

Staying Sane: 5 Tips for Writers

by Helen Taylor

1. Don't do it if you don't love it

Writing can be a tough, lonely occupation and may not have much financial reward. The most important thing is that you do it for the love of it. Ok, maybe there are bad days when a chapter won't come together or you've worked on a short story and it isn't flowing the way you hoped, and you're not actually having that much fun, but I'd say that if you don't enjoy writing most of the time, it isn't worth doing. You could use your energy elsewhere.

On the other hand, if you enjoy it, writing is worth doing simply for the love of it without necessarily looking for any other reward. It can help your mental health in several ways. It can work as a type of therapy, it can help you clarify your thoughts about your own emotions or about difficult subjects or, if like me you write fiction, it can fill you head with interesting characters⁽¹⁾ and unusual situations that can lift your mood or distract you from day to day tribulations.

2. Find your community

Whether it is one or two writing buddies, a Facebook group or a local writing circle, having a writing community is important if you want to navigate the tricky waters of writing and getting published without feeling like you might go under.

Writing support: Knowing you have somewhere to share work to be critiqued is really helpful, and being part of someone else's writing support network is rewarding. It makes you feel good and you can learn a lot.

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Psychological support: Need someone to moan to because you didn't make a competition shortlist, because you've only written twenty words today, because you wonder if you'll ever produce anything that anyone else will read? Your writing community will understand your anxieties perfectly because they will all be going through similar things. Knowing that other writers have doubts, have had rejections, or think that they are imposters, for example, helps to put your own worries in perspective. And your writing community is a brilliant place both to share your successes, whether they are tiny or huge and to be encouraged by the successes of your peers.

3. Work out what success means to you

If success to you means being a Sunday Times bestseller or earning millions in royalties, you might be in for a disappointment. But even if your measure of success is not quite those dizzy heights, it can be easy to get downhearted if you don't attain the levels that you feel you should (ah, that awful destructive word, 'should'). *I should be better than this. I should have sold more books. I should have found an agent.* It is a myth. There is no 'should'.

Find your own measures of success and remind yourself when you have achieved them.

Success⁽²⁾ comes in many forms and often in small increments. Success is completing a short story. Success is getting a poem published. Success is making someone laugh or cry or think. Success can even mean getting 100 rejections because that means you have been writing loads and submitting and that takes courage. Success can mean getting a one-star review of your book because for someone to really dislike it means that it has affected them and that isn't an easy thing to achieve. Find your own measures of success and remind yourself when you have achieved them.

4. Let go of professional envy

Oh, how easy it is to say that. I'm terrible for this. I have to work hard not to get completely demoralised by other writers' successes. *Why them not me? How come they have a six-figure book deal and I can't get any attention for my work? Why did their book get a brilliant review and mine get a so-so one?*⁽³⁾ It is a very destructive thought pattern and it is a waste of energy.

For a start, it is always worth reminding yourself that luck plays a significant role in these situations. True, you can make your own luck to some extent by developing networks, interacting with people of influence, getting your work out there. But there is still luck involved. For every talented writer who wins a prize, there is another who has been completely overlooked. For every best-selling author whose latest release has a huge marketing and publicity campaign, there are brilliant authors who are doing all that work themselves. Some people are lucky. Many more are not.

Secondly, unless you happen to be writing on exactly the same subject (and perhaps even then), someone else publishing a book does not lower the chances of your book getting published. The two are independent and unrelated. Don't worry about everyone else. Concentrate on what you can do to make your own work the best it can be.

And thirdly, the prize-winning, critically acclaimed, commercially successful author that you see all over Instagram and Twitter may have just got divorced, may be suffering from a serious illness, may be about to burn-out, might have an ingrowing toenail. You don't know what else is going on in other people's lives. I frequently have to tell myself this. I might desire someone else's professional success but do I want to swap my life for theirs? No thank you. I'm happy with my own.

5. Don't sit still

I mean this literally but probably metaphorically too. Sitting is terrible for you, especially in front of a computer. Stiff neck, sore shoulders, wonky hips, bad back, screen headache anyone? It isn't good for our physical health and the pain certainly isn't good for our mental health. I know that we have to sit down in front of the computer or at the desk to write in our notebooks if we are going to produce the material we need for our novel or our short story collection, but writing isn't only about typing words on the screen or putting pen to paper. Thinking, planning and day dreaming are equally important.

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Exercise is great for your mental health and can give a boost to your writing in lots of different ways. Natural endorphins, endocannabinoids and other brain chemicals released during exercise help reduce stress and anxiety, lift mood, reduce pain, improve concentration and have many other beneficial effects. And even if your exercise of choice doesn't leave any headspace to let you plan or daydream, it is an opportunity for your subconscious to work away in the background while you do your Pilates or cycle round the block.

Running is my thing (injuries permitting) and for me there is something about the very act of moving at speed that stimulates ideas. When I go for a run, I don't consciously decide which problem or plot point or character I'm going to work on, but almost without fail, when I drag myself back in the house, sweating and panting, the first thing I do is rush to my desk and note down the revelations that have come to me during the run.

My metaphorical interpretation of not sitting still is writing across forms and styles. Varying my writing projects and having fresh approach keeps me enthusiastic for the craft and gives me a both a mental and creative boost.

Further reading:

- 1 <http://booksbywomen.org/calming-my-demons-how-writing-my-novel-unexpectedly-helped-my-recovery/>
- 2 <https://helenmtaylor.com/2018/12/10/measures-of-success/>
- 3 <https://helenmtaylor.com/2018/10/24/life-lessons-taste-in-books/>

The School of Life have many useful posts that have helped me reframe some of my thinking around work and my state of mind. Like this one about the inner critic:

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/how-to-fight-off-your-inner-critic/>

Kevin MacNeil *The Brilliant & Forever* (Polygon 2016): A novel about a short story competition that addresses professional envy, cliques, and being an outsider. Essential reading for any writer.

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