



Are you suffering from PTSD? Why not give “expressive writing” a try? Sources as diverse as “touchy-feely” books and the “Army Times” suggest this kind of writing can help.

The preface to my memoir begins, “I didn’t consciously set out to write a book about healing. What I thought I was going to do was write a memoir about being adopted and ultimately searching for my birth mother. But when I started to write, the story I had told countless times turned into something quite different. Every time I sat down, a scene from my life poured onto the page, and with each buried memory came the emotion connected to it.”

It wasn’t just telling my story that was so healing. I’d repeated my adoption story many times without the benefit of healing the abandonment issues that were the foundation of my trauma. It wasn’t the act of putting pen to paper either (actually spending hours at the computer), recalling memories as they came up, and turning them into scenes. The real healing didn’t begin until my older, wiser self began to make sense of my situation, filling the gaps between scenes with a perspective that comes only from wisdom and age. In my case, this happened quite by accident.

I was looking for a way to tie my scenes together when the voice of distance and experience stepped in with new insight and understanding. Time provided me with the advantage of being able to learn from and make sense of an experience that had wounded me as a child. Eventually, I understood how powerful and healing the written word can be – espe-

cially when we take the time to find meaning in a traumatic memory.

What I was fortunate enough to figure out by chance, research has confirmed: Writing, as long as certain parameters are followed, has the power to heal. After a trauma, writing can move an individual along the continuum from shock, to acceptance, to gratitude, and ultimately, to transformation. What’s more, writing can boost the immune system, help patients get better, and in many cases, keep them from getting worse. Research also indicates that writing reduces stress, anxiety, and depression.

Kee in mind that not all writing is a pathway for healing illness and trauma. There is evidence that the nature of the writing is crucial. According to some experts, the initial writing about a trauma can trigger distress, as well as physical and emotional arousal. While some people can work through the distress therapeutically or through continued writing, others cannot. To benefit from writing, experts recommend that people who relive upsetting events should focus on meaning, and find significance in the traumatic memory. According to Dr. James Pennebaker, PhD, who has conducted extensive research in the field of wellness and writing, “People who talk about things over and over in the same way aren’t getting any better. There has to be growth or change in the way

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they view their experience.” Words like “realize” and “understand,” showing cause and effect, are indicators that growth is occurring.

The National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), a department of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, provides care to service members and their families who are dealing with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other psychological trauma. Expressive and creative writing are included as part of a program called Operation Homecoming, a four-week residential program that began in January 2012 through funding provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. The program includes an expressive writing component where service members are encouraged to express their emotions, and make sense of their experiences.

Because many participants see the value in writing, an optional informal four-week creative-writing series is offered to service members and their families, as well as NICoE staff. According to the program’s curriculum designer and teacher, retired Army Lt. Col. Ron Capps, “During the creative-writing series, which takes place on Wednesday evenings, participants write for 25 minutes about anything at all; it doesn’t have to be related to their war experience, or be focused on therapy. Writers then have the option of sharing or not sharing their writing with members of the group.”

Capps is also the founder and director of the Veterans Writing Project (veteranswriting.org), an organization that provides “no-cost writing seminars and workshops for veterans, active and reserve service members, and military family members.” The Veterans Writing Project also publishes a quarterly literary review, a podcast, and an ongoing scroll of writing at *O-Dark-Thirty* (o-dark-thirty.org). Service members who want to give writing a try can buy a copy of Capps’s book, *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. Written by a veteran for veterans, it details the elements of the craft involved in writing both fiction and non-fiction.

In his blog post, “Healing PTSD Through Writing,” Dr. John Zemler, whose primary interest lies in understanding the spiritual dimensions of post-traumatic stress disorder, says, “Writing can help us find meaning in our PTSD suffering. Indeed, writing can help us discover meaning in all of our experiences, not just the traumatic ones that gave us our PTSD. I can write about certain experiences in my military history, or I might write a poem about suffering, or I may write music that celebrates life. In each case the act of writing will help me heal a little bit more from my PTSD.” ★

TRY IT YOURSELF

As someone who knows firsthand the healing power of words, I would like to encourage anyone who is experiencing PTSD symptoms to give what experts call expressive writing – writing that describes thoughts and feelings about life experiences – a try. Here are some guidelines to help you:

- Pick the writing tool that best suits you. You can write by hand on paper with pen or pencil. You can write using a keyboard or typewriter. If you prefer, you can use voice-recognition software, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking.
- Get into a relaxed state of mind. The simplest way to do this is to sit in a quiet place, and take a few slow, deep breaths to clear your mind of all thoughts.
- Take a moment to reflect on recurring feelings, or situations and events that affect your life in an unhealthy way. Jot them down. You’ll want to add to this “master list” whenever you are triggered by an unresolved feeling or memory.
- Pick one of the situations, and write down whatever comes up. Don’t worry about grammar, punctuation, judgment, or criticism. Just let the writing (or speaking) flow automatically. Keep in mind that you are writing for yourself. When you are finished, you can either keep what you’ve written or dispose of it. Don’t be surprised when feelings that need to be expressed find their way onto the paper. Be sure to conclude your writing with the insight and wisdom you have gained.
- Researchers have found that you’ll get the most benefit from writing if you do it for a minimum of 15 minutes a day for at least three or four consecutive days. If you struggle with staying focused, set a kitchen timer, and try writing for just five minutes at a time. You can continue to write about your initial topic, or move on to something else.
- Later in the day, reflect on your writing experience. How did it make you feel? If writing creates agitation or triggers uncomfortable memories, you might want to solicit support from a counselor or veteran’s support group.

If you want to learn more about the link between writing and health, you might want to check out one or more of the following books and web sites:

- *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*, by Ron Capps.
- *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, by James W. Pennebaker, PhD.
- *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*, by James W. Pennebaker, PhD.
- *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, by Louise A. DeSalvo.
- *Writing to Heal. Change Your Life Through Stories (The Pathway to Self)*, by Jacqui Malpass.
- Dr. John Zemler. drzemler.hubpages.com.
- Ron Capps. Veterans Writing Project. veteranswriting.org.
- Quarterly literary review and podcast. *Oh-Dark-Thirty*. o-dark-thirty.org.