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Want To Feel Better? Write Your 'Hard Story'

By Daphne Larkin



Debbie Weingarten (right) and Daphne Larkin discuss Weingarten's memoir-in-essays to be published by Grand Central/Hachette Book Group in 2025. "I would die if I couldn't write," Weingarten said, noting her book includes some "hard stories." (www.debbieweingarten.com).

All of us carry personal stories. We walk around with them perched on our shoulder, whispering in our ear, nagging at us. Many are about our childhood, coming-of-age years, and marriage and family. Others are about looking back on a long life that has seen its share of joys and sorrows. Some of us, however, come with traumatic stories that have broken our hearts.

Those of us carrying stories of sadness and grief are what author Melanie Brooks calls "hard stories" in her book by that name ("Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma").

If you carry a hard story and want to lift its weight, writing about it can be life-changing. When you put words to your experience, whether it's one of abuse, violence, or the loss of a loved one, you move the burden from your tender heart to the written page. That one could heal from writing about a trauma may seem too simple to be believable, but this was documented in a study published in 2018 in the American Medical Association journal, JAMA Psychiatry. The study found that for adults with post-traumatic stress disorder, writing about an upsetting memory was as effective as traditional cognitive processing therapy.

I know what it means to carry a hard story. Overnight, my life changed from journalist at the United Nations to stay-at-home mother caring for a baby born with a severe congenital heart defect. After open heart surgery failed to repair Lucien's heart and left my 4-year-old with damaged lungs and a tracheostomy, I became his round-the-clock "nurse." I despaired. Then I started writing about Lucien and other children with disabilities for Parenting

magazine. As I wrote, I began to feel better and, though I was in the trenches, I found meaning educating others about raising children with disabilities. In the end, I couldn't save Lucien's life – he died at 10 from heart failure – but writing about him saved my own.

Because writing about my long-ago hard story profoundly transformed my life, I believe in the value of memoir writing so much that I now teach it. Watching the palpable relief of my students as they work on their hard stories about growing up in foster homes, living in solitary confinement, and losing a beloved family member has been incredibly satisfying.

Writing a hard story is not easy. It requires a willingness to deeply mine one's emotional experience and that can be painful. Writing about my adorable, red-headed elf of a son, even now in this article, brings tears, but it gave me a new life. Writing your hard story can do that for you, too. So, if you want to move on from your hard story and find happiness in the life you have yet to live, here are six steps to launch your writing – and healing – journey.

SIX STEPS TO WRITING YOUR HARD STORY

- Write Down What Happened:** Dive to the bottom of your stormy sea. Leave nothing out. Don't come up for air until your lungs are about to explode. Your heart and gut and body will know when you're there. Later, you can edit out the extraneous parts that don't move your story forward.
- Get Inside Your Experience:** Dig deep and unearth the uncomfortable range of emotions you feel – guilt, shame, blaming others, rage, anger, hatred, grief, sadness, love. Go ahead and cry your heart out. As the writer Eudora Welty said, "Expose yourself to risk... all serious daring starts within."
- Take a Break When the Writing Gets Tough:** Go on a hike, have a swim, read a good book, see a movie, join a friend for dinner, drink a glass of wine. Do whatever recharges your battery from the arduous journey you're bravely undertaking, knowing that it will eventually free you.
- Look for the Lighter Moments:** If you can glean some lighter moments in the gloom and doom, you'll find relief. When I wrote about my son's life, as difficult as it was, remembering the many pranks Lucien played on us made me laugh. He was a funny kid.
- Get Inspired:** Read someone else's hard story. Think "Solito: A Memoir" (Javier Zamora). "The Glass Castle" (Jeannette Walls). "Townie: A Memoir" (Andre Dubus III).
- Take a Writing Class or Join a Writing Group:** A writing class or writing group can help you organize your thoughts and get the words down. Plus, you'll meet other writers who will offer important feedback. Some of my students have established their own writing groups and others have found a writing partner from former classmates.

In his book "On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction," William Zinsser writes that no other nonfiction form as the memoir "goes more deeply into the roots of personal experience, to the drama and pain and humor...of life." This is especially true for those writing a hard story. Perhaps this is why hard stories are often the most powerful – and the most important to write – of all stories.

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer who teaches memoir writing at the Transylvania County Library and the Blue Ridge Community College. Her next class will be at the Transylvania County Library from Sept. 18 to Nov. 13. Registration for the class, which will meet on Monday from 3 to 5 p.m. and is limited to 10 students, opens online on Aug. 31. For questions about the class, email Larkin at Daphne@daphnelarkin.com.