

Expressive Writing

An evidence-based guide
for healing trauma



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Introduction

This ebook is an introduction to the Expressive Writing technique. This technique is an extensively well-researched self-help therapy. In 4 days of writing for 20 minutes, it has been shown to improve both mental and physical health.

Benefits you can expect after doing the Expressive Writing Technique are (each of these are supported by studies):

- Feeling more positive emotions
- Falling asleep more quickly
- Fewer aches and pains
- Less alcohol or drug use
- Thinking about trauma less often
- When thinking about trauma, it is less painful
- Feeling less irritable, people “seem nicer”
- Experience more honest and open relationships
- Easier to focus
- Noticing a greater sense of meaning in your life

For more on the benefits and theory behind why, see the Benefits and Theory sections. If you want to go straight to the technique, go to page 15.

My Goal

I've created this ebook because I'm committed to learning and sharing evidence-based therapies that will help people heal themselves.

I wanted to get my Ph.D in Clinical Psychology (I have a B.S. in Cognitive Psychology), but realized the world doesn't need more studies people won't read. We need more people who understand the science, finding and popularizing what works. Getting a Ph.D seemed like I would only be adding to the pandemonium.

So my goal is to find and understand the best therapies, write about them until I understand them enough where I can explain them simply, and then to share those therapies. I want anyone who is interested, to be able to afford and do techniques that will improve their lives.

There is absolutely a place for the expensive experts, but I believe that most of us can improve our lives on our own if we are given the right tools.

This ebook aspires to be one of those tools.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy might be the most exciting finding I've stumbled upon this year. The name refers to the observed phenomenon that some self-help books can improve a patient's depression as effectively as psychotherapy or the most effective drugs. This is vital considering the rising healthcare costs and the proliferation of depression.

Dr. Forest Scogin of the University of Alabama has published 5 studies testing the effects of self-help books. These studies have been published in the peer-reviewed journals *The Gerontologist* and the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. He has concluded that some self-help books (specifically *Feeling Good* by Dr. David Burns), can be as effective as a full course of psychotherapy or using the most effective drug in treating depression and mood disorders.

My goal for this ebook is that if it were used in a study such as Dr. Scogin's, it would qualify as bibliotherapy. The beautiful feature ebooks have over traditional books is ebooks are adaptive. I will use your feedback to constantly refine this tool.

To do this, I will ask you to take a test before starting the technique, and I will send you a survey 2 weeks, 4 weeks, and 2 months after you get this ebook. Feel free to unsubscribe or not respond, but if you'd like to participate in the evolution of this tool, I look forward to your responses.

Your participation will help me mold this tool into a bibliotherapy.

Good luck and thank you.

What is Expressive Writing

Expressive writing is one of the most well-studied examples of bibliotherapy. It seems incredible, but writing for 20 minutes a night, for four days in a row, can improve things from your GPA to how often you go to the doctor.

Most of us incur a few soul scars as we navigate this life. These soul scars, if they happen before the age of 17, significantly correlate with adult illness. If you have had traumatic experiences in your early life, you tend to get sick easier and go to the doctor more. (Stockdale 2011; Brown et al. 2010; Dube et al. 2009; Fellitti 2009).

What is even more interesting; those who keep their trauma a secret go to the doctor even more than those who share their trauma. (Pennebaker & Susman 1988.) So here we have 5 studies finding a scientifically significant correlation between keeping a secret and physical health. This will seem obvious to some readers, but this is demonstrating a real link between the mind and the body.

The expressive writing technique was created by Pennebaker in the light of this mind-body connection. His technique has been shown to reduce doctor visits by HALF for those who had the traumatic childhood event and kept it a secret (Pennebaker & Susman 1988.) Since then, over 300 studies have been done on expressive writing.

*If you don't need convincing and want to skip straight to the technique, go to page 15.

My Expressive Writing

I've had a pretty lucky life, but below I share my most traumatic experience. Expressive Writing helped me make sense of the event.

When I was a sophomore in college I drove from my rural college town to the near big city for a girl. That night I ended up eating my first edible and I committed the sin every rookie does; I ate a second because I wasn't feeling the first. An hour later, the girl I had come to see is hiding under a blanket not speaking (she committed the rookie sin as well) and her friend needed a ride home.

I was too high to be driving. I don't know why I got in that car. I ended up in an accident where a woman is in the middle of the road, banging on my car door, screaming I hit her baby.

Note: I'm visibly high, my friend is as toasted as I am, I have weed and pipes in my bag, and my friend has weed and a pipe on him.

I felt like I fucking died. While my car is still idling in the middle of the road, I ignored reality and buried my head in my hands. I had killed a child. This irrational conclusion was a combination of this woman's complete hysteria and the ungodly amount of THC in my blood. I was sure my life was over.

People talk about seeing their life flash before them, and weirdly, that did happen. But it wasn't my past I saw, it was my future. I saw a rapid whirl of images of me graduating, getting a fancy job, having kids, and as a pure testament of my insanely inflated ego, I saw myself in a suit shaking hands in the white house. And then I saw myself in a jail cell.

I thought about killing myself. But, after what felt like 20 minutes, but was only 45 seconds or so, I heard, or maybe felt, a voice in me say something like "One moment at

a time. Take responsibility.” I can't remember exactly, but it was delivered with powerful conviction.

I brought my head up, pulled my car out of the road, confronted the lady, and waited for the cops.

And, everything was okay. The lady had hit my car, her child was in the back seat completely unharmed. When the cops came, her cussing and threats consumed most of their attention and I, by virtue of just standing there explaining myself, looked like a paragon of sainthood.

The cops called a tow for me which they paid for, and my copilot's friends came and got us.

This was the most psychologically traumatic experience I had ever had. It was the only time in my life I thought about killing myself. When I got home the next day, I felt an irresistible urge to write down the experience.

I hadn't known it at the time, but I engaged in expressive writing.

Since that first writing four years ago, I've revisited the traumatic experience using what I've shared in this document, and my PTSD symptoms are mostly gone. I used to get mini panic attacks driving in the crowded city, I'd imagine at least one car per minute flying into my car and causing an accident. I'd sweat, feel impending doom, and was generally not an effective driver.

Now I live in the city. My girlfriend will be quick to point out I don't drive much, but I'm much more capable than I used to be. It is largely due to this technique, coupled with self-implemented exposure therapy.

Expressive Writing's Benefits

Since Pennebaker's first Expressive Writing study in 1986, over 300 studies have been conducted in multiple countries and languages. The physical and mental benefits are robust and valid. Here is a brief list of what Expressive Writing can do;

- Reduced doctor visits for following year by 43-50% (Pennebaker & Beall 1986).
- Improved lung function in asthmatics and limb mobility in rheumatoid arthritis patients (Smyth & Arigo 2009; Smyth Stone & Hurewitz, et al. 1999).
- Increased white blood cell production in cancer patients (Petrie et al. 2004).
- Reduced Irritable bowel syndrome symptoms (Halpert, Rybin, & Doros 2010).
- Improved cancer patient sleep, reduction in overall pain, reduction in overall symptoms, and higher daytime functioning (Henry et al. 2010; Low et al. 2010; De Moor et al. 2002; Rosenberg et al. 2002).
- Reduced blood pressure, heart rate, facial muscular tension, and hand skin conductance (Pennebaker, Hughes, & O' Heeron 1987).
- Decreased depressive symptoms (Lepore 1997).
- Improved GPA (Lumley & Provenzano 2003; Cameron & Nicholls 1998; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp 1990).
- Improved rate of being hired if unemployed (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker 1994).
- Physiological effects can last up to 4 months or more (McGuire, Greenberg, & Gevirtz 2005).
- Improved social relations - more frequent conversations, laughter, and use of emotive words (Pennebaker & Graybeal 2001, Baddeley & Pennebaker 2011).

- Reduced negative emotions and PTSD symptoms in couples using psychotherapy after extramarital affairs (Snyder et al. 2004).
- Improved marital satisfaction (Baddeley & Pennebaker 2011).

Exploring The Theory

This is going to be a very brief incursion into the theory behind Expressive Writing. If you are interested in more, check out the Resources section at the end.

The effects of Expressive Writing appear to hinge on how memory and stress work. When we remember something, the body is capable of reacting as if the memory is “real.” Trauma appears to be unconsolidated memories. Unconsolidated memories intrude into consciousness.

This conscious intrusion of unconsolidated trauma can trigger a chronic stress response. A chronic stress response can impair the functioning of almost all bodily systems. With chronic stress, we are more likely to get sick.

When we share a secret verbally, or in writing, we show biological markers of reduced stress. By sharing a secret, we shape the secret by language, which appears to help us consolidate the memory, which frees up our working memory.

This freeing up of working memory implies that the unconsolidated memory is no longer intruding into consciousness. These effects are most robust when the trauma is a secret the individual has not created a narrative for.

Pennebaker and others think the reason writing about trauma works so effectively is because the very nature of writing transforms the trauma from a hard-to-understand sensory experience into an easy-to-understand narrative. Human language is a simplifying device for experience.

Guide

How To

The Expressive Writing research has helped us understand what variations are more effective than others. This section will cover how you should approach Expressive Writing to maximize your benefits. We'll cover:

1. How to write
2. When to write
3. Where to write
4. A Not-To-Do List
5. A Summary

1. How To Write

The two most important aspects of this technique are to write honestly about your emotions, and to seek to structure the experience.

Emotions

Listen for and follow where your emotions take you. Trauma from a decade ago may not bother you. You may want to talk about your current work predicament or the illness of a loved one.

Speak candidly and personally, don't write like it is an essay. Some people will approach this technique by quoting Plato or referencing obscure historical figures. This is often an indicator that they are intellectualizing the exercise and are not allowing themselves to experience their emotions.

Interestingly, studies on Expressive Writing find that people who don't articulate their emotions about the trauma don't experience the health benefits. Follow where the emotion goes.

Note: It is normal to feel sad directly after writing. This may last for a couple of hours, much like how we feel after watching a sad movie.

Structure

Just as important as expressing your emotions is the process of structuring your experience. Expressive Writing researchers believe the psychological mechanism behind why this technique heals is due to the nature of language and how it molds experience into a story structure.

Language naturally molds a complex experience into a story.

The research shows that the magic is in constructing a coherent story where there wasn't one before. If someone has a clear story about a certain trauma and that trauma is what they write about during the technique, they don't see the health benefits.

Explore and write about an emotional upheaval in your life that you haven't constructed a story for (Hint: if it is a secret, it almost certainly has not been molded by language and would be an ideal topic for this technique.)

Miscellaneous

Research has found no difference between typing or writing long-hand. You can pick.

Studies have also concluded that if you write about trauma, the trauma should be more than a month old. We need a little psychic distance from the trauma to start organizing it into a story.

To maximize the benefits, on at least one of the writing days, explore the trauma from the 3rd person.

2. When to Write

You'll want to write at the same time every day. This will give the writing a habitual/ritual feeling and allows you to get into the head-space more effectively.

Studies support that having a little reflective time after writing is ideal. Pennebaker suggests writing at night, after the whirl of the day. I suggest writing at night and going on a walk afterwards to unwind.

3. Where to Write

There have been some creative studies exploring different types of writing environments. The conclusion is, create a unique environment. (The uniqueness will trigger you to think differently.)

It could be as simple as lighting a candle or as weird as getting naked and writing inside a home fort you made. At the very least, pick a place you will be undisturbed for the 20 minutes.

4. Not-To-Do List

Flip Out Rule

If you feel that by writing about a certain topic you will go insane or need hospitalization,

do not write about that thing. Pennebaker has never had this happen in his studies, but as a precaution, he always asks the writers to observe the Flip-Out Rule.

Don't Over-Analyze

Writing about the same trauma for more than four days tends to not help, and can actually harm. If you find that the writing technique did not help at all after the four days, Pennebaker strongly suggests looking for a therapist to work with.

Don't let others see or read it.

It is hard to acknowledge, but our trauma can hurt the people we share it with. Pennebaker explains that he has seen relationships damaged and destroyed when others have found the journals of their loved ones or friends. Delete or hide or destroy your writings afterwards.

Don't expect your life to stay the same.

This is slightly tongue-in-cheek but its a serious concern. The technique has radically shifted peoples lives and Pennebaker has reported people divorce their spouses, leave their jobs, or move. Expect your life to be changed if you dive into the trauma.

5. Summary

When you write, explore your emotions as deeply and candidly as possible. Seek to understand your experience as a story with a resolution. Write at the same time and in the same place everyday. Observe the flip out rule, and plan for your life to change.

The Technique

Note: This section is quoted in its entirety from James Pennebaker, PhD's Expressive Writing; Words that Heal. Given the subject, it would be irresponsible for me to tamper with the therapeutic tool he has honed for over thirty years.

Day 1

Set a Timer for 20 Minutes

Write continuously

Write only to yourself. No one else will see this.

Observe the Flip Out Rule

Writing Prompt

Remember that this is the first of four days of writing. In today's writing, your goal is to write about your deepest thoughts and feelings about the trauma or emotional upheaval that has been influencing your life most. In your writing, really let go and explore this event and how it has affected you. Today, it may be beneficial to simply write about the event itself, how you felt when it was occurring and how you feel now.

As you write about your upheaval, you might begin to tie it to other parts of your life. For example, how is it related to your childhood and your relationships with your parents and close family? How is the event connected to those people you have most loved, feared, or been angry with? How is this upheaval related to your current life -- your friends and family, your work, and your place in life? And above all, how is this event related to who you have been in the past, who you would like to be in the future, and who you are now?

In today's writing, it is particularly important that you really let go and examine your deepest emotions and thoughts surrounding this upheaval in your life. Remember to write continuously the entire twenty minutes. And never forget that this writing is for you and you alone.

At the conclusion of the twenty minutes of writing, read the "thoughts following" section and complete the post-writing questionnaire.

Thoughts Following the Day One Writing Session

Congratulations! You have completed the first day of writing. After each writing exercise, it can be helpful to make objective assessments about how the writing felt. In this way, you can go back and determine which writing methods are most effective for you.

For this and for all future writing exercises, respond to each of the five following questions either at the end of your writing or in a separate place. Put a number between 0 and 10 by each question.

0 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, 10 = a great deal

___ To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?

___ To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?

___ To what degree do you currently feel happy?

___ To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful to you?

Briefly describe how your writing went today so you may refer to this later.

For many people, the first day of writing is the most difficult. This kind of writing can bring up emotions and thoughts that you may not have known you had. It may also have flowed much more easily than you expected -- especially if you wrote about something that you have been keeping to yourself for a long time.

If you don't want anyone to see your writing, keep the pages in a secure place or destroy them. If keeping them is not a problem, you can go back and analyze the pages at the end of the four days of writing.

Now, take some time for yourself. Until tomorrow.

Day 2

Set a Timer for 20 Minutes

Write continuously

Write only to yourself. No one else will see this.

Observe the Flip Out Rule

Writing Prompt

Today is the second day of the four-day process. In your last writing session, you were asked to explore your thoughts and feelings about a trauma or emotional upheaval that has affected you deeply. In today's writing, your task is to *really* examine your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You can write about the same trauma or upheaval as you did yesterday or a completely different one.

The writing instructions today are similar to those of your last writing session. Today, try to link the trauma to other parts of your life. Remember that a trauma or emotional upheaval can often influence every aspect of your life -- your relationships with friends and family, how you and others view you, your work, and even how you think about your past. In today's writing, begin thinking how this upheaval is affecting your life in general. You might also write about how you may be responsible for some of the effects of the trauma.

As before, write continuously for the entire twenty minutes and open up your deepest thoughts. At the conclusion, complete the post-writing questionnaire."

Thoughts Following the Day Two Writing Session

You have completed the second of the four-day writing exercise. Before setting aside your writing for the day, please complete the following questionnaire. Put a number between 0 and 10 by each question.

0 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, 10 = a great deal

___ To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?

___ To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?

___ To what degree do you currently feel happy?

___ To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful to you?

Briefly describe how your writing went today so you may refer to this later.

You now have two days of writing to compare. Look at the numbers on the questionnaire from the first day and from today's writing. How did today compare with your first day? Did you notice that your topic was shifting? How about the way you were writing? Between now and your next writing, think about what you have written. Are you starting to see things in a different light? How is writing affecting your emotions?

Now give yourself a little time to step back from your writing. Until tomorrow.

Day 3

Set a Timer for 20 Minutes

Write continuously

Write only to yourself. No one else will see this.

Observe the Flip Out Rule

Writing Prompt

You have made it through two days of writing. After today, you will have only one more day of writing. Tomorrow, then, you need to wrap up your story. Today, however, continue to explore your deepest thoughts and emotions about the topics you have been tackling so far.

On the surface, today's writing assignment is very similar to the earlier assignments. In your writing, you can focus on the same topics you have been examining or you can shift your focus to either another trauma or to some other feature of the same trauma. Your primary goal, however, is to focus on your emotions and thoughts about those events that are affecting your life the most right now.

It is important you don't repeat what you have already written in your past exercises. Writing about the same general topic is fine, but you also need to explore it from a different perspective and in different ways. As you write about this emotional upheaval, what are you feeling and thinking? How has this event shaped your life and who you are?

In today's writing, allow yourself to explore those deep issues about which you may be particularly vulnerable. As always, write continuously the entire twenty minutes.

Thoughts Following the Day Three Writing Session

You have completed the next-to-last day of writing. Please complete the following questionnaire using a number between 0 and 10 by each question.

0 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, 10 = a great deal

___ To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?

___ To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?

___ To what degree do you currently feel happy?

___ To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful to you?

Briefly describe how your writing went today so you may refer to this later.

In most studies, the third day of writing is highly significant. People often arrive at critical issues they have been avoiding. Whereas the first two writing sessions can be like putting toes in the water to see if it's too cold, by the third day some people are ready to jump completely in. A second group of people open up most on the first day. By the third day of writing, this second group sometimes is beginning to run out of steam. Both patterns are associated with improved health.

As with your last writing exercise, try to compare what you have written across the three sessions. What issues are surfacing as most important for you? Have you been surprised by any of your feelings while you were writing? Has the writing provoked any thoughts during the periods now that you have been away from them?

Remember that tomorrow is the final day of the four-day writing exercise. The instructions for your last assignment will be much like today's. Since it will be the final day, however, think about how you will tie things up.

Now pamper yourself a bit. Until tomorrow.

Day 4

Set a Timer for 20 Minutes

Write continuously

Write only to yourself. No one else will see this.

Observe the Flip Out Rule

Writing Prompt

This is the final day of the four-day writing exercise. As with the previous days' writings, explore your deepest emotions and thoughts about those upheavals and issues in your life that are most important and troublesome for you. Stand back and think about the events, issues, thoughts, and feelings that you have disclosed. In your writing, try to tie up anything that you haven't yet confronted. What are your emotions and thoughts at this point? What things have you learned, lost, and gained as a result of this upheaval in your life? How will these past events guide your thoughts and actions in the future?

Really let go in your writing and be honest with yourself about this upheaval. Do your best to wrap up the entire experience into a meaningful story that you can take with you into the future.

Thoughts Following the Day Four Writing Session

You have completed the last day of writing. Please complete the following questionnaire using a number between 0 and 10 by each question.

0 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, 10 = a great deal

___ To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?

___ To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?

___ To what degree do you currently feel happy?

___ To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful to you?
Briefly describe how your writing went today so you may refer to this later.

Today concludes the basic four-day writing exercise. Most people find the last day of writing the least enjoyable. This is often a sign that you are tired of dealing with this trauma and want to get on with other life tasks.

In some ways, it is tempting to go back over the various writing samples, questionnaire responses, and personal observations immediately after writing the fourth day. Indeed, it is important to review your writing. **However, it is strongly recommended that you take at least two or three days off from the writing exercise before you do this.**

By using this technique, you have organized complex and emotionally charged experiences. The science is clear. Your physical and mental health will improve the following months. Congratulate yourself. Take yourself out to dinner or somewhere you'll enjoy. Thank you for trusting us and this process. Good luck on the rest of your story.

Going forward

For those of you, who like me, found this technique to be beneficial, and you want to keep writing; I offer the Daily Pages.

Note: Studies support that expressive writing focusing on a trauma for more than the 3-4 days does not help. If you found you have done this technique and feel no relief or that you still want to explore your trauma, Pennebaker recommends you seek out a capable therapist.

Daily Pages

The Daily Pages are a technique popularized by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way* (a book I cannot recommend enough.) The technique is simple and Expressive Writing research on this particular style of writing has found it has cognition enhancing effects (It may increase working memory by closing “open loops”).

The Technique

First thing every morning, write or type for 3 pages (I type and set a timer for 10 minutes.) The key is to write stream-of-consciousnesses, do not censor, edit or reread anything. Let whatever comes up come up. And the kicker, you don't reread it either.

She recommends doing this every morning. And I do it.

If you are interested in this, I highly recommend you get and read her book.

Revisiting My Goal

I hope this has helped you. In order for me to improve this, I will send you a few survey's over the next couple of weeks. Your feedback will help me improve this tool.

Bonus: Psychedelic Trip Version

There has been no research done on this topic that I am aware of, but I think there is the evidence for the hypothesis that Expressive Writing would help people who have had challenging psychedelic trips.

If you have had a hard psychedelic experience that still bothers you, use the expressive writing technique to explore the trip.

I have written every one of my trips before I knew about expressive writing. I remember my explorations more clearly, and the writing itself is a kind of catharsis. Often I cry when I write them. Happy tears.

If enough of you want it, I will make another ebook using the Expressive Writing technique specifically for the psychonaut integrating a challenging psychedelic experience.

Resources

These are the main books I have referenced in the creation of this ebook.

Expressive Writing by James Pennebaker

Opening Up by Writing Down by James Pennebaker

Redirect by Timothy Wilson

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

Stay Connected

I publish articles once or twice a week on my blog, individuationing.com. I focus on self-development that's rooted in scientific evidence. Thank you for reading and I truly hope this helps you heal yourself. Namasteezy.