

Kathleen Adams  
& DeeAnna Nagel



The Benefits of  
Therapeutic  
Writing

**K**athleen Adams LPC, is a clinical journal therapist and the founder/director of the Center for Journal Therapy ([www.journaltherapy.com](http://www.journaltherapy.com)) and its professional training division, the fully online Therapeutic Writing Institute ([www.TWInstitute.net](http://www.TWInstitute.net)). She is the author/editor of nine books on journal therapy, including the best-selling *Journal to the Self and Expressive Writing: Foundations of Practice*, due out in July 2013. She has been a tireless spokesperson for the power of writing for healing, change and growth for nearly 30 years and is known as a

pragmatic visionary in her approaches to writing as a therapeutic tool. In an internet survey she was listed, along with Anais Nin and Anne Frank, as one of the three most influential journal writers of the 20th century.

Although familiar with her work, I only recently met Kathleen when I attended a workshop she conducted this past spring in New Jersey. As an online therapist, I have used the written word as a therapeutic tool for nearly 15 years. The topic of therapeutic writing fits both within the process of journal writing and in the use of written



interventions such as email/discussion forums and Internet Relay Chat.

As you read through, begin to conceptualize applying journal writing methodology to on-line therapy and coaching. And then, hold that thought! We will be continuing this interview in a further issue of TILT, focusing down on the use of technology and the application of therapeutic writing within cyberspace!

## Q ● Why do people write journals?

KA: Journal writing is one of the most reliable and effective ways we have to stay in touch with whatever's going on in the present moment. The journal creates a bridge between the past and the future. It helps clarify angst, objectify drama and heal trauma. And it helps us know and remember who we are, so we can celebrate the everyday joys and successes as well as the major achievements of our lives.

## Q ● Has there been research on the benefits of journaling?

KA: Absolutely! Dr. James Pennebaker, a research psychologist and chair of the psychology department at the University of Texas in Austin, has done landmark work correlating writing with both emotional and physiological healing for the past 30 years. In a nutshell, the research model is: three or four episodes of writing over a several-

day period – daily, or every couple of days—about a topic that is emotionally upsetting and that is also hard to talk about or let go of. That's it. There's a structure the research subjects often follow—tell the story, add in some layers, look for patterns or connections, consider moving on—but even that little bit of structure isn't absolutely necessary for healing benefit.

There are various theories as to why this works. Pennebaker first started out with the "inhibition theory"; that it's hard physiological and emotional work to suppress something—to keep a secret—and when we release it, even if it is in the privacy of words on paper in our journals, we free up physiological and emotional resources for healing. More recently, he's been looking at the fact that people are storytelling animals, and our life events—big and small—want to seek the container of story. Particularly when we're experiencing difficult or upsetting events, we want to make sense of them, and putting them into language allows us to make cohesive, coherent sense of them.

There's also recent research in brain science about how we can actually change neural pathways and reprogram ourselves for success by, among other things, the thoughts we think and the language choices we use. It's not particularly startling; we've probably all had mothers or grandmothers who told us about "glass half-empty" and "glass half-full" orientations, but what's really exciting is that we apparently actually can change the way we think and behave through the words that we choose. And writing is a powerful way to anchor in different choices. Pennebaker says that even choosing to write "I am not happy" rather than "I am sad" gives the brain a shot of good word juice.

Q ● It's like writing  
● helps digest the  
experience,  
whatever that  
experience is.

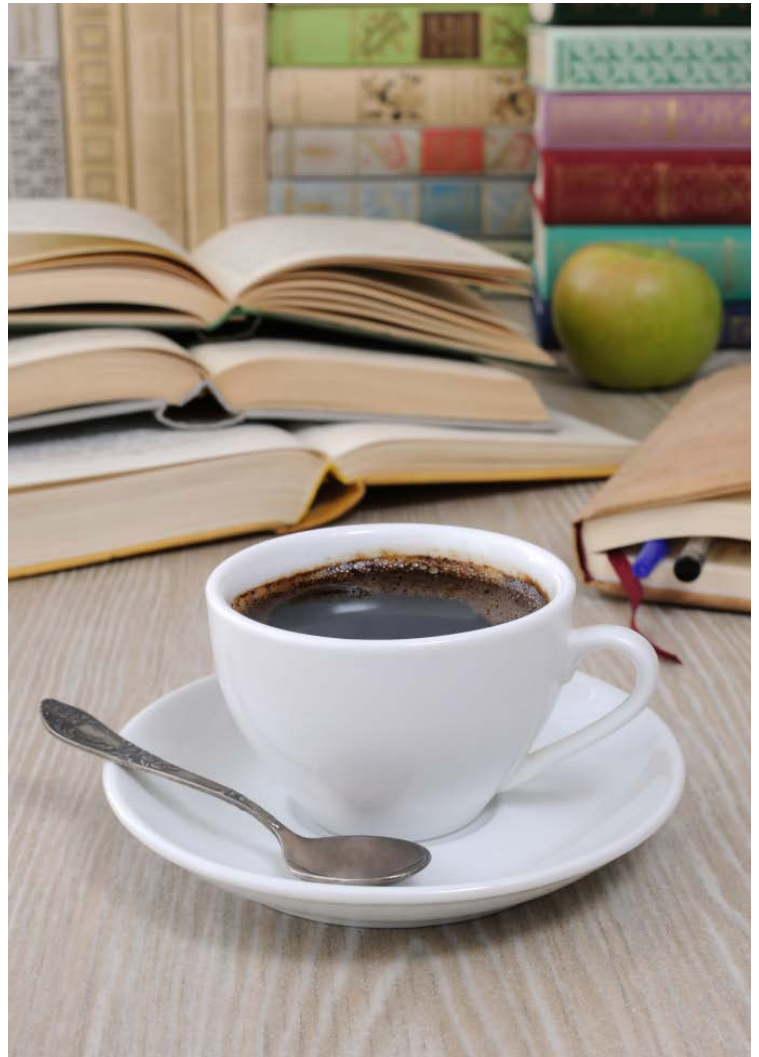
KA: Yes, and some fiber to go along with it!

Q ● What do you say  
● to someone who is  
just getting  
started?

KA: I say, "welcome!" And I suggest spending some time developing a relationship with the journal. Making friends with your journal is just like creating any other relationship; it takes time to get acquainted and build trust. Both literally and metaphorically, the journal is an extension of the self.

Q ● How does a  
● person build a  
relationship with  
the journal?

KA: One of the first things is to find a journal you're comfortable with. Computer, spiral notebook, pretty blank book, yellow pad – doesn't matter, but you need to like it and feel good, or at least neutral, about writing in it. If you're a wide-lined person, don't write on narrow-lined paper. If you hate to write by hand, find a good on-line journal method



(I love [LifeJournal by Chronicle Software](#), and they just released an online version). If you love glitter gel pens or mechanical pencils, buy them by the dozen. These seemingly silly decisions can go a long way toward building a journal relationship.

Then you can start experimenting with different ways to write. My whole teaching methodology is based on the idea that people succeed when they have lots of choices – including lots of techniques, but also lots of permission to write or not write. There may be weeks or months between entries. Then there may be weeks or months when you write a lot.

Most people do better if they have some structure to begin with. Can you realistically commit to two or three times a week? Can you agree with yourself that you'll write for five minutes every morning when you get to the office, just to organize and plan your day? Can you take twenty minutes when you wake up with a dream to get it on the page? Giving yourself these accountabilities is a powerful statement about your willingness to devote attention to your own well-being and self-care.

Q ● Is journal writing good for everyone?

KA: Well it's not a cure-all or panacea, and I've certainly seen plenty of people who used their journals as avoidance, or a way to beat themselves up, or to justify choices that they knew in their heart of hearts weren't healthy. There are some people who find journal writing frustrating or demoralizing or generally more challenging than helpful. Journal writing isn't necessarily good for everyone. But a structured, intentional approach to writing can have therapeutic benefit for nearly everyone who is willing to align with best-practice standards. That's where having a coach or counselor who has studied journal therapy or therapeutic writing can come in very handy.

Q ● Where does a coach or counselor study?

KA: There are many fine practitioners of the work. When my first book, *Journal to the Self*, came

out in 1990, there were about two dozen books on journal writing. Now there are about 500! Some of the best authors and thinkers in the field are on the faculty of my own fully online Therapeutic Writing Institute, where we teach both theory and best practice. It's one-stop shopping for those who facilitate others, or who want a deepened experience with their own journals.

Q ● Why do people resist journaling even though they know it's good for them?

KA: Sometimes because they figure they'll probably find out stuff that they don't really want to know. The beauty and sometimes curse of journal writing is that it lets you read your own mind. It can be scary to find out what's lurking in the darkness of your own shadows.

Quite a few years ago now I spent two years setting up a journal therapy program for people who had been horribly abused as children. Everyone was dealing with excruciating psychological and emotional pain. These clients were often afraid to write about their lives because their abuse had been loaded up with threats of great harm if they told anyone. Or it was simply too ghastly to put into words. That led me to investigate how to make journal writing safe for people healing from the deepest psychological and emotional wounds. I found that structure; pacing; containment; and permission were key factors. This is all imbedded in a methodology that I call the Journal Ladder, which I've written about extensively.





I guess my rule of thumb is that I see the journal as a healing tool, and if it's feeling like a burden or a scary nightmare, then I work with people to back it off so that it feels manageable, purposeful and safe. A lot of barriers can be overcome with some basic teaching about how to maintain a journal environment that is safe and protected.

Q ● In your own journal do you experience times when it feels like it's not going anywhere?

KA: Oh, sure. Sometimes I bore myself silly. Sometimes I just wander around in circles and never come to resolution. Sometimes this is because there's something I don't want to look at, so I just ask myself the journal question, "What don't I want to know?" or "What am I avoiding?" Sometimes I'm in a gestation period where I'm not yet word-ripe. I had a meditation teacher

who used to say, "Winter is not a mistake," and sometimes emptiness needs to be honored and respected. Sometimes I'm not supposed to be writing—I'm supposed to be doing my dishes, or riding my bike, or going to a movie with a friend.

Q ● You make journal writing sound accessible to just about anyone!

KA: That's the mission of my business, the Center for Journal Therapy – to make the healing art and science of journal writing accessible to all who desire self-directed change. In nearly 30 years of doing this work, I've learned a lot about how the vast power of writing for healing, growth and change. Yet there's always something about beginner mind that I'm always yearning to come back to. The simplicity and elegance of the journal allows us to know ourselves better, like ourselves more and feel more peaceful in our own skin. People who know who they are and like themselves have no incentive to create or participate in unhealthy behaviors or relationships. People who are peaceful have no incentive to make war. The journal helps us learn to live peacefully, within and without. And to me, a peaceful heart, mind and spirit is the greatest gift of the journal. ■

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This interview is offered with much appreciation to Kathleen for sharing her expertise with TILT readers. Remember to stay tuned for another interview that will highlight the use of technology within therapeutic writing. Don't miss our Love of Books section where you can read about Pennebaker's new book *Writing to Heal*.