Words for Wellbeing

Using creative writing to benefit health and wellbeing

edited by Carol Ross
foreword by Jim Eldridge
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Making the Most of *Words for Wellbeing*

Marilyn Messenger

Wellbeing is at the centre of a balanced life. Taking care of our mental and physical wellbeing is essential. Our mental wellbeing in particular, and how we view ourselves, is fundamental because it has an effect on how we form relationships with other people and how we manage the inevitable ups and downs of our lives. Mental wellbeing, like physical wellbeing, involves maintaining reserves of energy and ability that help us to be resilient when life takes a challenging turn.

Creative activities have long been viewed as beneficial when we are worried or anxious, but writing has often been overlooked in this respect. Yet no one would argue with the idea that words are capable of creating something magical. Written or spoken, words can move us to tears with the beauty of their imagery or captured emotion and they can make us laugh out loud. Words often live within us, long after we have read or heard them, to kindle further thoughts or images. And all of this is created by human beings, fashioned from somewhere within us and often using the simplest of tools: a pen and a piece of paper.

Perhaps the very ‘magic’ of words is the reason why many people imagine that writing creatively is beyond their capabilities – they don’t see themselves as wizards or sorcerers. *Words for Wellbeing* is a book which aims to show its readers that they can indeed write and, even better, that writing could help them towards an improved sense of wellbeing.

*Words for Wellbeing* has a varied selection of chapters, poems, images and prose pieces. There are accounts in the book written by people who have overcome major problems in their lives and who offer a moving insight into how this was achieved. Reliable, practical advice abounds and there are writing exercises to explore.

Some readers of this book may already enjoy writing and would like to help others to share the same rewards. There are chapters in
*Words for Wellbeing* which show how successful practitioners achieve this regularly.

Some chapters may awaken your interest straight away because they are particularly relevant to an existing need or situation in your life. Others that seem at first glance to be less relevant may turn out to be the most helpful.

You can read this diverse book from cover to cover, select initially from the contents listed, or simply dip into its pages for inspiration and encouragement. Above all, readers of *Words for Wellbeing* should quickly appreciate that they don’t need ‘special powers’ to write, because they already have the ability to create with words. They simply need the encouragement that this book offers to get their words onto paper or to help others to do so.

*Words for Wellbeing* has been compiled to help people to discover and enjoy writing as a possible means of finding their way back to wellbeing. With chapters that inform and enlighten and creative writing to enjoy and inspire, this book shows that we all have the ability to write.

Finally, whilst not an exhaustive list, *Words for Wellbeing* is intended to be of help to the following groups of people:

- Those who would like to try writing both for pleasure, and as a means to help their wellbeing
- People who are unwell, recovering from a period of illness or experiencing stress
- Clinicians and therapists who want to explore the possibilities of writing therapy
- Educators, parents and young people.

Once encouraged to write, anyone can then discover that their writing has the power to amaze others, and frequently astonish themselves. How wonderful is that!
Chapter 1 – Word Power

Carol Ross

People write a lot – letters, diaries, poems, stories, ‘to do’ lists, shopping lists. And let’s not forget electronic forms of writing – blogs, emails, Tweets, texts. There are so many ways to write creatively that lots of people do it all the time without even thinking that they’re writing, and certainly without realising that it could be doing them good.

Writing is good for you! This book has come about because I passionately believe that and the aim of this chapter is to persuade you to start writing. Lots of people love writing and need no persuasion from me to do it. I want to persuade people who don’t think of themselves as writers to give creative writing a try as a way of helping their health and wellbeing. It doesn’t seem to matter what you write, it is the process of putting thoughts down in writing that does you good. It certainly doesn’t matter how ‘well’ you feel you can write. When you write for your wellbeing you are writing just for you – so don’t worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar and all that.

Although I do a lot of typing, I find that writing my thoughts down on paper has a calming effect on me over and above the effects of ‘writing’ on my computer. It may be that the rhythmic motion of my hand and the pen across the paper is soothing. But I also think that writing on paper allows thoughts to flow more freely. When I type I cannot resist going back to correct ‘typos’ which breaks the flow of my writing. If you do a lot of typing (or texting), I recommend that you try some freewriting (see later in this chapter) on paper every day for a few days and see how it makes you feel. Handwriting does seem to work differently to typing – but you should do what feels right for you.

Write what you feel you want – or need – to write, but try to write a little every day. The best way to encourage yourself to write is to practise. The more you write, the more you want to write. As a minimum, I would recommend you do 6 minutes of freewriting
every day – perhaps in your diary/journal, or in a writer’s notebook that you could carry around with you everywhere and use to note down any interesting things you see or hear that you might want to write about later. Freewriting is an enjoyable and powerful writing technique. It can provide inspiration for all kinds of more structured writing, such as: poetry, song lyrics, stories, essays, and writing about problems and worries.

Try to find a regular time to write – whatever time works best for you. Writing at the same time each day will encourage you to keep going. I find that writing at the end of the day can help clear my thoughts so I sleep better. Some people like to write first thing in the morning to find some calm to help them deal with the day ahead. Experiment with different times of day to find what works best for you and your life circumstances. But don’t let yourself think you have no time to write – 6 minutes a day is not much time to find even in the busiest of days.

Experiment with different kinds of writing to find what you enjoy. Try something different. For example, if you like writing freestyle poetry, you could try writing a sonnet (Sweeney & Williams, 2003). If you like to sing, try writing song lyrics (Davis, 1988).

The biggest barrier to writing is finding the motivation to keep going. Setting aside a regular time to write will help with that, but you will also need to find some outside inspiration and support to keep going. You might think about doing a creative writing evening class or joining a writing group (face-to-face or online). Books, magazines and websites can give you inspiration to keep writing too (Capacchione, 1989; Morgenstern, 2005; Neubauer, 2006; Ross, 2012; Sweeney & Williams, 2003). Best of all might be to find someone else who wants to write so you can encourage each other. I have writing friends who live hundreds of miles away from me. We met on online writing courses and now we keep in touch and encourage each other by email.

This chapter is mainly about writing but reading books and listening to audiobooks can also help your wellbeing. I find that listening to an audiobook every night helps me get a restful sleep. Check out your local library: as well as having a large number of
fiction and non-fiction books to borrow, it may have a range of audiobooks, and possibly some self-help books/audiobooks (Cumbria Libraries, 2012).

**Freewriting**

Freewriting means writing for a timed period without stopping to think, punctuate or correct your writing in any way. The idea is to just keep writing whatever comes into your head, without stopping. If you stop and don’t know what to write next, just write: “I don’t know what to write” a few times and more thoughts will come.

I mainly use two types of freewriting in my writing groups: (i) writing everything that comes into your mind for 6 minutes starting without any sort of stimulus (see Bolton, 2011, p. 33); and (ii) writing in response to stimulus words or phrases: 5 words, 2 minutes per word.

Try the following idea for freewriting. Look around you until something catches your eye – something that interests you. Look at whatever it is for a few seconds. Now, start to write whatever comes into your head and keep writing for 6 minutes. The idea is not necessarily to write about the thing you were looking at, but just to write down your thoughts. Remember: you are writing only for you, don’t stop to think or correct anything, and spelling and punctuation don’t matter. Don’t worry if your thoughts come out jumbled and random. Just keep writing – you might be surprised by what comes out. Why not try freewriting every day?

**Ideas for freewriting:**

- Try freewriting in response to a random word or sentence you read in a book or newspaper.

- Freewrite in response to a painting or photograph.

- Or you could turn on the radio, and freewrite in response to the first story you hear. You might change the story a bit and write something different, or the radio story might remind you of a memory and you could write about that. See where your writing takes you.
• You might write a story, or a poem or something about your past or your future. Just write what you feel like writing, two lines or two pages – it’s up to you.

• Choose a ‘set’ of words that go together and write for 2 minutes in response to each word (I find that 2 minutes is about 1” or 2.5 cm of hand writing on an A4 page). An example word set could be: wind, wave, sea, ship, shore. Freewriting from word sets can produce great inspiration for writing poems and song lyrics.

• Read a poem or listen to a song and then write in response to it.

**Journals and diaries**

If you only do one kind of writing for the benefit of your wellbeing, do this: write regularly in a journal or diary. A word of caution though: if you find that your thoughts at the moment are all negative, be careful what you write in your diary because you don’t want to emphasise your negative thoughts. If you are thinking negatively try making it a rule to only write about positive things in your diary – even if the positive things seem quite mundane to you some days, like “I got out of bed today” or “I went to the shop to buy milk this morning”. Celebrate the positives however small they may seem.

There are no rules for writing journals or diaries – just write what you want. The only rule you might want to set for yourself is to always date every entry. That way you can look back through your journal(s) and see how things have changed.

If you want to use a diary rather than a journal you need to choose one that will give you enough space to write what you want to write. Some diaries give you a whole page per day.

One disadvantage of a dated diary is that unless you write in your diary every day you will end up with blank pages. That’s why I prefer to use a journal, which is just a diary with no printed dates – in other words a blank notebook in which you write your own dates. There are no wasted pages with a journal, and you can write as much or as little as you like each day with no restrictions on
space. And there are no blank pages to make you feel guilty about not writing anything for a few days.

Journals come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I like to use an A5 size spiral bound notebook with a pretty cover and plenty of pages. Some people like to use an A4 notebook, and some prefer a bound book because they seem more substantial. The choice really is endless.

If you decide to write in pen, rather than pencil, choose one with fast flowing ink because your thoughts always go faster than your pen! Writing in different colours can be fun – just choose the colour that suits how you feel that particular day. I have a pencil case full of pens and pencils so I always have lots of choice.

Journals don’t have to just be about writing. Some people decorate the cover of their journal with drawings, ribbons, buttons, tickets, photographs, etc. I don’t decorate the cover, but I stick souvenirs inside my journal – programmes, photographs, tickets, and so on. Sometimes I sketch something I’ve seen – my drawing skills aren’t great, but my journal is just for me so it doesn’t matter.

**Ideas for what to write in your journal or diary:**

- Write about what you did and where you went today. Add your thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears.
- Write down your dreams – this works best if done as soon as you wake up.
- On the hour, every hour, for one day write one word that sums up how you feel at that moment. Then towards the end of the day choose two or three of the words to write some more about (Morgenstern, 2005, p. 79, 11 March).
- Write about something that happened or a conversation. Next, imagine that you are the other person in the conversation, or perhaps an object that was there at the time – a coffee cup maybe. Now write about the event or conversation again from this new point of view (Bolton, 2010, p. 123).
• Write lists – your favourite films/books/people, your shopping list, things you want to do this year (Adams, 1990, p. 123; Bolton, 2011, p. 34).

• Write letters to your journal as if it was a best friend.

• Freewriting for a few minutes every day. Decide how long to write for and then just write whatever comes into your head.

• Make a list of all the important areas of your life, e.g., family, friends, singing, writing. Every day write about the next one on the list (see ‘Topics du Jour’ in Adams, 1990, p. 167).

• A potted history of you.

• A letter from (or to) yourself (as you are in the present) to (or from) yourself sometime in the past or future, e.g., a future when you are well and happy.

• The story of how you want your life to be in 5 years.

• The best or worst thing about the day in question.

• Include detail in your writing, e.g., what could you see, hear, feel, smell and taste at the time you are writing about? How were you feeling?

**Writing groups**

There are different kinds of writing group so if the first one you try is not for you don’t be put off. Some writing groups write during their meetings, whereas other groups meet to discuss writing but don’t write in the meetings. Some writing groups take their writing very seriously and their members might have had work published or be working towards publication. And some groups are more welcoming to beginners than others.

You could start a *Words for Wellbeing* (Ross, 2012) group yourself – it’s much easier than you might expect. A writing group can just be a small number of like-minded people who get together to inspire each other to write. One person can take responsibility for bringing writing stimuli and writing exercises for the group to try,
or the group members could take it in turns to provide writing inspiration.

The library could be a good place to help you find an existing group, or start your own group – they might be able to provide you with a room to meet, or display leaflets advertising your group. You might want to consider volunteering to lead a writing group where you work or study, or in your local hospital.

**Comics**

Making comics can be fun if you like drawing. Try this way of making a simple comic: fold a piece of A4 or A3 paper in half to make a 4-page booklet. With a fine black pen, draw a line horizontally across the middle of the front page. Next draw two more lines to divide the bottom half of the page into four equal rectangles or ‘panels’. Now draw lines to make eight equal rectangular panels on each of the other three pages of the booklet. The big space at the top of the front page is for the title of the comic and the first panel of the story, which should set the scene for the whole story. Now continue the story through the booklet.

It’s a good idea to plan your story first so you know what you are going to draw and write in each panel. Don’t use too much text, mainly you will need speech bubbles, thought bubbles and some short pieces of descriptive or explanatory text where necessary, e.g., ‘...three days later...’

To make your comic more interesting and professional-looking, try drawing most of the small panels as individual rectangles separated by narrow strips of white space (rather than using intersecting lines to make the panels as described above), and leave the big panel on the front and two or three small panels on each page with no border.

If you find you enjoy making comics I recommend the book *Making Comics* by Scott McCloud (McCloud, 2006).

**Blogs, social networking sites, etc.**

People all over the world enjoy sharing their thoughts and experiences on the web. Many people find it helpful to share their
problems on support websites and interactive blogs. They get support from the comments of others and find comfort from reading about people who have had similar experiences to their own. Sharing your thoughts online may not be for you. If you do post personal thoughts and feelings online, please take care what you reveal about yourself. On many websites it is possible to remain anonymous.

**How can writing help your wellbeing?**

We don’t know exactly how writing benefits health and wellbeing, although many research studies have shown that it does. I believe that writing probably benefits different people in different ways, for example:

- Providing a ‘flow experience’ (see next section on research).
- Bringing enjoyment – sometimes during difficult times.
- Giving you something different to think about.
- Clarifying your thoughts and feelings.
- Helping you to learn ‘Mindfulness’ – “Mindful Writing works by writing down your thoughts and feelings as you experience them. This strengthens your sense of NOW. The more you can accept yourself as you are, the more you can change” (Beier & Birkenhead, 2012).

- Bringing a sense of calm and decreasing anxiety.
- Lifting your mood.
- Allowing you to discover or re-discover an interest – not just in writing but through the topics that come out in your writing.
- Bringing out topics that inspire meaningful and interesting conversations.
- Reminding you of happy times and positive memories.
- Giving you a chance to ‘stretch’ yourself.
- Letting you re-define yourself as a writer rather than as someone with this or that diagnosis.
• Giving you the opportunity to share thoughts with others (e.g., when you write in a group or share writing online).

• Encouraging catharsis, i.e., the purging of emotions or relieving of emotional tensions.

• Making it easier to ‘open up’ and talk to someone about your problems, e.g., therapist or counsellor (see next section on research).

Research
Research shows that writing can have positive effects on wellbeing (for some examples see: Lepore and Smyth, 2002; Harris, 2006; Lowe, 2004; Wright and Chung, 2001). No-one knows how writing works (King, 2002, p. 119), although there has been some interesting brain research done (Lieberman et al., 2007). However, what is known is that it is the process of writing that leads to wellbeing benefits, and not what is done with the writing afterwards.

Much of the research that has been done about the benefits of creative writing, has involved people being asked to write about negative events. But I agree with Laura King (2002, p. 131) who says that it’s not necessary to write about negative emotions or traumatic events to gain benefit from writing. People also benefit from writing that inspires happiness or joy. I believe it’s important to achieve a balance between writing that helps you deal with unhappy thoughts or problems, and more neutral or positive writing that creates a sense of calm or encourages positive thoughts.

Do you know the saying to be ‘in the flow’? A flow activity is something that you do just for the sake of it, and which takes up your whole concentration. And ‘flow activities’ are good for you (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). What activities do you do that give you that feeling of being in the flow? For many people, writing is a flow activity, and that could be partly how it helps wellbeing. But not everyone finds writing a flow experience. Find out what your flow experiences are – playing football, gardening, learning guitar – and spend more time doing them.
Encouraging people to write can help them clarify their thoughts and feelings and express them to someone else. A Danish psychiatrist called Peder Terpager Rasmussen, recognizing the usefulness of writing in helping clients to explore their personal experiences, developed a systematic approach to guided letter writing. Rasmussen explained that the writing “is only a pathway, a channel, or a means towards the therapeutic end of self discovery and self healing”, and he introduced “the metaphor of using a train as a means to explore a country” (Rasmussen and Tomm, 1992, p.4). Writing could be the train you use to explore the country that is you.

Some research carried out with young people has shown that blogging can help aspects of wellbeing (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2011).

For an interesting discussion on a theoretical model to explain how mindfulness can lead to positive change see “Mechanisms of mindfulness” by Shapiro, Carson, Astin and Freedman (2006).

So far, most of the research on therapeutic writing has been carried out in the USA and I feel that therapeutic creative writing is less advanced in the UK than in the USA. However, I find it encouraging that the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR, 2011) has commissioned an evidence synthesis or systematic review of research on the use of therapeutic writing in long-term conditions.

**Conclusion**

There’s no doubt in my mind that writing is good for you. I hope I may have convinced you of the therapeutic benefits of writing. Go on – give it a try!

**References**


