**Expressive Writing: A Path Forward for Your Health**

The convenience and power of writing offers an important health opportunity. As a doctor, a public health practitioner and a writer myself, I think that’s a good thing.

Writing provides an enjoyable means of exploring and expressing feelings. Science has proven that when people write about what’s in their minds and hearts they feel better and get healthier. And it isn’t just that they’re getting their troubles off their chests. Moving past negative emotions like guilt and shame, and accessing positive ones like optimism and empathy, makes them feel connected to others even when they can’t have a direct conversation. This is a vital and even life-saving benefit in a modern world where loneliness—and the ill health it can lead to—has become an epidemic.

Loneliness is on the rise, and it can put people at risk physically. *TIME* magazine reporter Justin Worland wrote in 2015 that a Brigham Young University study found simply feeling alone increased risk of death by 26 percent and that social isolation and living alone caused even worse problems – increasing mortality risk by 29 percent and 32 percent, respectively.[[1]](#footnote-1) To put it in perspective, that’s equivalent to the increase in risk from smoking. So, in short, not only does loneliness make you miserable, it can have long-term effects on your health. How does that happen? The lonely can suffer impaired immune function and increased inflammation, promoting arthritis, Type II diabetes, cancer and heart disease.[[2]](#footnote-2) And to make it even more alarming, the number of people reporting loneliness has doubled since the 1980’s.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Figures from Great Britain show that social isolation is growing there as well. The Office for National Statistics found that the number of British people living alone had risen to a record 7.6 million in 2012.[[4]](#footnote-4) That amounts to almost one in three households, as Brian Brady reported for *The Independent* in 2013. Brady added that experts believe loneliness promotes unhealthy habits, such as exercising less and drinking more, increase the likeliness of illness, frequent hospital visits and early moves into residential care.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Expressive writing can help with the “loneliness epidemic,” reducing this burden among those we know to be at particular risk for loneliness and isolation, including older adults, those with major illness, caregivers, veterans and their families, adolescents and young adults, minority communities and immigrants. When people tell their personal stories through writing, whether in letters to friends or family, or in journals for themselves, they discover a means of organizing and understanding their own thoughts and experiences, of demystifying and reducing their fears and sharing their feelings with others, even if they prefer not to converse with them. Writing offers the ability to operate in the past, present and future all in the same time. When putting pen to paper, your brain is actively making sense of the recalled past, choosing and shaping words at the moment of creating. However, it’s also operating in the future – imagining a person reading what you are actively writing. In the process, expression through the written word can build trust and bonds with others in unthreatening ways that help develop tools for living happier, more stable lives.

Personal thoughts expressed in a card or note—handwritten, on real paper—create a special, private feeling of closeness between two people, whether they write it or receive it. Who hasn’t mailed a letter to someone, imagining how that person would look and feel holding it and hoping the recipient would enjoy, value and respond to the words? Who hasn’t opened their mailbox and felt a leaping in their heart at the sight of a hand-addressed envelope waiting to be opened?

Handwriting has also been found to enhance mind power. In April 2016, a *Wall Street Journal* story reported that evidence from a joint Princeton University and UCLA study shows that writing by hand helps college students focus their attention better in class, allowing them to learn and retain knowledge more effectively than typing.

In fact, writing has benefits for pretty much anyone, distressed or well, who wants to work through how he or she feels, thinks, believes and perceives. And the best part? It can be fun.

Art therapist Jennifer Schwartz, who chairs the undergraduate art-therapy program at Ursuline College, affirms this. “Human beings have been making art since the dawn of time and our brains have evolved accordingly,” she said in a case study that was part of the Creative Minds in Medicine research by Cleveland’s Community Partnership for Arts and Culture in 2014. “As a result, humans not only have the aptitude and desire for arts-making, but also a sense of pleasure when they do it,” she added. “So making art feels good.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The process of creative expression operates in three very distinct and related ways to better connect us. First, the making of the creative work itself—a poem, a drawing, a photograph, a sung melody—allows deep exploration of thoughts and feeling and a chance to make sense of the world. Then there is the sharing of the creative work with others, bridging the gap that is often experienced as loneliness or isolation. And lastly, the receiving of creative work by others closes the loop of interpersonal engagement that energizes and activates us. Writing a letter, for example, a lovely demonstration of this creative looping, provides benefits to both the letter writer and recipient as the creative connection is made. As noted humanist and poet Edward Hirsch says is like an “electric circuit” being completed and switched on.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the 1970s, a professor of psychology named James W. Pennebaker began experimenting with the effects that talking, confessing and self-understanding had on human well-being. Nearly 30 years later, he and his collaborator, Joshua M. Smyth, a professor of behavioral health and medicine, produced a body of research that found the emotionally connective and relieving effects of expressive writing to promote self-understanding, ease emotional pain and aid in physical healing.[[8]](#footnote-8) Since their book, *Opening Up by Writing It Down*, was published in 1997, their findings have been corroborated by other scientists’ independent studies around the world.

The 2016 edition of their book explains that expressive writing:

* Offers those who either don’t wish to talk about their feelings or have no one to confide in a way to unburden themselves
* Reduces stress, fear and isolation
* Boosts immune systems, optimism and sense of connectedness
* Allows minds to process, organize and understand their experiences and feelings, enhancing learning and memory

When expressing themselves in writing, people often report that they feel safe. They are actually creating an artifact—one that symbolizes some of their thoughts and feelings but is not them. With that safety, people often find they can put things down on the page that are often hard to speak about, and explore the deeper truths that we all carry with us. The writing itself is a “made thing”—something with weight and substance. Therefore, it has a place in the world and you become identified with that creative construction. For many people, this gives them a way to bootstrap out of negativity and to start to identify themselves in a powerful and positive way.

I’ve documented much of the research being done in the area of healing and the arts, including expressive writing. In fact, my colleague, Heather L. Stuckey, and I published “The Connection Between Art, Healing and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature” in the February 2010 *American Journal of Public Health*.

As a physician and public-health advocate, I would like to see the benefits of writing better understood and more widely accepted. I created the Foundation for Art & Healing in order to support these efforts. The foundation’s UnLoneliness Project launched in May 2016 specifically to raise awareness of the threats isolation poses to well-being, encourage scientific examination of the issue and help people appreciate the useful role creative expression can play in improving life and health.

And as a poet, I’ve also personally experienced the benefits of expressive writing. The skills it sharpens; the experience of sharing ideas, feelings and perceptions on a page; the sensations of intellectual stimulus and emotional relief, are life enhancing. I’d like more people to enjoy those powerful feelings and discover that expressive writing can contribute to wellbeing in its way, just as exercise and healthful eating do.

I write a lot these days as a student in New York University’s MFA Creative Writing Program, and I journal and compose my poems on paper. There’s a sheer sensory pleasure to that: the texture of each blank sheet; the smell of ink, or wood and graphite; the weight and design of the writing instrument in my hand; the visual and physical satisfaction of making marks on paper in my own particular style. Writing this way engages every molecule of you. You can feel it’s changing you for the better. And it is.

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1. The following individuals/organizations are not affiliated with the Paper and Packaging Board.

   Worland, Justin; “Why Loneliness May Be the Next Big Public-Health Issue”; TIME online, March 18, 2015; online http://time.com/3747784/loneliness-mortality/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Hawkley LC](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Hawkley%20LC%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=20652462), [Cacioppo JT](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Cacioppo%20JT%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=20652462) **“**Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms” Ann Behav Med. 2010 Oct;40(2):218-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. G. Oscar Anderson; “Loneliness Among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+” AARP Research, September 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brady, Brian; “Is this the loneliest generation?”; The Independent, Saturday, Jan. 12, 2013; http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/is-this-the-loneliest-generation-8449305.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The following individuals/organizations are not affiliated with the Paper and Packaging Board.

   Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Case Study 3, Art Therapy Studio; Creative minds in Medicine, 2014; http://cultureforward.org/Reference-Desk/Research-Library/Health-and-Human-Services/Creative-Minds-in-Medicine [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The following individuals/organizations are not affiliated with the Paper and Packaging Board.

   Interview with Edward Hirsch by the Foundation for Art and Healing, May 2015; http://www.artandhealing.org/unloneliness-with-edward-hirsch/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pennebaker, James W. and Smyth, Joshua M.; Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain; third edition, The Guilford Press, New York, NY, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)