

Healing through Writing

 **Emotion regulation**

 Intervention

 10-15 min. daily

 Client

 Yes



Past research has shown that expressive writing about past traumatic events has many beneficial on both physical and emotional health. Extensive research by James Pennebaker and colleagues shows that individuals who occasionally write about their emotions and thoughts experience several benefits: increased feelings of well-being, reduced physician visits, reduced absenteeism from work, improved academic grades, and enhanced immune system functions (Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker, 1997, 2004).

Goal

The goal this exercise is to help clients find meaning and resolution in their trauma. Through the writing process, clients may experience their emotional reactions to the trauma more manageable and might be less disturbed by unwarranted ruminations.

Advice

- Clients should be aware that the benefits of expressive writing only emerge over time. Expressive writing is not a quick fix. In fact, directly after expressing, participants typically report feeling worse and are more physiologically aroused.
- Clients should be encouraged to write about the emotional aspects of an emotional event rather than the factual aspects.
- Inform clients that the goal of writing is not to find a culprit or to punish the self. The idea is to connect to one's feelings and thoughts and write them down with the intention to allow oneself to express what is happening emotionally and to better understand what is going on. When feelings stay locked up, they can have detrimental effects on well-being in the long run.
- For many clients, talking about difficult emotions is difficult as they feel embarrassed and vulnerable. This tool can be a powerful way for people to "free their emotions" in a non-threatening way.
- If clients want to share what is written, encourage them to talk about it rather than read it. This is especially relevant for group settings, as talking about it gives them the freedom to alter the story slightly so as not to hurt others' feelings, or to address other issues that may be more relevant in the current context of therapy.
- Encourage clients to take extreme care in the storage of their writings at home. If found by family members or friends, deeply personal writings can be devastating.
- Be careful that writing does not turn into another form of rumination. If clients have not found the task helpful after three writing occasions, try something else.

- Many clients are hesitant to write for fear of others discovering and reading their journal. You can inform clients to feel free to dispose of their writings after they have written the day's entry. No one need ever see they have written. The process of self-expression is beneficial even if the text is immediately destroyed.
- Typically, this exercise is done in four consecutive days. However, a client may wish to proceed for a longer period of time. In any case, it is important to reflect on the experience. You can ask your client to reflect privately or/and during the coaching sessions.



Suggested Readings

Lepore, S. J., & Smyth, J. M. (Eds.). (2002). *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions*. New York: Guilford Press.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1999). Health effects of expressing emotions through writing. *Biofeedback*, 27, 6–9, 14.

Pennebaker, J. W. (2004). *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press.

Tool Description

This exercise is intended to have you focus on your most traumatic life experience. Let your ideas flow fluidly as you recount the past, the present, or the future. As you write, explore the emotions. Patiently believe in yourself and your process. Take as long as you need.

Key Points

- Choose something that deeply affected you and that is personal.
- Feel free to use the same topic or a different topic each day.
- Keep your writing in a secure place to avoid feeling intimidated or limited while writing due to the fear of someone else reading it. If helpful, communicate with family members what you are doing and respectfully ask for privacy.
- While this exercise may be a challenge, be gentle on yourself. Keep in mind that you are working on your personal development that will lead to beneficial effects including clarity on life.
- If you feel overwhelmed while writing, it is okay to take a small break. Try not to get out of your writing flow. Sometimes we resist what is painful, preventing us from moving forward by feeling the emotions.
- It is normal to feel vulnerable. Using your social support to provide comfort.
- Choose a time that will make you feel the most comfortable. I.e. You may choose to write in the evening or early in the morning.

Instructions (Adapted from Pennebaker, 1999):

Each time you write in your journal, express your deepest thoughts and feelings about some important emotional event or issue that has affected you. In your writing, let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives; to your past, your present, or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Do not worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. Journaling is most effective if you write whenever you notice that you are thinking or worrying about something too much. Set a length of time comfortable for yourself, anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. Then continue writing until the time is up. You do not need to write every day. Instead, think of expressive writing as a way to clarify your thoughts and emotions. This method is particularly powerful in helping you to get through emotional upheavals.

Post Four Days-Reflection

- What was the most challenging aspect of writing? Even though it may have been difficult, do you agree that it was worth it?
- Did the process of writing help to decrease the avoidance you may have felt?
- Despite any lingering emotions, can you identify areas of personal growth or healing that may have occurred? If you have, write down specifically what positive actions and behaviors you have and intend on taking regarding post-traumatic growth.
- Do you see your trauma differently post completion of the exercise?
- Is your character different, or do you have improved strengths, from your post traumatic growth?