

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2019-2020 News & Notes



February 2020 News and Notes **The Many Benefits of Expressive Writing** **By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT**

Expressive writing, that is, personal freewriting on emotional topics without regard to grammar, punctuation, or spelling, has been widely recognized as a simple means to improve physical and emotional health. Since the groundbreaking work of social psychologist Dr. James W. Pennebaker in the 1980s, the practice of expressive writing has been applied in research settings for specific purposes, as well as adopted by countless writers, artists and other individuals as a way to enhance creativity and wellness.

In an abstract of their article, “Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing,” Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm explain, “ In the expressive writing paradigm, participants are asked to write about such [traumatic, stressful or emotional] events for 15–20 minutes on 3–5 occasions. Those who do so generally have significantly better physical and psychological outcomes compared with those who write about neutral topics.”¹

Among many physical and mental health conditions identified by researchers to be improved by expressive writing have been sleep apnea, asthma, migraine headaches, and rheumatoid arthritis, as well as traumatic experiences, PTSD, mild depression, stress and anxiety. Researchers at the University of Chicago discovered that “anxious test-takers who wrote briefly about their thoughts and feelings before taking an important exam earned better grades than those who did not.”

Moreover, the effects appear to be long lasting. “In one early study, Dr. Pennebaker asked 46 healthy college students to write about either personally traumatic life events or trivial topics for 15 minutes on four consecutive days. For six months following the experiment, students who wrote about traumatic events visited the campus health center less often, and used a pain reliever less frequently, than those who wrote about inconsequential matters.”²

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It is noteworthy that variations in timing, guidelines and structure of the writing have been adapted according to the needs of the population. For example, to examine writing's effect on the severity of PTSD, participants were instructed to write 30 minutes every day for at least 5 days, writing from the safety of the present, looking back on events, rather than reliving them. Participants in a study on individuals with mild depression were directed to incorporate an attitude of "emotional acceptance" in their writing, which proved more successful than expressive writing without this instruction. Another finding revealed that individuals who keep a weekly or daily gratitude journal experience "a greater sense of optimism and life satisfaction."³

John F Evans Ed.D, in his article, "Expressive Writing: What's on your mind and in your heart?" explains why the effects of this practice can be so profound: "Expressive writing comes from our core. It . . . is not so much what happened as it is how you feel about what happened or is happening."⁴

Grief therapist Linda Silver, LMFT, instructs those confronting loss to write for 10 to 20 minutes two to three times a week. "The point is to give yourself time and permission to practice naming and expressing your experience of feeling. . . . When dealing with difficult emotions or events, writing about the same thing several times in a week can assist with healing. It can be reassuring to see how your emotions shift with time as your healing progresses."⁵

¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/emotional-and-physical-health-benefits-of-expressive-writing/ED2976A61F5DE56B46F07A1CE9EA9F9F>

² <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/writing-about-emotions-may-ease-stress-and-trauma>

³ <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/boosting-your-mental-health-with-expressive-writing-0823185>

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/write-yourself-well/201208/expressive-writing>

⁵ <http://www.miltonherickson.com/learning-through-everyday-losses/>