

The Medical Minute: Writing your way to better health

February 2 2012, By Martha Peaslee Levine

When I have spoken about writing and depression, many people respond that they can understand the relationship -- whenever they have to write, they get depressed. That might have been the situation when they were in school, diagramming sentences and writing with many guidelines and restrictions. But what I'm referring to is how writing can help ease depression. Writing can help improve a number of emotional and even physical illnesses.

Many studies have examined the ways that [writing](#) helps. In one inquiry, a group of college students wrote about their basic daily activities. The other group wrote about a past [trauma](#) or challenge. Before the study, both groups visited the student health center the same number of times. Afterwards, those students who wrote about their challenge or trauma had a decreased number of health care visits and showed improvement in their overall health.

Writing about challenges can help in other areas. When a large group of men lost their jobs, they were enrolled in a study and divided in three groups. One group didn't write at all, one wrote about what they were doing day to day to get a new job, and the third wrote about their feelings around losing their jobs. Those who wrote about the difficult experience and their feelings had a much better chance of getting a new job. Why? Those who processed their anger about being fired appeared as better candidates for a new job. They had found a way to deal with their feelings and move on.

Writing about past traumas has allowed individuals with rheumatoid arthritis to experience a decrease in pain. It has helped individuals with asthma to breathe better. It has assisted individuals who have gone through natural disasters to work through the adversity. Those who wrote about the experience had far less emotional difficulties. They had less [depression](#) and after-effects from the disaster.

What has become apparent through the studies is that one thing that is important is the creation of a story. This includes writing not only about the details of the trauma, but also your feelings about what happened. This gives you the opportunity to put the trauma into perspective. It is a chance to review how you dealt with the trauma, survived it, and what you learned from it.

When writing about the trauma, a few guidelines are helpful.

- Understand that although in the end physical and emotional health can improve, in the early moments of writing you might feel worse. If you are writing about a trauma, it is understandable that you will feel pain and sadness. But not writing about it, not experiencing these feelings means that you are keeping them inside and they are affecting your health.
- You can write in short snippets. Many of these studies had individuals write for 15 to 30 minutes at a time. But they wrote for a number of days and continued the exploration of the trauma. You don't have to accomplish everything in one day.
- Try to include as many specific details as possible. What happened? How did you feel? It is the specifics that will get you inside the story and help with letting go of the pain.
- You don't have to share the story with anyone else. Often it is the act

of writing that is important, not having someone read it.

More information: How can you start? One way is with writing prompts. You can find some at my blog, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-write-health .

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