

Why write?

Several years ago, researcher, James Pennebaker asked 37 HIV / AIDS patients to write about their negative life experiences during four sessions consisting of 30 minutes each. Patients who participated in the writing exercises had a higher immune boost than those who didn't.

He also discovered that students who wrote about childhood trauma visited the student health center a lot less than those who experienced trauma but never wrote or spoke about it.

Pennebaker's research has been duplicated by other researchers, over 300 times, with the same results. You can read more about the writing experiments in his book, *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal*.

Journaling or writing helps you gain perspective, closure, and understanding. Through writing you can release anger, clarify thoughts, and organize plans. Plus, it's a lot cheaper than therapy.

Pennebaker's writing experiments proved that keeping your thoughts and feelings bottled up leads to stress, anxiety, depression, decreased immune system, and physical illness. Being able to freely write or talk about them have the opposite effect.

But using writing to vent is not enough. Writing should be used to better understand and learn from your emotions. The focus of the writing has to be on finding meaning, growing, and changing. The more you use cause and effect words such as: because, realize, and understand, the more you will benefit.

For instance,

I am hurt because you broke up with me. It made me feel unwanted, not good enough, and unloved. I realize that I've felt that way my whole life. My father used to make me feel that way too. The way he treated me set me up to accept that type of treatment from every other man in my life. I understand that what my father did was about him and his self-worth because I was a child and I did nothing to deserve that type of treatment. Maybe someone else made him feel unwanted.

The example above is abbreviated so that you see how it works. When you write, you need to take as much time and space to explore the different emotions that you need. The more you can write about your feelings, the more you begin to question why you're feeling that way and it starts to make sense.

Read these guidelines before you begin writing

1. Write for a minimum of **twenty minutes per day for four consecutive days**.
2. **Choose a topic** that plagues your memories. It should be something that has kept you stuck, angry, or depressed throughout your lifetime.
3. **Write continuously for 20 minutes**. Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Your feelings will flow a lot easier if you write from your heart, without worrying about language and structure. Keep the pen on paper consistently for 20 minutes. If you run out of things to say draw a line or repeat what you've already written.
4. Be honest and **write without fear** of judgement! Dig deep and **write for your eyes only**—as if no one else will see it. When you're done (at the end of 4 days), you can shred it or throw it away.
5. **Pay attention to your emotions**. If you get into the writing, and you feel that you cannot write about a certain event because it will push you over the edge, STOP writing! Wait a few days and come back to it.
6. **It's common** to briefly feel a bit sad or down after expressive writing, especially on the first day or two. Usually this feeling goes away completely in a few hours.
7. The point of this exercise is for you to free your own feelings and encourage forgiveness. You're not obligated to share it with anyone else.

Writing Prompt (Write for twenty minutes)

Expressive writing is more about **your feelings** than it is the specific events or memories that caused you to hurt. It's not so much "what happened" as it is about how **you feel** about what happened. This is your time to explore your deepest emotions about the most pivotal, life-changing stressors or conflicts in your entire life.

As you write your feelings, make an attempt at adding any new perceptions or understanding gained from going through the trauma (i.e. I feel 'confused'....., because). Validate your emotions by giving them a name (i.e. hurt, anger, rejection). You may not be able to fill in all the sections on day one. The more you write, the more you may come to realize and understand; you can go back and fill them in later. Remember, this is your safe space. Write like no one else will ever read it!

Dear _____

I feel _____ because _____

Preparing to love.com

As a result, I realize

I understand that,

Now I can forgive you for,

Conclusion

Take some time after writing to reflect on what you have written and to grieve, if necessary. If you don't want anyone to see what you wrote, put it in a safe place or simply tear it up or shred it—at the end of 4 days. If you don't care that

someone may read what you wrote, you may want to keep it, so you can come back to it after you have completed the four-day exercise. A week or two after you have completed the four days of expressive writing, take some time to reflect on what you notice in your life, how you feel, and how you behave.

Please note: *this quick guide is not a substitute for medical advice. If you feel that you need additional help and you can't get past your feelings alone or with the help of friends and family, by all means seek professional help. If you have already been diagnosed with a condition that affects your emotional stability, please continue to seek guidance from a professional.*

Preparingtolove.com