

# WRITING AND HEALTH: SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

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Writing about emotional upheavals in our lives can improve physical and mental health. Although the scientific research surrounding the value of expressive writing is still in the early phases, there are some approaches to writing that have been found to be helpful. Keep in mind that there are probably a thousand ways to write that may be beneficial to you. Think of these as rough guidelines rather than Truth. Indeed, in your own writing, experiment on your own and see what works best.

## Getting ready to write

Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed. Ideally, pick a time at the end of your workday or before you go to bed.

Promise yourself that you will write for a minimum of 15 minutes a day for at least 3 or 4 consecutive days.

Once you begin writing, write continuously. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you run out of things to write about, just repeat what you have already written.

You can write longhand or you can type on a computer. If you are unable to write, you can also talk into a tape recorder.

You can write about the same thing on all 3-4 days of writing or you can write about something different each day. It is entirely up to you.

## What to write about

Something that you are thinking or worrying about too much  
Something that you are dreaming about  
Something that you feel is affecting your life in an unhealthy way  
Something that you have been avoiding for days, weeks, or years

In our research, we generally give people the following instructions for writing:

*Over the next four days, I want you to write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the most upsetting experience in your life. Really let go and explore your feelings and thoughts about it. In your writing, you might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. How is this experience related to who you would like to become, who you have been in the past, or who you are now?*

*Many people have not had a single traumatic experience but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors in our lives and you can write about them as well.*

*You can write about the same issue every day or a series of different issues. Whatever you choose to write about, however, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts.*

Warning: Many people report that after writing, they sometimes feel somewhat sad or depressed. Like seeing a sad movie, this typically goes away in a couple of hours. If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics.

## **What to do with your writing samples**

The writing is for you and for you only. Their purpose is for you to be completely honest with yourself. When writing, secretly plan to throw away your writing when you are finished. Whether you keep it or save it is really up to you.

Some people keep their samples and edit them. That is, they gradually change their writing from day to day. Others simply keep them and return to them over and over again to see how they have changed.

Here are some other options: Burn them. Erase them. Shred them. Flush them. Tear them into little pieces and toss them into the ocean or let the wind take them away. Eat them (not recommended).

## **Some references for writing, journaling, or diaries**

There are some outstanding books by people who have an intuitive and practical approach to writing. Each author approaches journaling or diary writing in very different ways. Check the various books out and see what works best for you.

Adams, Kathleen (1998). *The Way of the Journal : A Journal Therapy Workbook for Healing*. Sidron Press.

Baldwin, Christina (1992). *One to One : Self-Understanding Through Journal Writing*. Evans Publisher

DeSalvo, Louise A. (2000). *Writing As a Way of Healing : How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press.

Fox, John (1997). *Poetic Medicine : The Healing Art of Poem-Making*. Tarcher Press

Goldberg, Natalie and Guest, Judith (1986). *Writing Down the Bones : Freeing the Writer Within*. Shambhala Press.

Jacobs, Beth (2005). *Writing for Emotional Balance*, New Harbinger Publishers.

Pennebaker, James W. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotion*. NY: Guilford Press.

Pennebaker, J.W. (2004). *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press.

Rainer, Tristine (1979). *The New Diary : How to Use a Journal for Self-Guidance and Expanded Creativity*. Tarcher