day basis, we may not confront experiences like the participants in Dr. Pennebaker's studies. However, life is made up of lots of smaller challenges, and what works on a grand scale can also work on a smaller scale. Dr. Pennebaker suggests that we use writing on a day-to-day basis as preventative medicine.

A journal can be a safe, effective way to process many of the difficulties, opportunities, and joys that occur in day-to-day life. Although it's no substitute for action, your journal can be a good friend who won't judge you and with whom you can be completely honest.

Writer James Miller makes a distinction between a diary and a

journal. A journal is similar to a diary but doesn't have to be a strict accounting of what the writer did or saw that day. A journal includes more about the writer's thoughts, feelings, and dreams—the inner workings of his or her mind.

Other Reasons for Journaling

Perspective

Putting thoughts down on paper allows you to gain perspective. It becomes easier to assign priorities when you can see everything laid out before you.

Clearing the Mind

Many ideas that we think may be important are swimming around in our minds. We expend a lot of energy trying to keep them alive. Why not write them down in a journal? When you do this, you let your mind relax and move on. Once a thought is down on paper, the energy that your brain was using to keep it in the forefront of your thoughts can be used to develop that idea, build on it, or discard it.

Problem Solving

Putting an issue on paper forces you to concentrate on it in a fresh and tangible way. Writing is slower than thinking, so you are forced to consider each element of a problem in greater detail when you are writing about it.

Generating New Ideas

One of the great things about writing is that it begets more writing. When you write about something, you tend to jog your brain. You release all sorts of creative energy and tap into places in your mind that you didn't know existed. Many novelists have said they do not plan out the plot of their books; they start with an idea and let the writing take them wherever it may.

Insight and Reflection

Writing is a great way to look back at how things have worked out for you in the past. It's always good to take stock of how you've grown, what you've learned, and where you want to go in the future.

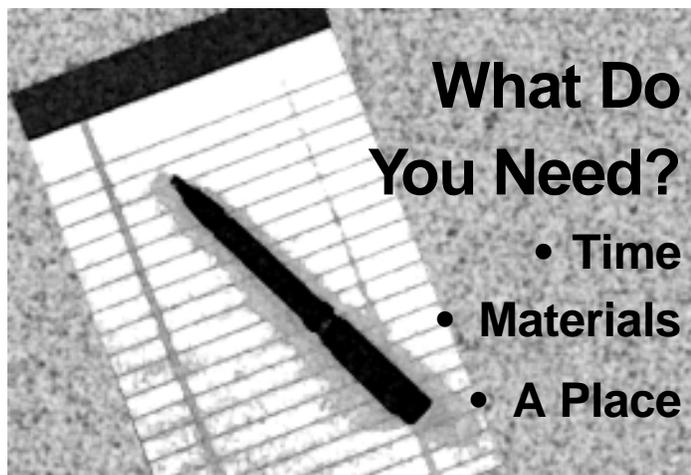
Explore your visions, the desires of your heart, your dreams. Putting them on paper can be an important first step in bringing them to life.

Self-Expression

Human beings have basic needs for survival—food, shelter, security. Beyond these necessities, however, they have certain psychological needs. Possibly the greatest of these is the need for self-expression. Psychologists have long noted that if this outlet is blocked, problems result. Although there are many ways to satisfy this need—talking, singing, dancing, wearing certain clothes, etc.—writing is one of the most fundamental ways in which we can express ourselves.



Your Personal Journal is a friend who always listens and with whom you can share anything, a mirror in which you see your inner self and outer life reflected, a teacher who leads you toward personal growth and a healthier lifestyle.



What Do You Need?

- Time
- Materials
- A Place

Time

First, you need time. You can start with as little as five or ten minutes several days a week. Most people find, however, that after they have kept a journal or engaged in some sort of regular writing for a while, they need or want more time. This is up to you. What is important is that you do your writing regularly.

Materials

Next, you need something to write with and something to write on. Choose whatever writing instrument you like—pen, pencil, marker. Writing teacher Natalie Goldberg suggests you choose a “fast-writing pen” since your thoughts come faster than you can write, and you don’t want to have the added disadvantage of a slow pen. Some people prefer to use a computer or typewriter. Whatever you like best and are most comfortable with is what you should use.

What you write on is important, as well. You can choose a beautiful blank book that feels special to you. Or you might just use an old spiral notebook or legal pad. Sometimes a plain notebook relieves the pressure to have profound thoughts or be excessively

neat. You want to be able to follow the wildest tangents, which may prove to be total nonsense. Sometimes you want to scratch ideas out or scrawl things down as quickly as you can. Most of all, you want to be able to relax and write without restrictions, so choose whatever medium will let you do that. It should be noted that some people like to keep a journal on audio or video tape—which is fine, but not really the subject of this publication, although many of the same principles apply.

If you plan to keep something you’ve written for a long time, choose an ink and paper combination that will last over time without undue fading.

A Place

Find a quiet spot where you can be undisturbed for whatever amount of time you have chosen. Some people like to write late at night or early in the morning when there are fewer distractions. Anytime you choose is fine. It is best if the place you choose is private. To really get at your deepest, truest thoughts, you have to be assured that your journal will be completely your own, without the threat of someone else looking at it. Your internal censor will hold you back as you write if you don’t give yourself this security.

How Do You Get Started?

There are many methods for jump-starting your brain. The following two are taken from the academic and creative writing areas but work with any type of writing. If you don’t know what you want to write about when you sit down, try the following exercises.

Let yourself relax—
there is no right or
wrong way to do this.

Free Writing

In this method, from writing teacher Peter Elbow, you set a time limit, say ten minutes, and then write continuously and quickly for the entire time. Just put down whatever comes into your mind—without lifting the pen from the paper, without worrying about spelling and grammar, and without looking back at what you wrote. If you don't know what to write about, then you can write "I don't know what to write" over and over again until something comes to you. When you're done, check out what you've written. Along with some nonsense, you'll probably find some good writing.

Clustering

This method is taken from Gabriele Lusser Rico's book *Writing the Natural Way*. The principle behind this activity is that any mind is rich with ideas and information and that you just have to allow yourself to tap into them. Start by writing a word or a phrase in the center of a piece of paper and then putting a small circle around it. This is called the nucleus. Then look at the circled word and write down any thoughts that come into your head, clustering them around the nucleus. This will help you to see ideas and patterns that you may want to write about. Let yourself relax—there is no right or wrong way to do this. Clustering is a great way to brainstorm and see new connections and fresh ideas.

More Ideas for Writing

Here are some special writing activities you may wish to explore. Unlike traditional journals, some of these suggestions will be of a less private nature, but, again, spelling and grammar should not be your main concerns. People are forgiving of mistakes, especially when you're writing from the heart as many of the exercises call for you to do.

Idea Files

Whenever an interesting idea comes into your head—about something you want to do, think about, write about, or whatever—write it down on any paper that's available, even if it's a napkin, a magazine page, or a receipt. You can transfer it to a neater list later. It is important that you don't let your good ideas slip away.

Your Wellness Notebook

In a way that feels right to you, keep a record of your wellness goals and your progress toward meeting them. Research documents that this type of self-monitoring helps us achieve our objectives. Make it fun, remembering that wellness is a decision to treat yourself with acceptance, kindness, and respect.

A Gratitude Journal

Occasionally jot down things you are grateful about. Keep the list updated. Look back on your life and see if there were hidden blessings during some of the more difficult times of your life. Particularly when the going gets rough, looking through your Gratitude Journal can be a great way to re-energize your feelings of optimism and thankfulness.

Just put down
whatever comes into
your mind—without
lifting the pen from
the paper, without
worrying about
spelling and grammar,
and without looking
back at
what you wrote.

This collection of thoughts can be left for your children or grandchildren, or yourself later in life, or anyone you choose to give it to.

Your Autobiography

This exercise is especially relevant for older people, but certainly not restricted to them. One way to approach this activity is to purchase or check out from the library one of the many books that lead you through this challenging project. The important thing to remember here is that everyone has a story that is worth telling. Keep the title of Erving Polster's book in your mind: *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel*. Whatever you produce will be of untold value to the generations that follow you.

Special Event Diaries

If you are going on a trip or if something special is happening to you, like getting married or participating in an unusual assignment at work, consider keeping a special journal. You can record your impressions, how things made you feel, or what you thought about the other people involved. Something like this can be fascinating to look at later and may also be an interesting keepsake for future generations.

Time Capsules

Write about what's currently happening with you, your opinions on stories in the news, and what your hopes and dreams are. This collection of thoughts can be left for your children or grandchildren, or yourself later in life, or anyone you choose to give it to. If it is intended for a certain person, you can address it to and gear it toward that person's interests. Of course, you might not have anyone specific in mind when you do it, but don't let that stop you.

Ethical Wills

This idea comes from ancient Jewish tradition. Like a traditional

will, the ethical will involves passing something on to the next generation, but an ethical will passes on values, ideas, and personal reflections rather than money or goods. An ethical will need not be lengthy or time consuming to produce. It can be just a few paragraphs or as long as you want it to be. You don't have to be sick or up in years to compose an ethical will. Write from the heart.

Stories

Let your creativity out and try your hand at writing a story. You can make something up entirely or "fictionalize" something that actually happened to you. Let your imagination go wild. Also consider writing vignettes or stories about topics like "One of My Funniest Experiences" or "Picking Strawberries with My 90-Year-Old Grandmother."

Book of Dreams

Keep some paper or a notebook next to your bed and write down the dreams you remember. Often if you don't write them down immediately, they will slip away forever. When a dream impresses you, try your hand at interpreting or analyzing it. Remember that dreams are often symbolic. A good friend may be able to help.

Food Diary

Note how you feel after eating various foods. Pay attention to what you eat, the amount, where you eat it, how the food was prepared, and whom you eat it with. How do your eating habits affect your energy level and general well-being? Or you might just want to record the pleasure of enjoying a fabulous meal.

A Visual Journal

Like verbal journaling, a visual journal is a way to express feelings, ideas, and visions. But instead of using the language of words, you use the language of imagery. For example, imagine what a feeling, thought, or situation would look like if it were expressed as a color, shape, or image. Then use markers, paint, or another medium to express yourself on paper. Often images can express our emotions and visions with a power, freshness, simplicity, and depth that words cannot capture.

Some who journal find that a combination of visual images and writing works best for them. As an alternative to drawing images, you may wish to cut images from magazines and other sources and

create collages that express your thoughts, feelings, or dreams.

Inner Dialogues

Let one part of you “talk” to another. You could start a dialogue by raising a question: “Mr. Headache, is there something you are trying to teach me?” Or you could let a particular part of your body “talk” to you. Those who are spiritually inclined might write “Dear God,” and pour out their hearts. Similarly, you might ask the spirit within a question, and calmly sense the answer as you write it down.

Autobiography of the Soul

James Miller suggests this activity. He finds that it is difficult for many people to discuss their sense of spirituality. A journal is a good place to ponder questions,

study your sense of calling or devotion, or chart your spiritual growth and longings.

Conclusion

Remember, your writing is your own. Feel free to experiment, come up with new ideas, and develop your own style of journaling. There are as many ways of doing this as there are people out there. You don’t have to write in sentences and paragraphs—you can make lists, draw pictures and diagrams, or write dialogues and conversations. The sky’s your limit. Trust your writing and let it take you where it may.

An in-depth *Teaching Guide* accompanies this publication.



Rules for Rich, Spontaneous Writing

To help freshen your writing, consider these suggestions, mostly taken from the work of Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*:

- 1. Keep your hand moving.**
Don't pause to read the line you've just written or typed.
- 2. Don't cross out.**
That's editing as you write. Whatever you've written, let it be.
- 3. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, and grammar.**
Don't even care about staying within the margins and lines on the page.
- 4. Don't think. Don't get logical.**
- 5. Lose control. Let it flow.**
- 6. Go for the hot spots.**
If something comes up in your writing that is scary or enticing, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy.
- 7. Edit only after you're finished.**
Once you get this rich, alive writing down, you can go back and eliminate any nonsense and polish up the rest to your heart's content.

References

- Cameron, Julia. (1998). *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam.
- DeSalvo, Louise. (1999). *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Elbow, Peter. (1973). *Writing Without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, Natalie. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Miller, James E. (1998) *The Rewarding Practice of Journal Writing: A Guide for Starting and Keeping Your Personal Journal*. Fort Wayne, IN: Willowgreen Publishing.
- Pennebaker, James W. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Rico, Gabriele Lusser. (1983). *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.
- Smyth, J. Stone, A. Huewitz, and A. Kaell. (1999). "Effects of Writing about Stressful Experiences on Symptom Reduction in Patients with Asthma and Rheumatoid Arthritis." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 281:1304-1309.



Wildcat Way to Wellness Series Editor:
Janet Tietzen, Ph.D., R.D., Extension
Specialist, Food and Nutrition, Family
and Consumer Sciences