



'Can't Talk? Write'

White paper

Introduction

Writing already forms the basis of much therapeutic practice (such as narrative therapy, a method of therapy that separates the person from their problem), yet receives little attention in the mainstream as an accessible and simple wellbeing tool for all. In order to promote greater understanding and to support writing as a potential route towards improved resilience and positive mental health, Royal Mail, Action for Children and the Prince's Trust have partnered to consider the scientific research behind its apparent benefits.

Campaign objectives

Following a review of the academic literature, scientifically-rooted learnings have prompted a campaign to raise the profile of 'putting pen to paper', with writing shown to support a variety of wellbeing factors such as sense-of-self and personal values, goal-setting and self-regulation (managing emotions, thoughts and behaviours), purpose and resilience. The science will also inform the creation of future workshops for young people, intended to leave them with practical writing tools for life and has already led to the development of some simple online tips and exercises.

In the transition period of adolescence, sub-clinical disorders such as depression can considerably increase the risks for psychopathology in adulthood. However, the cognitive, social, psychological and physical challenges encountered in adolescence also provide an opportunity for positive influence at this time. Writing may provide a practical and purposeful resource to help young people deal with some of these day-to-day pressures.

Executive summary

The Prince's Trust Ebay Youth Index (2019) shows that the wellbeing indicators - across various aspects of young people's lives such as work, relationships and finances as well as physical and emotional health - remain at their lowest since the survey began in 2009. Young people (16-25 year olds) are more concerned than ever about their emotional health.

27% of respondents believe that social media makes them happy, although sport (42%) and spending time with friends and family (77%) were more popular. Social media is a mixed bag of course. Whilst giving young people a voice and helping some to feel more confident, 60% find it hard to not compare themselves with others, and almost half feel more anxious about their futures when seeing friends' lives online.

The Wellness Index Survey (part of the UK Workplace Stress Survey, 2018) also showed 18-24 year olds to have the lowest wellbeing score, with 80% experiencing daily anxiety and stress.

A thorough trawl of the academic research databases identified reviews, meta-analyses and further scientific papers on the subject of mental health writing. Additional searches looked at



specific tools such as poetry, gratitude and 'best possible self' writing. The vast majority of the data was taken from scientific, peer-reviewed journal papers and with a keen, but not exclusive, focus on youth-centred projects.

The research found that writing – in its various guises – might help young people in the following ways:

- ➔ Enhancing their self-awareness
- ➔ Supporting self-regulation (helping to manage thoughts, emotions and behaviours)
- ➔ Reinforcing a sense of self, and support them to reach self-fulfilment
- ➔ Building personal psychological resources (strengths, values, achievements, social capital, resilience)
- ➔ Eliciting positive emotion
- ➔ Pointing the way to meaningful goals
- ➔ Bringing inspiration and creativity
- ➔ Supporting relationships and communities

Overall, the evidence suggests that writing can be a useful (simple, free and broadly accessible) tool to help support positive mental health, which may help pave the way towards greater resilience and personal flourishing. It will of course require some commitment, perhaps by building simple new rituals and habits. Wellbeing, like our physical health, takes effort and while these are useful tools for learning about oneself and for reflecting on experiences, they are not quick fixes.

How writing can be helpful for young people:

With education, social media, broader economic and political uncertainty and other personal and environmental challenges, young people can find themselves under significant pressure. Writing (ideally putting pen to paper) may be a useful support technique. Depending on the particular tool, writing can help by refocusing attention, building sense of self and one's psychological resources, activating creative and meditative brain parts, and highlighting personal strengths, values and goals – away from the noise and distraction of others. As examples, activities might focus us on self-awareness and self-reflection, enhancing relationships through appreciation, considering meaningful futures or simply on enjoyment and exploration.

Barriers to writing

There are obvious barriers to writing; it's reminiscent of school and homework battles, grammar and content struggles, and for most will simply feel alien as a free-time activity choice.

Yet writing for wellbeing is not compulsory nor is it constrained. When young people are given full ownership of their writing - they can scribble, draw, doodle, write or copy poetry or prose, and, crucially, ignore all the rules. This allows them the freedom to really start finding their voice. Unlike 'homework', these kinds of narrative approaches are likely to feel personally meaningful, and therefore intrinsically motivating too.

We need then to encourage young people to fall 'in love with' writing by nurturing this sense of ownership and self-fulfilment. Overall, the tools need to be congruent with young people's



values, expectations and goals in order to be meaningful and thus beneficial. Offering variety is essential too i.e. those with a visual orientation might be keen to collage rather than write.

Writing approaches that promote wellbeing:

From focussing on difficulties to 'gain without pain'

Research into writing for mental health started with Pennebaker's 'expressive writing' in the 1980's which involved writing about struggles or difficult experiences. With the advent in the late 90's of the positive psychology movement, however, other forms of personally meaningful writing interventions were researched, such as writing about personal values, gratitude and one's best possible self. Notably, Laura King explored outcomes of positively focussed writing, wondering whether there could be 'gain without pain' i.e. away from the inevitable discomfort of writing about difficult times. Outlined below, these tools have been shown to offer general support towards multiple factors contributing towards positive mental health.

Personal values

Personal values (or self-affirmation) writing encourages people to write about their core personal values. Participants review a list of values (e.g. honesty, friendship, independence, music), select those which are most significant to them and then write about their importance and a time when they were especially pertinent. This taps into a person's valued identities and gets to the heart of what really matters to them. Writing might typically cover subjects such as friendship, family, purposeful projects, humour and kindness.

Values can act as a reassurance to people of their integrity, bringing feelings of resilience and perspective, despite adversity. A key example of a values writing methodology is the international 'Laws of Life' essay programme with 100,000 annual participants. Students who felt fully engaged in their essay writing reported improved self-regulatory and life purpose outcomes. The self-regulatory measures included emotional regulation, anger management and coping. N.B. it wasn't possible to establish whether the essays themselves led to improved functioning or if those engaging well were better-adjusted individuals in the first place. (Banyard, 2016)

Topics chosen (Hamby 2016) were classified either as 'adversity' (e.g. bullying), 'personal' (e.g. an impactful experience) or 'impersonal' (e.g. an inspiring quote), and figures show that almost 90% felt that they had benefited in some way from the writing, with key factors described as 'a chance to focus on an important value' and 'a chance to express thoughts and feelings'. Values narratives hold potential as a prevention tool, enabling young people to connect messages of learning, growth and resilience to their own life stories – away from overt help-seeking or diagnosis. Signposting additional support is also essential, with 26% reporting some negative feelings and 0.6% reporting no positive effects at all.

Another values study showed improved academic performance amongst African American students (Cohen, 2009). Aimed at counteracting racial stereotyping of African American youth, students wrote about 'the personal importance of a self-defining value' and the project saw a reduced racial achievement gap, with underperforming students benefiting most. Participants' self-integrity appeared to be strengthened by the writing and this helped to



break the cycle of poor performance, bringing changes in equity as well as shifts in their longer term self-perceptions.

Affirming core values seems helpful as a route to securing feelings of competence and self-determination especially in the face of adversity; it helps to protect one's self-image from daily stress factors.

Gratitude

A 2010 review (Wood) links gratitude to emotions such as pride, optimism, hope, contentment and inspiration. Studies suggest that it is associated with coping and resilience and helps to solidify social resources and a recent study (Bono, 2013) found steady gratitude gains amongst adolescents to be positively associated with empathy, self-efficacy, self-regulation, goal-setting and community affiliation.

Gratitude has also been identified as a critical ingredient in Positive Youth Development (PYD) which considers the strengths of connection, confidence, competence, character and caring as routes to optimal functioning. It's been shown to support social exchanges and to counter hedonism and materialism in building towards these PYD strengths.

It also supports community affiliation by increasing prosocial behaviour, such as helping or offering emotional support to others. Feeling part of a community, increased social support and protection from stress can all help towards building resilience.

Gratitude journaling

Students who completed a daily journal noting up to five things they were grateful for over two weeks, showed an increase in positive emotion, optimism and feelings of satisfaction with their lives and with their education. Gratitude themes were family, basic needs, friends, teachers and school (Froh, 2008).

In Martin Seligman's 'Three good things' exercise (2005), participants also note why things went well. They did this each evening for a week, described it as enjoyable and many continued to write afterwards. Well-being benefits showed at the one-month follow-up and participants stayed happier and less depressed up to six months later. The 'why did it go well' prompt helps to build a sense of personal control and self-efficacy - a belief in our own abilities and associated successes. Those who feel in control of their lives and personally effective, tend to demonstrate greater levels of wellbeing (and less psychopathology).

In other gratitude journaling studies, college students writing daily reported increased levels of alertness, determination and energy; those who journaled weekly exercised more frequently and had increased life satisfaction and optimism versus those in the controls (Emmons, 2003). More recently, Passmore (2016) considered that repeated use of a 'three good things' type technique may shift neural pathways into looking for the positives and reduce our natural human bias towards the negative, bringing a more beneficial thinking style and increased life satisfaction.

Gratitude letter-writing

Seligman's 'gratitude visit' (2005) in which adult participants wrote and then personally delivered a letter of thanks to someone they had never properly thanked, showed the largest



positive (though relatively short-lived) uplift in happiness compared to other key wellbeing-boosting exercises. A similar intervention with adolescents (Froh, 2009) showed that those who were low in positive emotion reported a boosted sense of positivity immediately and still two months' later.

Whilst questions remain around the mechanisms of the relationship between gratitude and well-being, it seems that these interventions do consistently deliver positive outcomes in terms of psychological and social functioning which are maintained over time.

Gratitude researchers (Froh and Bono) argue that letter writing the best investment we can make in young people. Based on their research findings, those who have the ability to feel grateful can feel more resilient and even thrive in the face of adversity.

Best Possible Self (BPS)

Laura King's "Best Possible Self" writing intervention explores the ideal of who we would like to become, enabling the expression of our deep-seated personal values and interests. Her original study showed an immediate uplift in positive emotion, increased subjective wellbeing and health improvements (fewer doctor's visits). She hypothesised that writing about future ideals might increase self-awareness and self-regulation, supporting improved goal-pursuit. Goals drive behaviours and energise us, positively influencing day-to-day experience and, importantly, helping us to address emotional and wellbeing needs. They are also shown to support emotional stability and help mediate personal resource towards positive change.

There have been more than thirty BPS studies since then, and a 2016 review of these. (Loveday). Whilst mechanisms are little understood, these studies have shown enhanced levels of optimism and boosts to positive affect as well as other health and wellbeing improvements including increases in life satisfaction, flow and happiness. Increased mindfulness has also been observed as a BPS outcome. By nature, writing about your 'best self' is inherently motivating, with participants often inclined to continue with the activity.

Overall, BPS appears to be a robust, flexible and 'repeatable' writing tool with positive outcomes both on and offline and in numerous formats, such as handwritten, typed, spoken and even drawn (an experiment with 5-11 year olds showed an increase in self-esteem following drawings of their BPS). BPS well-being increases seem to endure on a more long-term basis.

Other writing formats

Research into specific writing formats such as journaling, letters and poetry writing tends to be with targeted, often clinical, populations but they are likely to have broad population relevance too. Blogging and humour writing are newer and interesting, as is what is happening in practice e.g. mindfulness in writing.

Journaling

A recent 'Resource Diary' study amongst adolescents – aimed at promoting well-being and preventing depression – indicated the benefits of positive writing in guarding against worries, negative mood, low self-esteem and rumination, which is consistently linked to depressive symptoms. The diary was formed of twelve questions such as 'What gave you strength today?' and 'Which aspects of yourself are you content with?' (Reiter and Wilz, 2016). So-



called 'Resource Diaries', originally designed for adults, are aimed at promoting positive mood, improving emotional regulation and increasing a sense of one's personal resources. Research amongst a youth audience is in its infancy but initial signs are promising and, as with other (positive) writing interventions, it's potentially useful as an accessible, everyday tool.

A journal might also get filled with favourite poems and quotes or other forms of inspiration, and handwriting itself (including scribbling, doodling and drawing) has been shown to elicit more complex emotional exposure than keyboard typing.

Wong (2017) also highlights research which suggests that handwriting may be more stimulating for the brain, can increase creativity and idea generation, forces us to slow down and stimulates a part of the brain which is linked to meditation. Overall, writing is a more subtle and complex process than typing and perhaps prompts us, whilst slowing down, to link in with our feelings and to focus on what is really important to us.

Blogging

Online social environments vary of course but they can feel like intimate, authentic and creative – yet often relatively anonymous - spaces away from the usual social norms. This potentially increases young people's confidence to self-express and offers an audience too when they want one. The inherent social factor means that bloggers more naturally "re-story" themselves for and by interacting with their audiences.

More generally, the current socio-technical environment can support the wellbeing of marginal groups too by bringing social recognition, improved inter- and intra-group relationships and sharing of relevant information. The latter may help increase information handling skills, thus also supporting learning, empowerment and self-efficacy (Miura & Yamashita, 2004).

Virtual environments can be a way to keep current friends and family groupings close, as well as to extend networks and, despite some of the well-documented issues, can represent a safe and rich social space to many. Ko and Kuo's (2009) research showed an uplift in bloggers' wellbeing, with self-disclosure helping to reinforce their social circles and improve their sense of social integration.

Positive and negative self-disclosure are seen as intrinsically rewarding for the self. Positive sharing can enable a "re-living" of a good experience and elicits positive feedback from networks, prolonging the associated feel-good emotions. Negative sharing may help relieve stress and perhaps lead to new perspectives and even a re-storying. It might elicit support from others too.

Online engagement behaviours and motivations are complex however and research is in its infancy. The current picture is far from complete and research will naturally struggle to keep up with the fast pace of change.

Letters

Contemporary letter-writing research sits largely within the counselling field of Narrative therapy in a convention which encourages clients to externalise negative personal narratives in a letter, either to themselves or to their counsellor, which is followed by a process of 're-



storying' i.e. an exploration of alternative and empowering narratives. Externalising difficult personal stories can bring distance and a sense of control.

There is, however, a gap in the research of letter-writing as a more casual, universal intervention. Amongst the few examples, DeCino explores the concept of (2018) a 'letter about themselves' - timed at the beginning, middle and end of the school year - to help young people engage with a counselling support system and to feel more empowered. Through self-expression and reflection, letter writing of this nature may help to build decision-making skills, increase choices and bring a sense of control as well as building engagement with support services.

Whilst academic research amongst a primary audience is minimal, letter-writing appears to be popular in practice, with techniques such as writing from one's 'wise' self or from one's fear. There are copious arguments in support of more typical card- and letter writing too. Appreciating, celebrating, apologising and all other forms of day-brightening are potentially powerful routes to eliciting positive emotion and to improved social bonding.

Poetry

The majority of poetry interventions have been explored as a therapeutic tool across specialist fields such as psychiatry and addiction. Poetry therapy uses three approaches; pre-existing poetry (including wider literature and songs), individual writing and collaborative writing; an intervention programme would likely combine all three. As Heimes points out in her 2011 review, poetry therapy has been shown to constitute a quality of life uplift for those coping with illness and is a helpful therapeutic tool in the treatment of anxiety and depression. Physiologically, it's been shown as an immuno-enhancer, providing defence against infection.

A rare research paper on poetry and visual arts in the classroom was found to support emotional intelligence in students, increasing their self-awareness and emotional recognition (Morris).

It's been described as a multi-dimensional and penetrating art form and while there is relatively little empirical evidence for it as a universal intervention, the use of poetry nonetheless appears to be fairly extensive.

Indeed, a 2018 study by the National Literacy Trust of almost 3,000 eight to eighteen-year olds highlights significant levels of engagement with poetry (almost 50%). Of those who are writing their own poetry, its top benefits are expressed as 'creativity', 'freedom of topic' and 'self-expression'.

Song-writing

Song-writing sits under the banner of music therapy and the science is predominantly directed towards problem-focussed coping. An interesting – but unpublished and non-peer-reviewed - PhD study on hip hop in schools (Roygardner, 2017) suggests potential for hip hop and rap genres in helping towards self-awareness, resilience (measured as 'hope' and 'overcoming') and literacy.

Humour writing



With links to wellbeing through happiness, mood, self-esteem, coping and resilience, the use and appreciation of humour is considered a character strength and one which can be helpful in the face of stress and depressive symptoms. Recent study participants writing about their own humorous experiences showed wellbeing benefits in terms of a positive interpretation (or cognitive appraisal) of events. Overall, a promising piece of early research into a brief humour writing intervention (Maiolino). NB the mental health benefits have been associated with self-enhancing and bonding humour rather than self-deprecating and critical humour styles.

Highlights from practice

Away from the scientific literature, there is convincing practitioner evidence for the positive link between writing and wellbeing:

Carol Ross is a proponent of two types of mindful writing - descriptive and expressive. Both are aimed towards an appreciation of mindfulness and increased mental focus. She also uses the technique of freewriting and other creative approaches e.g. images and symbols to inspire metaphor and to deepen thinking.

The 'Morning Pages' (from Julia Cameron's 'The Artist's Way') is a relatively well-known writing technique, aimed at mind-clearing by writing three pages each morning upon waking.

Kathleen Adams offers a range of tools too in her 'Journal to the Self' book. For example, her 'Captured Moment' technique involves writing about one of your happiest ever moments, remembering to include information from all the senses. Such tools can represent simple, yet potentially insightful and beneficial writing habits.

Conclusion and aims:

'Putting pen to paper' appears to hold considerable potential as a tool towards positive mental health. A writing programme might help young people flex and build their emotional and psychological muscles by reinforcing a sense of self, improving self-regulation, building personal resources and supporting relationships.

We would warn against specifically confronting issues or disorders in the traditional, head-on, way (i.e. writing about it directly) because, even in psychologically healthy individuals, writing about difficulties brings negative effects in the short term; and for younger people whose brain function is less well developed, the benefits of exposure and reframing tend to be less accessible.

Our aim is to design a wellbeing programme which offers a variety of writing techniques and sits within a wider psychoeducational format in a safe, supportive environment. We would encourage participants' exploration of topics, styles, platforms and audiences, and would explicitly share with them the potential benefits of writing for wellbeing, considering which writing tools might be better for thinking, decision-making, creativity or goal-setting – thus providing them with a practical, lifelong toolkit.

Workshops would also provide an opportunity to educate and empower young people around specific (mental health) themes as they emerge during the writing process - e.g. relationship challenges or self-regulation issues - forming a tailored 'collective needs assessment'.



The intention is to inspire them too with the writing of others and for this to be a joyful experience. Our hope is that, in future, writing might simply form part of a deliberate toolkit towards emotional wellbeing and empowered youth narratives.

“We become the stories that we tell ourselves. Write yours with passion and joy...” (Minarik, 2012).



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