

Can Journal Writing Improve the Condition of the Chronically Ill?
A Review of the Literature
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Digging Deep—A Journal for Young People Facing Health Challenges (Rose Offner and Sheri Brisson, Resonance House, 2013) provides kids and adolescents an opportunity to express their personal feelings about their illness and how it has affected them emotionally. The co-authors' intent is to provide young readers with serious and chronic conditions a chance to build their own emotional skill set to better cope with their diagnoses and treatments.

An examination of writings by well-known healthcare professionals and psychologists shows us that, not only are psychosocial interventions proven to better the health outcomes of chronically ill patients, when used in combination with biomedical care, but expressive writing, in particular, is one type of psychosocial intervention that we know to be effective, affordable and easily accessible to people with long-term illnesses. While the goal of *Digging Deep* is to help chronically sick *children*, the studies we review in this paper are based on sick *adults*, simply because those are what are available. What is needed now are studies based on sick children and adolescents, which prove that they too, benefit greatly from expressive writing. We are optimistic that when *Digging Deep* is in the hands of enough young patients, studies will follow which track the relation between young people's journaling, feeling emotionally better about themselves and their situations, which in turn can help their physical health outcomes. For now, we at Resonance House have no doubts that young people facing chronic illnesses deserve to express themselves with dignity and pride, thus taking a pro-active role in their own health journey.

According to a National Health Council (2013) paper, a chronic disease is a disease lasting three months or longer. About one-fourth of people with chronic conditions have one or more daily activity limitations, meaning a hindrance to perform major activities in one's life. 7 out of 10 deaths in the U.S. are due to chronic diseases. A 2007 study reported that seven chronic diseases—cancer, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease, pulmonary conditions, and mental illness—have a total impact on the economy of \$1.3 trillion annually. By the year 2023, this number is expected to increase to \$4.2 trillion. But chronic diseases don't only affect adults--now 15-18% of children and teens have chronic illnesses, too. And the numbers are only increasing. For instance, one in three children is predicted to develop Diabetes, due in part to obesity and a sedentary lifestyle. So chronic diseases are not diminishing, and in fact are affecting more and more young people.

Children are particularly vulnerable, emotionally, when faced with chronic or life-threatening illnesses. In *Health Science Journal*, Dimitrios Theofanidis, a clinical nursing professor at the Alexander Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki said, “children do not usually comprehend the complexities of diagnosis and treatment and confusion arises as they try and cope with the illness and medical interventions.” They may experience unjustifiable guilt, shame, panic, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, insecurity, sleep disruptions, depression and a fear of being left in the dark about what is really happening to them. According to Theofanidis, the best period for Psychological intervention is during the initial phase of diagnosis-- “when the family finds itself in a crisis and its members try, select and adopt ways of coping

that determine the short-term and long-term adaptation of the chronic illness.” Most children wish for a fast recovery or would like techniques to ease their condition. It is the responsibility of the health care team to help identify stress factors and provide the patient and their families with constructive methods to face them. Theofanidis suggests that the hospital ward for children with chronic illnesses must have equipment to engage the child in group activities such as table games, painting, etc., so that the child does not remain inactive or adopt a “sick child role” with all its negative connotations. He also says that two of the basic objectives of the nursing personnel should include: 1--encouraging an open channel of communication between members of the family and, 2--prompting the child and the parents to play an active role in the treatment.

The authors of *Digging Deep* whole-heartedly agree with Theofanidis' recommendations, but Offner and Brisson would also suggest that journal writing be included as one of the “must-have” early psychological interventions for children facing chronic or life-threatening diseases. Rather than relying merely on game playing or artwork, *Digging Deep* could be the instrument which helps improve communication for the patient and allow the youth to play an active role in his or her treatment.

In “A Review of Psychological Interventions for Children with Chronic Health Conditions,” authors Laurie Bauman, PhD and her co-authors point out that epidemiologic data shows that children with chronic health conditions have higher rates of mental health problems than children without such conditions, and that there is evidence that the psychological and social needs of these children and their families are not adequately addressed through conventional systems of care. Access to psychological and support services is limited—only one quarter of the children with a chronic physical illness and a significant mental health problem receive mental health services. Adding to this statistic, an increasing proportion of children with chronic health conditions and disabilities are being cared for in managed care arrangements, which make comprehensive services even harder to obtain and fund. Funding of pediatric psychosomatic care is an ongoing problem, with insurance reimbursement of such care averaging only 30% (Shaw and de Masso, 2007.) This is why the goal of the authors of *Digging Deep* is for their journal to be provided free of cost to children of any socio-economic background. Journaling is one crucial way for seriously sick kids of all backgrounds to have their psychosocial needs addressed. And it is affordable, accessible, and effectual.

Barbara Sourkes, PhD, Psychologist and Professor of Pediatrics (Critical Care) at Stanford University Hospital and Lucille Packard Children's Hospital in Palo Alto, regrets that her work is called upon more often in times of crisis than as a preventative or normal part of the care of a child confronting serious illness: “Psychologic support is considered a luxury item.” Naturally, it is preferable to offer therapy to *prevent* the issues we already know chronically ill kids so often have: anxiety, depression, hopelessness, even PTSD, which make it hard to manage the physical aspects of their illness. *Digging Deep* however, offers preventative psychologic support without being a luxury. This journal can help fill in the gap for kids and teens who do

not have access to a therapist, but need psychosocial support. And since it can be offered as a preventative measure to a child as soon as he or she is diagnosed, it can help them deal with their illness with dignity and without distress. Of course it can also be used in conjunction with therapy, often making the therapist's job a little bit easier.

Frank Elgar and Patrick McGrath published an article in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* in which they suggest that self-administered psychosocial treatments for children and families have the potential to circumvent barriers to traditional models of care. "They are convenient and inexpensive to families and...can be as effective as therapist-based care." This article further acknowledges the belief that patient pro-active practices, such as journal writing, may well help fill their psychosocial needs.

In RealBuzz.com a healthy active living newsletter, the author discusses the work of James Pennebaker, Professor of Psychology and Department Chair at the University of Texas, Austin. Through a series of lab experiments with college students, Pennebaker proved the health benefits of expressive writing for college students who have had traumatic experiences in their lives. "Regular writing can bolster the immune system, help recover from traumatic events more successfully and ease stress and depression." Survivors of traumatic events who wrote 20 minutes a day for 3-4 days visited the doctor half as much as those who didn't. Through blood tests, they learned that journal writers produced less of the stress hormone, cortisol, and demonstrated a more vigorous antibody response to bacteria and viruses.

Elizabeth Broadbent, PhD in Psychology at University of Auckland, New Zealand showed in a 2013 study, published in *Psychosomatic Medicine* that expressive writing about an emotional topic lowers cortisone levels and can improve wound healing. 49 healthy adults aged 64 to 97 years were assigned to write 20 minutes a day either about upsetting life events or daily activities. Two weeks later small biopsy wounds were created in the upper arms of all participants and were routinely monitored and photographed for 21 days. Those in the expressive writing group had better healing than those who merely wrote about daily activities. (76.2% fully healed in the expressive writing group vs. 42.1% in the daily activity writing group had fully re-epithelialized wounds at Day 11.)

In "Strange But True: Improve your Health through Journaling," Ray Bruce, PhD discusses studies by scientists at Southern Methodist University and Ohio State College of Medicine that have proven that writing contributes directly to physical health, not just emotional health. Tests by teams of clinical psychologists and immunologists showed that subjects who wrote thoughtfully and emotionally about traumatic experiences had increased T-cell production, a drop in physician visits, fewer absentee days and generally improved physical health.

Joshua Smyth, PhD, while Professor of Psychology at State University of New York at Stonybrook, conducted a study of 112 adult patients with asthma or arthritis. This study was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. They were asked to write in a

journal for 20 minutes a day for three days in a row, about either an emotionally stressful incident or their plans for the day. Of those who expressed their anxiety on paper, 47% showed a large improvement in their disease after four months, versus 24% of those who had only written about their plans for the day. Clearly, regular, expressive writing is good for your health.

Chris Woolston, M.S., writes in *Health Benefits of Journal Writing*, that we don't know for sure *how* expressive writing improves health, but we do know there is a strong connection between stress and disease—emotional stress leads to depression, weakens the immune system, promotes heart disease, worsens the course of arthritis, asthma, cancer and many other diseases. Many studies, including Pennebaker's and Broadbent's, show us that capturing trauma in narrative form allows us to step back, reflect, summarize, understand, store, forget and then *move on* from traumatic events such as chronic illness.

In summary, if we know that journal writing produces such results in adults with chronic illness, don't we owe it to children and teens to provide them with easy, affordable access to the same practice? *Digging Deep* offers seriously ill youth and adolescents an easy and fun opportunity to proactively manage the emotional issues that their illnesses have wrought, and a chance to improve their own physical health. When we know that children are more vulnerable to emotional problems than adults when faced with chronic and life-threatening illnesses, and when we know that, in general, most sick children's psychosocial needs are not met by the present health care system, and when we know that expressive writing offers a simple and cost-effective psychosocial intervention to people who are chronically ill, it seems clear to Resonance House Publishing and the authors of *Digging Deep* that children not only deserve to be given a journal at the onset of their diagnosis, but it makes medical and economic sense. Indeed, children's hospitals, pediatric therapists, children's health camps, and all charities working to help chronically sick kids should consider providing *Digging Deep* systematically to all young patients in their care.

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