

[Freedom? Write On!](#)

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PSYCHOLOGY

Freedom? Write On!

A Simple and private way to resolve your past emotional conflicts and interpersonal experiences

American President Abraham Lincoln was known for his wisdom. One day his Secretary of War, Edwin Santol, sought the president's advice on a heated conflict with an army general. Santol complained to Lincoln, who advised, "Tell him in a letter how you feel." Santol wrote a strongly-worded letter and showed it to Lincoln. Lincoln acknowledged his ability for the powerful language used, then asked, "Edwin, what are you going to do with it?" Santol was surprised at the question, but said calmly, "I will send it to the general." Lincoln shook his head with disapproval and advised, "Do not send this letter. It is better if you burn it in the stove. That is what I do when I write letters when I am angry. It is definitely a good letter, and you had a nice time writing it. You feel better. Now burn it and write another letter."

Lincoln understood how writing down a stressful event releases pent up emotions from the subconscious mind. Modern psychologists have discovered this, too. They call it "journaling," and there have been dozens of studies demonstrating that it is an excellent way to release the burdens of difficult memories. It is also often followed by

significant improvements in the patient's health.

The studies revealed that people, ranging from grade-schoolers to nursing-home residents, and from medical students to prisoners, feel happier and healthier after writing about deeply traumatic memories, according to researcher James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas.

Pennebaker became interested in the potential of writing therapy when he learned that a criminal's heart rate and breathing measured during a lie detector test becomes much slower immediately after a confession. He theorized and then proved the same dramatic and beneficial effect could be caused by writing down past stressful misdeeds and unhappy memories.

The effect isn't only an emotional release, Pennebaker says. One of his studies, published in 1988, found that college students have more active T-lymphocyte cells, an indication of immune system stimulation, six weeks after writing about stressful events. Other studies have found that people tend to take fewer trips to the doctor, function better in day-to-day tasks and score higher on tests of psychological well-being after such writing exercises, he asserts.

Another study, published in the April 1999 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, presented evidence that journaling can even ease the symptoms of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis, both stress-related diseases. Joshua

Smyth, psychology professor at North Dakota State University, did a study in which 70 people with either asthma or rheumatoid arthritis were asked to write about the most stressful event in their lives. The participants wrote for 20 minutes on three consecutive days. A control group of 37 patients wrote about their plans for the day. Four months later, 47 percent of the group that wrote about past traumas showed significant improvement--less pain and a greater range of motions for arthritis patients, and increased lung capacity for asthmatics. Only 24 percent of the group that wrote about their daily activities showed such progress.

Journaling in the Hindu perspective is a form of confession, sometimes called anahatha yoga, or the yoga of understanding. It is one aspect of scriptural requirements for penance, in which one seeks to resolve past karmas. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, publisher of Hinduism Today, has discovered in ministering to his devotees that journaling is an effective way to deal with deep-seated emotional experiences which, if not resolved, would later manifest in unwanted karmic experiences, including disease. He named his particular method "Vasana Daha Tantra." Daha means "burning," tantra means "method" and vasana is a deep-seated subconscious trait or tendency that shapes one's attitudes and motivations.

"This is one of the best methods for resolving difficulties in life, of dissolving troublesome vasanas," says Gurudeva. "It's a practice of burning confessions, or even long letters to loved ones or acquaintances, describing pains, expressing confusions and registering long-felt hurts and grievances. Writing these problems down, and burning them in an ordinary fire, brings the problems from the subconscious into the

external mind, releasing the suppressed emotion as the fire consumes the paper. It's a magical healing process."

Just as Lincoln advised Santol to write a strong letter, so does the Vasana Daha Tantra advise going into the subconscious and bringing up and re-experiencing all the emotions of a particular experience or relationship. Burning the journaling pages serves two purposes. First, there is guaranteed privacy. As no one will ever read them, one can be totally free in expressing oneself. Second, destroying the pages in a fire conveys a message to the subconscious mind that no matter how painful or difficult an experience is, once it is written on paper, it easily burns away and disappears. If the tantra is done right, the remembered emotion goes up in smoke, never to come back. The memory is not erased, by the emotion attached to it is dissipated. Just throwing the paper away doesn't work as well, say those who have tried it, nor does typing it on a computer and then trashing the file. It seems the physical action of destroying the paper is most effective.

For those really intent about overhauling their subconscious mind, there is the "Maha ['great'] Vasana Daha Tantra." It's a once-in-a-lifetime, global search-and-destroy mission for serious spiritual aspirants. They write down and burn everything of significance since the day they were born--ten pages for every year of their life. That is 350 pages for someone 35 years old. They write about good times, bad times, relationships with others, everything that comes to mind about a particular year. Events which occurred decades ago are seen to have had far more impact than previously realized. Incidents and relationships they believed they had "gotten over," they hadn't. They discovered things for which

they felt great shame and remorse, and which they resolved never to repeat. Those who have completed this discipline report feeling like "new people."

Overall, journaling is a simple, do-it-yourself process. Prove it to yourself by writing down and burning a couple of big emotional issues. And save the money for that visit to the shrine for your next pilgrimage.