

## Rewriting Your Present No Matter Your Past

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The results were remarkable, even hard to believe. James Pennebaker of the University of Texas had assigned half of a group of students to write about a traumatic experience, and half to write about a neutral topic—specifically, time management. In total, the students wrote for only an hour, spread out over a few days. But months later, those who had written about a traumatic event not only reported better psychological health, but also had fewer visits to the student health center.

Was it a fluke? No. The benefits of rewriting—from improved mood and well-being to boosts in the immune system—have since been demonstrated in dozens of studies, including my own. Rewriting helps you organize your thoughts and feelings and put them into words. This, in turn, helps you gain perspective, sort out your emotions, and increase narrative coherence—your understanding of who you are, how you became that person, and where you are going.

### How to Start

Some psychologists suggest that you write about the most traumatic experience you have been through, but that's not the only type of writing that has helped individuals. Other prompts that have been successful include:

- “I am thankful for all the experiences in my life. However, what shaped me into who I am today was...”
- “I will never forget the lesson that person taught me that day...”
- Think about an upsetting experience and replay it in your mind, trying to see it as an observer. Try to understand the thoughts and feelings you had during that time.
- Think about a wonderful experience you have had and write about its impact on you.

### Some tips:

1. Very short writing times are helpful—as brief as two minutes in a sitting—and, in total, around two or three hours appears to be the most beneficial. More than that may not prove better, as too much "navel-gazing" creates its own problems.
2. If you have an encouraging person in your life, ask them to give you feedback. If you do not, seek one out, such as a therapist or counselor.
3. Share your story, perhaps with people who might be helped by hearing it. In my own research, sharing added to participants' benefits.
4. Make sure your writing is grounded in your life. Writing about abstract principles does not appear to deliver the same benefits.
5. Do not try rewriting when you are in the middle of a crisis. Let some time pass so you can step back and reflect.
6. Focus on post-traumatic growth—the idea that you can often learn something from bad experiences, such as increasing empathy for others; realizing that you have more inner strength than you thought; and identifying your true priorities.