

# 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 consecutive days

## HOW TO DO IT

Over the next four days, write down your deepest emotions and thoughts about an emotional challenge that has been affecting your life. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write continuously for 20 minutes.

Tips for writing:

- Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed.
- Write continuously for at least 20 minutes.
- Don't worry about spelling or grammar.
- Write only for yourself.
- Write about something extremely personal and important to you.
- Deal only with events or situations you can handle now—that is, don't write about a trauma too soon after it has happened if it feels too overwhelming.
- Optional final step: After the four days of writing, try writing from the perspectives of other people involved in the event or 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 that 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 a six-week period following the writing exercise, and seemed to have a healthier immune system.

## WHY IT WORKS

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

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[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](#).

