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# Writing, Risk, and Well-being

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# Writing, Risk, and Well-being

## **Abstract**

Becoming a writer is filled with challenges, internally and externally, that often derail those who want, or need to write, for personal and professional reasons. In the last two decades, positive psychology research has revealed many insights for managing the creative challenges of being a writer, mitigating the personal difficulties involved, and offering a way forward to thriving productivity. These include strategies for better managing state of mind, improving our physical and emotional well-being, improved approaches to work, and how to healthily encourage creativity. Through understanding how risk works, and how to manage it better using insights from positive psychology, more people will be able to thrive in their writing.

## **Keywords**

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Writing, Risk, and Well-being

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University of Pennsylvania

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Advisor: Kathryn Britton

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Becoming a writer is filled with challenges, internally and externally, that often derail those who want, or need to write, for personal and professional reasons. In the last two decades, positive psychology research has revealed many insights for managing the creative challenges of being a writer, mitigating the personal difficulties involved, and offering a way forward to thriving productivity. These include strategies for better managing state of mind, improving our physical and emotional well-being, improved approaches to work, and how to healthily encourage creativity. Through understanding how risk works, and how to manage it better using insights from positive psychology, more people will be able to thrive in their writing.

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## **Introduction**

Many talented writers die with the book inside them never written. In addition, there are many who need or want to write better for personal, academic, or professional reasons. It is likely that the significant risk factors internally and externally that writers contend with stop many from reaching their potential as writers. In the last two decades there has been a shift in psychological research to focus on topics that relate to increasing well-being, productivity, meaning, and joy using scientific methods. This body of research is known as positive psychology. Thanks to recent findings, writers now have a new set of research-based tools at their disposal that can help them better understand the risks and challenges they face and how to meet them successfully. While many tools can be culled from positive psychology, in the interests of not boring the reader and myself, I have focused on those that I have found most helpful in my own journey towards becoming a healthier and better writer. The aim of this paper is to help people who write understand what positive psychology is, the common risk factors that writers face and how to manage them, and arm them with a toolbox based on positive psychology they may find helpful.

### **Introduction to Positive Psychology for Writers**

Positive psychology as a movement was borne out of frustration. Dr. Martin Seligman was understandably frustrated about the path that psychology had taken for decades with a primary focus on what can go wrong with the human condition (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Psychological research has accomplished remarkable things, helping to bring relief and even cure to at least fourteen disorders that were previously thought to be inflexible (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the same time, the near exclusion from psychological research of all



that makes life worth living in terms of positive emotions, strengths and virtues, mindsets that foster thriving, and how to build a meaningful life, was a narrowness that Seligman felt compelled to correct with the help of some remarkable friends (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

A particularly important relationship developed when Dr. Seligman encountered Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on a beach in Hawaii after Csikszentmihalyi made a near escape from death. Csikszentmihalyi had been swimming off the volcanic coast of Hawaii, Kona, and underestimating the power of the swell, found himself getting smashed against the volcanic rock before making it to shore beaten and bloodied. Seligman was on the beach and went to help Csikszentmihalyi and lead him to the life-guard station to receive first aid (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011). This led to a close bond and many conversations between these two scientists on the need for a change of course within the field of psychology that would offer something better to future generations of psychologists, and to the world. The result of their collaboration is what we now refer to as positive psychology.

In many ways positive psychology is a paradigm shift away from behaviorist or Freudian views of people as reactive beings, damaged because of circumstances or genetics. Instead, it views people as being capable of choice, action, and tremendous potential that is waiting to be actualized (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A core belief of positive psychology is that the best way to treat disease and dysfunction may be to build inner resources, strengths, and qualities that will help buffer people from threats to their physical and mental well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is characterized by a futuristic hope that asks what it would look like to be one's best, and what will it take to get there, (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2016) critically applying the

best of scientific research methods to the questions that arise as part of this endeavor. While Maslow and Rogers addressed many ideas that positive psychology focuses on, they did so as lone rangers and theorists, as opposed to the hundreds of researchers today who are conducting qualitative and quantitative research, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of the highest standard (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015).

Positive psychology was preceded by other movements in the history of psychology that shared similar aims. Among these were Carl Jung who wrote about the value of spirituality, meaning, and finding a path to the development of one's potential (Jung, 1933), and Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who wrote about the individual's potential and innate drive towards actualization of a greater self (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961). What sets positive psychology apart is its application of research methods to these topics.

Positive psychology is focused on the science of what makes life worth living, including experiences that are subjectively positive, personal strengths and talents, and the thriving of organizations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since Dr. Seligman's famous APA address in which he launched his vision of positive psychology, impressive progress in positive scholarship has been made in multiple domains. These include: organizational sciences, leadership, social services, public health, education, political science, neuroscience, and economics, among others (Donaldson et al., 2011). It seems that the umbrella of positive psychology is quite large, considering that it covers nearly any endeavor in which individuals or organizations are engaged in building a life, or an environment, that encourages human flourishing based on the empirical findings of positive scholarship.

Although positive psychology has experienced remarkable growth and progress, it also has its share of critics. There are two primary concerns that have been raised. The first critique

centers on the integrity of its research methods and the generalizability of interventions done using primarily subjects who are college students (Lazarus, 2003). In response to this critique a review of over 1300 peer-reviewed scientific articles was assessed to measure the validity of this criticism (Donaldson et al., 2015). It was found that at least half of the studies involved participants beyond college students, such as children, adolescents, and adults in organizational and other contexts. Further, strong empirical evidence was found linking many interventions to improved well-being, and the conceptual and methodological rigor of these studies has held up under scrutiny (Donaldson et al., 2015)

The second critique focuses on the dangers of overemphasizing the positive while ignoring the negative to our own peril (Hackman, 2009). An example of this is David Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry model. In this model, an organization engages in a discovery, dream and design process in which they discover what is going right within an organization and then dream and design how to use its strengths and successes to make the organization even better (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). While there is value in this model, its focus solely on the positive could have negative consequences. The recent #MeToo movement is a case in point of something that would have been ignored by this model to the detriment of all those who are victims of abuse, assault and harassment in the workplace (A. Grant, personal communication, March 23, 2018). As a result, there is a need to approach the research findings of positive psychology and the benefits it has to offer with the same level of healthy skepticism, scientific rigor, and openness to multiple perspectives that is found in other sciences. To this end, many studies have been replicated to test their findings, while others have not. Also, it is important to remember not to overgeneralize the findings of any one study, but to look for comparable studies that are relevant before drawing conclusions.

### **Writing, Risk, And Well-being**

Just as economic progress is not possible without risk-taking, so too artistic progress. Artistic progress is difficult because of the range of risks involved and our natural aversion to loss. Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel prize for applying psychological insights to economic theory, including that our potential gain must be almost twice as great as the loss ventured for us to chance risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1990; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992) Considering our natural risk aversion, it seems strange that writers will endure privation, disappointment, shame, and rejection, to practice their craft in the face of significant odds against achieving success. This paper aims to explore the risks involved in being a writer, and how to mitigate them and thrive in the face of the challenges that are common to writers.

#### **The Risks**

To begin, it is necessary to understand what risk is, and appreciate the range of risks that writers contend with. There are two elements to any risk: (a) The actual facts of the situation, and, (b) The subjective view of risk-takers as to what they want, how much they want it, and what they stand to lose (Bernstein, 1996). To weigh a risk, it is necessary to have some objective standard of measurement of what is being chanced, as well as an appreciation of the subjective utility of what stands to be gained or lost.

Like most people, many writers appreciate when their work is admired and feel hurt when it is rejected. Research suggests that some of the same neural centers that are activated when humans experience physical pain are the same ones that are activated when people experience social exclusion or rejection (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Considering how vulnerable many writers are to their work being rejected or criticized, they are

taking a significant risk in terms of pain by putting their work in front of others who may tear it apart.

Shame is part of this equation. Shame experiences have been reported to be more painful than experiences that evoke guilt. The difference between feelings of shame and those of guilt is that guilt's inner message is that "I did something wrong," whereas shame's inner message is that "I am something wrong" (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Shame is associated with feelings of being physically smaller and inferior to others, and often involves the sense of being seen by others in a way that elicits the desire to hide (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). While many writers want to be published, the visibility of being published may expose writers to the risk of being shamed by those who do not like their work.

Another risk is psychological dysfunction. Writers often seek to express something novel. Some evidence suggests that individuals who are high in novelty-seeking are more at risk for certain types of psychological dysfunction, particularly deficits in attention and addictive tendencies (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, & Wetzel, 1994). This may be related to low *latent inhibition (LI)*, which means being open to many stimuli at the same time. This tendency has been linked to higher creative achievement (Carson, Peterson, & Higgins, 2003). While LI and novelty-seeking may be beneficial for creative achievement, there is likely a cost in emotional stability which may be related to the dysfunctional tendency towards addictive behaviors that can serve as temporary fixes for managing difficult emotions.

To illustrate how severe the risk of psychological dysfunction may be, writers are nearly twice as likely to commit suicide as non-writers (Kyaga et al., 2012). Among famous writers who have taken their lives are Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton,

and Virginia Woolf (Andreasen, 1997). This has led to the question of whether psychological dysfunction contributes to creativity or whether creativity leads to psychological disturbances (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010). Some writers plumb the depths of their minds unearthing pieces that may arguably be better left alone (Cropley et al., 2010). It seems that King Solomon (Proverbs, 3:13) had this in mind when he wrote, “In much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

While moderately creative individuals may be more healthy than non-creative people, those who are prolifically creative tend to have more tendencies that correlate positively with some symptoms and traits of psychopathology. This seeming contradiction has been referred to as the mad-genius paradox (Simonton, 2014). To partially explain this puzzle, it seems that success has its costs as well, with the act of engaging in the creative process and producing outputs that meet with success resulting in stress and other consequences that can negatively impact mental health (Simonton, 2014).

Further, writers who exhibit creativity often challenge the status quo, making themselves the targets of criticism and rejection (Simonton, 2009), with those who create prolifically doing so many times over. In a sense, they are pushing against the minds of others and often get pushed back, with this effect growing with each work they produce. For those writers who do not welcome conflict, this is a considerable risk in terms of emotional stress.

An additional risk on the side of success is the downside of renown. Fame is not as fabulous as it may seem, considering the evidence that it leads to increased self-consciousness that can be quite uncomfortable (Schaller, 1997; Simonton, 2014). People often seek to relieve psychological discomfort through less than healthy means such as drinking alcohol to excess that

can lead to further dysfunction. For those of us who wonder why celebrities suffer, this may be part of the reason.

Aside from psychological and social risks, writers face financial risk. Unless writers get paid for their writing, all the time spent working on writing will not pay their bills. As people need money for living expenses, and many writers do not get published, there is considerable risk in writing for a living. Stephen King (2000) advises writers not to quit their day jobs before their writing earns enough income to allow them to do so. Subjective well-being includes several elements such as life satisfaction, financial satisfaction, pleasant affect and lack of unpleasant affect (Diener & Oishi, 2000). On average, poorer people report having less subjective well-being (Diener & Oishi, 2000). So, if being a writer translates into poverty, there is a significant risk of experiencing an inferior quality of life.

While less obvious than poverty, lack of power may also negatively impact well-being (Ryff, 1989). Power is defined as the ability to exert control over material and other significant outcomes of others (Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007). For writers, there are numerous people who seem to have power over them. These may include an agent, publishers, and a public who will decide to read their work, or not. In addition, there are many critics who feel justified in passing judgment, privately and publicly, with their “other readers found this review helpful” comments on Amazon and other forums. Engaging in a profession where so many people have power over desired outcomes seems a considerable risk in terms of powerlessness.

Despite the seemingly daunting risks involved in writing, and sharing one’s writing through publishing, many seem to consider the potential upside as being worth it. In this next section, there is an exploration of several of the primary benefits that writing has to offer.

**Writing and Well-Being.**

Writing can be a means of fostering well-being. In discussing well-being, there are numerous models, with some focusing more on hedonic well-being, while others have a greater focus on eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic well-being focuses on positive emotion, while eudaimonic well-being focuses on the realization of potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Considering the difficulties in the moment that writing often entails, it seems that the most helpful model of well-being for writers is psychological well-being (PWB) because it has a greater focus on the development of potential and self-actualization as opposed to the present moment experience of positive emotions (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Being aware of the process of building PWB that occurs during writing can help writers to see their struggles in a more meaningful way.

Psychological well-being includes autonomy, purpose in life, personal growth, positive relations, environmental mastery and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Thinking of writing in these terms gives purpose to the pain and perseverance often required to excel in the art of writing. Hemingway supposedly quipped, “It is easy to be a writer. Just sit in front of the typewriter and bleed” (Paul, 2016). Good writing is not about feeling good. It is about struggling to say something worthwhile - clearly, briefly, and well (Quiller-Couch, 1916). Because of how trying the act of writing and rewriting can be, the writer’s positive affect while writing may suffer. At the same time, a deep psychological well-being can be developing, despite not feeling great in the moment.

This well-being is likely influenced by several elements. As writers struggle and make peace with their limitations, they can experience the personal growth of self-acceptance. In seeking to improve their craft and remain sane, they often seek to develop positive, caring



relationships with others, giving and receiving support. In expressing their uniqueness through words, autonomy may be fostered. Purpose in life can be supported and strengthened through working to overcome challenges and communicate something meaningful. Finally, the development of abilities towards becoming a better artist contributes to mastery (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

In considering PWB and writing, openness to experience plays a significant role, being predictive of personal growth and eudaimonic well-being (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). This makes sense as stepping out into the unknown can be uncomfortable yet produce significant benefits for personal development and self-actualization. As E.L. Doctorow (n.d.) observed, “Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.” Not everyone wants to be an explorer because it is difficult to deal with the uncertainty involved. Some writers, however, embrace the uncertainty of writing because of its potential for learning and growth.

Seeming contradictions are often found in creatives, such as scoring higher in neuroticism, while at the same time scoring higher in psychological wellbeing (Kauffman & Gregoire, 2016). The model of PWB that focuses on personal development as opposed to feeling good in the moment makes this easier to understand. Personal growth like muscular growth comes from working against a resistance that is necessary and beneficial, although difficult in the moment, so long as it is not too great. Writers translate thought and emotion into words. To express oneself accurately is a difficult art (Lucas, 2012). Finding the right word, the right tone, and the right cadence, can be very challenging. Despite this, staying with the process and finally expressing something vivid and moving, can be a growth experience.

Through the medium of arranging and expressing thoughts and feelings in words, writers develop what Ryff and Keyes call *environmental mastery* (1995), that is the capacity for

managing their lives and place in the world in a better way, as they process their experiences through their art. As Ray Bradbury (1996) wrote, “Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper” (p.149). Seeing concrete words on paper gives a solidity and clarity to the writers’ existence that brings with it an improved sense of well-being.

Aside from their own processing, writers often aspire to share something worth saying with others. This can give their efforts and life a sense of purpose and meaning as they strive to benefit others through their writing. In finding meaning there is often a healing and fostering of well-being (Frankl, 1984; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Research has indicated that life meaning relates at least moderately to many components of well-being, such as positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). So, while writing may be challenging, meeting the challenges can result in significant benefits.

In addition, writing can be a means towards realizing personal potential, or self-actualization (Maslow, 1965; Ryff, 1995) through the ongoing work of writing and rewriting. It is the deliberate practice of an activity, with regular feedback, and the focused attention on specific parts of a task that makes one a master of their craft (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). As writers struggle to put thought to paper, refining their words again and again, they are engaging in deliberate practice, improving as writers, and actualizing their potential. This process is an exercise in personal growth that contributes to greater psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Finally, writing can foster *individuation*, or the realization of identity through the combination of conscious and unconscious processes (Jung, 1939). This relates to the construct of autonomy which depends on possessing a coherent self that charts its own course and is a significant element of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Writers frequently

traverse between conscious and unconscious processes, relying on both to find the words that fit just right. Better writers succeed in presenting what they desire, combining precision, beauty, and grace, often revealing much of themselves in the process. As Virginia Woolf (1933) observed, “Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works” (Ch. 4).

In summary, being a writer may lack much in the moment in terms of feeling good yet possess tremendous potential for developing psychological well-being. Through writing, people can experience personal growth, purpose in life, greater autonomy, enhanced self-acceptance, and environmental mastery.

### **Making sense.**

Life is filled with situations where the unexpected collides with how people think things should be. To make sense of experiences, people use words to contain their feelings and thoughts, providing reasons that allow them to restore order and keep on going (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This is a continual process. Often, people do not quite know how they feel or think about something until they express their implicit impressions in words (Weick et al., 2005). Joan Didion (1976) wrote, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear” (par. 7). Writing is a way to bring what is beneath the surface to light, and in so doing, gain understanding of oneself and others.

Part of life’s confusion is connected to relationships. Relationships often involve some degree of uncertainty because of the difficulty involved in knowing what is going on in the mind of someone else. Being able to better understand others, what they are thinking, and feeling, also known as *theory of mind*, can be helpful in more successfully navigating interpersonal interactions (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Writing allows people to step into the shoes of those they

encounter and explore their different minds and emotions at a safe distance. This seems to expand the mind, improving the ability to relate to others (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

In addition, many people have experienced traumas that they are reluctant to share with others. These may include rape, incest, and molestation that victims feel embarrassed to speak about. As a result, many victims inhibit their expression of these traumas, with this inhibition exacting a toll on their well-being (Pennebaker, 2012). Writing about these traumas can yield significant health benefits including improved immune function, fewer experiences of illness requiring doctor visits, (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), and increased levels of psychological well-being (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990).

It seems that these health benefits may result from the disinhibition of traumatic experiences which reduces the stress related to inhibition. Also, a cognitive shifting occurs by putting traumatic experiences into words. Giving form to emotion allows people to restructure and reframe events, seeing them in a different way that enables them to find meaning and insight in the difficulties they have experienced (Francis & Pennebaker, 1992).

While disinhibition may be related to some benefits of writing, it is likely not the only cause of writing's benefits. In a study comparing subjects who wrote about previously undisclosed traumas and those who wrote about previously disclosed traumas, no differences were found in health outcomes (Greenberg & Stone, 1992). In addition, when subjects wrote about trauma that was imaginary they also experienced significant physical health benefits, indicating that the benefits of writing involve more than disinhibition (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996). Some health benefits of writing seem to stem from translating feelings and mental pictures into words that allow writers to find coherence through developing a narrative. Through this process, difficult events can be packaged and internalized in a form that is easier to

assimilate (Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001). This cognitive shift is likely related to changes in disturbing thought patterns connected with the trauma that allow for a healthier relationship to the event (Greenberg, 1995).

For writers who wish to stay away from trauma, studies indicate that people who write about positive and non-traumatic experiences seem to have similar health benefits to those experienced by people who wrote about traumatic experiences (Burton & King, 2004; King, 2002). These findings indicate that additional variables beyond disinhibition are responsible for the health benefits of writing.

Likely, varied processes are responsible for the health benefits gained from writing. This would explain why whether writing about traumatic or non-traumatic experiences, or even positive experiences, benefits were experienced. It seems that across diverse emotional processes writing can play a role in fostering well-being (King, 2002).

### **The beauty of flow.**

Like the experience of well-being and connection experienced when attuned to natural beauty (Zhang, Howell, & Iyer, 2014), when writers are engaged in writing, the experience of its creation can be transcendent. To appreciate this, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of beauty, and how it relates to writing.

What is beauty in a face?

Is it the nose, the mouth, the cheekbones, or the eyes?

What is beauty in a symphony?

Is it the B flat, the C sharp? The horn, the harp, or the violin? The clarinet, or the cello?

What is beauty in a sunset?

Is it the pinks, the purples, or the oranges?

It is none of these, and all of these. Beauty is the coming together of disparate parts in just the right way, at just the right time, expressing an ineffable oneness that can be felt on an essential level. When excellent writing occurs, the feeling can be beyond words because the writer is connecting to a place that finite words do not reach.

The word flow strives to capture the magic of such moments of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). At the same time, it took Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the greatest thinkers of our time, an entire book, entitled *Flow* (1990), to try and explain what this means, and how to get there. He states that there are several necessary conditions to enter this seemingly timeless state. These include possessing a necessary level of skill, matching task to ability while stretching the limits one possesses, and having clear goals which offer feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). He characterizes this experience as carrying with it a quality of being transported to a new reality, discovery, and personal transformation that opens new possibilities of performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) uses the word “complexity” to describe this bringing together, or assimilation, of different parts and qualities into the expanded whole of the human being who experiences flow. He could have used the word beauty as well.

Considering the experiential quality of flow, it is likely that many creative people engage in creation for its own sake. The poet striving for that perfect phrase, or word, may be motivated by the love of the process of creativity and the intrinsic pleasure that it offers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Like the Diet Coke ad, “Just for the taste of it,” many writers likely write - “Just for the flow of it.”

### **The Writer's Guide to Thriving**

Since writing can be such a challenge, and because many writers are at risk for psychological dysfunction, it would be helpful to have a toolbox of psychological concepts and interventions to nurture and support the craft and well-being of writers. Although there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to writers, in terms of what best supports flourishing, there are several habits that seem to be helpful. The following set of tools is not an exhaustive list, but rather those that I have experimented with and found particularly useful in my own struggles as a writer. See which ones work for you, adopt them, and ignore the rest.

#### **Decide When to Write**

Human beings, like most organisms, possess an internal clock. This clock helps regulate and align multiple biochemical and physiological processes to manage inner resources according to cycles of light and darkness throughout the day (Foster & Kreitzman, 2014). People are at their best at varied cognitive and interpersonal activities at different times of the day. Some people perform better at certain tasks in the early morning hours, while others do the same tasks better in the evening. Most people fall somewhere in between the two extremes (Wittmann, Dinich, Merrow, & Roenneberg, 2006). With unfamiliar tasks that require staying focused and tuning out distractions people perform best at their optimal times. Interestingly, when it comes to some kinds of creative work people might perform best during their non-optimal times. (Wieth & Zacks, 2011). To discover this, researchers had subjects perform different creativity tasks both at their optimal and non-optimal times of day. It seems that divergent thinking, which is related to creativity, is higher when there is less top-down inhibitory control at non-optimal times. This is likely due to a greater openness to more information with a less selective focus (Wieth & Zacks, 2011). Better performance of tasks that involve retrieving information from implicit memory was

also found at non-optimal times when inhibitory control was lower. In addition, tasks that involve seeing a problem from a different angle that would benefit from a fresh and novel perspective are done better at non-optimal times (Wieth & Zacks, 2011). So, if writers are trying to access some vague memory, come up with an uncommon sentence ending, or find a new perspective on a problem, they should pursue these tasks at non-optimal times.

People possess two separate peaks a day for positive, and two separate peaks for negative emotions (Stone et al., 2006). The practical implication is that by writers becoming aware of the times they work best at varied tasks and the times when they are stalling and feeling miserable, they can more intelligently structure their day. This would involve setting aside the optimal times for writing when they do this best, avoiding distractions at these times, and leaving other tasks, or some downtime, for when they are feeling less able. Awareness of their emotional and attentional peaks and valleys will help them keep perspective when they get stuck, understanding that the valley will pass, and a peak is yet to come.

A simple way for writers to figure this out is to keep a file on their smartphone where they rank each waking hour of the day for two weeks on a scale of 1-10 for how well they are feeling, and how well they are writing at the time. At the end of two weeks, it is likely that a pattern will emerge of when they are at their best and worst. Setting an alarm on the hour can be done on most phones and this will remind them to take a moment and rate the hour. Considering that the variances in functioning during different times of the day can be the equivalent of performing the same task after drinking several shots of whiskey and being legally drunk (Foster & Kreitzman, 2014), it is worth spending the time to note when they are peaking and when they are dropping.



### **Cultivate Optimism**

People possess inner beliefs that shape how they perceive or explain the events of their lives. Some people have a more negative or pessimistic style. *Pessimistic explanatory style*, relative to negative events, is comprised of three pieces: (a) Whether they personalize fault when things go wrong. For example, “My work was not accepted because I am a loser”. (b) Whether something that goes wrong is generalized to all areas of life. For example, “I did not get published, so I am a failure in all life domains, personal and professional. (c) Whether hard things are seen as being permanent or transitory. For example, “I am doomed forever because I got a bad review” (Seligman & Buchanan, 1995). Pessimistic explanatory style has been shown to have significant consequences for emotional and physical well-being, being predictive of depression and physical illness (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988). For writers, the dangers to well-being that may arise because of the possibilities of criticism and failure, make understanding their perception of challenging events an essential skill.

Life insurance agents have a lot in common with writers. They often fail at their task, experience rejection, and face apathy from others. Not surprisingly, many insurance agents quit, with the attrition rate for this profession being quite high (Seligman & Schulman, 1986). In a study measuring the explanatory style of insurance agents, those who scored in the top half for explanatory style (more optimistic) sold 37% more insurance in their first two years on the job than those who scored in the bottom half. In another study, agents who scored in the top half not only sold more insurance, but also had half the attrition rate of those who scored in the bottom half (Seligman & Schulman, 1986). The results of these studies demonstrate that those with an optimistic explanatory style have more staying power and get better results than those with a

pessimistic explanatory style. In addition, optimism is related to being happier, and having better health (Peterson, 2000).

So, how can writers become more optimistic? Optimism, like pessimism, has three pieces in terms of how people relate to difficult events. (a) Externalized. For example, “The reason responsible for the event is not because I messed up, or did something wrong, but rather there is some factor outside my control such as current publishing trends.” (b) Unstable. For example, “This event is hard to deal with, but it won’t last forever.” This makes it easier to deal with because there is an awareness that the hardship will pass. (c) Specific. For example, “The fact that my writing was rejected does not mean that I am a lousy writer or a failure in life altogether. It is one piece. That is all” (Seligman, 2006). Research indicates that the most important pieces of optimism in terms of future well-being are how permanent and pervasive negative events are seen to be (Peterson, 2000).

Cultivating optimism is a psychological strategy that can be used when writers catch themselves feeling more down or unwell than serves them. It can help them reframe bad events and setbacks that threaten to derail them. When these events happen, they can explore their explanatory style and take a second look at the event in the most external, temporary and local way possible. This will likely help them to feel better and see the event in a way that is less personally damaging. At the same time, taking responsibility for a setback, or seeing things in a more self-critical way will sometimes be the most adaptive response when in fact something was done that needs to be repaired (Seligman, 2006). So, caution needs to be exercised if explaining away what went wrong will prevent writers from learning something valuable or doing the work necessary to address something that needs to be corrected.

Beyond explanations of bad events, optimism is also about positive expectations for the future (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Positive expectations may become self-fulfilling prophecies (Peterson, 2000). Human beings are distinct in their ability to imagine the future, and their emotions are significantly influenced by the types of expectations they have for the future (Seligman et al., 2016). *Prospection*, or the ability to consider and plan for the future, is a central function of the human brain, with people thinking about the future nearly three times more than the present or past (Seligman et. al, 2016). While genetics and upbringing play a large role in how expectations towards the future are formed (Peterson, 2000), people have considerable choice in the types of future scenarios they imagine for themselves (Seligman et al., 2016).

Becoming aware of expectations regarding the future and considering whether they are constructive, is a good place to start cultivating optimism. People have a choice in how they think about the future and can exercise that choice by intentionally considering positive possibilities, and multiple options that can lead to outcomes they desire.

### **Hope to Create**

For writers, understanding *hope theory* (Snyder, 1995; 2002) can make all the difference between whether they translate their creative energy into work that matters or not. Hope theory is the combination of having goals that they care about, belief that they can act to achieve them, or *agency*, and being able to conceptualize varied pathways to reach their goals (Snyder, 1995; 2002). People with greater hope approach goals with a sense of possibility, possess a readiness for challenge, and have a mindset focused on reaching their target. In contrast, people who are low in hope perceive themselves as being less up to the task, or have less agency, have more difficulty generating possibilities for how to accomplish what they want, and have thoughts that are more focused on what could go wrong, rather than on figuring out how things could work out

(Snyder, 1995). Understandably, these two dispositional and cognitive stances influence very different types of energy and outcomes (Snyder, 2002).

Hope is similar to the definition of optimism that means having a positive expectation in general that things will work out (Peterson, 2000; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Hope differs though, in its adaptive quality of responding to obstacles. This is done by coming up with new ways of reaching a desired goal, seeing oneself as a person who can generate different ways to get something done, and can act to realize a goal (Snyder, 1995; 2002). Hope is distinct from optimism in that it is a way of thinking and approaching specific positive goals, as opposed to a way of responding to things that have already happened (Snyder, 1995; 2002).

Students who are higher in hope perform better academically (Snyder et al., 2002; Feldman & Kubotta, 2015). This is likely due to a more flexible thinking style that allows them to focus on ways to overcome obstacles and accomplish tasks, rather than getting derailed by self-criticism for getting stuck or making mistakes that can lead to emotional turmoil (Onwuegbuzie & Snyder, 2000).

If writers get stuck trying to find the right word or phrase, or are simply not feeling inspired, being able to think flexibly about creating material and how to navigate emotional challenges may help them get unstuck. Instead of beating themselves up for not being more productive or talented, they could consider the many tasks involved in writing and switch to working on a different one. This could include doing research, explaining concepts, describing activities, editing, revising structure, character development, or storytelling. If finding the right word is what writers want to stick to, brainstorming multiple word possibilities quickly, jotting them down on sticky notes and looking up their synonyms may be helpful.

Further, people higher in hope report feeling more energy, inspiration, self-worth, life-satisfaction, and lower levels of depression (Snyder, 2002). They are more likely to find the upside in adversities they face (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Studies have found higher rates of suicidal ideation amongst college students who scored lower in the Hope Scale (Range & Penton, 1994). Victims of sexual assault with lower hope scores were also found to have higher rates of suicidal ideation (Chang et al., 2015). These findings indicate how critical hope can be for emotional well-being. Considering that writers face many challenges and may be predisposed to certain types of psychological dysfunction, having higher hope would be helpful in maintaining greater emotional well-being.

Hope theory suggests that there are three possibilities of why people may be lacking in hope that can be targeted to increase hope and improve outcomes. (a) A person may be lacking sufficient mental energy, or agency, to accomplish their goals, while at the same time having many ideas for how to accomplish them that will never be acted upon. (b) A person may have plenty of energy and the internal drive to act on their goals but be lacking the ability to generate pathways to reach their goals (Snyder, 1995; Kibby, 2015). (c) A person may be lacking both the will and the ways needed to accomplish their goals.

For people lacking the will to pursue their goals despite being able to think of ways to accomplish them, it may be that their goals are insufficiently clear. It is hard to get excited about something vague. By clarifying goals and making them specific and concrete, it is possible to increase the likelihood of feeling energized by them (Snyder, 1995; Bovend'Eerd, Botell, & Wade, 2009; Kibby, 2015; Gardner, Diesen, Hogg, & Huerta, 2016). Therefore, if writers have a goal of writing a book, but it is not clear what the book is going to be about, or how they will

measure progress, clarifying their content by making a list of what they are going to write about will make it easier to work on and accomplish their goal.

Sometimes goals lack for energy because they are too big. This is not to say that a person should not set big goals. Rather, it may be necessary to break up goals into smaller pieces so that they are more manageable and lend themselves to experiencing steady progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). This helps provide energy along the path towards a bigger goal (Snyder, 1995; Bovend'Eerdt et al., 2009; Amabile & Kramer, 2011). When people feel that something is beyond them it is understandable that they will not feel energized. Dividing the writing of an entire book, or large paper, into discrete tasks such as brainstorming character development, writing an introduction, or researching a specific topic, can energize writers by breaking their goal into more manageable pieces.

If writers are still lacking motivation, there may be a disconnect between their deeply held values, or aspirations, and their goal. Through questioning the reasons of why certain goals are important and worth pursuing and getting to the core of why something really matters, it may be possible to ignite the inspiration and energy needed to accomplish their goal (Sinek, 2009; Halvorson, 2010).

For writers, this may involve revisiting why they are writing in the first place. Perhaps there is something they care deeply to impart and can be motivated by meaning. Perhaps they love the process of writing and the flow that it sometimes produces. Perhaps they love the clarification that writing brings to their thoughts, desires, and ambitions. Or maybe, they are looking for the credibility that publishing a book may lend their career. Through understanding the core elements that matter most to the writer, they can reconnect to the energy that got them started in the first place (Sinek, 2009; Halvorson, 2010).

Individuals who possess motivation but are getting stuck in generating the pathways to move forward, may need help from a friend or professional in learning how to practice idea generation. For writers, the getting stuck despite being motivated sometimes comes from feeling like they must get it right the first time. This is a crippling expectation that has paralyzed many fingers from putting down words. Being able to consider the many ways to get something done, and generating multiple possibilities for challenging this belief, can help overcome it. A good example is writers giving themselves permission to write lousy first drafts, real bombs that they would be embarrassed to show anyone. With this mindset, they can free themselves to put down whatever is going on inside their heads and work from there (Lamott, 2007). Another example is imagining themselves getting paid by the word, no matter the quality, and having a credit card bill they need to cover. Another way would be to set a personal challenge to write a set amount of words within a short time frame, with no concern of it lasting, or being any good.

Some writers may be stuck for a lack of ideas, or ways to express nascent ideas. Picking up another book to read may be helpful. Reading consistently many different kinds and types of books in general can be helpful for idea generation and seeing the varied ways that writers practice their craft. This practice is a basic for anyone who wants to be a serious writer (King, 2000). For others, getting up and dancing may be the answer. Dancing to music for as little as five minutes has been shown to enhance verbal and non-verbal creativity (Campion & Levita, 2014). If writers are feeling a little more adventurous, transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) of the brain has been shown to improve performance on certain cognitive tasks involving insight (Goel, Eimontaite, Goel, & Schindler, 2015) and thinking caps that produce tDCS stimulation have recently become available to the public.

**Write Mindfully**

*Mindfulness* is the practice of paying attention in the present moment to one's feelings and thoughts without judging or reacting to what one notices (Hölzel, Lazar, et al., 2011). It is also about being receptive and attentive to the novelty of the moment (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). The benefits of mindfulness include being able to think with more focus, manage emotions more successfully, enhanced immune function, an improved view of self, and better social relationships (Ratey & Manning, 2014). Increases in gray matter in the brain have been found in regions relating to learning, memory, emotional regulation, and perspective taking (Hölzel et al., 2011) in as little as eight weeks of practicing using the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training developed by Jon Kabat Zinn (2003). Mindfulness is also related to improved creativity and less burnout in work settings, as well as more productivity (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). In addition, the benefits for both brain health and emotional well-being make investing in mindfulness a smart decision for writers whose most important tools are their ability to think creatively and manage the emotional challenges of their craft.

For writers, bringing their attention in a non-judgmental way to their process of writing would be a good place to begin. They may notice what thoughts or judgments they are thinking and whether these are serving them. They may sense what they are feeling in their bodies and whether some shift in their posture or breathing may help them. Becoming more aware of their moment to moment process is likely to help writers benefit from mindfulness without needing to do much beyond shifting some attention.



### **Meditate to Create**

Being able to think of many ideas and possibilities, known as *divergent thinking*, and being able to quickly and accurately come up with single possible solutions to particular difficulties, known as *convergent thinking*, are two of the main abilities that creatives need to accomplish their work (Guilford, 1967). Meditation has been found to positively influence creativity, but not all meditation is equal in terms of its influence on our divergent and convergent thinking abilities (Colzato, Szapora, & Hommel, 2012). There are many styles and practices of meditation, with the two primary methods of Buddhist meditation being *focused-attention (FA)* meditation and *open-monitoring (OM)* meditation (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). Many meditative practices are a combination of both methods (Cahn & Polich, 2009; Lippelt, Hommel, & Colzato, 2014). In FA meditation, the practitioner has a singular focus, whether it be their breath, an object, a word, or thought. When the mind wanders, or is distracted from the focus, the meditator brings attention back to it. In OM meditation, instead of having a precise focus, the meditator takes a receptive stance, welcoming to the mind whatever thoughts or feelings may arise, without holding onto any specific focus, but rather keeping an open and flexible mind (Colzato et al., 2012).

In OM mediation, there is a weaker top-down cognitive control state, as the meditator is intentionally open to multiple thoughts and sensations, flowing easily from one to the next. Divergent thinking that depends on being able to fluidly switch from one thought to the next, with little direction, benefits from the kind of cognitive state that OM induces (Colzato et al., 2012; Colzato, Szapora, Lippelt, & Hommel, 2017). Even with inexperienced meditators, practicing OM was found to have benefits for divergent thinking (Colzato et al., 2017).

Although it would stand to reason that convergent thinking would benefit from FA, since FA encourages the kind of strong top-down cognitive control that is characteristic of convergent thinking, no significant evidence has been found for this (Colzato et al., 2012). For writers, the takeaway of this research is that practicing OM can be helpful in strengthening their divergent thinking abilities.

### **Sit Less**

Writers, whether engaged in writing or reading, spend a lot of time sitting. In doing so, they may be damaging their health. Aside from missing out on the health and brain benefits of exercise, there is evidence that demonstrates that too much sitting can negatively impact metabolic function and increase the likelihood of an earlier death (Owen, Healy, Matthews, & Dunstan, 2010). Even people who met health guidelines, exercising at moderate to intense levels of at least 150 minutes per week, were found to suffer harmful metabolic health consequences from sitting sessions of long duration (Healy et al., 2008). In one study, individuals who spent more than 10 hours a week sitting in cars, as opposed to those who spent less than four hours a week, were 82% more likely to die from cardiovascular disease. In another study, people who spent more than 23 hours a week sitting between time in their car and time in front of a television, as opposed to those who spent less than 11 hours a week combined, were 64% more likely to die from cardiovascular disease (Warren et al., 2010).

Evidence suggests that more frequent breaks in sitting time, even without the movement being of moderate to vigorous intensity, has positive health benefits in terms of waist size, body mass index, and improved metabolic function (Healy et al., 2008; Owen et al., 2010). Standing up, as opposed to sitting, helps to offset the negative health effects of long, unbroken periods of sedentary time that include the suppression of skeletal muscle lipoprotein lipase (LPL) activity,

and decreases in glucose uptake (Hamilton, Healy, Dunstan, Zderic, & Owen, 2008). To protect their health and improve their well-being there are two tools that writers may benefit from that have become popular in recent years. The first is using an adjustable stand-up desk. They are relatively affordable and would allow the writer to continue working on whatever project they are in the middle of while standing at the same time. The second is using an app that times work sessions and alerts the writer when the time is up. There are many free apps that offer this. These tools have two significant benefits. One, they make it easier to stay on task and block out distractions for a set amount of time. Two, they remind the writer to take a short break when their session is up and get up and move their body to protect against the negative effects of sitting for too long. While specific guidelines on how often to take breaks from sitting based on age, gender and health have not yet been conclusive, people who sit for longer stretches than ninety minutes at a time have almost twice the rate of early mortality as those who normally sit for less than this duration. Health investigators recommend taking a break about every 30 minutes as this is correlated with the lowest rate of early mortality. This is likely related to the metabolic and cardiovascular benefits accrued from taking more frequent breaks from sitting (Diaz et. al, 2016).

### **Move to Think**

Physical activity is essential for brain health (Ratey & Manning, 2014). It is associated with benefits in cognitive processes such as working memory, inhibitory control, and planning (Ratey & Loehr, 2011). In addition, following physical activity, the neural systems that lie beneath the abilities of attention, learning, and memory are positively primed for effective and supple functioning (Ratey & Loehr, 2011). For writers, writing after exercising may be particularly productive as their brains are primed for optimal performance.

As people get older and there is often a loss of brain volume in areas of the brain necessary for better executive functioning, healthier aerobic fitness has been shown to lessen the reducing of brain volume and help maintain cognitive abilities (Colcombe et al., 2003; Kramer, Erickson, & Colcombe, 2006). Likewise, better spatial memory performance, and associated increases in the volume of the hippocampus have been demonstrated by older adults who have better levels of aerobic fitness (Erickson et al., 2009). It is worth beginning to exercise before one reaches old age, since having good exercise habits in midlife can protect from cognitive decline as people get older (Ratey & Loehr, 2011). Therefore, writers who wish to keep writing successfully across their lifespan would be wise to invest time in maintaining their physical health.

Aside from the cognitive benefits of engaging in physical activity, people report feeling stronger and having more energy after physical activity, (Reed & Ones, 2006), and having fewer negative feelings like fatigue and anxiety (Gauvin, Rejeski, & Norris, 1996; Hogan, Mata, & Carstensen, 2013). Because of these benefits, physical activity is often recommended to individuals suffering from emotional disorders (Walsh, 2011). Considering the vulnerabilities of writers to psychopathology this is another good reason for writers to engage in regular physical activity.

In terms of what kind of physical activity will be most helpful, it seems that aerobic exercise specifically yields cognitive benefits as opposed to strength training (Ratey & Manning, 2014). As far as what kind of exercise or physical activity, engaging in a variety of different activities is optimal (Ratey & Loehr, 2011), and finding something that is enjoyable will make it more likely that the physical activity will be consistent (Ratey & Manning, 2014). In addition, there is evidence that it is easier to make a habit of exercising when done in the morning

(Deschenes et al., 1998), and that exercising before eating in the morning burns twenty percent more body fat (Van Proeyen et al., 2010). So, if it works for a writer's schedule, it is probably a good idea to exercise in the morning.

### **Value Mind-wandering**

A restful mind is highly underrated. For many years, researchers had thought that when the brain is not actively engaged in some work, it is at rest. Recently though, neuroscientists have discovered that while resting, certain regions of the brain, known together as the default mode network (DMN), are very active (Greicius, Krasnow, Reiss, & Menon, 2003). Several studies have linked these areas of the brain to key functions of creativity such as generating novel ideas, spontaneous thought, future thinking, mental simulation, and perspective taking (Beaty, Benedek, Kaufman, & Silvia, 2015). It seems that specific areas of the brain become activated when there is a switch from an external task focus towards a more inward-focused type of cognition, during which the brain is making sense of information and figuring out how to foresee and respond to environmental demands (Raichle, 2015).

Many writers feel that when they are not writing, their time would be better spent writing. Mind-wandering research seems to indicate that when writers let their minds rest, their brains are likely engaged in making sense of the work they are in the middle of and finding ways to improve it. Practically, when writers feel that they need a rest, it may be their brain's way of telling them that they need to take a break and access the DMN.

Educators and parents have been known to tell children to stop spacing out, or daydreaming, but children are not the only ones who do this. According to some estimates, people spend about fifty percent of their waking time mind-wandering (McMillan, Kaufman, & Singer, 2013). Considering how much time people spend imagining future possibilities,

replaying memories, fantasizing, and mentally rehearsing, this makes sense. People often switch back and forth between what they are engaged in and this kind of daydreaming, so much so, that sometimes they may not even be aware of it (Singer, 2009).

There are three main categories of daydreaming: (a) Positive constructive daydreaming that ranges from plan-related creative thinking to more playful thinking, or wishful imagery. (b) Guilty-dysphoric daydreaming that is related to fantasies of failing and tortured inner drives. (c) Poor attentional control (Singer, 2009).

Individual differences in daydreaming are influenced by age, genetics, and life experience. These variables influence people's abilities to benefit from the processes of the default mode network. It is likely that sudden insights or inspiration experienced by poets or novelists, or scientific discoveries that seem to arise from nowhere, are products of the processing and interpreting that happens when the DMN is active (Singer, 2009). So, when your child, or inner child spaces out, it may be better to stand on the side and smile instead of trying to reengage them. Perhaps a great work is in progress.

Mind-wandering contributes to creativity, self-understanding, understanding others, and making sense of experiences. It seems therefore, that time spent relaxing and allowing the brain to unwind may serve people as much as time actively spent applying their minds to some task (Corballis, 2015). For writers, who often engage their brains in focused mental activity, this research indicates that allowing their minds to rest from their work is not necessarily a loss of time. This understanding can help writers be kinder to themselves when they feel that they need a break, appreciating that their brains are doing valuable work at the same time.

### **Conclusion**

Positive psychology has discovered multiple pathways to well-being, fulfilment, and productivity. It is hard to think of an area of endeavor that could not benefit from the application of scientific findings relating to the flourishing of people and organizations. Writers have historically had a reputation, somewhat deserved, of being poor models of mental and physical health. In this capstone, it is my hope that those who wish to write well, will be able to better manage writing challenges, and thrive because of the research of positive psychology. Ralph Waldo Emerson (n.d.) wrote, “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.” My recommendation is to try the tools contained in this capstone and find the ones that work best for you.

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