



We are all story tellers

Writing is known to be greatly beneficial to our wellbeing. What's more, it's free and can be done anywhere and at anytime, says Patricia McAdoo

WHAT IS IT THAT you write when you write? Work emails? Shopping lists? Texts to friends? For most of us 'writing' is something we now do on phones, tablets and laptops. We have developed pithy forms of communications with texts and Twitter. Writing is functional, speedy and to the point.

And yet recently, as I waited at an airport arrivals gate, I noticed that many of the people around me were busy writing in notebooks to pass the time, so busily in fact, that one girl's boyfriend came through the arrivals gate unnoticed by her as she furiously scribbled and he politely stood by!

So, in an era when we can communicate in the blink of an eye and express ourselves in 140 characters or less, why do people bother pouring their thoughts out in long hand? Why do people still carry notebooks when they have phones and tablets?

The answer lies with the kind of psychological research on writing, which has been carried out over the past 30 years, led by Professor James Pennebaker, a social psychologist based in the University of Austin. What Pennebaker's research has revealed is truly astonishing: expressive writing has been systematically shown to be really good for our physical and mental wellbeing. Writing has positive effects on blood pressure, immune system functioning and pain management. People who write tend to get fewer bouts of cold and flu and visit their doctor less often. In fact one recent

study even found that when people wrote in the weeks prior to an elective surgical procedure, their wounds healed more quickly after the operation. Writing also has beneficial effects on emotional health and social relationships and studies have shown that people who are unemployed or lose their jobs tend to get jobs more quickly if they write expressively.

So what makes writing so good for us? Sometimes in our lives, events pull us up short—the loss of a job, bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship causes huge upheaval. Times of crises can act like a stop signal switching on. We may choose this time to evaluate our life, to try to make sense of what has happened. It's the 'making sense of' that is really the key to what expressive writing is all about.

We are all story tellers. We make sense of our world through the stories we tell ourselves, it is how we create meaning. Writing our thoughts and feelings down is a way of making sense of things and Pennebaker's experiments show that when people are given the opportunity to write in this way, they grab it with both hands. And the great thing about writing is that it's free. You can do it anywhere, anytime and it's good for your wellbeing.

Do you have to write with pen and paper?

Writing longhand is quite different to typing on a keyboard. It's soothing and can enhance the flow of ideas.

What if you don't know what to write about? I've facilitated Writing for Wellbeing groups for several years now and I've never yet found that people were stuck for a topic or found writing long hand a problem. In fact it's very often the people who say they hated writing at school and being forced to write essays who take to this type of writing like ducks to water.

So what should you write about?

Free writing is a very popular way to begin: write for 10 – 15 minutes without stopping. Pay no attention to grammar, spelling... just keep writing. Avoid the temptation to cross out what you've written. Just write. Writing freehand without stopping is quite like meditation. You tend to lose yourself in the writing, zoning out from the world. The trick is to write without stopping, just let your hand write, don't over think, just write, letting your pen fill the pages. Only you will ever

Patricia McAdoo,
is a psychologist, writer and
facilitator of Writing for Wellbeing
groups. She is the author
of Writing for Wellbeing, a
guide to writing for enhanced
wellbeing. www.patriciamcadoo.ie



read this writing and even you don't have to read it if you don't want to. You can bin it when you're finished writing or you can keep it to read back some other time.

You might try writing ten things that went well for you at the end of each day.

Try writing about a time when... That gives you plenty of scope and you might be surprised what you end up writing about. Write about something that happened that upset you but try writing about it from someone else's perspective. So, for example, if you've just had a row with someone, try writing about what happened but tell the story from the other person's viewpoint, in their words. Research has shown that switching perspective and writing from other people's viewpoint is one of the best ways to use this type of writing. Why? Because we get entrenched in our view of the world and writing from someone else's viewpoint shakes us up, widens our viewpoint on what happened so we can see their perspective more readily.

Writing to express ourselves is a valuable free tool, which we can dip into whenever we want. It's not something that needs to be done every day, though of course some people do write every morning or at night. What writing gives us is a pause in the frenetic pace of life, breathing space to reflect, to make sense of what's happening. And our writing very often surprises. For example, people diagnosed with a serious illness very often don't write about that. They might end up writing about a childhood memory, a wonderful journey they plan to take, a row they had at work. Give people a sheet of paper and a pen and ask them to write and the world is their oyster.

So why not try it? A few sheets of paper and a pen is all you need. Do you need a quiet corner? Maybe... although some, like the girl at the airport, can get absorbed in writing anywhere and writing is perfect for train journeys or waiting during school pickups. Enjoy the journey!



To subscribe to *Complete Wellbeing*, send 'CW SUB' to 07738387787