

## Therapeutic Journaling

### What Is Therapeutic Journaling?

Therapeutic journaling is the process of writing down our thoughts and feelings about our personal experiences. This kind of private reflection allows us to sort through events that have occurred and problems that we may be struggling with. It allows us to come to a deeper understanding about ourselves, with a different perspective on these difficulties. Therapeutic journaling differs from more traditional diary writing, which involves recording the details of daily events. In contrast, therapeutic journaling is an internal process of using the written word to express the full range of emotions, reactions and perceptions we have related to difficult, upsetting, or traumatic life events. Along the way, this can mean writing ourselves to better emotional and physical health and a greater sense of well-being.

### The Therapeutic Writing Protocol

Therapeutic journaling can be done by keeping a regular journal to write about events that bring up anger, grief, anxiety, or joy that occur in daily life. It can also be used more therapeutically to deal with specific upsetting, stressful, or traumatic life events. An expressive writing protocol developed by Dr. James Pennebaker is the most widely used and researched method utilized in clinical practice. This writing protocol has been linked to improvements in both physical and psychological health. It has been used in non-clinical and clinical populations. The expressive writing protocol consists of asking someone to write about a stressful, traumatic or emotional experience for three to five sessions, over four consecutive days, for 15-20 minutes per session. Research has found it to be useful as a stand-alone tool or as an adjunct to traditional psychotherapies.

### How It Works

Emotional expression has been found to be good for our health. It enhances our immune system functioning. When upsetting or traumatic events occur, we often are not able to fully process what happened, and the event and the emotions around what occurred become stuck in our memory. The simple act of expressing thoughts and feelings on paper about challenging and upsetting events can allow us to move forward by expressing and letting go of the feelings involved. Expressive writing also provides an opportunity to construct a meaningful personal narrative about what happened. It brings clarity and enables us to place our experience into the context of our larger place in the world.

### Research

Over the past 25 years, a growing body of research has demonstrated the beneficial effects that writing about traumatic or stressful events has on physical and emotional health. Dr. Pennebaker, one of the first researchers in this area, found that writing about emotionally difficult events or feelings for just 20 minutes at a time over four consecutive days was associated with both short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in

health problems, such as immune system functioning.<sup>1</sup> Smyth conducted a meta-analysis of 13 studies of written emotional expression with healthy participants and found specific benefits in objective or self-reported physical health, psychological well-being, physiological functioning, and general functioning outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Frisina et al. conducted a meta-analysis of nine studies on written emotional disclosure on clinical populations and found significant benefit for health outcomes in medically ill populations but did not find any psychological health outcomes in psychiatric populations.<sup>3</sup>

## Who Can Benefit

Expressive writing has been found to produce significant benefits for individuals with a variety of medical conditions including:<sup>4</sup>

- Lung functioning in asthma
- Disease severity in rheumatoid arthritis
- Pain and physical health in cancer
- Immune response in HIV infection
- Hospitalizations for cystic fibrosis
- Pain intensity in women with chronic pelvic pain
- Sleep-onset latency in poor sleepers
- Post-operative course

In addition, it can be helpful for assistance with specific life circumstances, including:

- Break-up with life partner<sup>5</sup>
- Death of loved one<sup>6</sup>
- Unemployment<sup>7</sup>
- Natural disaster<sup>8</sup>
- General stressful events<sup>9</sup>

In 2012, Emmerik, Reijntjes and Kamphuis conducted a meta-analysis investigating the efficacy of expressive writing for treatment of posttraumatic stress conditions (e.g. acute stress disorder and PTSD) and comorbid depressive symptoms. It resulted in significant and substantial short-term reductions in posttraumatic stress and depressive symptoms. There was no difference in efficacy between writing therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy.<sup>10</sup> Smyth's 1998 review suggests that the effects of written emotional expression are substantial and similar in magnitude to the effects of other psychological interventions, many of which can be time-consuming and expensive.<sup>2</sup>

Expressive writing can therefore be considered an evidence-based treatment for posttraumatic stress and constitutes a useful treatment alternative for patients who do not respond to other evidence-based therapies. It may be especially useful for reaching trauma survivors in need of evidence-based mental health care who live in remote areas. Therapeutic journaling can also be a way to reach people who are unwilling or unable to engage in psychotherapy.

Expressive writing may be contraindicated for individuals who do not typically express emotions<sup>11</sup> or who have severe trauma histories or psychiatric disorders.<sup>12,13</sup>

## Therapeutic Journaling Instructions

This writing exercise is useful for dealing with emotional upheavals or traumas. It is a four-day writing program that has proven effective for improving mental and physical health. It is best to do your writing in a meaningful place, time, and atmosphere, so think about finding a location where you will be undisturbed by others, your phone, e-mail, etc.

It is important to think about what your writing topic will be. You might pick an emotionally upsetting event that is bothering you. If you have faced a massive trauma, it is best not to write about it for several weeks afterwards, as it may be too difficult to deal with some of the emotions that arise around what happened. Trust where your writing takes you. You might start writing about a traumatic experience and then find yourself writing about something entirely different.

For the next four days, please write about an emotionally upsetting or traumatic event that has had a strong impact on you. During your writing, you are encouraged to explore your deepest emotions and thoughts about this difficult life experience. As you write about this topic, you might tie it to your relationships with others. You may relate it to your past, present, or future, or you may connect it with who you may 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 you may choose to write about different topics each day.

Keep in mind these few simple guidelines recommended by Pennebaker:<sup>14</sup>

**Writing topic.** You can write about the same event all four days or different events each day. What you choose to write about should be something that is extremely personal and important for you.

**Length and frequency.** Write for 15-20 minutes each day for four consecutive days if you can. It is a bit more effective than writing four days over the course of several weeks.

**Write continuously.** Once you begin writing, write continuously without stopping. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you run out of things to say, simply repeat what you have already written. Keep writing about the topic until the time is up.

**Write only for yourself.** You are writing for yourself and no one else. After you complete the expressive writing exercise, you may want to destroy or hide what you have written. Remember this writing can be for your eyes only.

**What to avoid.** If you feel that you cannot write about a particular event because it would be too upsetting, then don't write about it. Just write about events or situations that you can handle now.



**What to expect.** It is common for people to feel somewhat saddened or depressed after writing, especially on the first day or two. Know that this is completely normal, if this happens to you. Typically, the feeling usually lasts just a few minutes or a few hours. It is a good idea to plan some time to yourself after your writing session to reflect on the issues you have been writing about and support yourself in any emotions that come up.

**Considerations.** Writing about the same topic day after day for too many days is not helpful. If, after several sessions, you feel you are not making progress, then you might need to stop and contact a health care practitioner.

**When to discontinue the journaling exercise.** Writing exercises aren't for everyone. If the writing exercise evokes strong feelings that you cannot cope with, stop immediately and do something soothing for yourself. Experiencing symptoms of hypervigilance, stress or distress are signals to discontinue this journaling exercise immediately. Take care of yourself by doing something like practice diaphragmatic breathing, reach out to a friend or loved one, or go for a walk to center and calm yourself. If you experience lingering negative feelings, you might benefit some additional help. It is recommended to seek the professional advice of a psychologist, counselor, or physician to discuss these feelings and experiences.

## Author(s)

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