

Feeling, Dealing and Healing: Expressive Writing

Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D.

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How to use Expressive Writing in the Most Effective Way

WRITE FOR TWENTY MINUTES. The research suggests writing for twenty minutes at a time. In our experience, after about 10 minutes of writing, people feel like there is a lull and they feel done; however, if you keep writing, experience tells us that you will go even deeper into processing. If you wind up writing for more than twenty minutes, that's great. All of that said, if you only have 5 minutes and you want to write, write for five.

WRITING TOPIC. You can write about any topic that is bothering you, or is painful, or is difficult to revisit; the research has recommended individuals write about distressing topics that you have never shared with anyone. Not everyone has had a major trauma that they want to write about. However, we have all had major conflicts or stressors in our lives that are fair game. Whatever you choose to write about should be something that is extremely personal and important for you.

WRITE CONTINUOUSLY. Once you begin writing, write continuously without stopping. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. Your high school English teacher will never see it. No one will ever have to see it. If you run out of things to say, simply repeat what you have already written.

WRITE ONLY FOR YOURSELF. You are writing for yourself and no one else. Plan to destroy (burn or shred) or hide what you have written when you have finished. Do not turn this exercise into a letter. After you complete your expressive writing task, if you want to write a letter, then do it. But this exercise is for your eyes only.

THE FLIP-OUT RULE. If you feel as though you cannot write about a particular event because it will "push you over the edge," then don't write about it. Deal only with those events or situations that you can handle now. If you have additional traumatic topics that you can't get to now, you can always deal with them in the future. It's ok to push yourself outside your comfort zone, but don't enter the danger zone.

WRITING INSTRUCTIONS, "Your goal is to write about your deepest thoughts and feelings about the trauma or emotional upheaval that has been influencing your life the most. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. It may be beneficial simply to write about the event itself, how you felt when it was occurring, and how you feel about it now." Try to use emotion words (happy, sad, angry, nervous, etc.) to articulate what you feel.

Adapted from the following book that I highly recommend:

Pennebaker, J. W. (2004). Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publication, Inc.