

WRITING AS HEALING

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Ernest Hemingway had said, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." For millions around the world, writing – a hobby, a profession and an art form – really does feel like bleeding on paper. But of late, we've stopped to notice how all that bled ink has the power to do more than inform or entertain. It has the power to heal.

HOW IT WORKS

It relieves stress and sometimes helps us sleep

Stress – heavy, depressing, irritating. It makes us want to scream out our complaints or block the world out for some semblance of peace. Getting all those negative emotions out on paper, be it for an audience or just for ourselves, is perhaps the easiest way to make our minds feel lighter. Having done that, it often improves sleep as well.

"If there was a particular occurrence in my life that was bothering me, I would get over it if I wrote about it. I discovered why keeping a journal has always been such a rage. It is a truly great outlet for emotions like anxiety, rage and frustration," shares Shama Sania.

It helps us gain perspective

When things go wrong, they tend to affect more than one area of our lives. A friendship or relationship gone bad may make work, studies and society feel irksome. Alternatively, professional or financial issues can seep into someone's personal life and make things worse. The stress tends to trickle from one area to another, turning our lives into a confused, discoloured palette of miseries.

When we write, we give structure to the stress and its causes. We're able to separate those colours - the blues and the greys- and even notice the occasional yellow. We gain clarity about why we may be feeling a certain way and how we can possibly solve it. We gain perspective and if we're lucky, closure.

Shababa Iqbal, a student at a private university, shares, "One of the most helpful ways of healing after a painful emotional experience for me is to express my pain and responsibility through writing. Penning down my feelings, be it in a journal or in a letter to the other party, helps to remind me of what that experience taught me, make better decisions for the next time and also be grateful for that experience."

Scientific Backing

Elizabeth Broadbent, a senior lecturer of health psychology at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, carried out a study that explained how expressive writing relieved patients of stress, gave them

insight into their trauma and improved their sleep patterns.

Joshua Smyth, PhD, of Syracuse University looked into how expressive writing helps build immune functioning in patients suffering from HIV/AIDS, asthma and arthritis, which was published in the 1998 *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (Vol. 66, No. 1) and *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Vol.281, No.14). The degree of recovery, however, depended on the type of writing and the patients themselves.

James W. Pennebaker (professor of Psychology at University of Texas), through some of his books such as "Opening Up" and "Writing to Heal" and several other works, shed light on how expressive writing often leads to people visiting doctors less, and helps a range of people from first-year university students to victims of violent crimes or tragedies. With the help of his colleagues, he also developed a text analysis program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), which examines the part writing plays in healing, and what particular language (words) achieves the desired results.

Meanwhile, some sceptics believe that writing doesn't necessarily play any role in helping to heal. Some even believe it can turn harmful for those who turn it into a means of wallowing in self-pity. Instead of endless venting, finding a meaning from writing about the experience is what truly helps.

HOW WRITING A STORY HELPS

Stories are more than just monologues. They have characters - each character with their own versions of the story.

When we switch between the perspectives of each character, we're essentially finding ways to look at each occurrence from different sides. On day 1, the writer could be talking about how she herself might have felt. When, on the days to follow, she changes focus onto the perspectives of her surroundings, that's a sign of progress.

Finishing a concise, structured story out of a messy beginning, with a narrative that ties the story and its

characters together, allows the writer to emerge from a complicated experience with a clear conclusion and insight.

DO'S AND DON'TS

In Pennebaker's words, writing about a tragedy makes it feel "graspable." It becomes available for us on paper to read, reread and analyse.

It helps to start with the simplest of beginnings possible - a time and place that's comfortable and devoid of disturbance. Write about things that are personal and things that matter; things you can handle thinking about, nothing more and nothing less; write for at least 20 minutes and, most of all, write for yourself.

When we write without worrying about impressing an audience, without the concerns of grammar or spelling, we crack open the shells of inhibition. Of course, this doesn't apply to writing for professional purposes. For personal purposes, however, expressive writing without inhibitions helps us gain self knowledge and come to terms with events and our feelings.

However, it's important to remember that different people recover in different ways. Writing works best as a form of healing for those who find solace in expressing themselves. For many others, dealing with issues without pouring them out helps more.

What *isn't* advised is to force oneself to write about events we don't feel ready to handle yet, or wounds that are still too fresh and recent. It's even more inadvisable to succumb to a never-ending spiral of venting and self-pity. It doesn't take a doctor or a professional to help us understand the perils of fixating on a tragedy.

Twenty-six letters, in their innumerable different combinations, are all it takes to connect lives across borders and calendars. But sometimes, their strongest feat lies in connecting us with ourselves.

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