

CHAPTER 2

The Invention of the Expressive Writing Approach

It would be so compelling to tell the story of how the first studies on expressive writing grew out of our traumatic experiences in our childhoods and how we independently discovered the healing power of writing on our own. It would be gripping, initially heartbreaking, and ultimately redemptive. But also false. The expressive writing method was actually the result of a series of serendipitous research findings. Okay, maybe not gripping, but still an interesting story.

The Case of Traumatic Sexual Experiences

Early in his career, Jamie and his students were putting together a questionnaire on health issues. The idea was to break out of the traditional way of thinking and simply ask a large group of students a broad range of questions about their lives. In putting together the questions, the group decided to ask about people's childhoods, their favorite foods, maybe even color preferences. One member of Jamie's research team suggested that they include an item on traumatic sexual experiences in childhood. There was no specific reason for including the question—but it was a question no one appeared to have asked before, and it made intuitive sense that such experiences might be important. So, toward the end of the 12-page questionnaire, they added a question that very few researchers ever ask:

“Prior to the age of 17, did you have a traumatic sexual experience (e.g., rape, being molested)? Yes _____ No _____”

Of the 800 college women who later completed the survey, about 10 percent answered in the affirmative. Overall, the women who reported traumatic sexual experiences in childhood did not differ from others in terms of age, social class, race, or even number of close friends. Most striking, however, was that those who reported a sexual trauma evidenced more health problems than any other group we had ever seen.

Soon afterward, a writer for the magazine *Psychology Today*—one of the most popular magazines of the early 1980s—was able to get 24,000 adults to complete a health survey that included the traumatic sexual experience question. Overall, 22 percent of the women and 10 percent of the men reported having a childhood traumatic sexual experience. These rates roughly corresponded with those found in numerous national polls on the topic.

Even though the reported sexual trauma had occurred almost 20 years earlier, it was associated with large increases in ulcers, the flu, heart problems, cancer diagnoses, and virtually every other category of health problem. In fact, those who reported a traumatic sexual experience as a child had been hospitalized *nearly twice as often* as those who did not report such traumas.

On the *Psychology Today* questionnaire, respondents were asked to include their name and telephone number for possible future telephone interviews. Fifteen people who claimed to have experienced a sexual trauma were called by Carin Rubenstein, the author of the magazine piece. In her article, she writes:

One woman was raped at 16; another was a victim of incest at 8; yet another had been fondled at the age of 5 by a man selling ponies. A 51-year-old woman from Los Angeles told me that she had been raped, at 5, by her neighbor, who was a friend of the family . . . “I never told anyone about it. You’re the first,” she said. Later on, not making the connection, she remarked, “I’ve always had health problems with organs in that area . . . since I was 5.” (p. 34)

Every person with whom Rubenstein talked reported an experience that all of us would agree was traumatic. In addition, the majority had not discussed this traumatic event with anyone when it had

occurred. If they eventually did discuss their trauma, it was not until many months or years later.

What makes sexual traumas so devastating?

It is clear that childhood sexual traumas influence long-term health. However, changes in health following the traumas may not reflect sexuality per se. Rather, traumas may be insidious because people often cannot talk about them. They must actively inhibit their wanting to discuss these intensely important personal experiences with others.

Later surveys from thousands of people—both students and nonstudents—supported this. Having nearly any kind of traumatic experience is bad for your health. However, if you keep the trauma secret, it increases the odds that you will have health problems. Not surprising, of all the traumas we have studied (death of a family member, victim of violence, moving, failure, personal losses, etc.), people are typically least likely to talk about a sexual trauma.

Expressive Writing and Illness Prevention

If secrets are so bad for us, would talking to others bring about benefits to our health? In the mid-1980s, psychotherapists began providing the first solid research evidence that therapy was good for both mental and physical health. In fact, there had been a couple of largely overlooked insurance studies showing that when insurance companies started coverage for psychotherapy, the extent of and costs associated with physical health care dropped.

What if we set up an experiment where we had people come into the lab and talk to someone about their secret traumatic experiences? You can immediately see the problems with such a study. Where would we find people who would be willing to come in and talk to some stranger about their darkest secrets? Even if we found them, would they really be willing to come to a lab for this? And who should they talk to? How should the people listening to the traumas react? This was too complicated.

And it was about this time that Jamie recalled an experience of his own that had happened eight years earlier. About three years after their wedding, he and his wife were dealing with some formidable issues in their marriage. For the first time in his life, he was despondent, even depressed. Even though he was a graduate student

in psychology, he never considered going to a therapist. Instead, after a couple of weeks, he started writing. He wrote about their relationship, his career, his childhood, basically everything that was important to him. In almost no time, the clouds parted. He realized how central his wife was to his very existence.

Recalling this experience, Jamie realized that he could have people write about upheavals in their lives rather than talk to others. Plus, writing would be much simpler to do in an experimental setting.

And so the expressive writing paradigm was born.

The Origin of Expressive Writing

Together with a new graduate student, Sandra Beall, Jamie outlined the following study: The plan was to recruit a group of college students to write about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics. With the students' permission, the student health center would release the number of illness visits each student made in the months before versus after the experiment.

On how many occasions should people write? How long should each writing session last? There was no blueprint for this. Because only a certain number of rooms were available between 5:00 and 10:00 P.M. for four consecutive days, the arithmetic was easy. Jamie and Sandy could run the required number of students if each person wrote for 15 minutes on each of four days. (There is an irony here. People often ask why expressive writing is typically designed to be done for 15 minutes on four days. The answer is that the first study arbitrarily used this approach and it worked, and this approach has been routinely copied since that time.)

On the day of the experiment, students came into a small office. After the study was described and students gave their consent, those assigned to write about their thoughts and feelings about a trauma were told the following:

"Once you are escorted into the writing cubicle and the door is closed, I want you to write continuously about the most upsetting or traumatic experience of your entire life. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or sentence structure. In your writing, I want you to discuss your deepest thoughts and feelings about the experience. You can write about anything you want. But whatever you choose, it should be something that

has affected you very deeply. Ideally, it should be something you have not talked about with others in detail. It is critical, however, that you let yourself go and touch those deepest emotions and thoughts that you have. In other words, write about what happened and how you felt about it, and how you feel about it now. Finally, you can write on different traumas during each session or the same one over the entire study. Your choice of trauma for each session is entirely up to you.”

Those in the comparison or control group were asked to write about superficial or irrelevant topics during each session. For example, on different days they were asked to describe in detail such things as their dorm room or the shoes they were wearing. The two groups were in the same location, interacting with the same experimenters, and engaging in the activity of writing for the same amount of time; what differed was the content of writing—one group wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings, and the comparison group wrote about emotionally neutral (and likely quite uninteresting) topics. Thus, the purpose of the control group was to evaluate what effect writing in an experiment per se had on health changes, independent of what was believed to be the important contribution of the content of the writing. Any differences between the two groups should, therefore, be due to the *content* of the writing, not any aspects of their participation in the study.

For the students, the immediate impact of the study was far more powerful than we had ever imagined. Several of the students cried while writing about traumas. Many reported dreaming or continually thinking about their writing topics over the four days of the study. Most telling, however, were the actual writing samples. Essay after essay revealed people’s deepest feelings and most intimate sides. Many of the stories depicted profound human tragedies.

One student recounted how his father took him into the backyard on a hot summer night and coolly announced his plans to divorce and move to another town. Although the student was only nine years old at the time, he vividly remembers his father’s voice: “Son, the problem with me and your mother was having kids in the first place. Things haven’t been the same since you and your sister’s birth.”

On all four days of the experiment, one woman detailed how, at age 10, her mother asked her to pick up her toys because her grandmother was visiting that evening. She didn’t pick up her toys. That night, her grandmother arrived, slipped on one of the toys, and broke

her hip. The grandmother died a week later during hip surgery. Now, eight years later, the woman still blamed herself every day.

Another woman described being seduced by her grandfather when she was 13. She depicted the terrible conflict she experienced. On one hand she admitted the physical pleasure of his touching her and the love she felt for her grandfather. On the other, she suffered with the knowledge that this was wrong, that he was betraying her trust.

Other essays disclosed the torture of a woman not able to tell her parents about her being a lesbian, a young man's feelings of loss about the death of his dog, or the anger about parents' divorces. Family abuse, alcoholism, suicide attempts, and public humiliation were also frequent topics.

That a group of college students had experienced so many horrors and, at the same time, had so readily revealed them was remarkable. The grim irony is that, by and large, these were 18-year-old kids attending an upper-middle-class college with above-average high school grades and good College Board scores. These were the people who were portrayed as growing up in the bubble of financial security and suburban tranquility. What must it portend for those brought up in more hostile environments?

The results of the study were fascinating, but also a bit unexpected. Compared to people in the control group, we found that people who wrote about traumatic experience evidenced:

- ***Immediate increases in feelings of sadness and anxiety after writing.*** Students likened it to the feelings that they had after watching a sad movie. Writing about emotional topics does not produce some kind of immediate release or euphoria.

- ***Long-term drops in visits to the student health center for illness.*** Those who wrote about emotional upheavals had half the number of illness-related visits to the health center in the six months after the study than people in the control condition.

- ***Greater sense of value and meaning as a result of writing.*** Not only did people express this in questionnaires afterward, but students would sometimes stop Jamie on campus and thank him for letting them be in the experiment.

The overall pattern of results was exciting. But for every question that the experiment had answered, a dozen more questions appeared.

Perhaps the most basic issue concerned the trustworthiness of these findings. Were the effects real? Does writing about traumas really affect physical health? Perhaps the experiment had just affected people's decisions to visit the student health center. Or even worse, maybe the findings were simply due to chance. Every now and then, for example, you can toss a coin ten times and come up with heads every time.

Additional studies needed to be conducted.

Freewriting

As a useful practice exercise, and one that can enhance creativity and foster your capacity for expression, find a quiet time and place to practice writing. For this exercise, write whatever comes into your mind for 10 to 20 minutes. Try to write the entire time without stopping. Don't worry about style or grammar; the important thing is to keep writing continuously for the entire session. Just let yourself write, a sort of limbering-up exercise. We will return to more structured expressive writing later in the book.

Exploring the Immune System: Writing about Traumas Is Better Than We Thought

Soon after the first expressive writing study was submitted, Jamie teamed up with Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, a clinical psychologist, and her husband, Ronald Glaser, an immunologist, both with the Ohio State University College of Medicine. In the mid-1980s, they were leaders of a new field called psychoneuroimmunology—the mind–body exploration of how mental states and strong emotions might influence the immune system. Together they were blazing a trail by showing that overwhelming experiences such as divorce, major exams in college, and even strong feelings of loneliness adversely affected immune function. They had recently published an article showing that relaxation therapy among the elderly could improve the action of the immune system.

The work by Jan and Ron was groundbreaking because it relied on techniques that directly measured the action of T-lymphocytes, natural killer cells, and other immune markers in the blood. It made

good sense for Jan, Ron, and Jamie to work together—so they set out to see if expressive writing could directly influence these direct measures of how the immune system was functioning.

The experiment that they designed together was similar to the first confession study. Fifty students wrote for 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days about one of two topics. Half wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings concerning a trauma. The remaining 25 students were expected to write about superficial topics. The major difference was that all the students consented to have their blood drawn the day before writing, after the last writing session, and again six weeks later.

As before, the experimental volunteers poured out their hearts in their writing. The tragedies they disclosed were comparable to those in the first experiment. Instances of rape, child abuse, suicide attempts, death, and intense family conflict were common. Again, those who wrote about traumas initially reported feeling sadder and more upset each day of writing, relative to those who wrote about superficial topics.

Collecting the blood and measuring immune function was a novel experience that added to the frenzy. As soon as the blood was drawn, it was driven to the airport to make the last flight to Jan and Ron's lab in Columbus, Ohio. Once the blood samples arrived, the people in the immunology lab worked around the clock in an assembly-line manner. The procedure involved separating the blood cells and placing a predetermined number of white cells in small petri dishes. Each dish contained differing amounts of various foreign substances, called mitogens. The dishes were then incubated for two days to allow the white blood cells time to divide and proliferate in the presence of the mitogens.

In the body, there are a number of different kinds of white cells, or lymphocytes, that serve a regulatory function in the immune system. The cells help govern and coordinate aspects of our immune responses. T-lymphocytes, for example, can stimulate other lymphocytes to make antibodies. Antibodies, along with parts of the body's defense system, can identify and kill bacteria and viruses foreign to the body. These aspects of the immune system help keep us healthy. The immune measures that were used simulated this bodily process in the dishes. Just as viruses and bacteria can stimulate the growth of T-lymphocytes in the body, the mitogens did the same in the labo-

ratory dishes. If the lymphocytes divide at a fast rate in response to the mitogens, we can infer that at least part of the immune system is working quickly and efficiently.

What were the findings? People who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding traumatic experiences evidenced enhanced immune function compared with those who wrote about superficial topics. Although this effect was most pronounced after the last day of writing, it tended to persist six weeks after the study. In addition, it was again observed that health center visits for illness dropped for the people who wrote about traumas compared to those who wrote on the trivial topics.

There were now two experiments that showed similar patterns. Taken together, the studies indicated that writing about traumatic experiences could be beneficial. The effects were not due to simple catharsis or the venting of pent-up emotions. In fact, the people who just blew off steam by venting their feelings without any thoughtful analysis tended to fare worse. Further, both experiments indicated that writing about feelings associated with traumatic experiences was painful in the short term. Virtually no one felt excited, on top of the world, or cheerful immediately after writing about the worst experiences of their lives.

In the surveys sent out several months after the experiments, people were asked to describe what long-term effects, if any, the writing experiment had on them. In sharp contrast to the reports immediately after writing, nearly everyone who wrote about traumas now described the study in positive terms. More important, approximately 80 percent explained the value of the study in terms of insight. Rather than explaining that it felt good to get negative emotions off their chests, the respondents noted how they understood themselves better. Some examples:

It helped me think about what I felt during those times. I never realized how it affected me before.

I had to think and resolve past experiences. . . . One result of the experiment is peace of mind, and a method to relieve emotional experiences. To have to write emotions and feelings helped me understand how I felt and why.

Although I have not talked with anyone about what I wrote, I was finally able to deal with it, work through the pain instead of trying to block it out. Now it doesn't hurt to think about it.

The observations of these people and most others who participated in these early studies are almost breathtaking. They tell us that our own thought and emotional processes can help us heal.

Beyond Health: Writing and Occupational Survival

The early studies were just the beginning of a research odyssey that has taken the expressive writing literature in several directions. Soon after the results of the immune study were published, Stefanie Spera called. Stefanie was a psychologist with an outplacement company in Dallas. An outplacement company typically works with large corporations in the midst of “downsizing”—a polite way of saying the company was laying off a significant number of employees. The outplacement company offers a variety of services to those who have been laid off, including providing office space, secretarial support, and job-hunting skills.

Stefanie called because a large computer company had laid off about 100 senior engineers four months earlier and not one of them had found a new job. She was curious to know if expressive writing could help speed up these engineers getting new jobs.

Over the next few weeks, a sense of how the layoff had occurred started to emerge. The corporation had never had to lay people off in its history. On a Wednesday morning in January, about 100 people, averaging 52 years of age, were individually called into their supervisor's office and informed that they were being terminated with no possibility of being rehired. The employees, most of whom had been with the company since graduating from college almost 30 years earlier, were then escorted to their workspace by a security guard who watched them clean out their desks. They were then taken to the front door, relieved of their keys and security badges, and bid farewell. No forewarning, no retirement watches.

Six months later, an expressive writing study was under way with almost 50 people. Even though they were a rather embittered and

hostile group, they were desperate to try anything that might increase their odds of finding another job.

The basic study was quite simple. Half were asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about getting laid off for 30 minutes a day for five consecutive days. The other half wrote for the same period about how they used their time—a strategy based on “time management” (time management was all the rage at that time in the corporate world, despite little if any actual support for such a technique being helpful). A third group of 22 former employees did not write at all and served as another comparison group.

As with our other studies, those who were asked to write about their thoughts and feelings were extremely open and honest in their writing. Their essays described the humiliation and outrage of losing their jobs as well as more intimate themes—marital problems, illness and death, money concerns, and fears about the future.

The potency of the study was surprising. Within three months, 27 percent of the experimental participants landed jobs compared with less than 5 percent of those in the time management and no-writing comparison groups. By seven months after writing, 53 percent of those who wrote about their thoughts and feelings had jobs compared with only 18 percent of the people in the other conditions. Particularly striking about the study was that the participants in all three conditions had all gone on exactly the same number of job interviews. The only difference was that those who had written about their feelings were offered jobs.

Why did writing about getting laid off help these people find jobs more quickly? The key probably has something to do with the nature of anger. Those who had explored their thoughts and feelings were more likely to have come to terms with their extreme hostility toward their previous employer. Recall that these former employees felt betrayed by their company. Even during the initial interviews, it was difficult to stop them from venting their anger. In all likelihood when most of them went on interviews for new jobs, many would let down their guard and talk about how they were treated unfairly and lash out at their former employer—perhaps quite inappropriately so. Those who had written about their thoughts and feelings, on the other hand, were perhaps more likely to have come to terms with getting laid off and, in the interview, came across as less hostile, more promising job candidates.

Does Writing Work?: The First Round of Meta-Analyses

The first expressive writing study was published in 1986, and the lay-off study came out in 1993. Other labs were now starting to conduct and publish writing studies. Most of the studies worked, but some didn't.

At Stony Brook University, a lab headed by Arthur Stone was beginning to run some interesting writing studies. Arthur was a scientist known for having a critical mind and was keenly capable of finding the flaws and limitations of psychology projects. Unfortunately (or, as it turned out, fortunately), his skeptical eye soon was locked on the expressive writing research. Several of his students were interested in expressive writing work, and one of these was Josh.

At this point, over a dozen studies had been conducted and published in the scientific literature. Josh reasoned that this would be an opportunity to apply a statistical method known as meta-analysis to the expressive writing studies. Put simply, a meta-analysis allows us to examine multiple studies in a cumulative fashion, attempting to find out what the overall message (or finding) is from all the studies collectively. By doing this, we can begin to get a more precise estimate of an effect—in this case, to determine if there was strong evidence that expressive writing was helpful.

In other words, this method could tell us whether or not expressive writing was leading to health improvements relative to writing about emotionally neutral topics. Such an approach can address other important questions as well. Are there particular outcomes that appear to show greater or lesser benefit from writing? For example, does writing work better for physical health outcomes or for depression?

In many ways, Josh was well suited to this task. He had adopted his adviser's skepticism but, at the same time, was not wedded to any particular outcome. Josh had another interest—ways to measure hard, objective outcomes. By way of background, social science has a reputation for relying on people's self-reports, which are considered soft (or not related to anything important) in scientific parlance. Perhaps disclosing deep thoughts and feelings through writing was leading people to overestimate their health in their reports—maybe they felt some emotional connection to the researchers after this powerful disclosure process and were trying to help the researchers out. By examining

different types of outcomes, Josh could look at a wider array of objectively measured outcomes such as those measuring immune function.

After combing through the scientific articles and selecting the dozen or so best studies, Josh applied the meta-analytic methods. Several promising findings emerged. Most important, people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to stressful or traumatic experiences had reliable improvements in health in the two to three months after writing. Although there were also improvements in people's self-reports of their health, there were equally large effects on people's physiological functioning.

There were some unexpected findings as well. The results of questionnaires that asked about health behaviors—such as healthy eating, exercising, taking medication, and the like—were not influenced by writing. Although some had suggested that writing may be beneficial as a result of better self-care activities, this explanation was not supported by Josh's analysis. Finally, he found that writing reliably but temporarily increased people's feelings of distress. Interestingly, the degree to which people felt distressed was unrelated to subsequent long-term mental or physical health changes. If you were thinking that a "no pain, no gain" explanation could account for the value of writing, it is not that simple. Even though most people felt somewhat distressed by writing, it turns out that suffering more in your writing doesn't lead to more improvements later.

One other observation was critically important: All of the early writing studies relied on people who were physically healthy. If this method is good for people's health, he asked, why haven't any researchers looked at people suffering from chronic disease?

When Josh's meta-analysis was published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, in 1998, it had an immediate impact. Researchers around the world realized that there might be something to this expressive writing and began conducting an array of innovative and interesting studies. Within the next several years, a surge of study findings were published that included wildly broad and diverse samples—people with a variety of acute and chronic disease, with major and minor mental health problems. Other studies employed people who were quite healthy but who were trying to master new skills, do better in college, or exhibit greater creativity.

The net effect of Josh's meta-analysis is that it demonstrated the potential value of expressive writing. His paper, however, challenged researchers at the time to explain why it worked. Clearly, when people

wrote about emotional upheavals, something important was happening. But what? What precisely happens when people are given the opportunity to disclose their secrets and emotions to others?

Try Expressive Writing

Find a quiet time and place for this next writing exercise. Write for 20 to 30 minutes, focusing on your deepest emotions and thoughts about a stressful or upsetting experience in your life. Whatever you choose to write about, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. Write continuously, and don't worry about spelling, grammar, or style.

Warning: Many people report that after writing, they sometimes feel somewhat sad, although this typically goes away in a couple of hours. If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics.