

12-3-2013

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Repository Citation

Battino, R. (2013). On the Importance of Distance Writing, Structured Writing, and Workbooks. .
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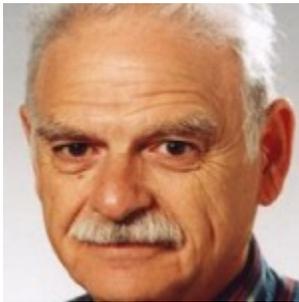
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Rob McNeilly

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On the Importance of Distance Writing, Structured Writing, and Workbooks

Rubin Battino, MS



There is something about keeping a journal or a diary and writing about your experiences and feelings that can be healing and therapeutic. In the 1800s and early 1900s many people kept diaries. I am the owner of the diaries of Bishop Wright, the father of the Wright Brothers. Not only did he make observations about his life and that of his family and events of the day, he also kept financial records. We have fallen out of that practice in favor of Emails, phoning, texting, word-processor written letters, and rare hand-written ones. The only writing I seem to do at the present time are the weekly postcards I send to my grand children. We travel a fair amount and I have amassed enough scenic postcards to last me several years!

The three terms in the title of this chapter describe variations of the same approach, that is, writing that is done in response to a series of questions and in an organized manner. The questions are designed to help the writer solve a particular problem or deal with a specific condition. There is an extensive literature in this field which was first developed by James Pennebaker (1997), and there is a “sourcebook” by L’Abate (2011). The last book cited contains an enormous number of structured writing exercises designed for clients in mental health areas. L’Abate’s web site (<http://www.mentalhealthhelp.com/>) contains a great deal of information about this subject as well as many workbooks. L’Abate feels that these workbooks will shorten the number of sessions that clients see therapists, and therefore be more efficient and more economical.

To give you a sense of what these workbooks are like I reproduce below part of a workbook I developed for helping people who have cancer (Battino, 2000, pp. 214-217).

Workbook For People Who Have a Life-Challenging Disease

The questions in this workbook have been designed to help you cope with a diagnosis of a life-challenging disease, and with its treatment. Please find a quiet time and place to do this writing over a period of successive days. What you write is personal and should be kept private. It is your decision about sharing any part of this, or all of it, with someone you trust. If you need more than the allotted space, please continue your responses on the back of the paper or on separate sheets. There are no “correct” responses—whatever you write is the right thing for you. Take whatever time you need to respond. You should know that a number of research studies have shown that the very act of writing responses to the kinds of questions in this workbook have been helpful in resolving painful concerns.

1. Use the following space to respond to these three related questions. You may not be able to answer them with any certainty—in that case, a guess or a theory about how to answer the questions is fine.
 - a. Why is this happening to me (versus someone else)?
 - b. Why is this happening to me at this particular time of my life?
 - c. Why do I have this particular kind of disease?
2. Do you know, or do you have a theory, or can you guess as to why at this particular time you are doing better, or worse, or staying the same?
3. What ways of taking care of yourself are you waiting to explore?
4. What is stopping you from exploring the options in (3) now? What resources do you need to be able to do whatever is necessary to help yourself in (3)?
5. Take some time to write about your fears for yourself, your family, and your future.
6. Take some time to write about your hopes and dreams, and what it is you would like to do with the remainder of your life. As your health improves, what are the things that you would be sure to do?
7. Write about your feelings about surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, or other treatments.
8. Some surgeries (like mastectomies and prostatectomies) involve the loss of body parts, particularly those that are related to body- and self-image. Please use this space to write about your feelings concerning these surgeries, if you have undergone one.
9. Write about your feelings about being in a hospital.
10. This question has to do with being able to communicate openly about your condition, and your feelings about this condition with the people in your life who care. Think carefully about who you can talk to about the following items (physical feelings, emotional feelings, fears,

treatments, information, fun and relaxation), listing *specific* people in each category. [A table is part of this question.]

11. Write about your feelings about dealing with medical personnel.
12. Write about what frustrates you about having this disease.
13. It is not unusual for people who have been diagnosed with a serious or life-challenging disease to have the seemingly paradoxical reaction of considering the disease to be a “blessing” in some way. What things have you learned about yourself and about the people around you that are beneficial to you?
14. How has having this disease changed your spiritual life?
15. Knowing what you know now about your life, if you could, how would you have lived differently? That is, what would you change about your past life?
16. Knowing what you know now about your life, what things will you do differently starting right now?
17. Sometimes opportunities for saying things to people just bypass us. Are there significant people in your past or in the present that you never had a chance to tell what was really on your mind? Write what you would have told them if you had the chance.
18. This is related to 17. Write out what things for your spouse and children (or specific others) you want to: (a) have them know; (b) leave them (personal items or thoughts); and (c) say to them. You may wish to share these writings with them now, later, leave for them, or continue to keep private.
19. Although this is a trying time, it is always wise to take care of certain “practical” things like wills, living wills, durable power of attorney for health, financial matters, power of attorney, and funeral arrangements as soon as possible. If you have not already done so, make appointments to take care of these items. This space would also be a good place to write about your feelings about these items.
20. Write about anything else that concerns you at this time. This is *your private* journal and you can write whatever you wish.

This article will give you some sense of a field of psychotherapy with which you may not be familiar. Giving clients homework assignments, particularly ones involving writing can be useful. Aside from anything else the act of writing is a solo kinesthetic one which intimately connects the client with his/her feelings and ideas and possibilities. Depending on the circumstance this writing can be shared with the therapist or others or kept secret as was generally done in olden times. Although the example given above is about cancer, think about how this format and many of the questions can be applied to other conditions and situations.

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