

The Healthy Writer: Writing for Health and Healthy Writing Habits

Kristin Dorsey for COWG

8 October 2024





Tonight we will:



Explore health benefits of writing

Consider health challenges for writers

Rethink our writing habits (as pertain to physical and mental health)

Write about our bodies and minds

Develop a plan for healthy writing practices





Writing as a healthy practice

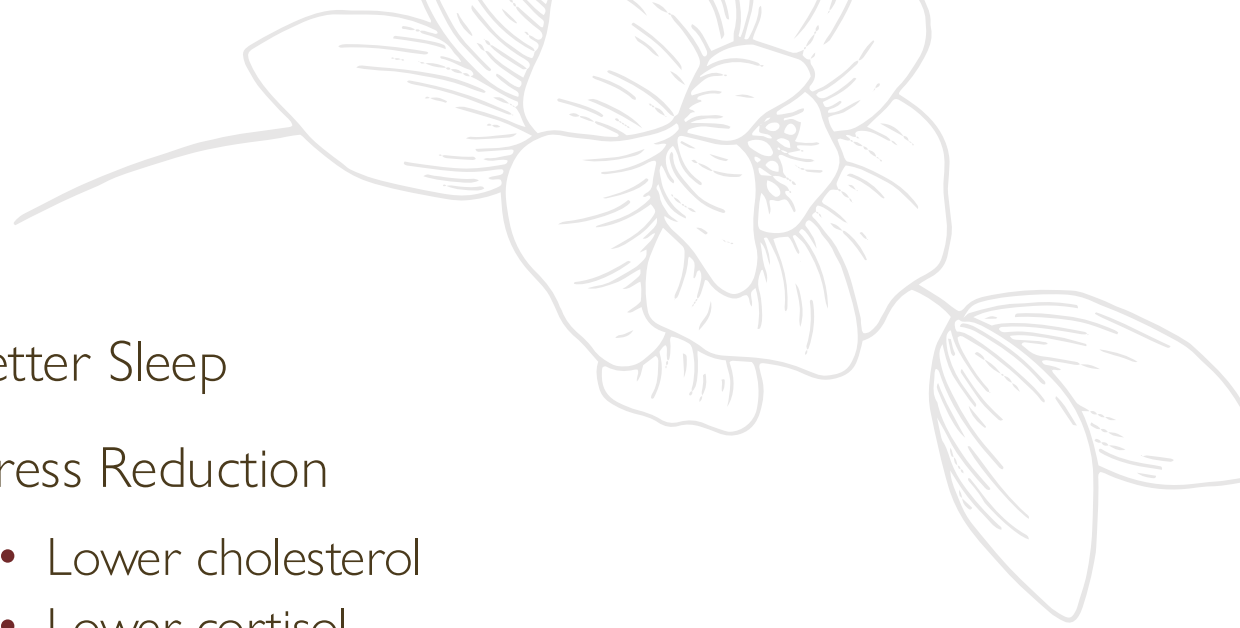
Let's take a quick inventory

For just a couple of minutes, we're going to write about ourselves.

- First, how do you feel in your body? Is anything hurting? How is your energy level? Do you need to stretch or reposition yourself? Are you breathing deeply and regularly?
- Second, how is your mental state? Are you aware of any generalized emotion? Which one(s)? Do you feel any acute emotion? Which one(s)? What is preoccupying you right now? Distracting you? How present do you feel? What would make you feel more centered?
- Third, check in with your writing self. What are you currently working on (or not working on)? How is that going? What feels good/productive right now? What feels less good/provokes anxiety/creates self-doubt?
- Last, clarify your intentions. What do you want to accomplish tonight? This week? This month? This year? After you identify your intentions, consider: are you being realistic/pragmatic? Evaluate your intentions in light of all the other things you have going on in your life currently.

Physical Benefits of Writing

- Better Sleep
- Stress Reduction
 - Lower cholesterol
 - Lower cortisol
 - Lower blood pressure
 - Improved liver function
- Increased immunity
- Accelerated healing



Research for Physical Benefits of Writing



“The Effects of Expressive Writing on Lung Function, Quality of Life, Medication Use, and Symptoms in Adults with Asthma: a Randomized Controlled Trial.” (H.E. Smith et al. *Psychosom Med.* May 2015)

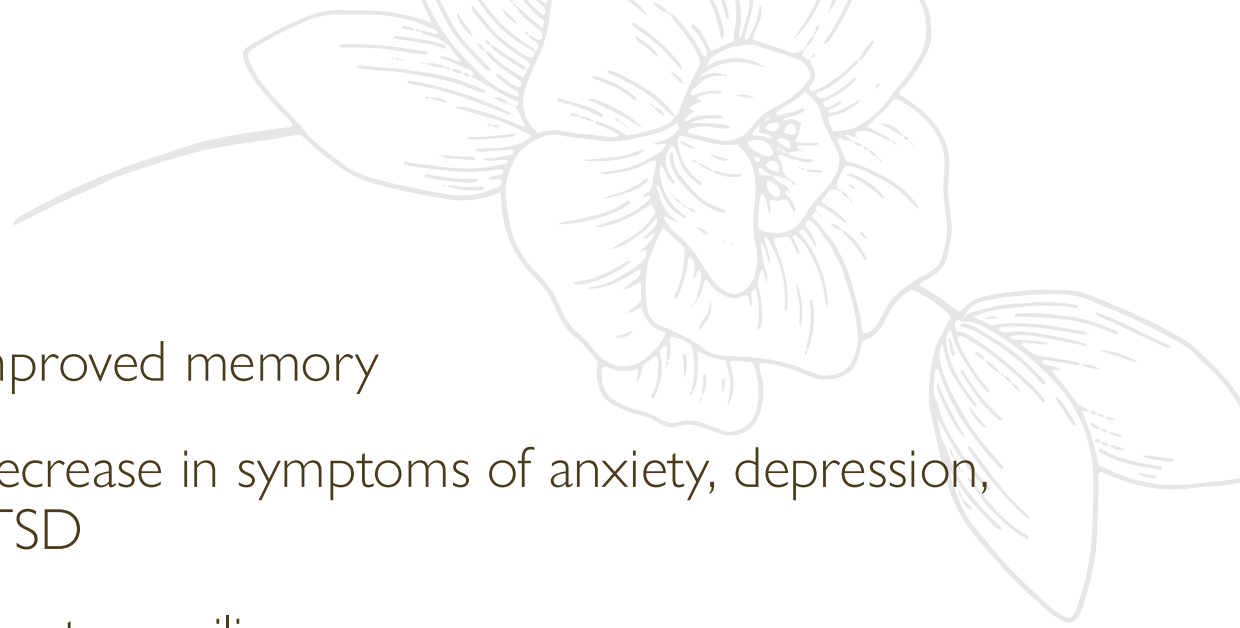
Burton CM, King LA. “Effects of (Very) Brief Writing on Health: the Two-minute Miracle. (C.M. Burton and L. A. King, *British Journal of Health Psychology* February 2008)

“Autonomic Effects of Expressive Writing in Individuals with Elevated Blood Pressure.” (K. M. McGuire et al, *Journal of Health Psychology*, March 2005)

“The Effect of Expressive Writing Intervention on Psychological and Physical Health Outcomes in Cancer Patients—a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis” (Robert Zachariae and Mia S. O’Toole, *Psycho-Oncology* 2015)

Mental and Emotional Benefits of Writing

- Improved memory
- Decrease in symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD
- Greater resilience
- Improved problem-solving capabilities
- Better overall mood
- Enhanced work/school performance



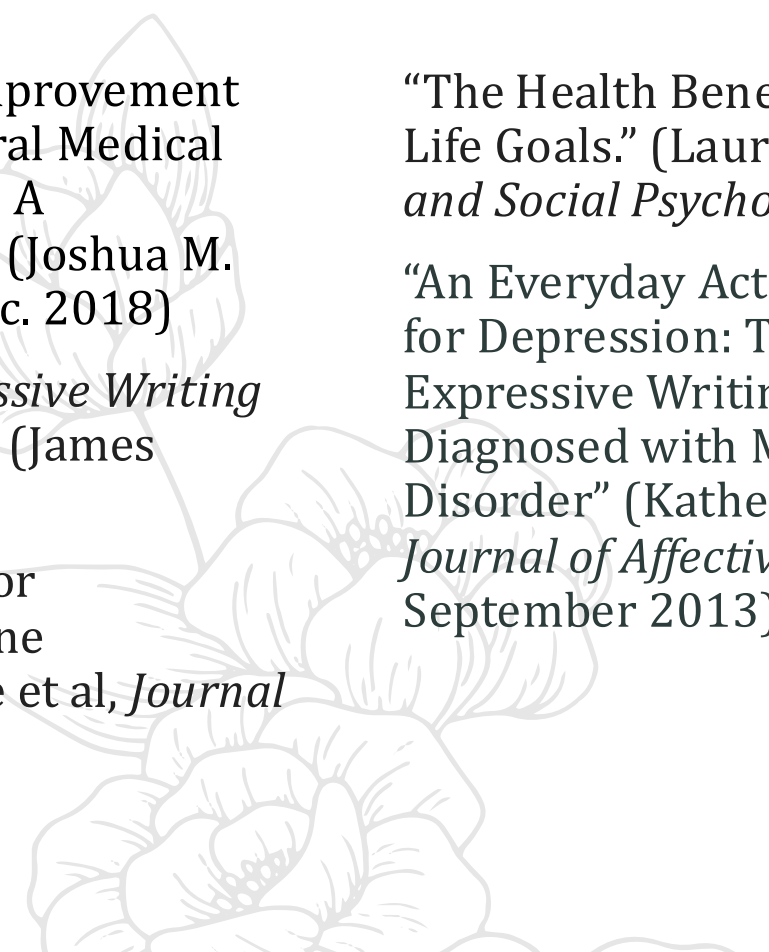
Research for Mental/Emotional Benefits of Writing



- “Online Positive Affect Journaling in the Improvement of Mental Distress and Well-Being in General Medical Patients With Elevated Anxiety Symptoms: A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Trial” (Joshua M. Smyth et al, *JMIR of Mental Health*, Oct.-Dec. 2018)
- *Opening Up by Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain.* (James Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth 2016)
- “Expressive Writing and Positive Writing for Participants with Mood Disorders: an Online Randomized Controlled Trial.” (K. A. Baikie et al, *Journal of Affective Disorders* February 2012)

“The Health Benefits of Writing About Life Goals.” (Laura A. King *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2001)

“An Everyday Activity As a Treatment for Depression: The Benefits of Expressive Writing for People Diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder” (Katherine M. Krpan, *Journal of Affective Disorders* September 2013)



Writing Activities for Health



Expressive writing—writing about thoughts and emotions (James Pennebaker)

Narration

Specific detail

Emotional specificity

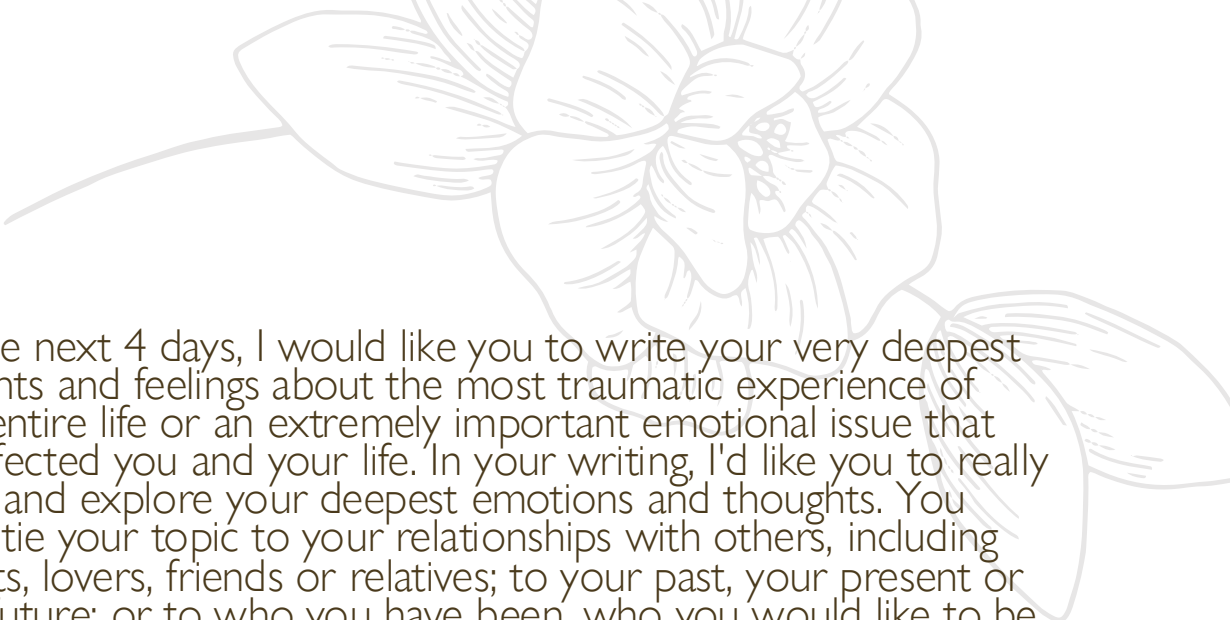
Reflection (meaning-making)

15-20 minutes; 3-5 times a week, 4 month period

Writing is private, personalized, distraction-free

Write toward positivity, gratitude, meaningful reflection

Pennebaker Writing Protocol



For the next 4 days, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential.

Don't worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up.





Specifically for Writers



This kind of expressive writing has been shown to minimize or remediate writer's block.

Let's Stretch!

Join me for some quick mid-talk stretching.



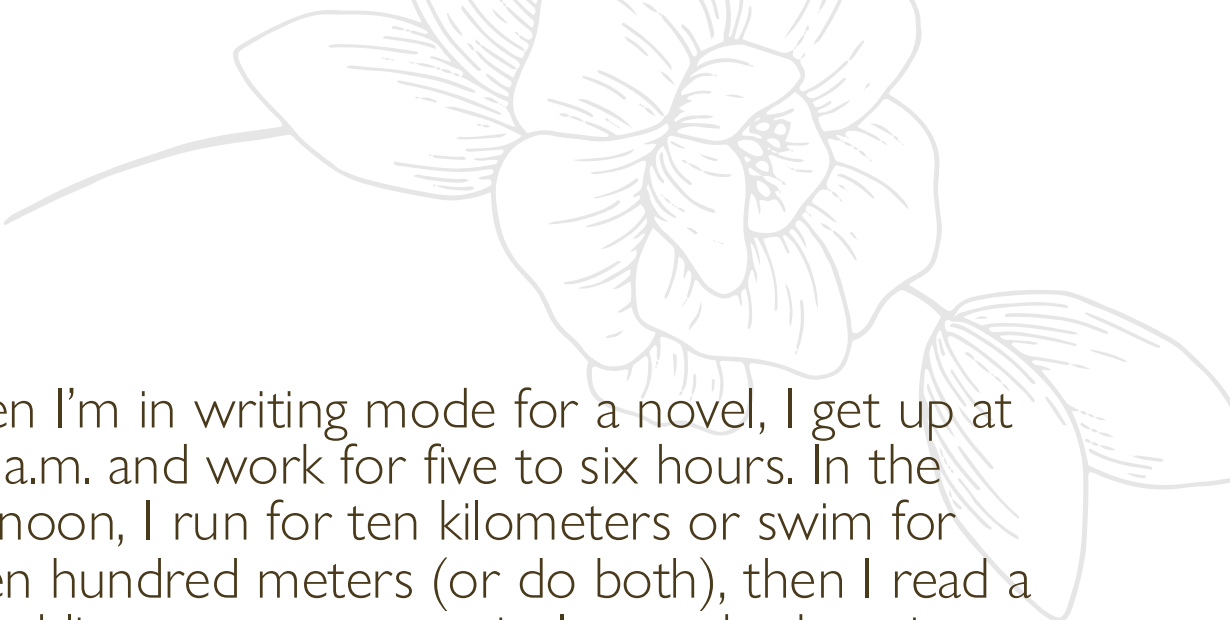
Health challenges for writers

Physical Health Challenges for Writers and Solutions



- Sedentary pursuit
- Eye strain
- Back, neck, shoulder pain
- Repetitive use issues
- Circulation issues
- Headaches
- Ergonomic evaluation of workspace (chair, desk, keyboard and mouse, monitor, lighting, eyewear)
- Breaks (timers/Pomodoro method)
- Dictation
- Stretching
- Regular exercise
- Proper hydration
- Proper nutrition
- Massage
- Adequate sleep

Haruki Murakami on Exercise



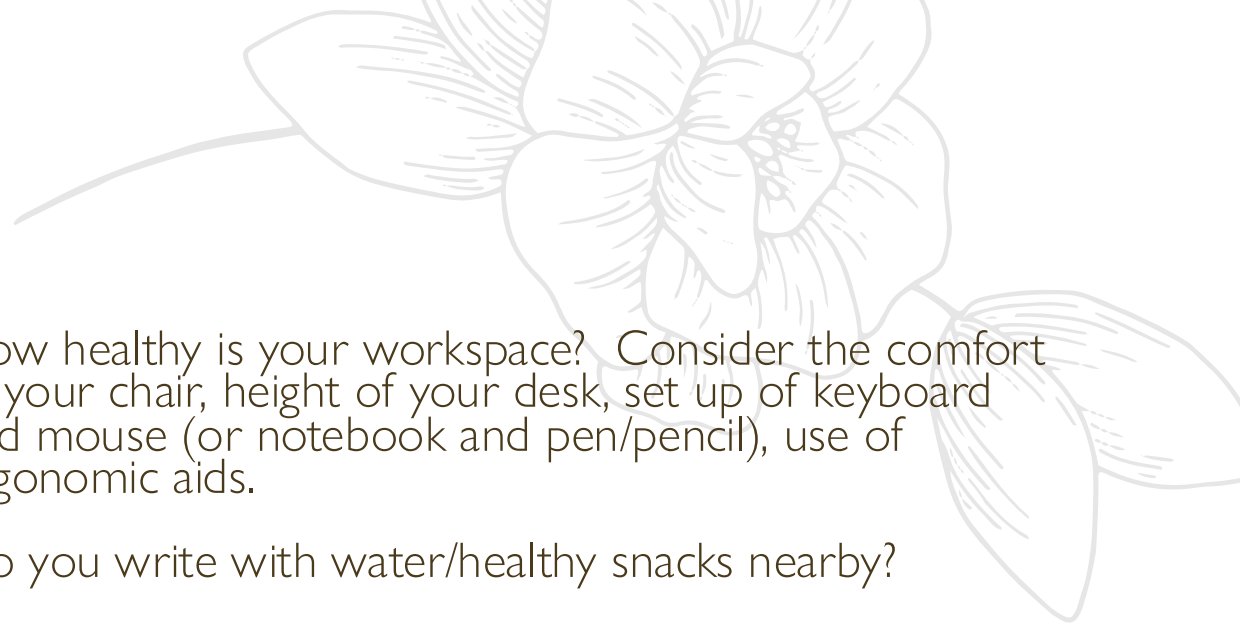
When I'm in writing mode for a novel, I get up at four a.m. and work for five to six hours. In the afternoon, I run for ten kilometers or swim for fifteen hundred meters (or do both), then I read a bit and listen to some music. I go to bed at nine p.m.

I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it's a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind.

Let's do an inventory of your work environment and habits



- How healthy is your workspace? Consider the comfort of your chair, height of your desk, set up of keyboard and mouse (or notebook and pen/pencil), use of ergonomic aids.
- Do you write with water/healthy snacks nearby?
- How often do you take breaks? How do you decide when to take breaks? What do you do on your breaks?
- Do you have a writing routine? What is it? How often do you follow that routine?
- What works in your writing routine and environment and what doesn't?
- When you are working, does anything hurt or feel uncomfortable? What can you do to remediate that?



Mental Health Challenges for Writers and Solutions



- Loneliness/Isolation
- Alcohol/drug abuse
- Impostor's syndrome
- Writer's block
- Anxiety
- Procrastination
- Create supportive, understanding community with other writers AND with non-writers
- Develop a reasonable schedule around natural energy peaks and valleys (and stick to it)
- Keep healthy, thoughtful boundaries
- Set goals and reevaluate often
- Take brain breaks
- Check in with yourself
- Practice expressive/reflective writing
- Seek inspiration
- Seek accountability
- Secure your work
- Treat mental health issues

Plan

- What aspects of your writing life need addressing immediately? (Choose 1-2 physical considerations and 1-2 mental considerations)
- What can you do to address these issues? (What steps do you need to take? Do you need help, and, if so, from whom? What do you need to resource or requisition? How much time would this take?)
- What aspects of your writing life need addressing eventually? (Choose 1-2 physical considerations and 1-2 mental considerations)
- What can you do to address these issues? (What steps do you need to take? Do you need help, and, if so, from whom? What do you need to resource or requisition? How much time would this take?)



Discussion, Q & A, Suggestions

Thank you

Kristin R. Dorsey

kdorsey@cocc.edu

