Chapter 6

The Expressive Writing Method

Jenna L. Baddeley and James W. Pennebaker

“Throughout history, writing has had a profound influence on the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals and societies … whether, when, for whom, and how writing can be used as a therapeutic tool to reduce the harmful effects of stress and trauma on health and well-being.” (Lepore & Smyth, 2002, p. 3).

Psychotherapy’s roots lie in the observation that when patients talk about traumatic events from the past, their current distressing symptoms abate (Freud, 1920). Talk-based psychotherapy continues to be an effective method of treatment for numerous mental health concerns. However, research over the last 25 years has shown that expressive writing — simply writing about one’s deepest thoughts and feelings about an emotional event — can alleviate both physical and psychological symptoms.

Expressive writing is built on a set of relatively open-ended instructions that encourage letting go and opening up about emotional events and exploring their meanings. In the first studies, people wrote for 15–20 minutes at a time over several days (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), though more recent work has shown that writing can be massed over just 1 day (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008). Relative to writing about trivial topics, expressive writing results in a range of benefits including improved physical health and immune functioning (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), well-being (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009), cognitive functioning (Klein & Boals, 2001), social integration (Kim, 2008), and relationship satisfaction (Baddeley & Pennebaker, 2011; Snyder, Gordon, & Baucom, 2004). The method is effective across a range of populations, from college students (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) to maximum-security prisoners (Richards, Beal, Seagal, & Pennebaker, 2000).
Expressive writing’s effectiveness and the low cost of its delivery (only a pen and paper are necessary) make it an especially valuable intervention in an era of rising health care costs and managed care.

This chapter will describe the main features of the expressive writing method in terms of Sweeney and L’Abate’s (2011, this volume) dimensions of writing and will review the literature on expressive writing with an emphasis on recent studies investigating novel applications of the paradigm.

The Pennebaker Paradigm

The core of the expressive writing method is putting into words one’s deepest feelings. Typical instructions are shown below:

“I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I’d like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie this trauma to your childhood or to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives. You may also link this event 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. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don’t worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up.”

Sweeney and L’Abate (see Chapter 1 in this volume) have described seven dimensions of writing, which can classify and describe various writing methods. We discuss where expressive writing fits on each of the five dimensions which we view as the most relevant to expressive writing. These five dimensions are: expressive–instructive, structured–unstructured, cathartic–prescriptive, content, and face-to-face–at a distance. The first two are structural aspects of writing. The expressive–instructive dimension describes a continuum from writing that is creative, spontaneous, and free-flowing on one end, and on the other end, writing that is concerned with a logical ordering of ideas and/or with precise use of grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. The structured–unstructured dimension describes how much scope the writer has to choose writing topics. It ranges from writing that is structured in the sense that it answers specific questions to writing that is unstructured in the sense that it is entirely open-ended. The cathartic–prescriptive dimension addresses the goals of writing. It addresses whether the goal is to enable the writer to express emotions (cathartic) or to move the writer toward specific outcomes (prescriptive). The content dimension broadly describes what the writing is about, whether it is about emotional or neutral topics, personal or relational issues, or other topics. Finally, the face-to-face–at a distance dimension describes the