While writing her first memoir, *The Liar’s Club*, Mary Karr was so exhausted she napped every day like a cross-country trucker. This was unusual for her, a single mom and a full-time college professor who usually needed just a few hours of sleep at night. Eventually, she identified the cause: The intense emotional workout of writing a memoir was causing her actual, physical exhaustion.

“I’ve heard that from other writers, too,” she told me. Compared to writing fiction, revisiting your own past just beats you up, she said. And a newfound urge to sleep is only one side effect of drafting a memoir: People who are long
dead can slowly come alive in your mind; you can hear and smell them almost as vividly as if you were having a full-blown hallucination. Your memories will change, as truths you long held about your life begin to unravel. Ultimately, you may end up a different person altogether. “In some ways, writing a memoir is knocking yourself out with your own fist, if it’s done right,” Karr writes in her most recent book, The Art of Memoir, which was released in paperback last fall. “The form always has profound psychological consequences on its author.”

Karr is a famous, successful memoirist, and if all of this applies to her, it surely applies to the thousands of others who have contributed to the surge of a genre once was confined to celebrities and people who have truly dramatic stories to tell. According to one estimate, sales of memoirs increased four-fold between 2004 and 2008; a search on Amazon returns more than 600,000 memoirs published since 2000. And many of those are written by people who have lived pretty uneventful lives (or by, as Neil Genzlinger wrote in a popular op-ed in the New York Times, virtually anyone who’s run a marathon, had a parent, or held a job). Memoir is simple enough in structure that the barrier of entry is quite low — in Karr’s words, it’s a democratic form, in that anybody who’s lived can write one. But given that the form is also the most private, closest to your selfhood and life, perhaps a more interesting question is: Should you?

Your understanding of the world is made of the stories you tell yourself about your life. When examining your life edits those stories, it also changes you. Here, according to researchers who study autobiographical memory and authors who’ve written autobiographies, is what you should prepare for if you write your own memoir.

**Your memories will change.**

The ideas we hold of ourselves are often not firmly grounded in reality: Our memories are influenced by how we want things to have been, and not necessarily the way things were. As you write, you may discover that you were never quite as kind, as funny, or as smart as you thought. “You start with a physical memory and sound bites and you kind of examine them,” Karr said. “Is this true that you think you were smart in high school? Well, what evidence do you have for that?”

The reasons for discrepancies between memories and facts may lie in our tendency to maintain a coherent story, says Mariam Chammat, a neuroscientist with the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research. To
minimize regrets and justify our behaviors, we sometimes convince ourselves of alternative explanations.

In psychology, this is known as cognitive dissonance theory, the idea that humans seek to eliminate dissonance and align their emotions and behaviors. In daily-life terms, this phenomenon may translate to thinking things like, “The job I didn’t get wasn’t good enough, anyway.” Evidence for this concept comes from numerous psychology experiments in which, after choosing between two similar items, people change their preferences and reevaluate their chosen items as more attractive and rejected items as less attractive. Even more puzzling, when people are tricked to believe they have made a choice that they haven’t made, they come up with post hoc explanations to justify the choice they believe they’ve made. “It seems as if what’s more important to them than anything else is to have this image of themselves that they are consistent and coherent,” Chammat says. Her own recent study points in the same direction, showing that people who don’t have a memory of their choices don’t fall into this self-convincing trap.

The disconnect in the way you remember yourself and the way you really were could also be caused by the quirks of memory. Numerous neuroscience studies have established that our memories are far from a precise videotape-like copy of the actual events. What’s more, they change during each recall. Memoir writers experience the amorphous nature of memory up close, and most often end up with a different set of memories from what they started with.

That, however, doesn’t mean that memories are too unreliable to teach us anything. Even if they are not always the best at capturing the facts of an event, they do a masterful job of capturing the flavor, revealing something about your desires and motivations at the time. “I think in some sense your memory is much truer than a videotape would be,” Karr says. “Memory captures all these stuff that a videotape wouldn’t capture.”

**Your understanding of your life story will change, too.**

This deeper understanding that comes with an examined life can settle the mind in different ways for different people. Research stretching back to the 1980s by Timothy Wilson, a University of Virginia psychology professor and author of *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*, has documented the effects of revising life stories and how a new narrative can lead to mental-health improvement. Similarly, writing a memoir may help you spot positive narratives for some of your negative memories. For example, you might realize
that, yes, it is true that you did poorly as a freshman — but you also did just fine over the following years. This larger perspective can help you understand that you were not dumb; you just needed more time to adjust to college.

“We do know that various kinds of writing exercises can be quite beneficial, particularly for people who are distressed about something in their past,” Wilson says. “The key is that this allows people to reinterpret events and come to see them in a different light. Does writing a memoir trigger that same process? I suspect it does.”

Writing can also help you identify thought patterns that you tend to get stuck in, and the behaviors that you are prone to repeat. Once you see these patterns in your history, it becomes much easier to spot them in your current life, which is the first step to break the cycle. Identifying and restructuring such thinking patterns are the core strategies of cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, deemed as one of the most effective ways to change problematic behaviors.

By its nature, the form of memoir helps create a distance between you as the narrator and you as the character. This can give you a lens to look at things without too much emotional involvement, which helps to gain perspective and feel better about the past. That’s akin to writing about yourself using a generic second-person, which a recent study has found can help people better cope with their negative experiences. Across six experiments, the researchers found that using the generic you when reflecting on negative experiences “allows people to ‘normalize’ their experience by extending it beyond the self.”

Similarly, a 2005 study found that taking a third-person perspective about one’s life allowed people to better see the progress they’d made, compared to reviewing their life in first-person. Highlighting that positive change then can help them to make more positive changes in the future.

But writing a memoir for therapeutic effect should not be your primary reason if you intend the draft for an audience of larger than one, says Sarah Saffian, a memoirist who teaches writing, and also a psychotherapist who uses memoir prompts as a therapeutic tool to help her clients open up about their internal experiences. “It’s good for your character self to be going through all these emotions,” Saffian said, “but if you as the storyteller are sitting at the computer roiling with emotion, then you’re probably not ready to tell your story.”
The primary reason for writing a memoir, of course, should be to tell a good story. But will yours stand a chance when you have lived a normal life and there are only a finite number of story plots in the world? “I don’t really think there are any ordinary lives,” said Dawn Raffel, author of *The Secret Life of Objects* and a book doctor who helps others write their memoirs. “If you look deeply enough, go under the facts and look for meaning and resonance, that’s where everybody has a story.”