Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing.

What is expressive writing?

Expressive writing can be defined simply as an exploration of emotions and thoughts through writing. Normally, these thoughts are deep thoughts regarding traumatic or emotional experiences. Although participants typically write about their deep thoughts regarding a traumatic or emotional experience, participants do not have to write about these specific deep emotions. In fact, studies that show the benefits of expressive writing note that many of the participants wrote about topics other than their particular physical illness or psychological problem, but still showed improvements in that area. Typically people, who participate in expressive writing, write for 15-20 minute sessions for 3-5 days in a row. They are not required to write about the same topic every day, but are only asked to write their deepest thoughts down for the allotted time.

Sample instructions include:

For the next four days, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issues that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I’d like you to really 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 whom 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 about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential.

Don’t worry about spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up.

Who can benefit from expressive writing?

Anyone can benefit from participating in expressive writing. Benefits have been seen both in patients who have medical conditions and psychological conditions. Those who take part in expressive writing report significant benefits in both objectively assessed and self-reported physical health four months later, with less frequent visits to the health center and a trend towards fewer days out of role owing to illness. Additionally, expressive writing results in significant improvements in longer-term physical health outcomes, such as illness-related visits to the doctor, blood pressure, lung function, liver function, and number of days in the hospital. In addition, significant benefits have also been found for objective outcomes such as students’ GPA, absenteeism from work, re-employment after job loss, and sporting performance.

In regards to emotional health, some studies have found longer-term benefits of expressive writing for emotional health outcomes, including an increase in positive mood and emotions, increase in psychological well-being, reduction of depressive symptoms
before examinations, and fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms. Students with a trauma history have shown improvements in physical health, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology, and other aspects of psychological health after partaking in expressive writing. Psychological health benefits tend to be found more often when participants’ traumas and/or symptoms are clinically more severe.

**Short-term vs. Long-term Impact**

The immediate impact of expressive writing is usually a short-term increase in distress, negative mood and physical symptoms, and a decrease in positive mood. Although expressive writing is associated with negative mood/emotions, the short-term distress does not appear to be detrimental or pose a longer-term risk to participants. These negative moods/emotions can easily be related to the fact that participants are tackling an experience that can be both traumatic and emotional. Although the immediate impact of expressive writing is negative, the long-term effects of expressive writing are positive. Expressive writing has been found beneficial for individuals with a variety of medical problems, such as asthma, rheumatoid arthritic, cancer, HIV infection, and even individuals who are poor sleepers.

**How does expressive writing help?**

It is not completely clear about the specific ways in which expressive writing benefits the individual. However, research has indicated that factors below are likely associated with improvement.

Participating in expressive writing allows individuals to confront the trauma or emotional experience, acknowledge the associated emotions, and lower the overall stress on the body. This confrontation involves translating the event into their own words, allowing the participant to understand their exact thoughts regarding the traumatic or emotional experience. In addition, expressive writing further contributes to the reduction in physiological arousal associated with suppressing the emotions or constantly thinking about the event. Over the course of writing, participants whose health improved used more positive-emotion words, a moderate number of negative-emotion words, and an increased number of words related to the understanding of the emotions the event created, along with causal words such as because and reason.

The beneficial effect of expressive writing is the development of a coherent narrative over time, reflecting the increased role that thoughts (and not just emotions) play in the processing of the experience. Expressive writing appears to have great potential as a therapeutic tool in diverse clinical settings or as a means of self-help, either alone or as an adjunct to traditional therapies. It appears that incorporating both the thought and feeling components of the traumatic and emotional experience is helpful both physically and emotionally.