

Writing can allow people to express feelings that are too difficult to say out loud. We have been encouraging teens to write about their experience with cancer in our [Cancer Unwrapped® Teen Writing Contest](#) since 2006. In that time we have received thousands of heartfelt essays that contain messages of love and healing to loved ones alive and deceased.

Writing a 'Last Letter' When You're Healthy

By VJ PERIYAKOIL, M.D. SEPT. 7, 2016



Participants in the Stanford Letter Project working on letters to their family members.

Over the last 15 years, as a geriatrics and palliative care doctor, I have had candid conversations with countless patients near the end of their lives. The most common emotion they express is regret: regret that they never took the time to mend broken friendships and relationships; regret that they never told their friends and family how much they care; regret that they are going to be remembered by their children as hypercritical mothers or exacting, authoritarian fathers.

And that's why I came up with a project to encourage people to write a last letter to their loved ones. It can be done when someone is ill, but it's really worth doing when one is still healthy, before it's too late.

It's a lesson I learned years ago from a memorable dying patient. He was a Marine combat veteran who had lived on a staple diet of *Semper Fi* and studied silence all his life. A proud and stoic man, he was admitted to the hospital for intractable pain from widely spread cancer. Every day, his wife visited him and spent many hours at his bedside watching him watch television. She explained to me that he had never been much of a talker in their 50-plus years of marriage.

But he was far more forthcoming with me, especially when it became clear that his days were numbered. He spoke of his deep regret for not having spent enough time with his wife, whom he loved very much, and of his great pride in his son, who had joined the Marines in his father's footsteps.

One afternoon, when I mentioned these comments to his wife and son, they looked incredulously at each other and then disbelievingly at me. They thanked me for being kind but stated that my patient was incapable of expressing such sentiments.

I wanted to prove my credibility and to make sure that his wife could actually hear her husband professing his love. I knew he was unlikely to speak to them directly. So I took my huge family camcorder with me the next morning on medical rounds and - with the patient's consent — recorded an open letter from him to his family. When I gave them the taped letter as a keepsake, both his wife and son were moved to tears.

The experience inspired an idea that has grown into the [Stanford Friends and Family Letter Project](#). With guidance from seriously ill patients and families from various racial and ethnic groups, we developed a free template for a letter that can help people complete seven life review tasks: acknowledging important people in our lives; remembering treasured moments; apologizing to those we may have hurt; forgiving those who have hurt us; and saying "thank you," "I love you" and "goodbye."

While these may seem intuitive, many people don't complete these steps before they die, leaving their family members with unanswered questions and regret.

(A video showing people participating in the project [can be seen here](#).)

The letter template, which is available in eight languages, allows writers to express gratitude, forgiveness and regret. In one letter, a participant wrote to his wife, Lily, "I wish I had loved you more."

Many writers use the templates to express pride in their children in ways they might not do in person. One wrote to a son, Michael: "You are so courageous to change your major and do what it takes to be successful to reach your dreams." Another wrote, "Life for us was never easy but you overcame obstacles."

And some apologize. A man named Tyrone Scott wrote to his daughter, "I'm sorry that I wasn't there when you were growing up. If I could relive my past, I would not have let your mother take you away from me."

The letters can be a chance to let go of grudges. Shirley Jones wrote, "To Harold: You have forgotten to repay some of the personal loans you obtained from us. We are wiping your account cleared."

So we invite you to use the "[Dear Friends and Family](#)" template and write your letter now while you still can.

Those with chronic or serious illness may use the [illness letter template](#); there is also a [healthy letter template](#) for those in good health. In working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, I found that some were reluctant to complete the "goodbye" task for fear that it might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I recommend that people write only the parts they feel comfortable with.

Once the letter is written, you can choose to share it with your loved ones right away. You can also store it in a safe place or with a trusted person to be given to your family in the future. Some people prefer to use the letter as a living legacy document and update it over time.

It may take tremendous courage to write a life review letter. For some people, it evokes deep and troubling emotions. Yet it may be the most important letter you will ever write.

Dr. VJ Periyakoil is the director of the [Stanford Palliative Care Education & Training Program](#) and the founder of the [Stanford Letter Project](#). Follow her on Twitter [@palliator](#).