

TELL YOUR OWN TRUTH: TRAUMA-INFORMED WRITING

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“Expressing thoughts and feelings about a massive upheaval enables people to learn more about the event and their own reactions to it, and the way in which it is represented in the memory. Once it has been put into words, it should be easier to organize and assimilate”
(Bolton, 1999).

Many of us live with stories inside us, be they tales of happiness or stories of pain. By the same token, we often feel as though we are alone in carrying the weight of those stories. Writing has been proven to release us from some of that burden.

Social psychologist James Pennebaker was one of the first to study the process of what he called expressive writing, in which people wrote about their thoughts and feelings, uncensored, for fifteen minutes a day for four days in a row. He found that in just four days, the act of expressive writing released trauma for the writer. This was the start of expressive writing workshops in hospices, therapist offices, and hospitals (Febos, 2022).

Pennebaker found several benefits to expressive writing:

1. Boosts the immune system.
2. Creates new neural pathways. Writing literally helps to create new neural means by which to process an experience and understand it.
3. Decreases obsessive thoughts.
4. Contributes to the overall health of the writer.

What is trauma-informed writing?

Simply put, trauma-informed writing practice accepts, acknowledges, and incorporates the reality of collective trauma and how writing about and sharing traumatic experiences can impact both reader and writer. When writing our own stories, many of us write about difficult memories or experiences.

While Pennebaker's work realized that expressive writing can release trauma for the writer, he also found that it can heighten trauma for a reader. If expressive writing is being shared (for example, in a group therapy setting or in a workshop), then keeping this simple fact in mind can inform how we write and how we share that writing.

When Writing About Traumatic Experiences

1. Set a space to write that feels safe and comfortable.
2. Write non-stop for fifteen minutes without overthinking, erasing, or rephrasing. Think stream of consciousness rather than flowery prose.
3. Don't worry about grammar or punctuation. This is not the focus.
4. Write for yourself only, without worrying about who may read it. There is no need to share what you put on the page, unless you choose to.
5. Take breaks and do not push yourself to write about something that feels too difficult.
6. Resist the urge to fact check your personal story with others who shared that story. This is about your truth and your experience.
7. Talk to mental health professionals as needed to be supported in this process, as writing about memories and experiences can bring up new ones, too.

How does trauma-informed theory apply to a writing workshop?

Since trauma-informed writing theory aims to create a safe space for writing and sharing personal stories, considering the collective experiences in the writing space is vital.

- **Keep in mind that much depends on the audience.** In a Transforming Military Cultures workshop, for example, comprised of a large military community, sharing stories of war or military sexual trauma could be triggering to others, and therefore, negatively impact the safe sharing space of the workshop.
- **Reconsider language and stories that may be triggering.** Think of colloquialisms or generalizations that many of us might use and how this phrasing might be upsetting to others.
- **Provide warnings on content.** If you are sharing a story that contains elements that might trigger others, it is appropriate to give a content warning so that listeners can prepare themselves or remove themselves from the room.
- **Above all, put yourself in the shoes of others.**

Some great questions to ask yourself (National Centre on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health):

- Is it important to include this description of abuse or violence?
- If so, is it important to describe it in this much detail?
- Is it possible and helpful to provide a warning to the reader prior to the description?

If I include descriptions of abuse and violence in the document, can I be thoughtful about how I share it with others? (Trigger/content warnings)

Suggested Writing Prompts

1. Describe your childhood home in vivid detail.
2. Finish this sentence: "I am..."
3. Describe yourself as a character from someone else's point of view. (Think of the five senses and how you would incorporate them.)
4. Write a scene from a memorable fight you've had.
5. Recreate a scene entirely comprised of dialogue. Try to help the reader differentiate between characters in unique, creative ways.
6. Set a timer for five minutes. Write everything you know about vegetables. Turn this into a poem.
7. In our Transforming Military Cultures workshop, we examined writing about "School Lunches." What other universal experiences can you examine? (First day of school, first kiss, first birthday party, etc.)

Sources Used

Andreasen, N (2005). *The Creative Brain: The science of genius*. Plume, London: England.

Bolton, G. (1999). *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing myself*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: Philadelphia, US.

Febos, M (2022). *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*. Catapult: New York, US.

Additional Resources

Books on Craft and Writing

- *Body Work, The Power of Personal Narrative*, Melissa Febos
- *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing*, Gillie Bolton
- *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr
- *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott
- *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick
- *The Memoir Project*, Marion Roach Smith
- *Old Friend from Far Away*, Natalie Goldberg
- *The Mindful Writer*, Dinty Moore
- *On Writing*, Stephen King

Books of Prompts

- *The 4a.m. Breakthrough: Unconventional writing exercises that transform your fiction*, Brian Kiteley
- *The 3a.m. Epiphany: Writing exercises that transform your fiction*, Brian Kiteley

Author Bio



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Dr. Kelly S. Thompson has an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC and a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Gloucestershire. She served for eight years in the Canadian Armed Forces before medically releasing in 2011. Kelly's essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in literary magazines and anthologies across Canada, as well as publications including the *Globe and Mail*, *Macleans*, *Chatelaine*, and more. Her memoir, *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces*, was an instant *Globe and Mail* bestseller and was listed as one of the top 100 Books of 2019. Her new book, *Still, I Cannot Save You*, released February 14, 2023.