

Healing words

A heart problem led to a car crash, pacemaker and difficult times for Jane Burns. She tells **Sarah Brealey** how writing about it has helped

Jane Burns' life changed in an instant when she blacked out on the motorway. Before that, she was a healthy 48-year-old, with no history of medical problems. "My heart stopped while I was driving. I had total loss of consciousness. I hit the back of a car that was queuing to come off the motorway: my car spun round and hit another car that was coming up behind me and then went into the central reservation. I don't remember any of this – I was told afterwards."

Luckily, no one was killed. But it remained a constant worry for Jane, who suffered memory loss as a result. "I kept getting upset, asking my partner if I'd killed anybody. I couldn't remember anything about the accident."

This meant big adjustments at work for Jane, who is self-employed as a litigation case manager. She nearly lost her business but carried on with colleagues' help. Jane still finds work more difficult because of memory loss and problems processing information, so three years after the accident, she decided to cut back on working hours. But things got worse rather than better. "I had more time to think. It hit me then what had happened. I was getting flashbacks and I was referred for counselling, where all I did was cry."

Jane was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (see page 34). It was the counsellor who



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suggested she try writing about her experience. Doing this, together with counselling and support from her family, has helped Jane come to terms with what happened. She still struggles at times but, gradually, things are getting easier.

Writing through the pain

Jane hadn't written poetry since she was seven but found this style of writing suited her needs. "With a diary I used to feel bad about not writing for a week," she says. "With poems you can write when you need to. If I was having a particularly bad day, I could capture it all. It was like emptying out what I was feeling onto the page."



ORIGINAL POETRY

Jane enjoys the spontaneity of poetry, writing when she feels she needs to most. Above: one of Jane's poems

The Heart Block

A phone call
I love you
I'll soon be home
You sat and waited
But I didn't come
A heart block
A car crash
No memory at all
Just police
A door knock
A hospital ward

But I'm unaware
Pain and tears
Flashbacks and fears
In just a second
My life has changed

Flashing and beeping
Laid on a bed
Unsure, confused
I think I've been dead
Where am I?
Where am I?

I'm angry,
I hate it
Too young
But I made it
Voices and
Drugs

What's happened?
Who knows?
Where am I?
What's happened?
And on it goes

Who is this person
Stood holding
My hand?
I can hear
Some voices
Unsure
Where I am
I drift in and out
Of an unknown place
'A heart block, an
accident'
Someone says

Jane got in touch with her local writers' circle and decided to go along to a meeting. She found it useful to have her story heard by others. "I thought, if I can share this with someone else, that will help. I had kept a lot to myself. Once they read my poetry, my story was out. I got a lot of support from the group," she says.

Jane recommends writing to everybody. "It has definitely helped me put things into perspective, and deal with and share my emotions."

Her partner Kevin, children and close friends have also been a huge source of support. "I have found this very difficult, I'm not going to lie. At work I would say things like 'you will get through this' and 'try to stay positive'. But when it came to myself, I couldn't. It's been such a long process but I know it is getting better when the upset comes with longer bits in between. I know I have to get on with my life."

She is also grateful that the trauma has given her a new perspective on life. "Sometimes I wish I could turn back the clock but then I wouldn't have written the poems," she says. "I would still be working very hard but now I realise there is more to life. I have tried not to be so tough on myself, to be a little more understanding of myself."

Life with a pacemaker

Jane was diagnosed with a Mobitz type 2 heart block, which means electrical signals from the top chambers of the heart don't always get through →



to the bottom chambers. This can cause dizziness and fainting. It can happen as a result of another heart condition, but sometimes it happens on its own, as in Jane's case.

Jane had her **pacemaker^P** fitted while in hospital, recovering from the crash and, at 48, she felt young compared with the other cardiology patients. "Sometimes I think, why me? I'd never smoked. I led a fairly healthy life."

Psychologically it's been difficult for Jane. In her mind, the pacemaker is linked to the car crash and the trauma that comes with it. Even going for her check-ups has been difficult because returning to the hospital brings back bad memories.

"The pacemaker is a constant reminder of what happened and that's difficult. I also find it intrusive. Mine is very prominent – it sticks out of my chest and if I move my arm I can feel it," explains Jane.

"Seeing the pacemaker just gives me a feeling of sadness. I have to be careful it doesn't bring me down. I have to stay positive. I've accepted I need a pacemaker, otherwise I could die. Now I've accepted that, I think the other things will get easier." **HM**



Photography: Rebecca Lupton

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES

- Try to write regularly, for a short, defined chunk of time, rather than setting aside a large chunk of time, which can feel intimidating. Even 10 minutes can be enough.
- If you're having trouble writing about your experiences, try writing about them as if they've happened to someone else – make up a character, or just use 'he' or 'she'.
- Using words like 'because' or 'as a result' in your writing can help you toward finding meaning in what you've been through.
- If in need of inspiration, reading other people's poems or creative writing can help.
- A writing group or, better, a writing for wellbeing group can give you extra guidance and help you to set aside time for writing. The Bristol-based Orchard Foundation (orchardfoundation.co.uk) organises courses like this.
- If you want further reading to get you started, try *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing* by Gillie Bolton.

WRITING FOR HEALTH

Two experts tell Sarah Brealey about the benefits of writing

Fiona Hamilton, a writer and facilitator who runs writing for wellbeing courses and mentoring sessions in the NHS and community settings, says writing can be a useful way to describe your experiences.

"As humans, we tell stories about our lives," she explains. "Writing is an opportunity to find ways of narrating the experience, to ourselves and others. When your life has been changed by an illness, when you can't do things you used to, or maybe you've gained an understanding of what matters in life, writing can help. Illness and challenge often involve feelings of changed identity and writing can be used to understand, in a safe space: 'How am I going to tell my story?'"

Writing can be especially helpful if it doesn't feel easy to talk to friends and family. "Talking to loved ones may not be straightforward; you may feel you don't want to burden them," she says. "Alternatively, people may not fully understand your situation or might want to hear that everything is better now."

Claire Williamson is the Programme Leader for the MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes at the Metanoia Institute, and works as a creative writing facilitator. She says writing about your health experiences can bring multiple benefits. "People often understand their experiences better as a result of writing about them. It's a way of becoming an expert on your experience," she says. "It doesn't remove the pain but you can get

a sense of making something whole out of something quite messy."

Even if writing upsets you at the time, as you relive a negative experience, it can help you feel better afterwards. There's evidence of the benefit that writing about your emotions and experiences can have on your physical health. Small studies of **heart attack^P** patients have found that those who wrote about their feelings on having a heart attack had a higher health-related quality of life than those who wrote about neutral topics.

Ms Williamson says writing can also be a calming process. "People usually become calmer when they write or read out their writing. This can help you feel less anxious, which is especially useful if you have symptoms of anxiety, such as panic attacks."

Getting started

Any form of writing can have benefits. "Sometimes poetry is useful because you can get a lot of emotion in a small space. Others may feel they need to get the whole thing out, so a longer form is better," explains Ms Williamson. If you belong to a writing group, having other people hear what you've been through can also help, as your feelings are heard and accepted.

There are no rules about how you write, although Ms Williamson encourages specificity and figures of speech. "Don't just say you feel sad, anxious or isolated, but 'like a puppy left out in the rain'. It gives you a frame of reference – rather than just feeling sad, you are thinking about the puppy and relating to that."

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Jane is part of a supportive writers' circle. Her partner Kevin, pictured, also encourages her work

POETRY CORNER

Read poems by Jane Burns and other heart patients at bhf.org.uk/poems. If you'd like to send us your poem, email HMeditor@bhf.org.uk.