



The Benefits of Expressive Writing - A Resource Guide

"I needed to write, to express myself through written language not only so that others might hear me but so that I could hear myself" ~ Gabor Maté

Traditionally, writing has been thought of as a communication process designed to arrive at the final goal of a text: "the writer's writing." Beginning in the late 20th century, physicians, nurses, rhetoricians, sociologists, and psychologists began to research and understand the incredible impact that exploring one's life through writing had on the writer: "the writer writing." The following citations are meant to serve as a resource guide for the power of expressive writing in achieving the latter goal.

Physiological Benefits:

"A growing amount of literature suggests that addressing patients' psychological needs produces both psychological and physical health benefits. Expressive writing is one such technique that has been used successfully in several controlled studies . . . Patients with mild to moderately severe asthma or rheumatoid arthritis who wrote about stressful life experiences had clinically relevant changes in health status at 4 months compared with those in the control group. These gains were beyond those attributable to the standard medical care that all participants were receiving" (Smyth, 1999, p. 1304).

"Our results suggest even a modest increase in leisure activity levels is associated with reduced risk of vascular cognitive impairment (VCI). According to our models, elderly participants who participated in any cognitive leisure activity 4 days per week had a risk of VCI that was 21% lower than among participants who only did 1 cognitive activity for 1 day per week" (Verghese, 2009, p. 117).

"[A] randomized single-blinded feasibility study of 45 patients aged >65 years without a psychiatric diagnosis in a university-based geriatric/internal medicine primary care clinic in the US . . . explored whether writing could reduce somatic and distress symptoms in older patients and found



that three 20-minute writing sessions reduced the use of outpatient services and associated costs to half that of the control group, but with minimal reduction in symptoms” (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012, p. 661).

“[S]tructured randomized controlled trials have been conducted with multiple groups of people dealing with common illnesses, common stressors such as workplace issues and common traumatic events such as imprisonment and manmade/natural disasters. Findings indicated predominantly that the experimental group (i.e. writing group) had reductions in symptoms, either physical or psychosocial” (Craft, 2013, 306).

It is nothing short of astonishing that in some way my words alter the neurons in my brain, the impulses of my motor cortex, the contractions of my muscles, and the design of my activities. In a word, thoughts change behavior. If we did not believe in change, we could not believe in therapy. Learning and memory may recruit cognitive processes as the negotiated symbol system, but healing almost always begins and ends in emotion. As central as cognition is, without emotion memory and learning could not occur. And what is healing if not learning” (Brand, 2013, p. 217).

Psychological Benefits:

“Writing about important personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvements in mental and physical health. This finding has been replicated across age, gender, culture, social class, and personality type . . . These findings suggest that the formation of a narrative is critical and is an indicator of good mental and physical health” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 199, p. 1243).

“The first lesson of thinking with stories is not to move on once the stories been heard, but to continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story” (Frank, 1995, p. 159).

“Writing is a vehicle to record ‘untold stories.’ As many scholars agree, such storytelling helps individuals to unburden themselves, to make sense of experience, or to reconstruct themselves or the events in their lives” (Nye, 2000, p. 406).



Current research shows that writing can have a therapeutic effect on painful life experiences two ways. First, by unlocking these experiences from the parts of the brain that store iconic images and allowing us to put words toward difficult moments, it is not only cathartic but it also creates understanding . . . Our emotions are validated. Second, writing can join the cognitive and emotional, resulting in a sense of control over that which we cannot control: the past” (MacCurdy, 2007, p. 2).

“As chroniclers of our own stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and where we have been. Our diaries become the stories of our journeys through life, stories that are both instructive and transforming in the telling and listening. These stories, these myriad voices, then serve to instruct and transform society, to add to the collective voice we call culture. Diarists, then, both as researchers and research subjects, begin to heal themselves and the split society has created between subject and object” (Cooper, 2006, p. 392).

“Through telling, writing, reading, and listening to life stories—one’s own and others’—those engaged in this work can penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and integrity of the other, and deepen their understanding of their respective histories and possibilities” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 391).

“As we manipulate the words on the page, as we articulate to ourselves and to others the emotional truth of our pasts, we become agents for our own healing, and if those to whom we write receive what we have to say and respond to it as we write and rewrite, we create a community that can accept, contest, gloss, inform, invent, and help us discover, deepen, and change who we have become as a consequence of the trauma we have experienced” (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2009, p. 7).

“By writing, we celebrate, too, our courage and survival. Engaging in writing . . . permits us to pass from numbness to feeling, from denial to acceptance, from conflict and chaos to order and resolution” (DeSalvo, 1999, p. 57).

Story is the way we define ourselves, make sense of our world, learn about ourselves, share our experiences, and form group identities. It is this aspect of human knowledge that the health sciences so often discount (Sierpina, 2007, p. 32).



Resources

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