

Expressive Writing: Tip-sheet and Resources

By: Sharon Bray, EdD and UHN Patient Partner

That's the way writing often starts, a disaster or a catastrophe... by writing I rescue myself under all sorts of conditions... it relieves the feeling of distress.
William Carlos Williams, MD & poet

The power of writing: Beginning with his ground-breaking research in the late 1980s, psychologist James Pennebaker, PhD, and his colleagues conducted over three decades of research on the health benefits of writing. Called “expressive writing,” research has shown many health, emotional and cognitive benefits associated with this practice.

What is expressive writing? It is writing about thoughts and feelings related to a personally stressful or traumatic life experiences. It is personal, free flowing, informal and written without concern for style, spelling, punctuation or grammar.

What are the benefits of expressive writing? Research has demonstrated a number of health benefits among many different groups of people, including:

- Stronger immune health
- Better sleep habits
- Improved mental and physical health
- Regulated blood pressure
- Reduction in pain caused by chronic diseases.

Expressive writing also has a number of other benefits, including:

- Translating chaotic emotions into words
- Making thoughts & events more concrete and accessible
- Facilitating reflection and "sense-making" of one's experiences
- Making linkages between feelings and upsetting events
- Helping release negative emotions and stress that can lead to disease
- Helping reclaim your voice, often silenced by illness and chronic conditions
- *and*, when done together, can ease isolation & build community through shared stories.

What is the most healing kind of writing? Writing that is most healing happens when you:

- Write deeply
- Use detailed descriptions of events & feelings
- Make connections between what happened & what we feel
- Create a "balanced" narrative--(using both positive and negative words)
- Form a story from events and emotions
- Write as part of a group exercise/activity in an environment that is safe and supportive
- Treat your writing and your experience with care.

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Beginning a Healing Writing Practice

- Write 3 – 4 times a week. Set the timer for 15 minutes and write.
- Write freely, keeping the pen moving or your fingers flying.
- It doesn't matter how you begin. Don't worry about grammar or spelling.
- Begin with anything or, if it helps, begin with a prompt to get you started.
- After you finish, read over what you've written. You can underline words or phrases that stand out and use those to begin your next writing session.
- Keep your writing private.
- If you feel worse after writing, it may be good to talk to someone who can help.

Sample writing prompts



- When the doctor said...
- What I fear most is...
- I remember...
- What really makes me angry is...
- I regret...
- I am grateful for...
- I have carried this sadness since...
- Use a photo of your younger self. Begin with: In this photo you are...
- Make two columns: Before heart failure/After heart failure (or any condition). Write lists for each column. Expand on one or more.

Selected Resources

Adams, Kathleen (1998). *The Way of the Journal: A Journal Therapy Workbook for Healing*. Sidron Press.

DeSalvo, Louise A. (2000). *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press.

Pennebaker, J.W. & Evans, J.F. (2014). *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal*. Enumclaw, WA: Idyll Arbor.

Pennebaker, J.W. & Smyth, J.M. (2016). *Opening Up by Writing it Down*. NY: Guilford Press.

Reeves, Judy. (2010) *A Writer's Book of Days, A Spirited Companion and Lively Muse for the Writing Life*. CA: New World Library. **Note: book of writing prompts**

www.writingtheheart.ca, a monthly blog by Sharon Bray, EdD, featuring reflective posts & writing suggestions on life and living with heart failure.