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THE WRITING CURE

A Four Day Protocol for

Writing Toward the Reckoning

Dr. Sarah Long

Doctor's Note

Dear One,

Inside these pages, you'll explore the foundations of the practice I teach. What you're about to do is called *expressive writing*. It's a structured intervention developed at the University of Texas in the mid-1980s by research psychologist James Pennebaker.

In his original study, participants wrote about a difficult experience for 15 to 20 minutes a day, four days in a row. In the months that followed, participants made fewer visits to the doctor, slept better, and showed measurable improvements in immune function.

That single finding has now been replicated in more than three hundred peer-reviewed studies, across populations including veterans with PTSD, cancer patients, hospice workers, caregivers, and people in chronic pain.

The cognitive mechanisms responsible for these physiological improvements are now reasonably well understood. The act of putting language on a difficult experience (called *affect labeling*) activates the prefrontal cortex and quiets the amygdala, our brain's threat-detection center. Additionally, writing by hand, a requirement of this process, recruits whole regions of the brain that typing does not, slowing the mind down so it can see more clearly through the ruminative thoughts, fragmented memories, and anxious impulses.

What follows is a four-day protocol adapted and refined from Pennebaker's original study, but I want to make a few points before you dive in. This is not journaling. It is not a gratitude list. It is not like Morning Pages if you've done such work. Those are useful practices – I've done (and love!) them all – but the evidence base behind them is small and less rigorous compared to the evidence base behind the structured protocols I use.

The Pennebaker protocol was designed as a brief intervention, a kick start, but it is not a substitute for sustained therapeutic work. If you're experiencing an acute psychological crisis, seek help from your therapist, psychiatrist, or physician. Now is not the time to work on this protocol.

For some of you, what surfaces in these four days will be more than four days can hold. If you find that you need more on the other side, that is the signal to bring it to a witness and move forward to the next stage of the process. The goal of these four days is not to finish anything. It is to *attend* and begin to metabolize what you've been ignoring or simply managing.

Take good care,

Dr. Sarah

Day 1

words to live by

“We must not wish for the disappearance of our troubles, but for the grace to transform them.” — Simone Weil

1. Set a timer for twenty minutes. Pen and paper, door closed, phone off.
2. Write what happened. Just what happened, not the meaning, not the moral. Whatever surfaces.
3. Tell the truth. Especially the parts you have not told anyone, including yourself. Especially the parts that do not flatter you.
4. When the timer rings, stop. Even mid-sentence. Close the notebook and do not re-read tonight.

Day 2

words to live by

“What if the question is not why are you so infrequently the person you really want to be, but why do you so infrequently want to be the person you really are?” — Oriah Mountain Dreamer

1. If you can: same time, same place, same pen. What you must commit to: twenty minutes, *same* experience.
2. Tonight, write what it cost you. What you lost. What you gave up. What you stopped being able to feel. What you started performing or managing in its place.
3. Say the thing you only circled around yesterday. Be *ruthlessly* honest. No one will ever read this unless you want them to.
4. When the timer rings, stop. Close the notebook. Be gentle with yourself the rest of the night. Do not reread.

Day 3

Useful questions you might write toward tonight:

What did this experience teach me about myself?

Who did I become because of it and who did I stop being?

What do I know now that I wish I had known then?

Given what I now know, what is this asking of me?

What would it look like to live as if this experience mattered?

words to live by

“And there's hope in the telling.” — Maggie Smith
from *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*

1. If you can: same time, same place, same pen. What you must commit to: twenty minutes, *same* (yep, the same!) experience.
2. Tonight, look for the *meaning*. Not the moral or the silver lining. Meaning is what you understand now that you did not understand before, and purpose is what that understanding asks of you next.
3. Pick one and follow it but don't force resolution. If meaning has not yet arrived, write *I do not yet know what this meant, but I suspect what it is asking of me*. Then keep going. Don't get stuck in the uncertainty.
4. When the timer rings, stop. Close the notebook. Do not reread.

Day 4

words to live by

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one most adaptable to change.” — Darwin

1. If you can: same time, same place, same pen. What you must commit to: twenty minutes, *same* (last call!) experience.
2. Tonight, write toward the body. Bring the experience to mind and write what you notice. Is the alarm quieter? Is something looser? Does the memory land differently? Write that first. Then keep going.
3. Put yourself in the picture in the present tense. Surviving got you here. It cannot take you further. Tonight, write toward the one who is ready to do more than endure.
4. When the timer rings, stop. Set the notebook aside. Wait at least one day before re-reading.

Doctor's Note

Well done.

Wait *at least* one day before re-reading. Two is better. The pause is part of the protocol. It gives the nervous system time to do the consolidation work that the writing started, so you can reflect with greater clarity.

When you're ready, sit down with all four days in front of you and read them in order. Do not edit. Do not apologize for or rethink what you wrote. Read it the way you would read a lover's letters: with curiosity, not judgment.

The following are a few of the markers that show up in the research as predictors of measurable, physiological change.

1. **Coherence.** Did the story acquire a beginning, a middle, and end? On day one, most people write fragments. Flashes of memory, scattered emotion, things half-said. By day four, a recognizable story usually emerges, with cause and consequence and a self moving through it. This shift – from fragmented, anxious chaos to coherent narrative – is what predicts the physiological changes the research has measured and predicts. If you see it in your own writing, that is the work doing what it is designed to do. The effects may not be immediate. Most people feel *worse* after the first day of writing, in fact. But within a week or so, when you recall the *thing*, pay close attention to where and how you experience it in the body. I'd bet you lunch, something has shifted.

2. **Insight words.** Read for the moments where you used language like *I realized, I see now, I understand, I think it was because, what I didn't see at the time was...* Pennebaker's research found that the increase in insight words across the four days predicted health outcomes more reliably than any other variable. If your day-four writing contains more of this language than your day-one writing, you are doing the integrative work, even if it doesn't feel like it.

3. **Causal language.** Look for words like *because, since, that's why, what led to*. These mark the brain's transition from carrying an experience as raw sensation, which often triggers the amygdala when remembered or re-experienced, flooding the body with stress hormones, to holding it as a story with cause and consequence. They are a sign that the prefrontal cortex is back online and starting to regain control, and that the structure of the story (beginning, middle, end) is now a container doing what it was designed to do – hold the *thing* so you can attend to it without being consumed or terrified by it.

4. A shift in pronouns.

This is subtle, and you have to look closely. Pennebaker's lab found that people who improved most often shifted their pronoun use across the four days, sometimes from *I to we*, sometimes from *you to I*, or sometimes from *past tense to present*. The specific shift matters less than that one happens because it indicates that your relationship to the material under observation has or is moved/moving.

5. Bodily signals. Notice what's happening in your body as you reread what's on the page. Are you sleeping differently? Has something in your shoulders, your gut, your jaw, loosened slightly? Are you able to think a bit more clearly? Did you wake up this morning thinking about the experience and not flinch? Or did you wake up this morning finally *not* thinking about the experience? These are the somatic markers of integration. They often arrive before the cognitive ones.

6. The grip test. Read your writing all the way through. When you finish, put it down and walk away. After an hour, notice: have you been able to leave it down? Or has it pulled you back? A loosening grip is one of the clearest indicators that the unmetabolized thing has begun to metabolize. If you can read what you wrote and then close the notebook and not return to it or start ruminating on it for the rest of the day, something has moved.

What if none of these have happened?

Sometimes four days surface more than they resolve. That's not a failure – it's information.

Three possibilities:

- *Wrong duration.* Some material needs a longer arc and a witness.
- *Wrong thread.* What surfaced may not be what you sat down to write about. Follow what surfaced.
- *Wrong angle.* You may have written around rather than toward. The medicine is in the *toward*.

What now?

Expressive writing reaches the part of you that has been managing, and begins to help you metabolize it. Sometimes what surfaces is bigger than four days can hold. That might be grief that doesn't lift, anger that wants somewhere to land, or a self you'd abandoned. It might be a decision becoming clear, or a relationship suddenly visible in a way you can't unsee. These are signals, not symptoms. Nothing is wrong with you. You've simply entered the reckoning.

The next step is to find a witness. If you'd like that witness to be me, send me a note. Regardless, I hope you found this tool useful. It is always available to you. As am I.

Take good care,

Dr. Sarah