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Blogging--It's Good for You

The therapeutic value of blogging becomes a focus of study

By Jessica Wapner

Self-medication may be the reason the blogosphere has taken off. Scientists (and writers) have long known about the therapeutic benefits of writing about personal experiences, thoughts and feelings. But besides serving as a stress-coping mechanism, expressive writing produces many physiological benefits. Research shows that it improves memory and sleep, boosts immune cell activity and reduces viral load in AIDS patients, and even speeds healing after surgery. A study in the February issue of the Oncologist reports that cancer patients who engaged in expressive writing just before treatment felt markedly better, mentally and physically, as compared with patients who did not.

Scientists now hope to explore the neurological underpinnings at play, especially considering the explosion of blogs. According to Alice Flaherty, a neuroscientist at Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital, the placebo theory of suffering is one window through which to view blogging. As social creatures, humans have a range of pain-related behaviors, such as complaining, which acts as a “placebo for getting satisfied,” Flaherty says. Blogging about stressful experiences might work similarly.

Flaherty, who studies conditions such as hypergraphia (an uncontrollable urge to write) and writer’s block, also looks to disease models to explain the drive behind this mode of communication. For example, people with mania often talk too much. “We believe something in the brain’s limbic system is boosting their desire to communicate,” Flaherty explains. Located mainly in the midbrain, the limbic system controls our drives, whether they are related to food, sex, appetite, or problem solving. “You know that drives are involved [in blogging] because a lot of people do it compulsively,” Flaherty notes. Also, blogging might trigger dopamine release, similar to stimulants like music, running and looking at art.

The frontal and temporal lobes, which govern speech—no dedicated writing center is hardwired in the brain—may also figure in. For example, lesions in Wernicke’s area, located in the left temporal lobe, result in excessive speech and loss of language comprehension. People with Wernicke’s aphasia speak in gibberish and often write constantly. In light of these traits, Flaherty speculates that some activity in this area could foster the urge to blog.

Scientists’ understanding about the neurobiology underlying therapeutic writing must remain speculative for now. Attempts to image the brain before and after writing have yielded minimal information because the active regions are located so deep inside. Recent functional magnetic resonance imaging studies have shown that the brain lights up differently before, during and after writing, notes James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin. But Pennebaker and others remain skeptical about the value of such images because they are hard to duplicate and quantify.

Most likely, writing activates a cluster of neurological pathways, and several researchers are committed to uncovering them. At the University of Arizona, psychologist and neuroscientist Richard Lane hopes to make brain-imaging techniques more relevant by using those techniques to study the

neuroanatomy of emotions and their expressions. Nancy Morgan, lead author of the *Oncologist* study, is looking to conduct larger community-based and clinical trials of expressive writing. And Pennebaker is continuing to investigate the link between expressive writing and biological changes, such as improved sleep, that are integral to health. “I think the sleep angle is one of the more promising ones,” he says.

Whatever the underlying causes may be, people coping with cancer diagnoses and other serious conditions are increasingly seeking—and finding—solace in the blogosphere. “Blogging undoubtedly affords similar benefits” to expressive writing, says Morgan, who wants to incorporate writing programs into supportive care for cancer patients.

Some hospitals have started hosting patient-authored blogs on their Web sites as clinicians begin to recognize the therapeutic value. Unlike a bedside journal, blogging offers the added benefit of receptive readers in similar situations, Morgan explains: “Individuals are connecting to one another and witnessing each other’s expressions—the basis for forming a community.”

This article was originally printed with the title, "The Healthy Type".

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