

Your Writing Is Killing You

Mental Hygiene for the Would-Be Writer

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Problem: Writers have crazy high rates of mental suffering.

1. Hemingway: "What's the best early training for a writer?" "An **unhappy childhood.**"
2. So many anecdotes of brilliant, successful, miserable writers. Hemingway suicide.
3. Nancy Andreasen studied **15 successful writers** at the **Iowa Writing Workshop**. Control group of **15 non-writers: 20%** had a psychiatric disorder. Writers: **73%**. Mainly **affective disorder** (depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder): **13% vs. 67%**. Writers' relatives also had higher rates compared to controls. Later studies (Kay Jamison), similar numbers.
4. This is real. And we see it in our **writer friends**, and possibly **ourselves**. **Elephant in the room.** So much misery, whether you're successful or not.

Premise: Much of this misery is avoidable, if we realize that our writing is not the solution to our problems; it's a difficult, hazardous path.

Paradox: Introverts Become Exhibitionist

1. Writers are secretive, yet writing demands that you bare your deepest soul to the world.
2. We may even have started writing to *hide* our true selves, but dishonest writing sucks. As opposed to basketball, chess, programming, crochet, even acting. *We had to go write.*

Paradox: We're already traumatized, but writing is incredibly hazardous

1. We **need more social contact** and healing than the average person, but we go into **solitary confinement** and listen to the voices in our head. #1 thing *not* to do when you're depressed.
2. We need **more affirmation**, but our path requires **insane levels of personal rejection**. Extroverts make six figures selling *other* people's stuff – how much can that rejection *hurt*?
3. We need **more certainty** than others, yet the artistic process *requires* us to lose our way and **feel lost** in the woods. That's how we find treasure. (*Being Wrong*, Kathryn Schulz.)
4. The **mental habits** we train to make **strong stories** will **destroy our real lives**. (Mnemonic: CREaM)
 1. **Catastrophizing**: Stories *need* the worst possible outcome, drama. Life is the *opposite*.
 2. **Rumination**. Stories need intense focus for years. Life needs you to forget it and sleep.
 3. **Escaping the Present Moment**: Stories need you to trance out. Life needs mindfulness.
 4. **and Maximizing/Perfectionism**. Stories need revision. People need unconditional love. *Paradox of Choice* by Barry Schwartz: every new option *diminishes* existing options. ([XKCD](#) comic)
 5. These habits are like a **chisel**. Sharpen it, but put it down before you play with your kids.
5. And somehow we're surprised that we feel kind of crappy. Writing is our **task**, not our **healing**. It *sucks* time and energy. We think success will fix us, but this process is killing us. Need **new life skills**.

Promise: The good news: we can (and must!) make deliberate choices to outwit these hazards and be successful, happy human beings (not just writers)

Forget the Fixed Mindset; Choose Growth

1. *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, she gave 5th graders a moderate test and told half, "You must be **smart** at this," and the other half, "You must have **worked** really hard."
Round 2: **90%** of **effort** kids choose **harder** test, majority of **smart** kids choose **easy** test.
Round 3: Hard test. Effort kids tried to do all the puzzles, smart kids were "miserable".
Round 4: Easy test. **Effort** kids score **30% higher**, but **smart** kids **20% worse**.
2. **Fixed** mindset: You are **born with set talent**, you either have it or you don't. Can't learn.
Growth mindset: With difficult, intentional practice, you can **improve your skills**.

3. Writers are at **huge risk** for the **fixed mindset**.
 1. Our culture worships the “born genius”, especially in the arts.
 2. We only read writers' **best work**. I love Wodehouse, but not all 90 of his books.
 3. If we had childhood trauma, we **coped** with the **magical armor of “being a writer”**
 1. We were already **reading**, escaping into this other, more real, controllable world
 2. A parent or (desperate) teacher admired our work – “You're a writer! You're SPECIAL!”
 3. Our work really was awesome compared to our bored classmates.
 4. Writing became our **identity**, our **promise** to ourselves of a future awesome self.
 5. Then we grew up – second trauma of the huge, real world, how *hard* writing is.
 6. That armor that protected us as kids will choke us. We need to **grow**.
4. **Warning Signs of the Fixed Mindset**
 1. You thrash back and forth about **whether** you're a “real writer” instead of **improving**. If you **fear learning**, you're choosing your doom. Everyone has to learn!
 2. You **idealize your heroes**. Beatles played **1200 shows**, King had a **spike** for rejections.
 3. You **rage** against “**gatekeeper” editors** because your stuff is so amazing. (Cure: read the **slush pile**.)
 4. You **fear failure**. Don't have to *like* it, but *fear* makes it final. IBM: “Double your failure rate.”
 1. **Procrastination**: You say “life gets in the way,” but you watch 3 hours of TV every night.
 2. You **envy successes**. If they have it, it means I don't. Reality: awesome writers mean more readers.
 3. You “**hate writing**,” the actual process, and just want to “get published”. Seriously, that's your plan?
5. **Growth mindset changes everything**. You accept where you are, you get help, because you **believe you can improve**. Who knows how good you'll get? Wodehouse wrote into his 90s. Embrace uncertainty.
6. But in the growth mindset, with healthy boundaries, you realize that your **personal growth** and your **writing growth** make a **virtuous circle**. They help each other.

Choose to Design Your Life – Writing Requires Massive Energy and Time

1. Writing would be hard enough if we were starting at **normal**. We have to catch up on life skills.
2. **Mental Health**: You can find **affordable counseling** on a sliding scale. Generic meds. Do it!

Choose your thoughts. If you're still thinking the fixed-mindset, trauma based thoughts from your childhood, it's like you **haven't showered in decades**. CBT. Slow but steady.

 1. Growth mindset: **I can and will improve**, and my craft doesn't define my **worth**, now or ever.
 2. Set aside the **mental writing chisels** in real life, before you cut yourself or a loved one.
3. **Health and Energy**: Eat right, lose weight, sleep hygiene – you *need* this energy to write!
4. **Time**: Time is currency of writing. Learn to track it, track progress in hours/words. Adjust process.
5. **Write**: Focus on **goals, not milestones**. You **control** and subtask goals. ([Carrie Vaughn podcast, #38](#).) Your goals: **Measurable, Specific, Written, Time-Sensitive, Your Passion. Sharing** helps. COMMIT.
6. **Money**: Get control of your money! HUGE stressor to remove. Incredibly empowering, we need this!
 1. I'm a huge Dave Ramsey fan, his Baby Steps take you from ditching debt to retiring a millionaire.
 2. At *least* do monthly **budget** (with your spouse). Changes everything! Free tool: everydollar.com
 3. Separate the money need (and shame) from your writing journey. Craft first, then reward.
7. **Social**: You need to **force** yourself to hang out. You're a mammal and at risk; you need relationships.
8. **Craft**: Besides setting **writing** goals, commit to **improving your craft** with **concrete goals**.
 1. **Read** good writing, bad writing, books on writing. Hemingway: read the masters. King: 4hrs/day.
 2. Join a **critique group**. (Like the Front Royal Writers!) Online groups. Be choosy, be careful..
 3. Attend **cons**. Oh wait, good job! :) Cons for your genre: Capclave, SCBWI, RWA, Mystery, etc.
 4. Attend **workshops**. Be careful. Apply to Odyssey Writing Workshop first, Jeanne is amazing
9. Your first new habit is to add **one habit** at a time! 1/month is awesome! Go **slow**, make **solid progress**.
10. Final thought: One **positive** mental writing habit is learning to **think like a hero**. Take risks for what we love. *Plot Whisperer* by Martha Alderson discusses our own hero's journey as writers. Takes real courage, grit. You're here, you're ready to **start** writing and *living* better than you've dreamed. **Do it!**