

Writing to Heal

happy love
grateful caring
laughter joy



Writing through our grief
can mire us in painful memories
or it can free us and inspire healing.
The difference is in the approach.

By Amy Paturel

From the time I was a little girl, writing was my go-to form of therapy—cheap, easy, and on my own terms. I wrote when I was happy, when I was sad, and when I wanted to craft a narrative from the thoughts swirling around in my head.

In my 30s, I discovered social psychologist James Pennebaker, Ph.D., known as the pioneer of expressive writing. Pennebaker's prescription for healing goes something like this: Write about a trauma, heartache, loss, or whatever issue is preventing you from moving forward. But don't just do it once. Linger on the subject for 15 to 20 minutes at a time throughout four consecutive days.

Research confirms focused writing can have profound effects, not only in helping people process negative experiences, but also in improving cognition, boosting immunity, and enhancing overall health and well-being. Intrigued, I began using Pennebaker's formula: I wrote about being sexually abused when I was 5, the two-pound adrenal tumor that wreaked havoc on me at age 23, and my son's near death following a choking incident when I was 40. When my dad's newly replaced heart valve began unexpectedly pumping bacteria into his brain, ultimately robbing me of my beloved hero, naturally, I turned again to Pennebaker.

Purging Pain

Pennebaker's prescription for moving past trauma is simple: record every

horrific detail of our pain so we can obliterate it from our psyche. It's like cognitive behavioral therapy where people who are afraid of flying get into simulators and go through the motions until they're able to set foot on a plane. The idea is that after committing trauma to the page, this purging process will leave us with some semblance of peace.

When my dad died, I followed the script. I wrote obsessively about the 16 months between his angiogram and his death. I relived every unthinkable moment, including the visit when he thought my name was Richard. I committed to memory every wrinkle in his crepe-paper thin skin, every retching cough, and even the horrible death rattle that continued for hours before he died. But instead of feeling freed, I felt stuck in a vicious loop of pain and heartache. I realize grieving isn't supposed to be fun, but I didn't want my memory of my father to be marred by his horrifying, soul-crushing last months.

So I did more research. I wanted to know whether unloading on the page, focusing only on trauma, was hijacking my health and well-being. "You can get retriggered, retraumatized, and fall into an abyss where you dissociate from your experience," says Helen Marlo, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Clinical Psychology at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California. "When there's no connection to the narrative, there's no growth or transformation."

Equally concerning is that this approach is almost like chemotherapy for our brains. It has the power to



detonate the good memories along with the bad. So you can imagine how excited I was when Marlo offered me a more palatable alternative: healing by shifting that same grief energy toward joyful memories.

Turning a New Leaf

In the early days after my dad's death while my system was running on adrenaline, the urge to write struck in the wee hours of the morning. I was obsessed with recording his life history and recalling memories for his obituary, and the experience was, well, healing. The reason, says Marlo, is that writing an obituary requires integrating both thoughts and feelings.

More than a decade ago, Marlo published a study in the professional journal *Psychology & Health* suggesting that expressive writing that focuses on happy memories, gratitude, and uplifting character sketches of loved ones who have hurt or left us can be even more healing than writing about the trauma.

She's not alone in this approach. Grief expert David Kessler, author of *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*

(Scribner, 2019), says when we're grieving it's important to water the garden we want to grow. Of course, he also says that the brain is like Velcro for traumatic memories and Teflon for the sweet moments. The task then is to focus your mind on the things you want to remember so the good stuff can stick.

Naturally, I struggled with this. I couldn't remember specific experiences or events. And when I was able to recall a memory, it was foggy—like a blank slate with only the faintest hint of faded chalk. In one case, I unknowingly fabricated an entire experience. I wrote about flying to Boston with my dad to secure an apartment before my graduate school career began. I detailed how we ate at the pub across from the cemetery where Paul Revere was buried, how my dad slurped oysters on the half shell at Legal Sea Foods, and how I tagged along with him to various business meetings.

After free-associating from memory, I looked over my journal entries from 1995 and discovered my dad wasn't even there. According to Marlo, my experience isn't uncommon. The human mind integrates and combines

different memories to preserve real estate. Memories come back foggy or incomplete.

“At first, a lot of people can’t even come up with one really great memory, and certainly not with any level of detail,” Kessler says. “But over time and with intention, they can remember one, then two, then thousands of precious moments.” So I read studies about expressive writing for grief—particularly the positive variety. I used the writing protocols the authors described in the methods section of the studies, and I responded to the recommended prompts.

To jog my memory, Marlo suggested using music, pictures, and tangible objects. I browsed through old photographs, read through dusty journals, and made a playlist of songs by my dad’s favorite artists—Barry Manilow, Rod Stewart, and Neil Diamond. What came up for me was not only healing—in some cases, it felt transcendent, as if I were connecting with my dad through words on a page.

Connecting with Another Realm

During my first attempt, I lay on my bed and opened my journal to see where the pen would take me. The first memory that came to mind was the night my dad disguised himself as a waiter at my wedding rehearsal dinner.

I wrote about how he worked the room, lingering too long beside the guests—and how the horrible toupée he wore should have been an instant giveaway. Nearly 20 minutes passed before it dawned on me that the oddball server delivering wine and appetizers was actually my father. I looked into his sea-blue eyes, saw a hint of that mischievous twinkle, and knew it had to be him. We ended up giggling until our laughter evolved into tears, hugs, and pictures.

In other entries, I reminisced about how he raced me and my sisters down the black diamond slopes in Park City, Utah, and traveled across the country to take care of me after major surgery. How he walked all over town searching for chocolate eclairs for my mom. And later, how he lavished his grandchildren with tickles, belly kisses, and bad renditions of Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine.” I detailed every feel-good moment I could access.

I was struck by how recording these memories transported me back in time. The exercises filled my heart with more love than pain. They also helped me feel connected to him in a way that the Pennebaker entries hadn’t. One prompt in particular, “This is what I want to say to you ...,” helped me release the shame I felt for allowing him to live chained to a bed for more than a year. I wrote:

I think about what happened to you and how medicine extended your pain and suffering. I knew you didn’t want to live that way. Without the surgery, you probably would have died within months from a heart attack. But it would have been quick, maybe even painless—like ripping off a Band-Aid—and you would have enjoyed your final days with us.

I remind myself that there is a blessing inside of that pain, a certain poetic justice in how your four girls rallied around you. You spent a lifetime laser-focused on all of us—our needs, our happiness, our well-being. But during the last year of your life, while you were held captive in a hospital bed, I hope you felt all of the love, kisses, and adoration you bestowed upon us coming back to you tenfold.

As I continued to recall the good times, special events, and strong emotions, I felt even closer to my dad. Now two years after his death, I’m much better equipped to home in on the sweet stuff. I’m spending time focusing on who he was and how he seemed to me almost superhuman. He was all go, no quit—and he was at his best when he was making people laugh. The bonus: I now have a “dad journal” full of precious memories. 🌍

Prompts for Positive Healing

Reconstructing your personal narrative on the page can play a key role in healing. There’s no one-size-fits-all prescription for writing through grief. The best approach depends on where you are in the grief process. If writing spontaneously without structure isn’t working, the following prompts may help:

1. I remember when ...
2. This is what I have to say to you ...
3. My happiest memory of you is ...
4. The greatest lesson I have learned is ...
5. Today I went to that place where we ...