

# EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **15 MINS**

## WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Most of us have gone through times of great stress and emotional upheaval. This exercise gives you a simple, effective way to deal with these challenges and the difficult feelings they bring up. Research suggests that completing this exercise can increase happiness, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, strengthen the immune system, and improve work and school performance. These benefits have been shown to persist for months.

## TIME REQUIRED

20 minutes per day for four days in a row

## HOW TO DO IT

Over the next four days, you'll write freely about your true feelings and thoughts about an experience of hurt that has been emotionally challenging.

1. **Find a comfortable time and place where you are unlikely to be disturbed.** If a private space is not available, you can ask people not to disturb you while you're doing this practice.
2. **Use any writing materials that are available to you.** You can use a word processor, or physical notebook, binder paper, or even a piece of scratch paper.
3. **Choose an experience of hurt to write about that is important to you.** Choose events or situations you feel you can handle now—that is, don't write about a severe trauma too soon after it happened, or if it feels too overwhelming.
4. **In your writing, explore what's been happening in connection to that hurtful experience, how it has affected you, and how it connects to different parts of your life.** You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or your career.
5. **As you write about your experience, really let go and write freely whatever comes to your mind.** Don't worry about spelling or grammar.
6. **Try not to edit or judge what you write.** Remember that your writing is for your eyes only and that you are doing this for your own well-being.
7. **To the best of your ability, write without stopping for at least 20 minutes.** Do whatever you need to help you stay on task—you might listen to music, wear noise-canceling headphones, and put away distractions.
8. **Optional:** After the four days of writing, try writing from the [perspective of a neutral observer](#) or the [perspectives of other people](#) involved in the situation.

## EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Pennebaker, J.W., Kiecolt-Glaser, J., & Glaser, R. (1988). [Disclosure of traumas and immune function: Health implications for psychotherapy](#). *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 56, 239-245.

Compared with a control group who wrote about superficial topics, participants who wrote about traumatic experiences for four consecutive days reported greater happiness three months later, visited the doctor less than usual during the six weeks after, and seemed to have a healthier immune system.

## Who Has Tried the Practice?

While there is no demographic information in the study above, additional studies explore how this exercise benefits different groups and cultures:

- [American psychiatric outpatients](#) and [people with mood disorders](#) decreased in anxiety and depression after several sessions of Expressive Writing.
- [Women undergraduate students in the U.K.](#) who completed three Expressive Writing sessions reduced in eating disorder symptoms.
- [Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer \(LGBTQ+\) people](#) (mostly white or Asian American) who did Expressive Writing about a time they received hate speech became more resistant to stress.
- [Gay and bisexual men](#) who did Expressive Writing about their sexuality daily for three days improved in emotional well-being, became more open with their sexual orientation, depended less on illicit drugs, and reported more safe sex behaviors.
- [Bilingual British undergraduates](#) whose first language was Korean or Spanish improved in social well-being after four days of Expressive Writing, especially if they alternated between writing in English and their native language.
- [Latino American](#) and [Chinese undergraduates](#) engaged in up to three consecutive daily sessions of writing about a traumatic experience and showed reductions in trauma symptoms.
- [American undergraduates](#), [American war veterans](#), and [British people who experienced psychosis](#) (all with post-traumatic stress disorder) spent up to four consecutive days doing Expressive Writing about their trauma and showed mental health improvements.
- [Chinese undergraduates](#) who completed eight weekly Expressive Writing sessions reported improvements in psychological, social, and physical health.
- [Japanese undergraduates](#) who did three days of Expressive Writing improved in working memory capacity (a sign of mental health).
- [British, Swiss, Italian, and Iranian mothers](#) who recently gave birth engaged in up to 10 writing sessions in the hospital and reported reductions in maternal post-traumatic stress and depression.
- [Female survivors of intimate partner violence](#), [women](#) with histories of [childhood sexual abuse](#), and [women with substance abuse disorders](#) decreased in mental health symptoms after completing several sessions of Expressive Writing.
- People with various disabilities and diseases, including people who have experienced [seizures](#), [heart attacks](#), [chronic pain](#), [respiratory disorders](#), [irritable bowel syndrome](#), [lupus](#), [fibromyalgia](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [ankylosing spondylitis](#), [kidney transplants](#), and [various cancers](#) (including [breast cancer](#) in [white Americans](#), [Chinese Americans](#), [Chinese nationals](#), and [Romanians](#)) improved in mental or physical health after Expressive Writing.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

## WHY TO TRY IT

When we experience a stressful event or major life transition, it's easy to ruminate over that experience; thinking about it can keep us up at night, distract us from work, and make us feel less connected to others. Expressive writing allows us to step back for a moment and evaluate our lives. Through writing, we can become active creators of our own life stories—rather than passive bystanders—and as a result feel more empowered to cope with challenges. Transforming a messy, complicated experience into a coherent story can make the experience feel more manageable.

## SOURCES

[James Pennebaker, Ph.D.](#), University of Texas at Austin  
[The University of Texas at Austin Office of Public Affairs](#)

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

