"One Hour to Better Health" by Kathleen Adams, MA, LPC

In the 1980's Dr. James W. Pennebaker, a research psychologist, studied the impact of cathartic writing on health. He asked subjects to write for only 15-20 minutes a day, for four consecutive days, about emotionally difficult topics. At the end of the study, he discovered that his subjects showed physiological changes that correlated to increased immune system functioning. These positive changes lasted up to six weeks after the end of the four-day writing experiment! And even months later, subjects reported fewer visits to health clinics and medical doctors for stress-related illnesses.

A decade later, in 1996-97, Dr. Joshua Smyth and colleagues replicated this study with rheumatoid arthritis and asthma sufferers. Subjects were asked to write about "the most stressful event of their lives" for only three days, 20 minutes per day. Four months later, there was "clinically significant" improvement in nearly 50% of the cases! "This is the first study to demonstrate that writing about stressful life experiences improves physician ratings of disease severity in chronically ill patients," writes Dr. Smyth in the April 14th, 1999 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Psychiatrist David Spiegel, MD comments in an editorial published in the same issue of *JAMA*, "Were the authors to have provided similar outcome evidence about a new drug, it likely would be in widespread use within a short time...(T)he authors have provided evidence that medical treatment is more effective when standard pharmacological intervention is combined with the management of emotional distress."

This groundbreaking research gives us clear and compelling reason to believe that writing in a journal or diary does more than simply chronicle thoughts and feelings, or record them for the future. There are actual healing benefits. But *how* does writing heal?

According to Pennebaker, the psychological state of *inhibition*—holding things back, or in, rather than giving them expression—is hard physiological work. "Active inhibition," he says, "means that people must consciously restrain, hold back, or in some way exert effort to *not* think, feel or behave."

On the other hand, says Dr. Pennebaker, *confrontation*—actively talking *or writing* about emotionally difficult experiences—offers welcome physiological and psychological release, and "the biological stress of inhibition is immediately reduced."

Additionally, giving form to difficult emotional experiences through words and language offers a context and a container. Understanding, insight and meaning all begin with naming and describing—with telling ourselves the truth about what we have experienced, and how we feel about it.

About the **Writing Our Way to Wellness** Instructor: Lauren Mari-Navarro, MSW, LCSW is a graduate of UC Berkeley's Social Welfare program and was a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Lauren has led writing groups throughout the Bay Area focused on finding meaning and purpose in one's life and is certified with Anne Hillman's "Mining Your Life for Meaning" writing process and received training in and workshops with Carolyn Foster, MA, Kathleen Adams, MA and the Progoff Journal Method. Her extensive training in somatic therapeutic modalities assists her clients and students to make the connection between mind, body, and emotions. Lauren has worked with people undergoing life transitions for over 18 years and is also an instructor at Cabrillo College Extension in journal writing and SoulCollage®.

For more information, please refer to the website below.

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