



WriteWell.

Write yourself a brighter future

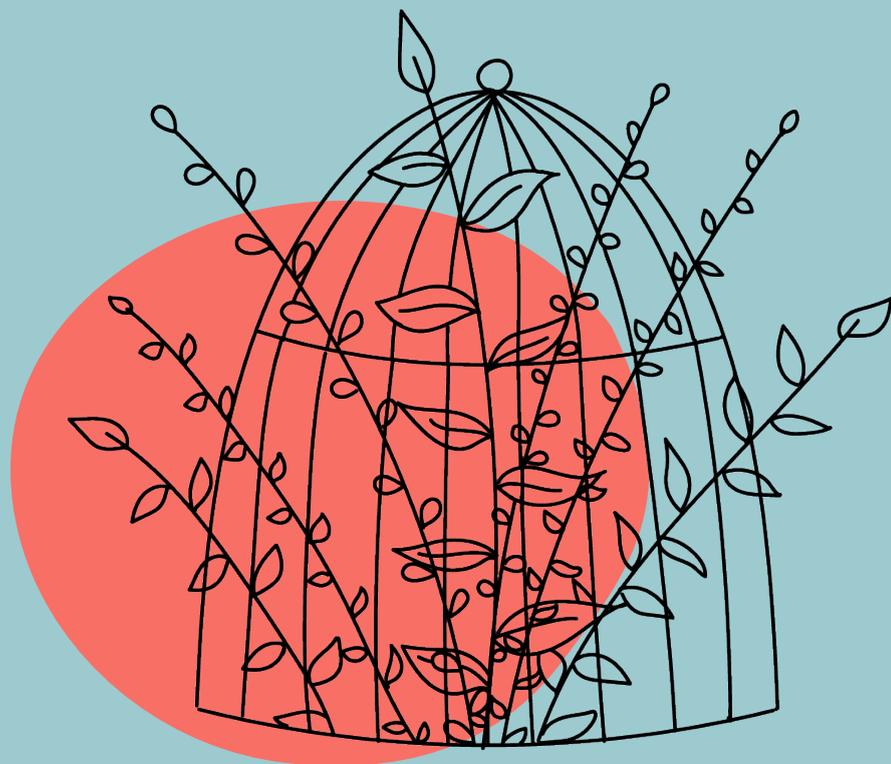
Ready, Steady, Flow:

How writing for wellbeing could
save our mental health

A Professional Writing Academy briefing paper

“Writing about important personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvements in mental and physical health”

James W. Pennebaker and Janel D. Seagal, Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative, 1999



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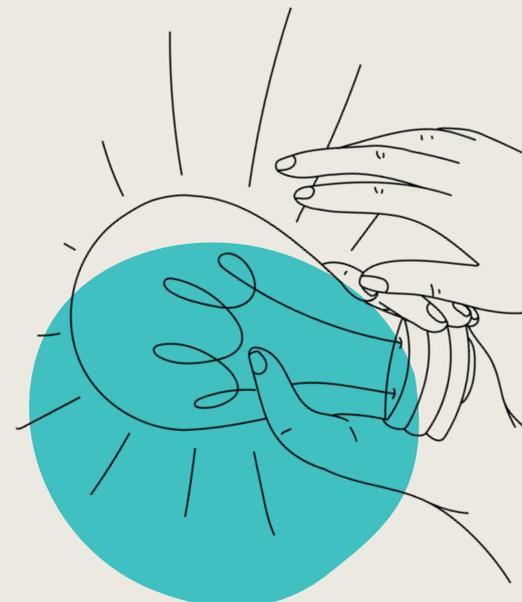
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Foreword



Why We Made WriteWell

Back in 2007, we were running an MA in writing at a university campus. A few lucky people with enough funds to take a year out of work travelled all the way to remote Falmouth in Cornwall to spend a year with us learning how to write.

We thought there must be a better way to bring quality writing education to a much wider range of people. And we were excited at the possibilities technology gave us to experiment with new delivery models, particularly those that would allow non-traditional learners, unable to commit to full-time study away from home, to access new ways of developing their talent.

So we created the world's first totally online Master's degree in writing, and we were soon teaching hundreds of students across the world, from Iceland to Indonesia, Nigeria to the Netherlands. There were people with full-time jobs and caring responsibilities, people who couldn't leave home or lived in places without public

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transport, and for many it was their first experience of learning since leaving school.

What soon became obvious was that despite – or maybe because of – the diverse backgrounds of our new online students and the freedom of the virtual environment, they were collaborating more than our on-campus students, creating amazing work, but also an organic support network and opportunities for each other, both in their writing and ways to make a living. New relationships were forged through this process, and for many this became one of the most valuable takeaways from their online learning. The process also delivered more distinction awards than the on-campus model.

Around this time we started to notice the benefits of writing on learners' wellbeing. People seemed to be finding resolution through the writing process by getting down their personal stories in fiction or non-fiction; "writing it out", as people sometimes say. Their confidence appeared to grow in rough proportion to their increasing articulacy.

In 2008, a chance meeting with the writer and poetry therapist Victoria Field, then-Chair of the Association for Literary Arts in Personal Development (LAPIDUS), opened our eyes to the growing awareness of writing as a therapeutic tool. Victoria pointed out that it was particularly useful for people with mild to moderate mental health problems, and those generally seeking personal or professional development. For both of us, the idea of using writing and storytelling to improve wellbeing spoke to our own personal experiences.

“As an NHS nurse, and then as a medical journalist for 10 years, Christina had seen the growth in need for mental health support”

Christina Bunce, as an NHS nurse, and then as a medical journalist for 10 years, had seen the growth in need for mental health support. She also had personal experience of therapy; starting out

determined not to revisit traumatic past experiences, she had found that by articulating them, she had immediately diminished their influence. Susannah Marriott's interest in wellbeing was born out of years

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of experience commissioning and running wellbeing lists for publishers such as Dorling Kindersley, working with authors including B. K. S. Iyengar, Penelope Leach and Zita West. She was inspired by the possibility of bringing expert knowledge to everyone, and the transformative effect of helping readers to use self-help teaching in their everyday lives.

Thrilled by the potential of using writing as a therapeutic tool, and convinced there was a better way to bring the benefits of writing and creativity to a wider audience, we left our jobs at the university and set up the Professional Writing Academy in 2013. PWA was the UK's first online education company dedicated to writing and creative talent development. All our writing courses were designed

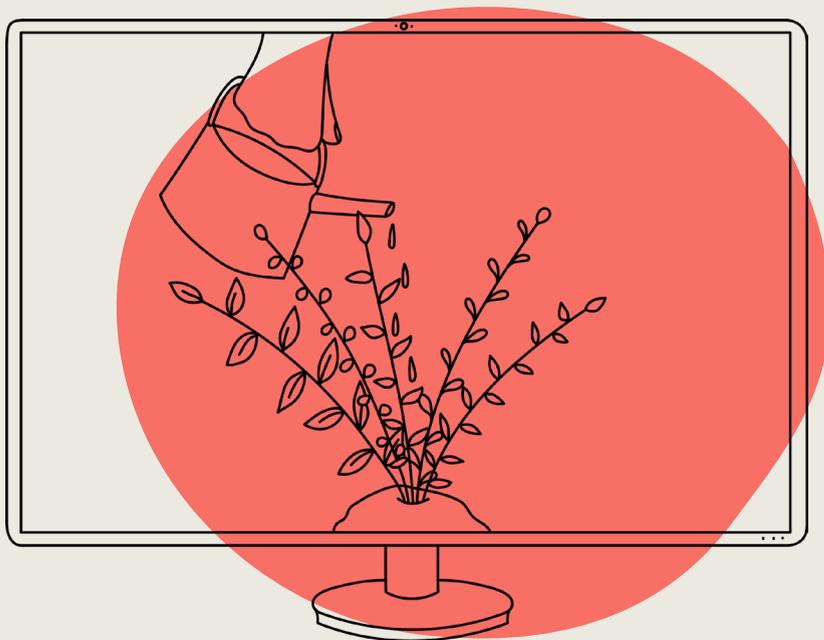
“Within a few years we had recruited and trained dozens of successful writers and editors to teach online”

using the social constructivist model of teaching, focusing on collaborative learning through peer interaction guided by tutors. This required an online classroom geared to small groups with dedicated tutors

and moderators fostering a supportive community. Within a few years we had recruited and trained dozens of successful writers and editors to teach online, and were creating courses for, among others, Faber Academy, the screenwriting expert John Yorke and universities across Europe.

In 2015, working with Victoria Field and Anne Taylor, we developed [Introduction to Therapeutic and Reflective Writing](#), an experimental course guiding people in using therapeutic writing for self-exploration and wellbeing. It was really a shot in the dark, but the first course sold out, the second likewise. Students told us that while they had not dispelled all their problems within eight weeks, many had found their concerns becoming less powerful and more manageable. They were also establishing strong, mutually supportive relationships with each other. Since the launch of our therapeutic writing courses, 40 per cent of students have stayed in touch with each other as members of the network of PWA alumni, a community that spans 38 countries.

“Time and again we had seen both online and face-to-face students arrive with varying degrees of trauma and find a level of peace and resolution through the writing process”



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In March 2020, as COVID-19 took hold, it was clear that many people's mental health was going to be shaken. Applications for our courses grew rapidly and we began to think about creating a low-cost, accessible format that encouraged writing as a support and benefit to mental wellbeing, for anyone, anywhere. Those thoughts led to WriteWell, an ongoing programme that enables people to experiment with writing in a creative learning community, with a view to boosting mental health, resilience and happiness. Launched in February 2021, WriteWell helps people to begin to express their experiences and feelings within a safe and supportive community.

In creating the WriteWell courses, we have looked at the ways in which writing can be, and is, used as a tool in therapy, bringing together scientific and academic studies, personal testimonies and our own experience. It is a fascinating and rapidly growing field, and we think it holds interesting insights into mental health, neuroscience, online relationships and the act of writing.

We believe that the ways in which we think about health, learning, and indeed writing itself will inevitably change over the next few decades, and we commissioned this document with a view to sharing and encouraging interest in the field. We know from our own experience that writing for wellbeing has the potential to significantly support and boost public health care, and we hope that some of the ideas set out in the following pages may encourage you to consider this potential and to explore further.

Christina Bunce and Susannah Marriott

Founders

WriteWell

2021

Introduction

Interest in using expressive writing as a therapeutic tool has been growing since J.W. Pennebaker¹ began his pioneering work in the field in the mid-1980s.

The rate of growth further increased in the 2010s, the decade when the Professional Writing Academy launched the UK's first course in therapeutic and reflective writing. The popularity of that course inspired PWA subsequently to launch WriteWell, an organisation dedicated to writing for wellbeing, in the spring of 2021. This briefing document, in support of WriteWell, is based on the findings and insights PWA founders Susannah

“Writing in which one expresses feelings... has been shown to have a powerful impact on mental wellbeing”

Marriott and Christina Bunce acquired during WriteWell's two-year development. It draws on academic, corporate and governmental

reports; interviews with tutors and experts; Bunce's experience working in the National Health Service and in medical journalism; Marriott's in wellbeing publishing; and on their shared experience of running PWA's online learning community and offering the Introduction to Therapeutic and Reflective Writing course.

Writing in which one expresses feelings and/or deals with trauma (often in the form of creative or life writing, journaling, bibliotherapy, curative writing or poetry therapy) has been shown to have a powerful impact on health and wellbeing. The precise nature of those benefits is still being explored², but recent studies suggest they have a positive role to play in public health in the future.

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Take, for example, the recent report from the UK Department of Education³ on the work of the Community Learning Mental Health (CLMH) research project. The CLMH is an initiative created to identify the potential for adult and community learning courses to help people develop the tools, strategies and resilience to manage, and aid recovery from, mild to moderate mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. It considers whether

“We don’t claim that it’s a ‘cure’; we simply point out that reputable, peer-reviewed studies have found it can play a positive part in recovery from trauma, and in maintaining wellbeing”

learning new skills can help to alleviate mental disorders. The Department of Education report found that more than half of the learners (52 per cent) who had clinically significant symptoms of anxiety and/or depression at the start of the skills course under consideration no

longer had clinically significant symptoms by the end. This figure was slightly higher than the recovery rate in the NHS frontline talking therapy service (49%). In other words, the study suggests that if you suffer from anxiety and/or depression, you have a slightly higher chance of recovering if you follow a course exploring new skills than if you solely receive the “default” NHS psychological therapy service (the Improving Access to Psychological Therapy service, known as IAPT).

Bunce and Marriott stress that they do not, in the words of Bunce, “take an evangelical approach to the use of writing as therapy. We don’t claim that it’s a “cure”; we simply point out that reputable, peer-reviewed studies have found it a useful tool which can play a positive part in recovery from trauma, and in maintaining wellbeing.

“We believe,” Bunce adds, “that its role and function in this respect is still underexplored and undervalued, but we feel awareness and acceptance are increasing. When we first created a course in writing as a therapeutic tool in 2015, we encountered a degree of scepticism. To see the idea endorsed by students, academics and now government researchers is highly encouraging.”

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This brief examination of how and why creativity in general – and writing in particular – impacts positively on wellbeing and mental health looks first at current wellbeing and mental health in the UK, and at the use of creativity and writing in improving wellbeing. We then examine historic perceptions of the relationship between writing, creativity and wellbeing, and of the nature of the writer in this context. Following this brief survey we look at the modern use of expressive writing as therapy. In parts three and four we examine how and why writing can help wellbeing and aid recovery from trauma, and how WriteWell’s service works. Finally, in the conclusion, we consider some current and potential future uses of writing as a form of therapy to enhance wellbeing. It is hoped that as a whole, the document will enable readers to better understand WriteWell’s role in this exciting, emerging new use of one of humankind’s ancient activities.

A note on terminology. Writing is used in different ways to achieve different kinds of effects, and the similarity and crossover between certain terms can be confusing. For example, “expressive writing” is often used to describe writing about emotional discomfort and/or trauma, but the term can mean either a) a discipline of writing within very specific parameters, as defined by James W. Pennebaker, the single most influential practitioner in the field, or b) any kind of writing that expresses one’s feelings.

Another example of ambiguity is that while writing might be described as “therapeutic”, or a therapeutic tool, the phrase “writing therapy” is problematic, because there are yet no formally accredited writing therapy qualifications as there are for, say, art therapy. “Reflective writing” can refer to a specific discipline, closely linked to reflective practice, a concept developed in the 1980s by Donald Schon⁴. Schon wrote about reflection as a creative act and the route to self-knowledge, new meanings and fulfilment in professional practice. Since he began his work, writing – particularly in the form of learning and reflective journals – has become an intrinsic part of reflective practice, which has expanded in popularity alongside journal writing for personal growth.

Then there are different states and conditions that one might seek to ameliorate through writing: trauma, generally poor mental health, specific mental health disorders, poor wellbeing. Indeed, one might be seeking less to ameliorate

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a problematic condition than to maintain a relatively healthy one.

All this comes before we consider the various genres and kinds of writing; free writing, journaling, bibliotherapy, morning pages and so on. Partly because this is a new and evolving area, no one phrase really captures its breadth and multiplicity. In this briefing paper we have used “writing for wellbeing” as our standard term for the discipline, because of all the terms available it seems to us to capture the breadth of individual activities and applications, while still conveying a clear sense of the essential nature of the idea under discussion.

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- 1 Pennebaker & Beall, 1986
 - 2 Harvard Health Publishing, 2011
 - 3 Lawson, 2018
 - 4 Schon, 1983, 1991



1. The Background

Mental Health, Creativity and Self-Care

1.1 Mental Health in the 21st Century

In the last few years there have been two hugely significant changes in the way British people think about health and wellbeing; one gradual, the other sudden and shocking.

The first concerns mental health. As a nation we have, since the mid-2010s, become more aware of its importance¹, with public campaigns, and important interventions from famous people including the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, and Prince Harry. We have also been suffering from more mental health disorders. The number of anti-depressants prescribed doubled² between 2006 and 2016 and in 2017-18, work-related

stress or anxiety accounted for more than half of all working days lost (15.4m, up from 12.5m in 2016-17) for the first time in history³. More than a quarter

“More than a quarter of adults have been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their life”

of adults have been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their life, almost six in every 100 people in England suffer from generalised anxiety disorders, and three in every 100 suffer depression. One in five of us will experience suicidal thoughts at some point in our lives⁴.

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These concerns have been increased and intensified by the second change, the global COVID-19 pandemic, whose various effects have been shown to have seriously detrimental effects on mental health around the world. We have been isolated – in some cases our jobs and sense of purpose taken away, in other cases some of us were effectively incarcerated with family members who contributed to our problems. It is a combination of conditions that could have been designed to worsen mental health disorders, and it is unsurprising that mental health and emotional issues now comprise some of the most pressing public health concerns across the world. Many people have reported experiencing anxiety, anger, confusion and post-traumatic symptoms as a consequence of the pandemic⁵, and studies have found that spatial distancing, self-isolation, quarantine, social and economic discord, and misinformation about the pandemic cause feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and nervousness⁶. In extreme cases, these feelings can trigger suicidal thoughts and attempts. In some cases they have resulted in suicide⁷.

To make matters worse, most countries have seen provision of mental health support services being disrupted, so that as demand for mental health services increased, access to those services was in fact being cut⁸.

1.2 The Long-Term Future of Mental Healthcare

It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health will be, but they are likely to be significant, at the very least on vulnerable groups⁹.

This draws public attention to public mental health care. Already many people have become more conscious of their own mental health, and some medical experts have called on government health agencies to provide online counselling sessions¹⁰.

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Christina Bunce and Susannah Marriott, founders of WriteWell, believe, in the words of Bunce, that the proven benefits of learning, creativity and community “will lead to a greater interest in novel ways of improving wellbeing, mental health and general health.” Bunce adds that the Professional Writing Academy, the parent organisation of WriteWell also founded by Marriott and Bunce, has seen applications for places on its Introduction to Therapeutic and Reflective writing course increase significantly since UK lockdowns began in March 2020. “We believe that creative practices in general, and writing in particular, will play an increasingly important role in wellbeing in the coming years,” she says.

1.3 Creativity and Wellbeing

In the 2000s, a significant number of health psychologists considered how the arts might be used to heal emotional injuries, increase understanding of the self and others, develop a capacity for self-reflection, reduce symptoms, and alter behaviours and thinking patterns¹¹.

Some educationalists claim that existing education systems, based on outdated models from the Enlightenment and Industrial eras, diminish creativity in people. Sir Ken Robinson¹² persuasively argued that in the Post-industrial era, the future is less predictable, and the abilities to think, problem-solve and innovate creatively are as vital as literacy and mathematical skills.

“The current system of [public] education,” he said in 2007, “was conceived in a different age to ours. It was conceived in the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment and the economic circumstances of the Industrial Revolution. ... It was driven by an economic imperative of the time, but running right through it ... was the Enlightenment view of intelligence – that real intelligence consists in the capacity for deductive reasoning, and a knowledge of the classics. ... Deep in the gene pool of public education is

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the belief there are two types of people: academic and non-academic, smart and non-smart. The consequence of that is that many brilliant people think they are not [brilliant], because they have been judged against this particular view of the mind.”

“Creativity” tends to be associated with the arts, but it can be seen as having a far wider application. Creative thinking is not limited to artists, but found in many

“Creative thinking is not limited to artists, but found in many areas of human life and work”

areas of human life and work. The artist Ryan Gander has said, “there’s a notion of the creative ladder, and everyone will say the artist is at the top in the creative

ladder. But the highest form of creative ingenuity by far is problem solving. Being creative is waking up every day and starting with a really difficult problem with a cause and effect that needs solving, and lots of restrictions. So, for example, good designers are way more creative than artists.”¹³

Several thinkers have pointed out that creative thinking, as well as boosting mental health and wellbeing, can be applied to a many different areas of daily life. The notion of “everyday creativity” was identified by Ruth Richards, Dennis Kinney, and colleagues at Harvard Medical School in 1988¹⁴, and recently revisited by Richards in an assessment of its benefits to mental health in *Everyday Creativity and the Healthy Mind*¹⁵. “In this book, she argues that all humans have creative potential, and that creativity is essential to human development. For her, the key to releasing our potential is to focus on the creator and the process, rather than the outcome or process.”

Richards defined everyday creativity as expressions of originality that were meaningful to others, and believed it could be expressed in many acts not traditionally seen as “creative”, from collecting to experimenting with hair colour. The British artist Grayson Perry made a similar argument the basis of his popular UK TV series *All in the Best Possible Taste* in 2012¹⁶.

1.4 Self-Care as a Creative Process

“In our work at the Professional Writing Academy,” says Bunce, “we see strong similarities between creative processes, learning processes, and processes that improve wellbeing.”

“When learning and working creatively, you often try to evaluate different approaches to discover what works for you as an individual, and then move forward from there. The same iterative approach can work well for individuals seeking to deal with mental health problems or boost wellbeing.”

Self-care, then, can be thought of as a creative process¹⁷; and that in turn means that one can have a model of ongoing, gradual, self-directed improvement, rather than a prescriptive solution that one may succeed in or fail to achieve.

“For many people,” adds Bunce, “that can be life-changing.”

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- 1 YouGov, 2017
 - 2 NHS Digital, 2016
 - 3 Health and Safety Executive, 2018
 - 4 NHS Digital
 - 5 Khan et al., 2020
 - 6 Sakib et al., 2020
 - 7 Bhuiyan et al. 2020
 - 8 World Health Organisation, 2020
 - 9 Khan, et al., 2020
 - 10 Khan, et al., 2020
 - 11 Stuckey HL and Nobel J. 2010
 - 12 Ken Robinson, 2007
 - 13 Gander, 2019
 - 14 Benet, et al., 1985
 - 15 Richards, 2018
 - 16 All In the Best Possible Taste, Channel 4 2012
 - 17 See also Schon (1983, 1991)

2. The Writing

Writers and Wellbeing through the Ages

2.1 Artists, Mental Health and the ‘Mad Genius’

Various forms of writing for wellbeing have received a great deal of attention since the 1980s, and its benefits are recognised by psychologists.

“Overall, studies examining expressive writing demonstrate some beneficial effects in physical and/or psychological health,” write Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhem¹. “Although the empirical findings are at times equivocal and further research is required to clarify populations for whom writing is clearly effective, there is sufficient evidence for clinicians to begin applying expressive writing in therapeutic settings with caution.” Indeed, Spiegel² noted that a drug intervention reporting medium effect sizes similar to those found for expressive writing would be regarded as a major medical advance³.

While a growing number of mental health professionals recognise the benefits of writing, there are some myths about the relationship between writing and mental health that can be confusing. For this reason it is worth briefly recapping some old ideas about that relationship.

Much academic discussion of links between writing and mental disorders features received ideas about links between creativity, genius and psychopathology⁴,

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and the trope of the ‘mad creative genius’ remains prevalent in academic literature and popular culture⁵. In the last fifty years links between creativity and mental disorders have been studied extensively, and the belief in the linkage was significantly boosted by the largest-ever study of the subject in 2013⁶.

That study found that writers had more than double the risk of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder compared to a control group of accountants. Writers also had a higher risk of depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse. Many reports of the results tended to reference “the tortured genius stereotype” and writers who had committed suicide⁷. Socrates’⁸ argument that poetry is a form of divine madness, and Aristotle’s belief that creative people suffered disproportionately from melancholic disorder were frequently cited as evidence that “madness” and “mental torture” had inspired writers since at least the 4th century BC.

2.2 A Short History of the Myth of the Solitary Writer

The notion that “madness” has always given writers impetus and insight is in fact unfounded, and long overdue for reassessment.

It is a relatively new idea, dating back only to the 19th century, and relies on a misunderstanding of writers such as Plato and Aristotle. As the American critic George J Becker wrote in 2014⁹, “the association of creativity with clinical madness is a decidedly modern phenomenon. Far from having been a source of concern over the course of many centuries in Western society, as supporters of the pathology position tend to assume, this association does not predate the 1830s. Even though speculations regarding the mental state of individuals during the act of creation predate this point in time by centuries, they typically fell short of the verdict of clinical insanity.”

Becker showed that the notion of psychopathology as writerly inspiration dates back only to the 1830s,

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a time when, as Ken Robinson argued, the new industrial establishment was imposing fictitious divisions between the creative and non-creative, arts and sciences, cerebral and manual. For this we have to thank the Romantics, some of whom actively encouraged the idea that writers and artists were mad¹⁰. As outsiders to the new world of machines and industry, the Romantic writers were cast by subsequent literary critics and historians as artists who had cultivated madness in order to gain insight.

While this may have been true in some cases to a small extent, it was far from true of all those involved. The critique, however, was sufficient to create the modern and enduring myth of the mad creative genius; and when we think of writers as mad geniuses today, we are really seeing them through a 19th-century prism. This was a period, Robinson pointed out¹¹, when prevailing thought lay claim to reason, reasonableness and science on behalf of industry, and found it helpful to posit less constrained artistic activity as an opposing, irrational force. It was only a short step from that to seeing at least some writers as mad.

The problem with this idea is that it obscures a rich, alternative history of writing¹². This is a history of people using the act of writing as a means to explore their own feelings and experiences, as a basis for friendships and collaboration and as a way of dealing productively with mental disorders. It is also a story of people who are aware of the therapeutic power of creativity and the imagination as a means of transcending stressful social situations – so aware, in fact, that some like Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Mary Shelley make it the subject of their work¹³.

Many discussions of the relationship between creativity and mental health reference the supposed ancient Greek belief in “divine madness.” The Greeks, it is true, did associate creativity with melancholic dispositions and possession by demons, but these conditions were different from contemporary notions of mental health disorders. As Socrates explained, the demon was a semi-deity, a means by which the gods provided inspiration to writers, artists and philosophers. “Madness, provided it comes as a gift from heaven,” wrote Plato, “is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings.”

“We believe creative practices, and writing in particular, will play an important role in wellbeing in coming years”

Christina Bunce, WriteWell Founder



The Writing

Aristotle's observation that creative people often had melancholic temperaments is similarly misunderstood. He was not referring to a disordered melancholic state, but a character type owing to the balance of humours in his body. Writing was not prompted by mental disorder, but rather stimulated by a particular state of mind.

In the following Roman period and then the Middle Ages, there was comparatively little speculation about the mind state of creative people, but Italian Renaissance thinkers revived the Greek ideas of melancholy and madness, or *pazzia*¹⁴. As in ancient Greece, sane melancholics were

“By the 1500s it had become fashionable in European courts to effect an air of creative melancholy”

distinguished from the genuinely insane; by the 1500s it had become fashionable in European courts to effect an air of creative melancholy. In England, Jacques, from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, is perhaps

the best-known example; again, in this case the condition is seen as one that can yield positive benefits if embraced, and be an experience to be shared with others.

The idea of the artist as a disturbed, melancholic type faded again in the 17th century¹⁵, to be revived by the Romantic movement towards the end of the 18th. During the Enlightenment, the term “genius” had come into use, signifying someone with marked powers of innovation, creativity and intelligence. The genius had been a hero figure, but George Becker points out that as the 18th century moved into the 19th, the sort of people who aspired to this sort of status faced new challenges. Industrialisation, commerce and the new market economies rewarded down-to-earth practicality, and meanwhile the growth of universities created an “overproduction” of intelligent, educated people.

“The men of genius themselves,” writes Becker, “faced with a practical world, lacked the special sense of identity necessary to separate themselves effectively from the masses. ... It was the idea of a special kind of madness that could serve as a distinguishing factor, one that could mark a person as separate, unique, even divinely chosen. The Romantic artists, and men of letters, in particular, revived the

classical notion of divine mania or inspiration and established it as a defining mark of the extraordinary individual.

... Importantly also, the idea of mania conveyed to the Romantics the notions of possession, suffering *weltschmerz*, or a mood of sentimental sadness.”

To distinguish themselves from the Greeks and the Enlightenment, the Romantics also assigned greater value to

the powers of imagination than reason and balance.

Given that reason was seen as the basis of sanity, it is easy to see how they “established a logical foundation for the association of genius and madness.” This, then, was the context for the wanderings lonely as a cloud, the visions of *Kubla Khan*, the cult of personality surrounding people like Byron and

“To distinguish themselves from the Greeks and the Enlightenment, the Romantics also assigned greater value to the powers of imagination than reason and balance”

Beethoven. When Byron and Coleridge claimed to be anxious about their mental health, suggests Becker, they may have been in part cultivating their reputations.

2.3 The Genius and Modern Mental Health Care

From the mid-19th century to the 1950s, doctors and psychiatrists took an interest in genius, with most who studied it judging it to be pathological, in keeping with the Romantic view.

A detailed analysis of such psychiatric studies is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that opinion is divided; some scholars take the reports at face value, others regard them as flawed because of an over-reliance on the self-diagnosis of their subjects. Analysis of the

nature of genius waned in the post-war period, with interest shifting to the social conditions associated with it, but

“In the 1980s the subject was revived, with the terms ‘creativity’ and ‘psychopathology’ replacing ‘genius’ and ‘madness’”

in the 1980s the subject was revived, with the terms “creativity” and “psychopathology” replacing “genius” and “madness”.

This new interest was linked to a shift in thinking

in mental health practitioners at the time, from talk-based therapies to a focus on the physiological and genetic causes of mental disorders, and pharmaceutical solutions (a shift that has subsequently somewhat reversed in recent years, with increasing interest in talk-based therapies such as counselling and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). However, in 1986 a psychologist at a university in the US began a series of research projects based on writing that, while not supporting the Romantic, pathological position, did cast a fascinating light upon it.

2.4 J.W. Pennebaker and Writing as Therapy

In 1986 J.W. Pennebaker and Sandra Klihr-Beall of the Southern Methodist University took 46 psychology students and assigned them to write for 20 minutes per day on four consecutive days about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics¹⁶.

Six weeks after the writing sessions, students in the trauma group reported more positive moods and fewer illnesses than their counterparts in the superficial topics group. Moreover, those writing about traumatic experiences made fewer visits to the student health centre and were found to have improved immune systems. In other words, confronting and writing about traumatic experiences was beneficial to not only mental, but also physical health.

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Pennebaker and Klihr-Beall concluded that: “writing about earlier traumatic experience was associated with both short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems.”

Pennebaker, now Centennial Liberal Arts Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, has undertaken many similar, influential research projects since then, and is recognised as the most significant pioneer of what has come to be called “expressive writing”. Others have followed in his wake, the usual procedure being participants writing (confidentially) every day about traumatic experiences, and then being monitored and interviewed about their health.

In the last 20 years there have been more than 300 studies of the effects of writing on health, covering a wide range of conditions, from migraine and sleep apnoea to HIV and rheumatoid arthritis¹⁷. Most of this work suggests that expressive writing can have beneficial effects¹⁸, the technique having been found to reduce stress in gay

men¹⁹ and carers²⁰, among several other groups. Students taking exams who practised expressive writing were shown to achieve better grades than those who did not²¹;

“Students taking exams who practised expressive writing were shown to achieve better grades than those who did not; athletes have found it improved their performance”

athletes have found it improved their performance²². There are also testimonies from individuals who have found expressive writing, often used with other forms of therapy, helped them to come to terms with past trauma. Bruce Weigl, a Vietnam War veteran and Pulitzer Prize for Poetry finalist, said: “What it helps you do is externalize things, give a shape to it. [Fellow poet] Denise Levertov kept telling me ... Look, you control it now. It doesn't control you anymore. You own it now.”

2.5 Traditions of Communal Writing

Weigl's remark, it will be noticed, posits writing as a kind of productive, therapeutic process – a process to be shared and discussed with fellow writers.

This is probably closer to the Greek notion of divine madness than was the Romantics' notion of remarkable, mad individuals. After all, did not much of Socrates, Plato and Xenophon's work come out of dialogues with others in the Socratic school?

When one considers the number of famous writing families and friendship groups (the Brontës, the Inklings, the Algonquin Roundtable, the Dymock Poets, the Beats, the Stratford on Odeon group, and Renaissance religious communities²³ might all count as examples), it seems that another reading of the relationship between writing and mental wellbeing is possible. Besides a tradition passed down from one solitary, remarkable, deranged genius to the next, might there not also be a lineage of writers working through their experiences by writing, and sharing the experience and their work with others? The supposedly "solitary" Emily Dickinson corresponded with friends about her work; the reputedly introverted Jane Austen shared ideas with Anne Sharp, the governess of Austen's niece; George Eliot shared a close, letter-based friendship with Harriet Beacher-Stowe²⁴. Come to that, what were Wordsworth and Coleridge if not mutually supportive?

Bunce and Marriott believe that the mad genius reading of literary history is limited, to say the least, and at worst it privileges those whose wealth and social status can support such a reputation and/or lifestyle. The mundane reality for most writers is more akin to that of Margaret Oliphant, who herself famously used her writing as a kind of therapy in *Autobiography*²⁵: "I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children."

The Writing

Of course writers, like many artists, tend to draw on difficult past experience; difficult experiences are the stuff of art. But the process of writing about such experience can be, and has been, productive, beneficial and social. This, argue the WriteWell founders, is the historical context in which best to see today's writer support groups, the work of researchers like Pennebaker, and the writing-as-a-therapeutic-tool approach of the Professional Writing Academy and now WriteWell.

- 1 Baikie and Wilhem, 2005
- 2 Spiegel, 1999
- 3 Smyth, 1998
- 4 Kaufman, 2014
- 5 Kaufman, et al., 2006
- 6 Kyaga et al., 2013
- 7 Joseph Jaynes Rositano
- 8 Plato, c. 370BC
- 9 Lovell, 1969
- 10 Lord Byron
- 11 Sir Ken Robinson, 2007
- 12 Brantlinger, 1983.
- 13 Richter, 2010
- 14 Ficino, 1480-1489
- 15 Wittkower R, and Wittkower M., 1963
- 16 Pennebaker and Klihr-Beall, 1986
- 17 Other topics examined in expressive writing studies include: cancer treatment, asthma, post-traumatic stress disorder, post-operative recovery, bereavement, chronic pain, depression, eating disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, smoking, sleep difficulties, school transition, school teaching, job loss, and self-esteem
- 18 Harvard Health Publishing, 2011
- 29 Pachankis and Goldfried, 2010
- 20 Mackenzie, et al., 2007
- 21 Beilock, et al., 2014
- 22 Scott, et al., 2003
- 23 Thomas A. 2003
- 24 Midorikawa and Sweeney, 2017
- 25 The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant, 1990

3. The Process

How Writing Can Help Wellbeing and Mental Health

3.1 Recovery and Maintenance

Studies have shown that writing can help and improve wellbeing in the sense of cure, in the sense of maintenance, and in combinations of the two^{1, 2}.

It might be assumed that writing for mental health is based on the cathartic revisiting of past trauma – certainly when Pennebaker and his colleagues started exploring the effects of expressive writing (see Part Two), the prevailing theory was that by “venting” their negative feelings people would somehow release them and become healthier as a result³.

As we have seen, studies showed that writing did indeed seem to offer health benefits, but over the years in hundreds of studies⁴ academics have debated the exact mechanisms at work⁵. Recovery from past trauma is now seen as one of several ways in which writing can be used to boost wellbeing. Another use – one that has attracted increasing attention in the last 20 years, and is a key focus for WriteWell – is the maintenance and “upkeep” of mental health.

The practice of maintaining good mental health can be seen as part of positive psychology, a branch of psychology focusing on individual and societal wellbeing. First named in 1998⁶, and founded to encourage a focus on happiness and positivity rather than disorder and illness, positive psychology is a key part of the WriteWell approach to writing and mental health.

The Process

Positive psychology is complemented by recent advances in positive neuroscience; there is now ample scientific proof that writing can engender positive feelings, and those feelings can improve mental health. Neuroscientists have made two significant discoveries in this respect: firstly, that positive emotions increase the range of understanding

“WriteWell is founded on the principles of positive psychology and corresponding advances in positive neuroscience in recent years”

and behaviour, and thus help to build “psychosocial” resources; and secondly that the neural circuitry governing emotions is plastic, and can be changed with lasting effect by positive emotions⁷.

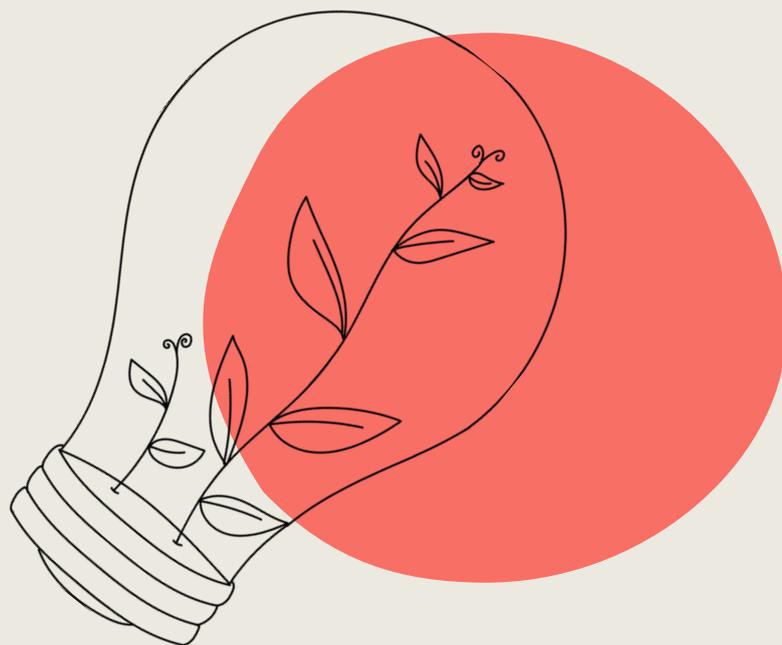
Moreover, creative activity in general uses parts of our brain in unique ways⁸. For example, some of our brain networks that operate in limited and isolated ways when we are engaged in uncreative work become more dynamic and begin working together when we are creative; this may be linked to our ability to engage in creative activities even when suffering brain degeneration and disorder. Creative activity also enhances our ability to learn, because it involves the discovery of novel connections⁹.

For these reasons, WriteWell focuses on the ways creative and expressive writing can trigger positive emotions, as well as offering tools with which people can work through unpleasant memories and experiences if they wish. WriteWell’s approach is based on the premise that people seek not only meaningful and fulfilling lives, but also a sense of being fully alive and engaged with the world. Marriott points out that she and Bunce were inspired by one of scholar Joseph Campbell’s beliefs.

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life,” wrote Campbell. “But I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive¹⁰.”

“I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive”

Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, 1988



3.2 How Does Writing Help Wellbeing?

We know that writing has distinct effects on wellbeing and mental health.

Pennebaker himself became involved with experiments in which people were asked to express their emotions through dancing or singing, but these didn't bring about the same positive results¹¹. It is tempting to look for a granular explanation of how writing as therapy works, but as the Harvard Medical Review observes, "it's not quite that simple. Instead, multiple mechanisms may underlie the benefits of expressive writing." Those benefits – particularly where trauma is concerned – are nuanced, and may not be apparent immediately; a large-scale systematic review¹² of research found that while facilitated therapeutic writing had been shown to have benefits, the precise nature of those benefits can be unclear. As the effects of the various techniques and processes differ according to the individual, circumstance and whether one is seeking maintenance of mental health or working through trauma, it is more practical to look at specific techniques and processes that have been found to work.

I Writing Affects the Way Our Brains Process Information

In keeping with the discovery that the brain's circuitry can be changed (see above), serious research suggests that expressive writing can increase our working memory capacity¹³, and make the brain more receptive to learning¹⁴. This latter insight has, the authors conclude, "implications for educators hoping to improve learning, especially after students experience academic failure"; the experiment that generated it involved people writing about traumatic past failures, so it meant that writing about past exam failure could improve performance in the future. More generally it means that expressive writing does not simply "cure" a "problem", but also helps us learn how to live better lives, avoiding the repetition of mistakes and achieving more.

II Writing Helps People Make Sense of Their Experiences

In order to write cogently about experience and emotion, one must to some extent think about and order one's thoughts. In ordering thoughts, we can gain a sense of control and understanding. In a meta-analysis of studies¹⁵, Pennebaker showed that the use of insight words (such as “think”, “know” or “consider”), causal words (such as “because”, “since” or “depends”) and words associated with cognitive activity (such as “understand” and “explain”) were a better predictor of positive outcomes. Health benefits have been noted when people write about positive experiences as well as negative ones, which has led to a suggestion that the skill of self-regulation (managing emotions and behaviour to fit situation and circumstances) might be at play¹⁶.

III Language Creates Manageable, Shareable Containers for Experience

Kate McBarron, a writing for wellbeing practitioner and Lead Tutor at WriteWell, believes that the nature of language itself is also at play. Thoughts and feelings are by their nature vague; by putting them into words we control

“It has been shown that merely naming a feeling has the power to reduce its emotional impact”

them, and then metaphors, similes and other literary and linguistic forms allow people to share themselves with others. “It’s very accessible,”

says McBarron, “and it enables us to share a clear story with a supportive audience, and feel heard and validated as a result. One could argue that other forms of arts therapy can achieve some of these things, but there does seem to be something particular at work when we use the written word.” Remember that merely naming a feeling has been shown to reduce its emotional impact¹⁷.

The Process

IV Writing Helps Us Find Meanings for Experience

Many people who suffer trauma find they better come to terms with it if they can use a system of reasoning that helps them understand how and why the trauma happened to them. Because writing encourages us to make connections between people and events, and compels us to fit events into logical, grammatical frameworks, it can help to “make meaning”. This has been found to improve the resilience of people who have suffered extreme trauma, such as sexual abuse¹⁸.



V Writing Narratives Can “Break the Cycle”

Writing expressively tends to lead to the construction of linear stories about one’s life, and these stories have been shown to have a benefit in themselves. According to the Harvard Medical Review, it’s possible that “constructing a story about a traumatic event ... helps someone break free of the endless mental cycling more typical of brooding or rumination¹⁹,” and Pennebaker has shown that it can help to psychologically contain an event and its consequences. “Forming a story about one’s experiences in life,” he and his colleague Janel Seagal write, “is associated with improved physical and mental health across a variety of populations. Current evidence points to the value of having a coherent, organized format as a way to give meaning to an event and manage the emotions associated with it. In this way, having a narrative is similar to completing a job, allowing one to essentially forget the event²⁰.”

The Process

VI Writing Lends Itself to Re-evaluation

Writing can, paradoxically, combine a feeling of permanence, which comes from the commitment of words to paper, with a provisional quality; unless copy is being prepared for mechanical reproduction, it can usually be changed. This means that people can use writing to explore switches of point of view, or to change endings; this in turn enables them to look at events from different perspectives.

VII Writing Provides Play-Like Therapy

In his influential essay “Creative Writers and Daydreaming”²¹, Freud compared creative writing with child’s play; as the

“Freud compared creative writing with child’s play”

child arranged and rearranged playthings to create a fantasy world to their liking, so the writer could rearrange memories

and desires into narratives and forms that interested and pleased them. One result of this can be the resolution of internal conflict, and a feeling of closure on an experience that allows them to “re-enter” the world in a more confident state. Taylor (see above) feels that she sees this process in therapeutic writing sessions.

For Christina Bunce, the idea of play is valuable because it allows people to explore different perspectives. “There can be a problem with conditions such as anxiety, depression and PTSD,” she says, “that if your behaviour doesn’t fit a social norm, then you get referred to a specialist and, in the process, arguably your personality is medicalised. By allowing people more reflection and creative expression, you can help both them and their medical professionals better to understand their individual experience and condition. It is frequently argued that from school age onwards, some people are basically given drugs to stifle the very creativity that could help them.”

VIII The Creation of a Piece of Writing is in Itself Therapeutic

The sense of pleasure and pride experienced in completing a piece of writing that transforms experience into art has its own powerful therapeutic effect, providing a kind of

“The sense of pleasure and pride experienced in completing a piece of writing that transforms experience into art has its own powerful therapeutic effect”

escape. Indeed some people find that this is what helps them, rather than a therapeutic benefit embedded in the act of writing itself. The poet Sharon Olds finds that her work does have a beneficial effect on her wellbeing, but

feels that “it’s different to therapy because when you’re writing poetry you are trying to make something, not working on your actual life.”

IX Writing Encourages and Enhances Positive Social Interaction

When many people write about a past traumatic or negative event, they are more likely to then talk to other people about it. This suggests that writing can help people to connect socially with the kind of support and resources that sustain and restore wellbeing. “Some people,” says Bunce, “can become so anxious about things that they forget there is anything in the world beyond their perceived problems. You can become mentally isolated even when you’re surrounded by lots of people if you’re not engaging with them. This can feed into feelings of shame at being “the sort of person” who is affected by “things like this”, and of course those feelings can then feed back into depression and anxiety.

“We find that learning and writing together can be an extraordinarily successful way of helping people to engage with each other.” This finding is in keeping with current understanding of how engagement and self-esteem can be built up by bonding over a common interest in communities of practice²².

3.3 The Implementation of Writing as Therapy

As mentioned above, there is now a thriving academic discipline of studying the processes and effects of writing for therapeutic purposes.

Studies have shown it can reduce anxiety and depression²³, improve physical health²⁴ and cognitive performance²⁵, and boost performance in exams²⁶ and sport²⁷.

There are several organisations that train and support people who use expressive writing as a part of therapy. Metanoia Institute in London, the University of Sussex, the International Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy and the International Academy for Poetry Therapy all offer either Masters qualifications or other accreditation in therapeutic writing. Lapidus International is a longstanding membership organisation for people interested in the use of writing for health and wellbeing. Many mental health practitioners offer courses in specific kinds of therapeutic reading and writing, such as journaling or bibliotherapy.

3.4 How WriteWell Works

After gaining experience in the National Health Service and wellbeing publishing, devising the social learning model common to all PWA courses, and running and evaluating successful therapeutic writing courses, Christina Bunce and Susannah Marriott founded WriteWell to be an entirely new kind of reflective and therapeutic experience.

They recognised that mental health doesn't discriminate, so wanted to create something that worked across the social spectrum, giving access to a way of maintaining

The Process

good mental wellbeing and thereby preventing illness, as well as a tool to benefit those already experiencing mild to moderate symptoms.

“We really wanted it to be a new kind of learning experience which worked as well for people who left school at 15 as for those with PhDs”

“We really wanted it to be a new kind of learning experience which worked as well for people who left school at 15 as for those

with PhDs. We wanted it to be accessible to as broad an audience as possible – regardless of age, gender, education, location, background or writing experience. We also wanted it to be more affordable than our longer courses, so the subscription model seemed obvious,” Marriott says.

WriteWell uses tools based on therapeutic, reflective and creative writing techniques proven to benefit wellbeing. These include creative prompts, quizzes and structured exercises delivered as one-off activities or as part of longer classes. People can also take part in live workshops with writers, Q&As with wellbeing experts, and reading and writing groups.

WriteWell’s techniques, while they can and have helped people to manage past trauma, are focused on maintenance; it is not claiming to offer an immediate, magical cure and should be seen as a therapeutic tool rather than therapy.

Besides its combination of practices, the most significant difference between WriteWell and other courses is its use of a “community learning model”. To create the course, Bunce and Marriott drew on the social constructivist learning theory pioneered by Lev Vygotsky and self-directed learning theory developed by thinkers such as Malcolm Knowles²⁸, and on the online community learning model used by the Professional Writing Academy to teach more than 5,000 students to date. This form of online

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learning encourages students to make connections with and help each other in ways similar to those in communities of practice²⁹. Bunce and Marriott believe that this kind of learning:

- Builds social connections around a common purpose and shared values
- Creates long-lasting empathy and support
- Diminishes feelings of loneliness, isolation and exclusion
- Builds confidence in articulating problems and ideas
- Supports people from diverse backgrounds, irrespective of previous education

WriteWell tutor McBarron feels “there’s something very validating and healing about sharing our words – our story, our experience of the world – and being heard

“WriteWell participants can share on their own terms – they can share their writing from the class activities, whether creative or reflective, or they can comment more generally with thoughts or ideas”

by others. And when those other people offer their reflections in a kind and supportive way, it’s a chance to gain insights and see our experiences from other points of view.

WriteWell participants can share on their own terms – they can share their writing from the class activities, whether creative or reflective, or they can comment more generally with thoughts or ideas. It’s important that people don’t feel pressured into sharing something if they’re really not comfortable with the idea. Meanwhile, there are other parts of WriteWell where people can work by themselves, and this can be very valuable too.”

“There’s something very validating and healing about sharing our words – our story, our experience of the world – and being heard by others. And when those other people offer their reflections in a kind and supportive way, it’s a chance to gain insights and see our experiences from other points of view”

Kate McBarron, Lead Tutor, WriteWell



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Marriott and Bunce believed there would be demand for WriteWell because “there are several apps and courses for different kinds of therapeutic writing, mindfulness, wellbeing and community building out there, but nothing that pulls all the threads together,” says Bunce. “And nothing geared to community. But we know from experience that the connections with people that one makes while learning can be crucial to the impact of the experience.

“We were keen to design courses and other activities to be accessible and inclusive. If you’re not used to writing classes, they can seem rarefied and off-putting. We want WriteWell to be used by people from all walks of life – certainly not just ‘creative types’. We want anyone to feel they can have a go, which is one reason that we’re offering free subscriptions at launch.”

To maximise accessibility, WriteWell offers choice and flexibility at every stage. People can choose to focus on a specific topic, such as building resilience or creating calm, or they can select from a variety of more

“We want WriteWell to be used by people from all walks of life – certainly not just ‘creative types’. We want anyone to feel they can have a go”

general creative activities. They can decide how much time they are able to commit, choosing between individual warm-up exercises, topic

tasters or live workshops with guests. Meanwhile, writing prompts themselves are often multi-choice or open-ended so that people can choose the direction of their writing. With this flexibility, someone could do the same activity more than once and get different results each time.

Mindful that users may revive memories of past trauma, or intensify awareness of current difficulties, participants are monitored for signs of distress by

a team all qualified in Mental Health First Aid. In addition, the team has devised an algorithm that tracks and alerts the moderators about certain words and usage that typically signify distress.

3.5 Formats and Genres

Bunce believes that all forms of writing have the potential to be therapeutic “because in our experience, people using expressive writing often find the basic physical act of writing valuable, particularly handwriting.”

For many of us writing is an everyday tool to organise our lives – from shopping lists, to work reports and pros and cons lists when making difficult decisions.

WriteWell members are encouraged to experiment with different expressive writing techniques to see what works for them. Forms such as memoir, journal and poetry tend not to be kept in silos, and the same topic is often explored in different forms. While forming one’s experiences into a narrative has been shown to have therapeutic benefits³⁰, narrative and non-narrative forms can be equally useful.

“For example, you could use journaling to make sense of your life story, particularly if you’re following a structured approach such as Ira Progoff’s method³¹,” says McBarron. “But you could also choose to write a full memoir. You could explore your thoughts and feelings about a challenging life experience through poetry with the guidance of a certified Poetry Therapist, or you could read poetry that you feel drawn to in your own time and write your responses to it in a private journal. With each of these options there would be unique benefits, but also similarities.

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“It can also be useful to discuss your experiences as well as write about them. The discussion/community element has been built into the WriteWell classes and it’s an important part of them, although participants can share on their own terms, to the extent they choose.”

Participants on the PWA Therapeutic and Reflective Writing course are free to find the formats that best suit them, and doing so is often a liberating experience. New Zealander Sarah Yulie, for example, uses a free writing technique devised by US academic Peter Elbow in 1973³².

“I use free writing regularly,” says Yulie, “and very rarely sit down with a definite direction or goal in mind. What comes out is what needs to be addressed and the

timing is always perfect. I am quite a private person and I share with my journal the depths of me that no one else knows. It’s a safe space to express

“I am quite a private person and I share with my journal the depths of me that no one else knows. It’s a safe space”

and process emotion without judgement or fear of repercussions.

“Often if it is a topic that I need to bring up with someone, I will write about it first so that it’s clear in my mind.”

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- 1 Frattaroli, 2006
 - 2 Harvard Health Publishing, 2011
 - 3 Pennebaker, 1997
 - 4 Niles, 2014
 - 5 Frattaroli, 2006
 - 6 Srinivasan, 2015
 - 7 Garland, 2010
 - 8 Kaufman, 2019
 - 9 *ibid.*
 - 10 Campbell, 1988
 - 11 *ibid.*
 - 12 Nyseen, et al., 2016
 - 13 Klein and Boals, 2001

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14	DiMenichi, et al., 2019
15	Pennebaker, 2002
16	King, 2001
17	Torre and Libermann, 2018
18	Grossman, et al., 2006
29	Winpenny, et al., 2010
20	Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999
21	Freud, 1908
22	Winpenny, et al., 2010
23	Smyth, et al., 2008
24	Harber and Pennebaker, 1992
25	DiMenichi, et al., 2018
26	Ramirez and Beilock, 2011
27	Scott, et al., 2003
28	Knowles, 1975
29	Wimpenny, et al., 2010
30	Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999
31	Progoff, 1975
32	Elbow, 1973



4. The Outcome

The Benefits of Writing for Wellbeing

4.1 What are the Benefits of Writing for Wellbeing?

Since Dr Pennebaker first found evidence¹ of the health benefits of expressive writing, many studies have confirmed his findings.

Evidence shows that expressive writing benefits health, based on objectively assessed outcomes, self-reported physical health outcomes and self-reported emotional health outcomes. Effects of expressive writing have been found to include the following health and social/behavioural outcomes²:

- Fewer stress-related visits to the doctor
- Improved immune system functioning
- Reduced blood pressure
- Improved lung function
- Improved liver function
- Fewer days in hospital
- Improved mood
- Feeling of greater physical wellbeing
- Feeling of greater psychological wellbeing

The Outcome

- Reduced depressive symptoms before examinations
- Fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms
- Reduced absenteeism from work
- Quicker re-employment after job loss
- Improved sporting performance
- Improved academic performance
- Altered social and linguistic behaviour.

It is true that in some studies the effects can differ between social groups; overall, for example, women tend to report greater benefits than males, and that effects have been found to be greater in people who are suffering from physical rather than mental health issues³.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the benefits for those coming to the subject for the first time is the extent to which serious, scientific medical research

“A drug as effective as expressive writing would in some circumstances be seen as a major medical advance”

confirms the efficacy of expressive writing in improving mental and physical health outcomes. One meta-analysis of 13 studies⁴ found

that “for physically and psychologically healthy individuals, the effects produced by expressive writing are substantial and similar in magnitude to the effects of other psychological interventions, many of which are more involved, time-consuming and expensive⁵.” As mentioned in Part Two, Stanford Professor of Psychiatry & Behavioural Sciences David Spiegel said that a drug as effective as expressive writing would in some circumstances be seen as a major medical advance⁶. This seems even more significant when one takes

The Outcome

into account the health benefits of learning that were revealed in the recent report from the UK Department of Education⁷ referenced in the introduction to this paper. The report was on the work of the Community Learning Mental Health (CLMH) research project, an initiative created to identify the potential for adult and community learning courses to help people develop the tools, strategies and resilience to manage, and aid recovery from, mild to moderate mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. In other words, it looks at whether learning new skills can help to alleviate mental disorders. The report found that more than half of the learners (52%) who had clinically significant symptoms of anxiety and/or depression at the start of the course no longer had clinically significant symptoms at the end of their course. As mentioned in the Introduction above, this was broadly similar – in fact it was slightly higher than

“Learning new skills, and practising creative and expressive writing in particular, can be better for your health, and cost less, than many of the conventional treatments currently being used”

– the recovery rate in the NHS Improving access to Psychological (IAPT) service (49%).

In short, learning new skills, and practising creative and expressive writing in particular, can both be better for your

health and cost less than many of the conventional treatments currently being used.

WriteWell founder Christina Bunce is not surprised by the findings. “Having worked in the health service I’ve seen how mental wellbeing impacts on physical health. The mind-body connection is now accepted as real – poor mental wellbeing can often present as physical symptoms. It’s not some hippy myth. You cannot overestimate how debilitating it can be for someone to be unable to articulate how they feel about how they’re

The Outcome

suffering. Expressive writing not only lets people articulate that, it also draws out a skill, and lets them produce something. It can give a sense of regaining control.

“It’s worth remembering that for a lot of us, feeling anxious or depressed brings feelings of shame. Why can’t we be sunny, confident people like those around us? Will being depressed affect our work prospects? These are all questions people ask themselves. Expressive writing in groups can help to dispel that.”

4.2 Recovery, Resilience, Rejuvenation

One way in which the various benefits can be grouped is under the headings of Recovery, Resilience and Rejuvenation.

Expressive writing aids recovery by providing a way to process trauma, reducing depression and anxiety, and generally reducing stress. It can then improve resilience by teaching coping mechanisms and increasing wellbeing. Beyond that, there is a mood-enhancing or rejuvenating effect that comes from improved communications skills, positivity and a flexible response to change and uncertainty.

McBarron finds that this three-stage journey can suit some users of expressive writing; if someone is trying to overcome the challenge of having lost their job, for example, “the goal might be to come to terms with that loss and feel able to move forward – in which case there’s an end point in mind.” For others, it is an ongoing mental health activity. “In my own case, I use writing as a way to “keep my head above water” day-to-day. I use it as a preventive measure.

“This flexibility between these two different approaches is one reason I find writing so exciting.”

4.3 Language, Expressive Writing and Toxic Language

Finally, it may be worth noting that in recent years the increasing manipulation of language in mainstream and social media has been blamed for an increase in mental health disorders⁸ and social tension⁹.

Media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has come in for particular scrutiny, with sensationalism and misinformation found to have stimulated anxiety and fear among the general public¹⁰.

Community learning builds strong, trusting relationships. Expressive writing can change people's use of language¹¹ and social behaviours¹², and has been used to cope with hate speech¹³, with some success. Optimistically, one might hope it has a role to play in detoxifying some of our experiences in the 21st century.

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- 1 Pennebaker & Beall, 1986
 - 2 Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005
 - 3 Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005
 - 4 Smyth, 1998
 - 5 Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005
 - 6 Spiegel, 1999
 - 7 Lawson, 2018
 - 8 O'Reilly, et al., 2018
 - 9 FeldmanHall, 2019
 - 10 Khan, et al., 2020
 - 11 Friedel, 2012
 - 12 Pennebaker & Chung, 2007
 - 13 Cowley, 2014

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, writing for wellbeing is not itself a new practice, but rather one that is thousands of years old.

As a contemporary therapeutic practice, it began to be codified and recognised by mental health professionals from the 1980s onwards – and an increasing amount of evidence since has shown that writing for wellbeing benefits health, and that its efficacy compares favourably with several more conventional medicines and therapies. As it is also inexpensive, and promises to save on increasing public healthcare costs, it is likely to play an increasingly prominent role in public health in the future.

As a therapeutic tool, writing for wellbeing has many different forms which can be selected and combined to suit the individual. It is suitable for both trauma

“Current mental healthcare tends to be about treating a crisis. But this is preventative”

recovery and maintaining levels of mental health and wellbeing. WriteWell is the first service to recognise the need for, and potential benefits of, a social

writing for wellbeing service, and offers a user-defined selection of forms and styles of writing. It can also be used in the way the participant chooses.

In the view of Christina Bunce, one particular advantage of writing for wellbeing in general, and WriteWell in particular, is that “current mental healthcare tends to be about treating a crisis. But this is also preventative. It allows you to intervene before reaching crisis point, and you can do it inconspicuously if you wish.”

It is now recognised by everyone from the World Health

Conclusion

Organisation to GPs working at the frontline that the after-effects of the COVID 19 pandemic will include greater mental health problems across all parts of society. In response, a growing number of companies and public authorities are seeking tools and services to support employees.

A Deloitte report¹ has noted the importance of good mental health to productivity and social cohesion in the workplace. And the sheer number of working days lost through mental health-related illness makes it clear that the productivity issue is national, and potentially severely damaging to the national economy in a time of great social and economic uncertainty.

Writing for wellbeing promises not just a recovery and maintenance of health, but also positive contributions to the workplace. According to LinkedIn, creativity is currently the most in-demand soft skill among businesses². The third, fourth and fifth most in-demand soft skills, collaboration, adaptability and emotional intelligence, can also be improved by writing for wellbeing.

Writing for wellbeing is set to play an ever-larger role in healthcare, and WriteWell is the first organisation to recognise that future and provide a relevant service. “We see huge potential in human resources, the medical and welfare services, and across all creative industries,” says Bunce. “The interesting thing for us at WriteWell has been that, as we go out to tell people in organisations and institutions about it, no one questions the need for it; I can honestly say everyone has been positive.

“We believe that we have something here that could make a real difference to the lives of a great many people, nudging them just a little further along the path towards a sense of wellbeing – by exploring writing, by learning with others, and by experiencing that thrill you get from uncovering previously unexplored creative potential.”

1 Deloitte, 2017

2 Cowley, 2014

Case Study

Hilary Shaw joined PWA’s Therapeutic and Reflective Writing course during the initial lockdown in April 2020. During this time of “disconnection” she says she felt a need to reach out to other writers in order to find a sense of purpose. She found the experience “life changing”, and a bridge to finding her “virtual writing soulmates”.

“It was the most gorgeous and gorgeously therapeutic writing adventure – a furtive endeavour that just kept giving. It was the precious gift of connecting through words. I joined a group of amazing writers and therapists from the UK, Europe and Scandinavia, and bared my soul, wrote things that no one has ever known about me, brought some really deep thoughts to the surface, and was prompted to explore corners that have been hidden from public (and sometimes my own private) view – while simultaneously developing and honing my writing skills.

“During the course I managed to write seventeen assignments and gave feedback on around seventy pieces of writing from other writers – and received approximately the same amount of feedback back on my own writing. My writing soulmates became the writing equivalent of an electrical grid: lots of powerful, high voltage interconnections generating flying sparks of inspiration.

“I’ll definitely be using some of my newly forged therapeutic writing techniques and the wisdom of those eleven wonderful people with whom I deeply connected over the past weeks, to help others heal and become their best selves.

Appendix

“Therapeutic writing gave a rhythm to my life during lockdown that kept me upbeat, thriving and feeling the greatest sense of achievement.”

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Some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched”.

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