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EXPRESSIVE WRITING THERAPY

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Definition: A method whereby people write about emotional upheavals.

Elements: People are encouraged to write repeatedly about emotional experiences, typically for 20 minutes per day on 4 consecutive days, though length and number of writing sessions is flexible. The writing exercises aim to help the writers explore their thoughts and feelings about one or more upheavals in order to identify, label, understand, and come to terms with their experiences. The writers receive no feedback from others - the goal is to stand back and to reassess upsetting experiences in writing for themselves alone.

Application: Done individually on its own or together with other psychotherapy procedures.

Related procedures: Disclosure methods in client-centered and other therapy, *religious confession, narrative exposure, prolonged exposure, goal setting*.

1st Use? Pennebaker & Beall (1986)

References:

1. Pennebaker JW, Beall SK (1986) Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95, 274-281.
2. Lepore SJ, Smyth, J.M. (Eds.) (2002) *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
3. Pennebaker JW (1997) *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions*. New York: Guilford Press.
4. Frattaroli J (2006) Experimental disclosure and its moderators: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 823-865.

Case Illustration (Pennebaker 1997)

Hal, an engineer aged 52, participated in a writing project involving over 40 laid-off workers after his company ended his 24 years of employment there. He was hostile, and had insomnia and difficulty talking with others about his experience. In the 4 months since being laid off Hal had had 4 job interviews without success. At an outplacement company contracted by the former employer to help laid-off employees find new jobs, Hal was asked to write about his experience daily for 5 consecutive days, 30 minutes each day. All 40 laid-off employees wrote by themselves in office cubicles. Daily writings were turned in anonymously to project workers and no one ever received feedback about them. By 1-month follow-up, Hal said the writing had markedly improved how he thought about the job loss, including fewer ruminative thoughts and less anger and helplessness about it. He was now talking with his wife about the layoff and sleeping better. After his writing sessions Hal had successful job interviews and was about to start a new job at a pay level above that in his previous job.