



# Expressive Writing: Your First Step to Eliminate Chronic Pain

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By any measure, chronic pain is an epidemic in the U.S. Fully one-third of Americans suffer from the condition—about 30 million people. Faced with treatment options that are limited, risky, and often ineffective, we spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year on chronic pain with little long-term benefit.

Severe chronic pain can be compared to falling into an abyss, leaving sufferers depressed, anxious, angry, and socially isolated. In fact, studies have revealed that the impact of chronic pain on a person's quality of life is equivalent to that of terminal cancer (1). I know, because I was a chronic pain sufferer for over fifteen years.

## MY STORY OF CHRONIC PAIN

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My journey into the abyss began with a panic attack while driving across a bridge late one night. I was already a practicing orthopedic spine surgeon and I was returning from a spine society meeting. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. My heart started pounding; I felt like I was going to pass out and possibly die. I didn't realize it then, but this began a thirteen-year descent into my own personal hell.

Unrecognized stresses that had been building from my youth, through school, and during my professional life surfaced. Physical symptoms I had been ignoring for years—back pain, a burning sensation in my feet, and ringing in my ears—intensified and became intolerable. I couldn't sleep. I developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Because I didn't know how to confide in those closest to me, I hid my misery. My marriage fell apart and I seriously contemplated suicide.

In retrospect, I'm not sure how I made it through. The unrelenting anxiety was nearly intolerable. But, motivated by my family, supportive friends and my patients, I hung on. start with.

I've been pain-free for over fifteen years and have helped hundreds of patients rid themselves of chronic pain. Remarkably, my healing began with a simple yet powerful tool that cost virtually nothing: It is called expressive writing.

Expressive writing is simply recording your honest thoughts—both pleasant and unpleasant—on paper, with no editing, censoring, or filtering; and then immediately tearing up and discarding your writing. You don't judge or analyze what you wrote, or share it with anyone.

As I began daily expressive writing, my pain and anxiety noticeably decreased within a couple of weeks. It was the first noticeable improvement in my condition, after trying every imaginable treatment. At first I thought I had discovered some new approach; but finally I made the connection between the writing and my newfound sense of hope. I wondered, if this

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practice worked this well for me, would it also work for my patients? The answer was a resounding “yes.”

You might be wondering how this simple activity could impact something so formidable as severe chronic pain. To understand how expressive writing works, it is helpful to explore how chronic pain works.

## THE NATURE OF CHRONIC PAIN

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Let's begin with a simple analogy. Imagine accidentally touching a hot burner on a stove. As soon as you feel that intense heat, your hand reflexively recoils. This acute pain—new pain caused by an injury, inflammation, or disease—lights up circuits in the “acute pain center” (nociceptive area) of the brain.

Now imagine that you feel the burner's heat but cannot pull your hand away. How would you feel? When I ask my patients this question, they usually use words like angry, fearful, panicked, enraged—all natural reactions to inescapable physical pain. Those emotions set off a cascade of chemicals and hormones (such as the fight-or-flight substances adrenaline, cortisol, and histamines), which sensitizes our nervous system, raises our anxiety levels, and amplifies our sensation of pain.

When pain lasts for three months or more, it is considered *chronic* pain. At this point the neurological circuits in the acute pain center go quiet, and instead the *emotional* area of the brain starts lighting up. In other words, the patient experiences the same pain, but a different part of the brain is driving it—the emotional area. (2)

Now that our pain is centered in the emotional area of our brain, it is subject to the stresses of everyday life. Intense feelings can trigger, amplify, or even create a sensation of pain where there is no physical cause. To make matters worse, pain triggers usually operate below our conscious awareness.

A great many chronic pain patients come to me complaining of severe pain, after a personal loss such as a death in the family or the loss of a job. For example, “Betty,” a woman in her sixties with a bone spur in her lower spine, was suffering from a serious case of sciatica. During the course of our conversation, I learned that, not only had she just lost her job, but also her husband had left her and her teenage son recently had been diagnosed with cancer.

I explained to Betty, as I tell all my patients, that, in the case where a patient is suffering severe emotional trauma, I don't perform elective spine surgery until the patient's stress levels have improved. My reason is that frequently patients' pain will resolve once they have begun recovering

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from their loss, even when there is a significant structural problem that might be causing their pain. I asked Betty to try expressive writing and then to progress into other simple practices that I include as part of a healing process, and she agreed. (These other practices address sleep, stress, life outlook, and physical conditioning. Details are at [backincontrol.com](http://backincontrol.com).) Indeed, in about three months, Betty's pain disappeared, without surgery.

## HOW EXPRESSIVE WRITING WORKS ON CHRONIC PAIN

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Why does this simple process work so effectively? Because treatments that target acute rather than chronic pain address only the physical aspects of pain. Expressive writing, on the other hand, addresses the emotional/neurological connection, a significant component of chronic pain.

When I began to research expressive writing, I was amazed to discover over 1,000 studies in the neuroscience literature that documented its healing power for both mental and physical disorders. I even spoke to two of the original researchers to validate what I was observing in my practice (3, 4). Based on my work with hundreds of patients, here are what I believe to be the reasons for this treatment's effectiveness in reducing chronic pain:

- 1. You are not your thoughts.** You can't control your thoughts. Research has shown that suppressing them not only makes them stronger (5), but also damages your short-term memory (6). However, you are able to detach from them. The act of writing creates a space between you and your thoughts. By putting pen to paper, you become the observer of your thoughts and feelings, rather than identifying with them. You become less likely to automatically react to the triggers in your environment. In addition, the fact that you do not save your writing allows you to record your uncensored thoughts, both positive and negative, with complete freedom. No one else will see them but you. Most importantly, you are not analyzing them. They are only thoughts—not "issues."
- 2. Pain loves stress.** As I discussed earlier, strong emotions lead to the production of "stress hormones," which stimulate pain circuits. The act of writing, however, causes the brain to release chemicals that calm the nervous system. As an added bonus, many people have reported that expressive writing right before bedtime allows them to fall asleep more quickly than when they don't write (7, 8).
- 3. Change your brain, lose your pain.** By expressive writing, you associate your thoughts with the visual and tactile sensations of writing, which connects with the unconscious brain. Writing in itself is a complex neurological process, as is destroying the pages. All of this results in the establishment of new neural circuits in the brain, new ways of responding to old pain triggers. As you continue to write every day, these new, "healthy" circuits grow stronger and eventually take over the old ones responsible for your experience of pain. This is the miracle of brain plasticity, which allows so many patients to eliminate their chronic pain without surgery.

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If you obsess about your thoughts and feelings, try to suppress them, or analyze them too much, you risk strengthening your old pain circuits. Your brain develops in the areas where you put your attention. You might as well voluntarily place your hand back on that hot burner, or into a hornet's nest.

In spite of all the evidence extolling the power of expressive writing that I give to my patients, it is remarkable how many chronic pain sufferers resist this simple exercise. One patient, a professor, came to me with lower back nerves that were so tightly pinched, they were causing leg pain. I told him I thought he would benefit from a simple operation called a laminotomy to relieve the pressure; but not before first trying expressive writing for a couple of weeks. He balked, and I refused to perform the surgery, without the patient first making this one simple effort toward his own recovery.

A few weeks later the professor returned. "This is ridiculous," he said, laughing; "I began the writing, and within a week my pain was gone!" He began to employ the rest of my recommended strategies. Years later he was still pain free. He may need surgery someday, but meanwhile, why subject himself to the risks of back surgery, when he is feeling fine?

## EXPRESSIVE WRITING HOW-TO

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Are you ready to begin your recovery from chronic pain? Here are simple instructions for using the expressive writing tool:

- With pen and paper (not a keyboard), write down your thoughts with complete abandon, with no editing or censoring. Do not stop to ponder or choose words; just write stream-of-consciousness style.
- Once you are finished, immediately destroy your pages. Rip them up into little pieces and throw them away where no one else can find them.
- Do this once or twice a day, for five to fifteen minutes, every day. Make it a habit, like brushing your teeth. Even when your pain subsides, retain the expressive writing practice. Keep up your good emotional hygiene.

You may find, as I did, that expressive writing is so effective that it is habit forming. I have made it an essential part of my daily routine. During those occasional periods when I neglect it, my symptoms return within a couple of weeks. I experience sleep disorders and ringing in my ears; skin rashes reappear on the backs of my wrists; both feet burn, my scalp itches and I become more reactive. My wife will ask me, "Honey, have you been doing your writing?"

## THE TAKE AWAY

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People with chronic pain have permanently-imbedded pain circuits that are easily triggered by stressful thoughts, emotions, and events in their daily

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lives. You cannot unlearn old pain circuits; but you can build new ones that bypass the pain.

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Expressive writing is only one of several powerful healing strategies I recommend to my patients for eliminating chronic pain. Other tools include: active meditation, getting better sleep, identifying stress-producing triggers, and using medications when necessary. However, of all of these, writing is the necessary foundational element. I have seen many patients heal completely by performing just this one basic exercise.

The journey out of chronic pain begins the day you start to write. When will you take your first and most important step?

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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1. Write Your Way Out of Chronic Pain. David Hanscom, MD. (Video)
2. Hanscom, David, MD. *Back in control: A surgeon's roadmap out of chronic pain*, 2nd edition. Vertus Press, 2017.

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