

The revived art of letter writing

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From increasing wellbeing to decreasing stress, writing a physical letter is one of the best ways to stay in contact with family and friends. Discover the benefits of putting pen to paper

If there was a new activity that's relaxing, proven to increase wellbeing, and brings guaranteed joy to people close to you, it's likely hundreds of thousands would be interested. And if that activity didn't require any special equipment or training, and was virtually free, that number would rise into the millions.

Rather than being a new social media platform or form of digital content, that activity has been in existence for thousands of years and is currently regaining some of the popularity it once had. That activity is letter writing.

The individual touch

Given the times we live in, it's perhaps no surprise that letter writing, using good old-fashioned pen and paper, is becoming more common. With people craving more contact with friends and family, dashing off an email or liking a social media post just doesn't have the personal touch of a well-chosen card or handwritten letter. And for many people, the excuse of not having the time has been taken away, along with the daily commute and jam-packed schedule.

Recent research from the Royal Mail has backed up the advantages that letter writing has, with nearly three quarters of people (74%) feeling that writing letters has positive mental health benefits. Those benefits include an increase in wellbeing, a decrease in stress, and the promotion of mindfulness.

The benefits don't stop when the letter is posted. For the receiver there's a great sense of excitement and gratitude, that someone has taken the time to sit down and carefully put their thoughts down on paper. Penning a letter by hand encourages the writer to think about

what they want to say and the message they want to get across – something that within seconds of opening demonstrates that you really care about the other person.

“Handwritten correspondence is a very powerful way of connecting and showing someone close that you care,” says David Gold, Director of Public Affairs and Policy at the Royal Mail, “particularly during these difficult and sometimes isolating times.”

The write stuff

If you're in any doubt about the benefits of writing and posting a letter, here are our top five reasons to put pen to paper:

1. It's personal

There's nothing more personal than writing a letter. With no one present but yourself, you can focus on what you want to say and how you want to say it, without interruption or a discouraging look. Many people can say a lot more in a letter than they can face to face, so take the opportunity to say some of the positive things you've never been able to say.

2. It's relaxing

Sitting down to write a letter, with no distractions, can be one of the most relaxing things you can do. The concentration required to neatly write a message in just the right tone means that time flies by, all day-to-day worries are temporarily forgotten, and before long you're in a highly relaxed state.

3. It promotes self-reflection

Writing a letter needs careful consideration of what you want to say, and the relative slowness of writing by hand gives you the time to weigh up how you think about important topics – your relationships, your job, your feelings.

4. It's great for mental health

All this adds up to a great deal of mental health benefits for the writer, as well as the receiver. The thought that you're putting time and effort into creating something lasting and permanent, as well as the offloading of thoughts and feelings onto paper, and the knowledge that you're about to brighten up someone's day, can result in a welcome boost for your mood.

5. It provides a physical reminder of a heartfelt message

For those who haven't written a diary, letters provide an instant reminder of the past, a nostalgic journey to people, places and

thoughts that may have been forgotten. For those lucky enough to have a collection of letters from family or friends that may not be around anymore, letters can also be a much-needed source of comfort and pleasure.

The final word goes to author Haruki Murakami, who said: "How wonderful it is to be able to write someone a letter! To feel like conveying your thoughts to a person, to sit at your desk and pick up a pen, to put your thoughts into words like this is truly marvellous."

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