

Using Expressive Writing Following Trauma

Objective

To use expressive writing to access trauma-related feelings and memories.

What to Know

Expressive writing is an activity to help you become aware of and understand trauma-related feelings and memories. The most common types of expressive writing are journaling, writing in a diary, drafting letters you will never send (followed by imagined replies from the recipient), and writing letters to your future self. You can also write to parts of your body or an object. Research suggests that this form of writing may reduce the physiological effects of stress.

Writing can bring about clarity, relief, and a sense of freedom. When using this technique, apply the following guidelines and tips.

- Let go of your inner critic.
- Be honest.
- Remember you do not have to please anyone, so write without restraint.
- Focus on you. It might be difficult at first, but with time it will get easier.
- Use first-person pronouns (I, me, my, we, etc.).
- Openly express your feelings, values, ideas, opinions, and sensations.
- Write about your tastes in music, film, literature, food, outdoor activities, friends, and so on.
- Define or label yourself, such as, “I’m a clever and quick-thinking person.”
- Do not worry about punctuation, grammar, and spelling.
- If you write a letter, do not send it.
- Imagine yourself as a character whose life story you are documenting (not inventing).
- Avoid thinking about the possibility of someone reading what you have written.
- Avoid immediately reviewing your writing. You may never want to read it again. The point is to get the words out of you.
- Find a time and place where you will not be interrupted or distracted.
- Write for a minimum of 20 minutes per day for a week.
- Deal only with events or situations you can handle now. That is, avoid writing about a trauma too soon after it happened if it feels overwhelming.
- If you run out of things to say, draw a line, or repeat what you have already written.

- Write only for yourself. You may plan to destroy or hide what you are writing but avoid turning this activity into a letter you will send to someone.
- Observe the “Flip-Out Rule” – If you feel you cannot write about a certain event because it will push you over the edge, STOP writing!
- Expect strong feelings. You may feel sad or down after expressive writing, especially on the first day or so.

This worksheet will help you use expressive writing to access trauma-related feelings and memories.

What to Do

Use a notebook, journal, or your computer to write. Close your eyes. When you open them, start writing about any of the following topics:

- an early memory
- family meals or holidays
- your first love
- a place you visited for the first time
- your biggest life challenge (so far)
- someone you saw in a shop/restaurant
- instructions how to be happy
- the story of your life
- your neighborhood

Writing on any of these topics can help you relieve tension, process emotions, establish self-control, and understand situations better after the words are put on paper.

Here are two more writing activities:

1. Write a letter you will never send to a real or imaginary person in your life, living or deceased. It can also be a letter to a concept like love, hate, health, death, beauty, justice, etc. It can be a letter to objects that are somehow significant to you, such as your favorite book, a pair of shoes, something you desire, and so on. After you write the letter, fold it, put it in an envelope, address it, and place it in a box. Act as if you mailed the letter.
2. For the next four days, write down your deepest feelings and thoughts about a problem or challenge that currently affects your life. As you write, really let go and deeply explore the issue. Each day, write for at least 20 minutes. Then, try writing from the perspectives of other people involved in the situation.

What was most challenging about this activity? Explain.

Did anything surprise you when you were writing? Describe your experience.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
