

Healing From Trauma Through Writing

Past research has shown that expressive writing about past traumatic events has many benefits for 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 ranging from:

Goal

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

Advice

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 that day's entry. No one need ever see what they have written. The process of self-expression is beneficial even if the text is immediately destroyed.

Typically, this exercise is done over 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 and/or during the coaching sessions. The questions listed at the bottom of this exercise can help to guide the reflection.

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 with yourself. Keep in mind that you are working on your personal development and in time, 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. Use your social circle to provide support & 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 that feels 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?