

therapeutic writing

"the greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives."

William James

"fortune favours the brave"

Traditional Proverb

what is therapeutic writing?

Therapeutic writing is a method of self-help. It has been shown to be a surprisingly powerful way of coping both with current life difficulties and with past traumatic events. Typically one writes for 20 to 30 minutes about anything one feels particularly upset about. It is often helpful to write about things that one has mostly kept to oneself. If one writes about the topic on several occasions the emotions are gradually processed. This working through can benefit our health both psychologically and physically.

When writing "therapeutically" don't think too much about how you are going to express yourself. Don't worry about style or spelling or how the writing would sound if read out. It sometimes helps if you write spontaneously, rapidly and without stopping. Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings. Write personally and self-reflectively. How does what you are writing about affect you and what are the implications for you personally? Sometimes, if what you are writing about involves someone else, it can help to frame the writing as a letter to them (whether they are alive or dead). The writing though is to help you, so it is usually best not to post the letter.

Don't worry if what you write seems illogical or a bit crazy. Writing it out helps to start making some kind of sense of what one has experienced. Initially the thoughts may come out in disorganised, surprising ways. That's fine. It is probably best if you don't show what you have written to anybody else – though of course you can if you really want to. Writing knowing that someone else may read what you have written tends to affect what and how you write. It is important if you want to make the writing as therapeutic as possible that you should write very honestly and openly about both feelings and thoughts.

when is it most useful to use therapeutic writing?

- 1.) If you have had difficult or traumatic experiences – recently or far in the past – therapeutic writing may well help you. This is particularly so if you find that thoughts, pictures or dreams about the experiences keep coming back to you, or you avoid anything that might trigger off memories of what has happened.
- 2.) If you are facing current stresses or you are muddled over some issue. You may have thoughts and feelings churning around inside, but you're not necessarily clear what it is you want or what you should be doing about your situation. Therapeutic writing is likely to help you understand your position better.

how does therapeutic writing help?

Therapeutic writing can help us in a number of ways. These include reducing internal, chronic stress; helping us to understand and integrate what has happened; giving us a sense

of perspective and control which helps us to move on with our lives; and maybe too allowing us to speak more freely to others about what has happened.

- a.) Therapeutic writing can help by releasing internal stress. If we are holding onto powerful emotions without really expressing them, then the work involved *[PTO]* in this inhibition produces internal stress on our bodies and minds. It can wear us down and increase our vulnerability to disease. Although initially therapeutic writing may often be upsetting, it has been shown that it can **reduce physical and psychological illness** in the weeks and months after you use it.
- b.) Therapeutic writing helps us to **understand and integrate** what has happened. The act of putting thoughts and feelings into words is surprisingly powerful. Our minds move so quickly that it is often hard to follow a train of thought right through to a clear conclusion. We may well be left with a mound of disorganised reactions which continue to churn inside. Speaking or writing slows us down and keeps us on a particular aspect of what we are facing. Confronting and expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings about a situation helps us to assimilate and learn from what has happened.
- c.) Therapeutic writing gives us **perspective and a sense of control**. By using therapeutic writing on a series of occasions, how we see and feel about an event or problem gradually changes. Less relevant aspects tend to drop away and the important learnings are highlighted. The problem becomes more manageable and we gain perspective and a greater sense of control. This allows us to work through what has happened and move on with our lives.
- d.) Feeling less overwhelmed and having a clearer sense of perspective can allow us more easily to speak with others about what has happened. Whether we want to do this or not will depend on us and on who is available. It can however sometimes be very helpful in **reducing feelings of isolation**.

further comments

Therapeutic writing is likely to be most useful if it digs deep. It is not meant to be a chance to daydream about revenge or other fantasies. It aims to explore our deepest thoughts and feelings in a self-reflective, questioning, open way. If you have a tendency to put yourself down or see things very negatively, be careful that you don't fall into this pattern when you are using therapeutic writing. Ask yourself what you can learn from all that has happened. How can the outer situation be improved? Maybe it is changes in your inner psychological state that are now more important? How could you view what has happened in a way that doesn't hurt you so much? What small or bigger steps can you take to move forward in your life? Therapeutic writing is a self-help method. It supplements rather than replaces the value of talking to others. If you don't find it is sorting out the situation you are facing, do please consider getting other help. This might involve talking to friends, particularly if they are likely to be accepting and non-judgemental. This may be hard for them however if they feel awkward with emotions or are involved in some way in what you are talking about. Professional help from your doctor or some other therapist may also be very useful.

For more details on the health benefits of writing and self-disclosure in general, see: J.W.Pennebaker *"Opening Up: the Healing Power of Expressing Emotions"* recently re-published by New York: Guilford Press, 1997, and Louise DeSalvo *"Writing as a Way of Healing"*, The Women's Press, 1999.

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Real – and imaginary-trauma group participants were told:

I am now going to give you a test of your imaginative and emotional capacities. People who are imaginative and really in touch with their emotions generally do very well at this task.

If data were being collected from a real-trauma group, participants were subsequently told:

The aim of this exercise is for you to mentally recreate the most traumatic event that has ever happened to you, especially the emotions associated with this event. Think of the event now. Sit quietly for a few minutes and try to visualise the most recent traumatic and deeply upsetting experience of your entire life. Recreate this memory as vividly and fully as you can.

If data were being collected from an imaginary-trauma group, participants were told:

The aim of this exercise is for you to mentally recreate an imaginary traumatic event, especially the emotions associated with this event. The paper that I have just handed out to you contains a description of this traumatic event. Please read it carefully for a few minutes. Read the event now [participants were given 5 min to read the event]. Now, I want you to close your eyes and try to imagine yourself actually experiencing the event you have just read. Let your imagination carry you away from this room and into the traumatic situation. Experience this imaginary situation as vividly and fully as you can.

Both real- and imaginary-trauma group participants were then instructed:

Visualise all the details of your surroundings, the sights, sounds and smells. Get into the fantasy as much as possible. Now I want you to look deeply inside yourself and to really experience as intensely as possible the full extent of your feelings associated with this event. Now, for the next 30 minutes, I want you to explore the full extent of your feelings associated with this traumatic experience by writing them down on the piece of paper in front of you. Describe as vividly and fully as possible all of the thoughts and feelings that you have when you imagine this experience. As you write, sink into your feelings more and more. Do not write about your emotions in general, but rather about how you responded emotionally to this particular event.

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Revising Traumatic Memories or Fostering Self-Regulation?
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