

## Talking, what difference does it make?

Anyone who has ever confided a deeply upsetting to a friend, or entrusted a troubling secret to a journal knows the feeling of relief that expressing strong emotions can bring. When we can express our distress, it is not only good for our emotional health, but boosts our physical health as well. When we don't - or can't - there is a cost to our mental and physical health.

We know this already. Irish people in particular know this. Every culture, from the beginning of time, has wanted to tell its story. Every culture has had some form of confession ritual to allow people unburden themselves. Villages in Ancient Greece had a designated person to whom those in distress could turn. They were the 'listeners', called "Therapati". Native American tribes believed that confessing our transgressions publicly was a necessity for our physical ailments to heal.

Catholicism created the confessional.

Peig Sayers told us that talking was critical to survival on the Blasket Islands – *"Everything that was coming dark upon us, we would disclose it to each other, and that would give us consolation of mind"*. AA and Al-anon have the slogan: "You're only as sick as your secrets". One of the twelve steps to recovery requires that we make an honest inventory of our lives and disclose it to someone we trust. When we unburden our guilt, it frees us up to live in the present. In the past century we have formalised the process of talking and confiding in a trusted other into the profession we call psychotherapy. And if we can't access any of the above, we can always "Talk to Joe".

What's interesting about the book, *OPENING UP*, by *James Pennebaker* is the way he explores why opening up – whether through talking or writing – can be healing. And why concealing emotionally charged experiences hurts us.

Pennebaker started his career working as a psychologist with the FBI. His job was to oversee the administration of lie detectors. These machines measured specific biological indicators, for example, heart rate, blood pressure, sweat. These indicators changed when a person tried to withhold truth about themselves. Frequently, the testers would say to the person: "Look I believe you, but this machine is jumping over the place when whenever we refer to X. Maybe you could go in that room over there and talk about this with Mike and I'll check this machine. When you're done we'll re-take the test". And invariably what happened was that the suspect opened up to "Mike" and told the whole truth. When they retook the test, their biological indicators were all good. Pennebaker concluded: "revealing pent-up thoughts and feelings is liberating, even if it means that they send you to prison".

His life's work as a psychologist became an exploration of how opening up and disclosing our deepest secrets can make us well, and conversely, how bottling stuff up does the opposite.

### WHY DOES OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH SUFFER WHEN WE KEEP SECRETS BURIED?

What he found was that each of us reacts physically to distressing experiences, but we rarely make a connection between the two. Partly because our bodies don't react immediately. Distress can compromise our immune system, but it's impact may not become apparent until several weeks or months later.

Another reason we don't make connections between stressful life events and our physical health is that we prefer to suppress unpleasant memories. But while the mind may deny or avoid thinking about upsetting experiences, the body doesn't forget. As Bessel Van Der Kolk says, "The body keeps the score"

When we push a painful memory out of our mind, we bury it alive. We hold distress in our bodies. Hiding our distress takes energy. This can be exhausting. The price we pay for this compromises our immune system.

Sometimes we have no choice but to keep our secrets buried. In the circles where we live our lives, some things are unsayable. Disclosure will almost certainly be denied and we may even be punished for saying it. In the 1980s a series of studies at UCLA, followed 300 gay men over a period of nine years. Among this group there were some who were infected with the AIDS virus and some who were not. Among those not affected, the more they concealed their sexual orientation, the more serious health problems they suffered. Three times the rate of serious illness as those who were able to be open about their sexuality. For those diagnosed HIV-positive, the more they had to keep their secret buried, the faster they died from complications of AIDS.

When we keep our difficulties hidden, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to come to terms with whatever has upset us. We are left in conflict with ourselves, trying to forget painful experiences but having them constantly revisit us when we least expect it, without being able to take care of it.

The value of being able to make the link between upsetting experiences and our physical health is that we can understand what's happening to us and face whatever may be aggravating our condition. When we take away the pressure of trying hard to forget, we give our bodies a better chance to heal.

## HOW TALKING HELPS

When we feel upset, distressed, threatened, or worried, we cannot think clearly. Our emotional brain – the Amygdala – becomes heated and our prefrontal cortex, the part of the human brain that plays a critical role in calming and soothing us and help us look at things from a number of perspectives, goes off line. Or at least it is temporarily operating below par.

When we talk to someone we trust, it's a bit like we borrow their prefrontal cortex to help calm us and understand why we are so upset.

Sometimes we can breathe slowly and soothe ourselves. But at other times there is so much distress churning around inside. We need the presence of someone who makes us feel safe in the world.

Talking through an emotionally distressing experience can help in a number of ways:

- *when we are listened to we can face things in our lives that we cannot face alone.*
- *As our emotions settle, we are able to think more clearly .*
- *We see the big picture. When we understand the wider context for our feelings they make sense. And we feel more in control.*
- *The source of our distress may not have gone away, but we are clearer about what our next step needs to be.*

## HOW DO I KNOW WHEN IT'S SAFE TO OPEN UP?

We are more likely to open up when we are with someone who cares about us and who genuinely gives us their attention. We pick that up by the way they turn towards us, put down their mobile phone, and look at us in a certain way. Something in their body language is open. There may be a softness in their eyes.

When we tell our story to that person, they don't tell us there is something wrong with us. They recognise that whatever we are feeling, we came by it honestly. That however confusing our feelings may be, there is always

a good reason why we feel the way we do, and that we just need time to figure what that is. In that moment, we need someone who helps us to bear what may feel unbearable.

Someone who makes us feel safe is also someone who is real with us. They don't need to have all the answers, they may not be able to solve our problems. They do what they can but they may also suggest we need to talk to someone else more familiar with whatever conundrum we're facing.

## HOW WRITING CAN HELP

When we're upset, it may be hard to write things down. But the evidence is strong that it can help. Pennebaker's studies showed that writing ...

- *Slows us down*
- *Helps us to stand back from our difficulties and think about things more objectively.*
- *Breaks our experience into bite-size pieces, which makes it less overwhelming.*
- *Relieves us from the effort it takes to bottle them up inside*

I use writing to loosen my mind and free up my emotions. I don't write to express how I feel as much as I write to discover what I'm thinking and feeling. Free writing is antifreeze for the system.

**Study of note:** Large Dallas computer company had laid off 100 senior engineers (Av age: 52) four months earlier (1991). None of them had found a job. Pennebaker divided them randomly into two groups. Half of them were asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about being laid off, for 30 minutes a day for five consecutive days. The other group wrote a time management plan for how they were making best use of their time. The first group described their feelings of betrayal, humiliation and outrage at losing their jobs, as well as about personal issues, such as their marital problems, illness & death, money and their fears about the future. Within 3 months, 27% of this group had found jobs compared to 5% of the 'time-management' group. By 6 months 53% of this group had found jobs compared with 18% of Time Management group. Both groups had gone to exactly the same number of interviews.

Many studies have demonstrated that just venting our emotions doesn't achieve very much. If we get angry and talk about all the ways we're going to get back at the people who upset us, we add fuel to the fire. We keep our anger alive. Talking or writing about our problems without self-reflection merely adds to our distress.

## DEALING WITH DISTRESS IN A TIME OF COVID

Two key components of mental health are that we are in touch with reality and open to new experience. Which is a way of saying that mental health is a willingness to be vulnerable, to be touched and affected by what is happening around us. Minding our mental health means learning to manage our vulnerability.

Talking and writing are ways in which we manage so that life doesn't overwhelm us. They help us to deal with upsetting experiences that cause upheaval inside us, and heal the wounds that life has dealt us.

Right now, in middle of this pandemic, there is a lot to feel upset about. People across Ireland are feeling furious, frightened, bored, frustrated and sad. This is part of what being mentally healthy means at present. Our strong negative emotional reactions to our current experiences of isolation, loss and uncertainty show us that we are human. They do not imply there is something wrong with us, or that we are mentally ill.

When we are hurting, we need to talk about our experience. We need to find ways to give each other what Peig called “consolation of mind”. Talking and listening are powerful antidotes to the isolation and distress we are all feeling. They help us to weave the threads of our experiences into a story that fits the landscape we now find ourselves on. Mental health is a story we can tell; mental ill-health is a story that’s never been told. Our stories shouldn’t diminish how hard things have been but they have to honour our strengths, our creativity, and what we’ve learned from this experience about the ways in which we matter to each other.

We’ve done surprisingly well given that we had no map.

## 2 novels relating to above themes:

### ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE by Gail Honeyman

Eleanor is that quite person in a group, or in our workplace, who keeps to herself, has very little to say and seems to hide in the corner. She’s the girl with the plastic bag who always brings her own lunch. After a while we don’t even notice they’re here. Her life is a very lonely affair. She passes the long weekends with a frozen pizza and two bottles of vodka.

We all know her and maybe we’ve all been her at some point in our lives. But behind this plain self-effacing person is a rich and complex story. There are good reasons why she has chosen to shut herself away from life. But as this story unfolds, as she takes creative risks, we discover she is a rich, warm three dimensional character. We grow close to her and respect her as she gradually creeps out from under the rock where she’s been hiding all her life.

### AS YOU WERE by Elaine Feeney

Sinead is a very competent woman who is also closed down with secrets she has never told anyone. She opens up gradually when she is hospitalised with a serious illness. This beautifully written book is dark but very funny. Elaine Feeney makes us laugh at the most serious of issues in our lives. As Sinead gets close to the characters with whom she shares her hospital ward, she opens up. What remained with me after reading this book was Elaine Feeney’s courage to write in such an honest, gritty way about what we all feel but rarely can express. Franz Kafka said “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us”. This is such a book.

I listened to this book on audible.com, and recommend this to potential readers. The narrator, Siobhan O’Kelly is amazing. She brings the novel alive and greatly adds to the pleasure of the whole experience.