

WRITE OUT THE NEGATIVE

Here's a writing activity inspired by the work of social psychologist and writing therapy pioneer James Pennebaker. If you find yourself thinking and worrying about something too much, promise yourself to write about it for 15+ minutes daily – but only for three or four days. (The idea is not to write about upheaval on a daily basis forever; this can actually get you stuck in a negative cycle.) Write for yourself, not for anyone else, not to anyone else. Write as you see fit, not as you think you're supposed to write. Be open and descriptive. Don't worry about grammar or spelling; corrections can lead to self-censorship. Plan to destroy what you've written – even if you don't. If this writing activity does not feel beneficial for you, do something else. (And if you're concerned about any physical or mental health condition, consult a doctor or other healthcare professional.)

WRITE UP THE POSITIVE

When I was researching and writing a collection of true stories about finding love, I positively out-smiled the Cheshire Cat. This is an extract from the book's introduction:

Other people's happy endings make me feel happy. It was a happy task prompting others to tell their tale. One couple who pounced on the idea said instantly 'recalling how we fell in love makes us fall in love all over again.' [...] If people who face the world with positive feelings tend to experience more positive events than those who don't, happy endings are better for you than spinach or chocolate.

Just as recalling good times prompted my interviewees to have newly joyful feelings, hearing or reading a happy story can make us feel happier. In creative writing workshops, after sharing positive stories, student-writers observe that the very act of sharing has reinforced the joy, amplifying it and validating it. Writing about happy things can make you – and others – feel happy.

KEEP A DIARY

Your diary is a storehouse for the uncensored, unstructured, primary material of your daily life, your dreams, travels, memories, passions, concerns, your unedited thoughts about work, family and friends. You don't have to worry about the audience because the audience is just you. Keeping a journal is a way of maintaining writing-muscle fitness, making sense of the chaos of experience, and enjoying therapeutic release, like chatting to a trusted intimate without self-consciousness or fear. Your diary keeps your secrets.

If you do only one thing in the diary department, I urge you to try your hand at this: gratitude. Make a regular record of the day's blessings: a pleasurable experience, a kind gesture, an accomplishment, a loved one, a smile, a gift, a moment of beauty. They needn't be colossal or numerous.

Positive journalling is not to avoid or deny negative experiences with 'positive thinking'. It's not about papering over cracks. It's about taking a few minutes to remember and focus on the not-cracks. Your happy notes have neurochemical effects. Write before going to sleep at night, drift off with a smile in your mind, and your dormant body will be suffused with benevolence.

Studies show that, over time, this positive writing ritual can lower stress and anxiety levels, while boosting self-confidence, clarity of thought and resilience. In other words, you could be writing yourself happy.

A short definition of mindfulness is to "pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally in the service of self-understanding and wisdom." (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

"Your true home is in the here and now. It is always available at every moment. We can practise going home all day long." (Thích Nhất Hạnh)

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'There are many guides to good writing but none as valuable as this.' —Oliver Kamm, author & columnist for *The Times*

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'Insightful, inspiring and brimming with useful tips, it's the friendliest guide you'll find to being a writer.'
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The Happy Writing Book is published in English (LKP, Orion/Hachette) & in French: Le Bonheur d'Ecrire (Pyramyd).