Dear Diary--Are you Listening?

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Most everyone knows by now that the mind and the body are one. Together they make a whole. For example, a piece of bad news can cause a headache. Obversely, a winning lottery ticket can cure one. That’s true in most of us, most of the time. A thump in the night can widen the pupils of the eyes, ratchet up the blood pressure as the heart races with fear. Try to fall asleep after that one.

Furthermore, black emotions like bitterness, hostility and resentment exact a bitter toll on the soma. Unresolved, they cause depression, sleeplessness, anxiety, even heart attacks. Unrequited, they knock out our immune defenses and rampant invasion by microbes can lead to sepsis. Example: pneumonia or meningitis.

Sure, it’s a given that negative emotions corrode our health. But is it also true that “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine?” Solomon said so and that alone makes it believable. A study out of New York State concurs in the affirmative and further implies that winning ways begin within.

Here’s how the study played out: One hundred and twelve patients who had either arthritis or asthma were asked to write for 20 minutes for three successive days. Divided into two study groups, half were invited to write about their plans for the day. The other half were asked to pen their thoughts about the most stressful experience that they had endured to date. No need to worry about spelling or grammar, just keep writing and stay on topic. Assurance was given that the essays would be private and anonymous. Plans for the day for the most part were just that, and mostly mundane. The stress group described loss of loved ones, auto wrecks and assorted trauma, along with stormy relations.

Perhaps you have already divined the results. Yes, that’s right—the day plan group showed little or no improvement. But the “write about your stress” group came through as winners. Almost 50% were measurably improved. Amazing! But can we really do that with pen and paper and a few short minutes a day?

It need be no surprise that when we express certain emotions we are blessed. (With a “primal scream?” Probably not.) Emotional release is what we seek from counseling, and support-group therapy. But beyond those healing sessions it’s comforting to learn that physical pain, soma suffering, can be relieved with just you. You, that is and a pen and paper. Diary anyone?

Some bard had it right when he said, “learn to read and you need never be lonely again.” May we paraphrase that one? Like “learn to write and never be sick again.” Wait now, it’s not that simple, but this is truth: “happiness and health grow from the same stem.”

Why does therapeutic writing work? Medical science is uncertain. But King Solomon wasn’t, and
perhaps it really is true that in selected illnesses, “the pen is mightier than the pill.”

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