

## Coping with Trauma: The Benefits of Expressive Writing

by James P. David Ph.D. on June 16, 2010

I first learned about the benefits of writing about trauma when I was a graduate student in the 1990s. I read James Pennebaker's research which showed that people who had experienced highly stressful events benefitted physically and psychologically simply by writing about the events. Frankly, I was skeptical, but one thing really stood out. Pennebaker knew his results would be controversial and scrutinized, so he sent his data to be inspected and analyzed by highly respected researchers at another university. That's confidence in your data!

After nearly 25 years of research on the effects of writing about trauma, a sizable literature has emerged. It is now quite clear that the simple act of writing about trauma can benefit one's physical health and psychological well-being. In much of the research, writing sessions are about 20 minutes a day over several consecutive days, people write about a highly stressful event and the associated emotions, and the writings remain private. Writing about trauma does not benefit everyone (e.g., it may be detrimental for adult survivors of childhood abuse), but it has helped people who have experienced events such as medical conditions (e.g., cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, HIV), bereavement, and other major stressors. (Such as Teacher Abuse) an insert by C. Foy

So, what are the benefits? They include physical benefits such as reduced blood pressure, improved immune function, reduced pain, and fewer visits to the doctor. They also include psychological and behavioral benefits such as improved mood and memory, reduced depression, and even better performance in sports. We know that "stress makes you stupid" and I previously wrote about this, but the present research on writing goes further by showing it is possible to improve school performance by writing about stressful events (i.e., higher GPA!). If stress makes you stupid, writing about it makes you smarter!

How does writing help? This question is still being investigated, but there appear to be some emerging patterns. Writing about trauma is a form of (mental) exposure to the stressful event, and exposure is known to have benefits in the treatment of trauma. Writing also may function as a way for one to organize (mentally, cognitively) a major stressful event into something meaningful and integrated with one's other life experiences; it can help one make sense of the event. The benefits of writing probably are not based on catharsis, otherwise known as venting or letting off steam.

Who benefits? It appears that people might benefit from writing about trauma regardless of their age or the severity of their trauma. One meta-analysis (a procedure whereby multiple studies are examined to determine whether there is an overall pattern across studies) suggests that the benefits of writing about traumatic events may be greater for men than for women.

There remains research to be done, and I hope to see more work that illuminates the mechanisms through which writing is effective. But I am no longer the skeptic about writing that I was in the 1990s. For many people, it appears that writing about their traumatic events really helps.

## Related References

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