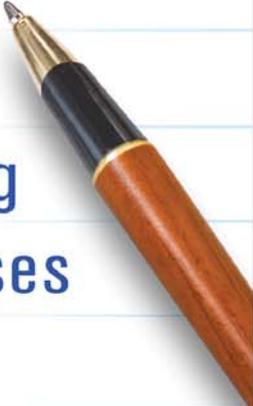


T H I R D E D I T I O N

“Dr. Pennebaker has demonstrated that expressing emotions appears to protect the body against damaging internal stress and seems to have long-term health benefits.”—*The New York Times*

Opening Up by Writing It Down

How Expressive Writing
Improves Health and Eases
Emotional Pain



James W. Pennebaker, PhD
Joshua M. Smyth, PhD



ebook

THE GUILFORD PRESS

Praise for *Opening Up by Writing It Down*

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Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles

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—**Susan M. Pollak, MTS, EdD, psychologist, Cambridge, Massachusetts**

“*Opening Up by Writing It Down, Third Edition*, is a wonderfully crafted blend of engaging examples and current scientific knowledge. The authors make a compelling case that people can improve their overall health and well-being by writing about troubling feelings and experiences. The book is fun and motivating, and it includes helpful exercises and suggestions to get you started on this path to wellness.”

—**Dena Rosenbloom, PhD, author of *Life After Trauma***

OPENING UP BY WRITING IT DOWN

Opening Up by Writing It Down

THIRD EDITION

**How Expressive Writing Improves Health
and Eases Emotional Pain**

JAMES W. PENNEBAKER, PHD

JOSHUA M. SMYTH, PHD



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Authors' Note

Throughout this book, we refer to individuals we have studied or interviewed. In all cases, we have changed the names and other identifying information about the people involved to protect their anonymity. In addition, we have reconstructed some of the direct spoken quotations from memory or notes of conversations. The gist of each of the stories, however, is true and based on real people.

Introduction

Expressive writing is a technique where people typically write about an upsetting experience for 15 to 20 minutes a day for three or four days. This very simple exercise has been found to improve people's physical and mental health for weeks, months, and even years when compared to individuals who write about emotionally neutral topics (or other comparison groups). The method was first described in a scientific paper in 1986, and since then several hundred expressive writing experiments have been conducted.

Expressive writing is not simply a form of journaling or diary writing. It's not a practice that will help you become a novelist or screenwriter. Rather, it is a brief writing technique that helps people understand and deal with emotional upheavals in their lives. It is a little like a self-help therapy without outlandish claims. Its greatest appeal is that it is a method with strong scientific evidence behind it.

This book was written with two audiences in mind. The first includes people who may be dealing with a difficult personal situation who want to know more about ways to get through a tough time. The second group of readers includes those who are simply curious about expressive writing and how it works. We hope that we motivate current or prospective students, colleagues, and laypeople to think more about the fascinating topics surrounding expressive writing.

The original editions of the book were published in 1990 and 1997. So much has happened since the earlier editions. A more complete story was needed for a broader audience. Expressive writing has been used to treat a variety of physical health problems as well as mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress

disorder (or PTSD). We've learned that expressive writing improves college adjustment and results in better grades. It even helps people's relationships and love lives.

But, as you will see, writing doesn't work with everyone. The effects are typically modest but usually beneficial, helping people across cultures and circumstances. In this edition, we offer opportunities to try it yourself in different ways. We still don't have a solid explanation of why it does and doesn't work—although we are getting some better ideas. The writing research community is made up of clinical, social, health, and cognitive psychologists; social workers; physicians; and even the occasional person in business and education.

The expressive writing world is far more complex and dynamic today than it was 30 years ago when Jamie Pennebaker first described the early findings. The current book has a far greater reach because of the collaboration with Joshua Smyth. Whereas Jamie was the inventor of the method, Josh advanced the field through his hard-nosed experiments and concise scientific mind. The two of us have worked closely together to bring a much more modern and, we hope, balanced view to the expressive writing literature.

We similarly hope you find this book both honest and helpful. Although we are convinced that expressive writing can be a valuable tool, we are not "true believers." There isn't any one way to write. What works for some people may not work for you. By seeing the different ways that writing has worked in research studies, we hope you might be encouraged to try writing on your own.

Above all, we encourage you to become your own scientist. If you, a friend, or a client is plagued with unwanted thoughts, memories, or worries, expressive writing may be helpful. If it isn't helpful, try writing in some different ways. If it still doesn't help you, try other avenues—therapy, exercise, meditation, or something else. Experiment, experiment, experiment.

A book such as this is ultimately a joint work of hundreds of people. We are humbled by the colleagues, editors, therapists, students, and practitioners who have influenced our thinking and, more generally, the direction our research has taken us. More immediately, the research on which this book is based was conducted with the help of thousands of participants—some healthy college students and others suffering from disease or other painful life circumstances. To conduct these studies, we have often relied on the help and collaboration of an

amazing group of graduate and undergraduate students over the last three decades. Finally, we thank our family and friends for sharing their lives with us while we lost ourselves in our labs. We are deeply grateful and indebted to all of you.

We hope you enjoy reading about the experiments others have tried and that they can inform your studies on yourself.

CHAPTER 1

“Shh . . . It’s a Secret”

BEGINNING TO EXPLORE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CONFESSION AND HEALTH

Why do people around the world tell their stories? Is there some kind of urge to confess? Is it healthy for us to divulge our deepest thoughts and feelings? Or, conversely, is it unhealthy *not* to share the private sides of our lives with others? Questions such as these have captivated psychologists, anthropologists, journalists, and others for generations. This book tells the story about the nature of secrets, self-disclosure, and health. It started with a number of personal twists and turns in our own lives; yet, as we explored these topics, family, friends, students, and colleagues joined in. Their stories, too, are woven throughout this book.

Major secrets can be stressful.* Like other stressors, keeping secrets from those close to us can affect our health, including our immune function, the action of our heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of our brain and nervous systems. In short, keeping back thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place us at risk for both major and minor diseases.

Whereas harboring secrets is potentially harmful, confronting our personal thoughts and feelings can have remarkable short- and long-term health benefits. Confession, whether by writing or talking

*This will be the only footnote you will see in the book. Rather than break up the story, we have included references and additional information in the Notes section at the end of the book.

(or many other forms of emotional expression or disclosure, as we will see throughout the book), can neutralize many of the problems of secrets. Talking or writing about upsetting things can influence our basic values, our daily thinking patterns, and our feelings about ourselves. In fact, there appears to be a basic need to reveal ourselves to others. Not disclosing our thoughts and feelings can be risky for our mental and physical health. Divulging them can be healthy.

These are the most basic ideas of the book. But, there is much more to the story. Before detailing the nature of revealing secrets, it's helpful to explain how we got into this business.

Setting the Stage: Clues to the Links among Secrets, Disclosure, and Health

You will notice that there are two authors of this book: Jamie Pennebaker and Josh Smyth. We have each taken our own journey as it relates to this work. Our stories are quite a bit different, but they both point to the ways almost-random experiences can set up lifelong career paths. Both of us were originally trained as social psychologists—people who study, among other things, attitudes, behaviors, and everyday social relationships. A strong and persistent interest for both of us is how people choose to share their personal experiences with others.

THE JOY OF TALKING

Early in his career, Jamie became fascinated by three seemingly unrelated phenomena: the joy of talking, the nature of lie detection, and the role of self-understanding in influencing the mind–body link (particularly as it related to health and well-being). Piecing together these observations laid the groundwork of an intriguing model that would help map out the nature and consequences of holding secrets and confronting emotional experiences. After graduate school, Jamie found himself teaching a class of 300 freshmen about basic psychology. One day, as part of a class demonstration, he split the students into small groups of people who didn't know one another. Once in their assigned groups, the students were told just to talk for 15 minutes about anything they wanted. As you would expect, they talked about their hometowns, why they had come to college, what dormi-

tory they lived in, friends they had in common, the weather, and related topics—the usual cocktail party fare.

At the end of 15 minutes, everyone returned to their regular seats and estimated how much of the time every person in the group had talked, how much they liked the group, and how much they had learned from the group. Two rather surprising findings emerged:

- *The more people talked, the more they liked the group.*
- *The more they themselves talked, the more they claimed to have learned from the group.*

In other words, as a group member, the more you dominate the conversation, the more you claim that you have learned about the others. In general, it seems we would rather talk than listen. Most of us find that communicating our thoughts is a supremely enjoyable learning experience.

THE POLYGRAPH CONFESSION EFFECT

As you'll see later in the book, both of us have long been fascinated by the links between people's emotions and their physiological activity. An important formative experience occurred when one of us was introduced to the world of lie detection—in particular, the use of biological clues to determine when people were not being truthful.

There is something frighteningly magical about the idea of lie detection. Machines that can accurately read others' private thoughts have been the basis of dreams by police officers, poker players, and parents. A crude approximation of this magical lie detector is the polygraph—an instrument that continuously measures several physiological indicators such as heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, and perspiration on the hand.

In law enforcement, polygraph exams and related lie detection methods assume that when suspects try to deceive their interrogators, their biological stress levels will increase relative to when they tell the truth. In other words, telling a lie should be stressful, and we should be able to reliably detect this response. Although polygraph techniques do better than chance at catching truly guilty suspects, they are far from perfect.

The real value of the polygraph is in bringing about confessions. A particularly skilled polygrapher uses a suspect's biological responses to

various questions as an indicator of what topics provoke the most anxiety. Once the “hot” questions are isolated, the polygrapher may note, “Gee, I really believe what you have told me, but my machine shows a huge reaction when you answered that question. Why do you think this is happening?” In more cases than not, deceptive suspects try to rationalize their physiological responses. In so doing, they often contradict their earlier stories. The more they are confronted with these contradictions, the more likely they are to ultimately break down and confess to the crime.

In the early 1980s, Jamie was invited to give a series of talks on emotion and health to some of the top-level polygraphers of the FBI, CIA, and other secret agencies. He spent several late evenings talking with the polygraphers about their jobs. As a group, these people were unusually bright and insightful. Most impressive was a remarkably similar experience that many of the polygraphers reported in interrogating some of their suspects—something we call the *polygraph confession effect*.

A San Francisco-based polygrapher gave an unforgettable account of the polygraph confession effect. He was called in to give a polygraph exam to a 45-year-old bank vice president who was a suspect in an embezzlement investigation. When initially run through the polygraph exam, the bank vice president’s heart rate, blood pressure, and other physiological levels were quite high. This is normal for both innocent and guilty people because such an exam is almost always threatening. Nevertheless, the polygrapher suspected that the bank vice president was lying or holding back information because his physiological levels went even higher when the vice president was asked about some of the details of the embezzlement. With repeated questions and prodding, the vice president finally broke down and confessed to embezzling \$74,000 over a six-month period.

In line with standard procedures, after the bank vice president had signed a written confession, he was polygraphed again to be certain that his confession was itself not deceptive. When tested the second time, his overall physiological levels were extremely low. His hands were no longer sweaty. His heart rate and blood pressure were extraordinarily low. His breathing was slow and relaxed.

You can appreciate the irony of this situation. This man had come into the polygrapher’s office a free man, safe in the knowledge that polygraph evidence was not allowed in court. Nevertheless, he