

The Power of Words: Research by James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D.

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James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D. is a pioneer in the research of the power of words. He has written books and articles describing the effects of journal writing on health. Compared to control groups who only wrote about more superficial topics, people who wrote about meaningful or traumatic events improved their health, immune function, hormonal activity, and other biological markers of stress or disease. Other researchers have found similar results in subjects who wrote about emotional topics: improved grades among college students and faster re-employment among unemployed workers. Researchers have tested subjects from different cultures, classes, and on different personality types and results show parallel outcomes. Of course, some people seem to benefit more than others, just as in other psychological treatments. In fact, it seems that the average effect of writing about meaningful events is similar to or greater than the ranges produced in other psychological treatments.

What is it about writing that produces the benefits? Pennebaker believes it is more than just the venting or the expressing of strong emotions that help people change. The research shows that the difference is linked to the way people think about the traumatic event, their emotions, and themselves. It seems that writing helps people create a coherent, reasoned story, leading to new meaning and understanding of the given situation.

Pennebaker's research developed a computer-based, text analysis program to analyze word counts in different categories, such as emotion words (e.g. happy, sad, angry, joyful), cognitive words (e.g. realize, understand, think), self-reference words (e.g. I, we) and an additional 70 categories. Much to the surprise of the researchers, the change in emotion words didn't correspond to improved health. The more powerful predictor of improved health was the use of cognitive words--that is, individuals who showed an overall increase in the use of causal words (e.g. because, reason) and insight words (e.g. realize, know, understand) showed improved health.

Also interesting was research that showed that writing about emotional topics not only improved health, but also changed the interaction between people in speaking situations. This research was accomplished with permission from the research subjects who wore recording devices that would periodically go on and off and catch several minutes of conversation. When researchers analyzed and compared the recorded conversations of the research subjects before and after the writing sessions, researchers noted significant changes in subjects' patterns of speaking, use of self-references, and use of positive emotion words. These data are the first to demonstrate that writing about emotional topics ultimately brings about objective changes in social and language behaviors in the real world.

Further linguistic analysis research shows something that on the surface seems odd: the flexibility in the use of pronouns (e.g. I, we, he, she, they, and it) is a powerful predictor of improvements in physical health. That is, individuals who shift the kinds of pronouns they use on a day to day basis (for example, first personal singular one day and use first person plural another day and so on) experience improved health. This shifting use of pronouns demonstrates that the writers are changing the ways that are thinking about themselves relative to others.

Again, analyzing captured snippets of conversation, researchers found that there is a similar shift in the use of pronouns in people's talking and interaction with each other weeks after they have written about emotional upheavals. And it also seems that these people are spending more time with others, laughing more in their interactions, and using more positive emotion words.

Considering that language is the foundation of the human communication and the filter through which we understand and learn about ourselves, the world, and others, it is no huge surprise that the use of words is strongly connected to our daily thoughts, emotions, and behavior. This research strongly suggests to me that including meaningful emotional content for some part of journal writing may improve health as well as enhance general well-being.