

Writing Your Way to Healing

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

You experienced a trauma. It was horrible. What now? How do you even begin to think about it? Where do you go first? You can't get it out of your head, and you don't want people to think you're weak. Should you talk to someone, or should you try to sort it out on your own? Should you take your time, or do you need to come forward right away?

The most important thing you can do to begin healing from a trauma is to deal with it right away! That means, beginning to think through what exactly happened and how it made you feel. In fact, one of the most helpful ways to begin to think through a traumatic event is by writing about it. There are so many subconscious thoughts that human beings hold internally – dreams, ambitions, fears, habits, desires, etc., and when people begin to write down their reflections on a situation, it engages their thinking on a deeper level. By using a different part of the brain, reflective writing can help us think about a traumatic situation differently, shedding new light on it, and helping us be able to wrap our minds around it. You may be surprised! The part of the brain that is engaged during reflective writing may produce even more thoughtful insights than talking aloud can produce.

This is not to minimize the importance of talking through a situation with a peer supporter or a counselor. Having someone to ask insightful questions and relate to what you have been through is invaluable. But, there is also power in taking a pen to paper and spilling your heart out. Think of this as translating your feelings into a story. There was an event, framed by all of your other life events, that occurred, and at the moment it makes no sense. But, as you fill in the words on the page, the story starts to take shape. You are the author and the main character, and you can begin to see how the event fits.

Research Psychologist James Pennebaker of the University of Texas conducted a number of studies that all found that writing about a stressful or traumatic event helped people come to terms with the emotional aftermath of such an event. Not only did writing help mentally and emotionally, but it also helped physically! Those in his study were less prone to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but they were also less likely to suffer from asthma, arthritis, and even chronic fatigue syndrome later. And, he quantified it! Pennebaker found that when people write for about 20 minutes a day – ideally at the end of the day – for three or four consecutive days, they were likely to have half the number of medical visits.

But, I must warn you that writing immediately after a traumatic event could make you angry, as you remember the event. But, in my experience, anything you can do to get your thoughts out immediately after it happens is going to help you move forward. A high percentage of first responders are introverts and need time to think about things on their own. That is totally fine! Many introverts will sleep more and process a trauma internally. One way to begin to think through an event without having to process with another person immediately is to write your experience down.

If you're up for it, grab a piece of paper, and begin to write down everything that happened. Ask yourself what you were feeling, why you were feeling that way, what senses were you using, what was stressing you out, what were you proud of, what do you wish hadn't happened, and, most importantly, what you want to learn from this experience. Once you've done some writing, set the paper down, and plan to write again later.

When you're ready, it is also incredibly important to process a traumatic experience with a peer supporter, a counselor, or a clinician. So, reach out and get help because processing takes time, and the sooner you can begin to heal after a trauma, the sooner you'll begin to see the sunlight again.

Jada Hudson is owner of Hudson Clinical Counseling and an LCPC serving women, children and firefighters. She specializes in pediatric death and substance abuse. Group counseling available.

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