

● employment counseling and life stressors: coping through expressive writing

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Job loss can be one of life's most traumatic experiences, especially if the unemployment is extended. In addition to more common interventions used by employment counselors and others dedicated to assisting clients in the search for work, it can be helpful to assist clients in expressing their negative feelings through writing. Expressive writing is a powerful technique used successfully to confront traumatic life events. Beneficial effects of expressive writing include understanding why feelings occur. Factors that favorably influence expressive writing and specific procedures for implementation in the employment counseling context are discussed.

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Job loss is often cited as one of life's most stressful events, along with divorce and death of a spouse (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Researchers have documented the negative effects of job loss on psychological and physical well-being of workers (e.g., Quick & Quick, 1984). The trauma of job loss induces powerful emotions such as anger and fear. One way to constructively deal with such feelings is to express and integrate them by writing about the emotionally traumatic experience.

Both historically and recently, researchers and practitioners have cited the expression of negative emotions as vital for good mental and physical health, whereas the inhibition of such emotion is often considered detrimental (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1966; Fawzy et al., 1993; Grinker & Spiegel, 1945; Larson, 1990). More specifically, expressing negative emotions generally has a positive effect across a number of outcome variables including *reported health* (e.g., health center visits & self-reported symptoms), *psychological well-being* (e.g., happiness & adjustment), *physiological functioning* (e.g., blood pressure & heart rate), and *general functioning* (e.g., reemployment & absenteeism). Emotional inhibition, on the other hand, can have harmful effects on such factors (Páez, Velasco, & González, 1999; Smyth, 1998; Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999).

People frequently have an intense desire to discuss trauma (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996), and counseling clients are often encouraged to verbalize negative

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emotions associated with traumatic events. Even so, social constraints may inhibit clients from doing so (Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment, 1996; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). Thus, written expression may fill an important need of providing a practical, concrete, and specific mechanism of emotional expression in circumstances where such expression can be difficult.

UNDERSTANDING EXPRESSIVE WRITING EFFECTS

Disinhibition

Disinhibition offers an explanation for understanding the beneficial effects that writing, like talking, can have on health (Pennebaker, 1989). Inhibition, the failure to acknowledge, understand, and emotionally grasp stressors, is potentially unhealthy. Inhibition serves as a cumulative stressor, building with time as more and more issues are disregarded. Also, failure to appropriately address stressful events impedes the cognitive-affective assimilation process (Pennebaker, 1989) leaving emotional resolution incomplete. This is consistent with the well-documented Zeigarnik effect, which suggests that unfinished issues are more readily remembered and more apt to affect us than those we address and lay to rest (Karniol & Ross, 1996). All of these arguments about the detrimental effects of inhibition build a case for the usefulness of disinhibition.

Confrontation

Expressive writing can facilitate confrontation of self and attendant issues. Confrontation acts as a source of habituation and desensitization while diminishing negative arousal and emotions that follow exposure to threatening material (i.e., memories of a negative experience and correlates; Mendolia & Kleck, 1993; Pennebaker, 1989). Confrontation can break the pathological feedback loop of avoidance and negative rumination and, in this way, diminish negative affect. These processes might be reflected in changes of self-reported arousal when remembering the problematic event and also in a decrease in avoidance as a coping mechanism. Confronting traumatic experience helps facilitate personal understanding of the experience and assists in reframing it. Confrontation allows people to change their original appraisals of negative events into more benign evaluations. Events are re-constructed as being more meaningful and more controllable (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Greenberg et al., 1996).

Emotions and Language

Studies have attempted to separate the contributions of emotion and language, specifically to determine the degree to which language is necessary for improving mental and physical health. Research on catharsis, the venting and reexperiencing of emotions, has failed to support the clinical value of emotional expression in the

absence of cognitive processing (Lewis & Bucher, 1992). Krantz and Pennebaker (as cited in Smyth, 1998) showed experimentally that writing is useful in encouraging the cognitive processing necessary to make the expression of emotion therapeutic.

Thus, the mere expression of trauma is not enough to bring about long-term positive change. Gains seem to require the translation of experiences into organized, meaningful language. Thirteen experiments, with more than 800 individuals, were included in a meta-analysis by Smyth (1998). He found the binomial effect size of writing to be a 23% improvement in those assigned to write about stressful events over those assigned to write about neutral topics. (The binomial effect size is a method to show the practical importance of a meta-analysis effect size and is presented as the difference in outcome rates between experimental and control groups [Rosenthal & Ruben, 1982].) For example, experimental (relative to control) participants are 23% more likely to find reemployment after layoffs.

More specifically, one study (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994) that was designed to ascertain the effect of expressive writing on employment showed impressive results. A total of 63 persons who had been unemployed 5 months were divided into a writing group and two control groups. Four months after the treatment, only 14% of the non-writing controls and 24% of those asked to write about nonemotional issues had found employment, whereas 53% of those asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about their layoff and how their life had been affected had found jobs.

For insight into the benefits of clients writing about stressful events, it may be helpful to compare writing about trauma with other psychological, behavioral, or educational treatments. In their landmark meta-analysis of psychotherapy outcomes, Smith and Glass (1977) reported an average 32% improvement for those receiving psychotherapy compared with those who do not; the overall effect was somewhat larger than that achieved by writing about stressful events (23% improvement). However, when addressing clients' issues concerning drinking and driving (Wells-Parker, Bangert-Drowns, McMillen, & Williams, 1995) and issues faced by cancer patients (Meyer & Marks, 1995), other recent analyses have reported similar or smaller effect sizes for psychotherapy outcomes when compared with effect sizes for relevant writing exercises. Finally, Lipsey and Wilson examined effect sizes from 302 meta-analyses of behavioral and educational interventions and reported very similar average improvements for studies that randomly assigned participants into experimental conditions (23%) with the same procedure used in most written expression experiments (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993). Although it is not possible to strictly compare effect sizes among studies when the same outcomes are not used, these comparisons support the view that the effect produced by writing about stressful events is significant and similar to a variety of other psychological interventions, many of which are more involved, time-consuming, and expensive.

Emotions and Writing

Originally, writing was believed to permit individuals to confront upsetting topics by reducing the constraints or inhibitions associated with not talking about the

event. It was thought that the effort of inhibition caused or increased stress-related disease processes (Pennebaker, 1989). Although early work focused on the central role of emotional expression (cf. Scheff, 1979), evidence suggested that emotional expression may be necessary, but is not sufficient, to produce positive change (Murray, Lammin, & Carver, 1989; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). More recently, researchers have suggested that emotional expression facilitates cognitive assimilation of the traumatic memory, which leads to affective and physiological change (e.g., Pennebaker, 1993). Specifically, written emotional expression leads to a change of the traumatic experience into a linguistic structure that promotes assimilation and understanding of the event and reduces negative affect associated with thoughts of the event (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997).

Writing and an Emotional Paradox

Although writing leads to an eventual reduction in negative emotions and other positive changes, these results are not without a short-term emotional paradox: an increase in short-term distress. Study participants tend to show marked increases on measures of autonomic arousal, such as blood pressure and skin conductance, during the actual writing experience. Those writing about traumas show a distinct shift to more negative affect; no changes in affect are observed for participants writing about innocuous topics (Smyth, 1998). In his meta-analysis, Smyth found that average short-term distress was unrelated to all long-term successful outcomes examined. In the absence of intervening coping strategies, this is contrary to the prediction of stress and coping theory, which would suggest that short-term stress produced by writing about past traumas would result in negative long-term mood and health outcomes (Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999). The negative physiological and affective states produced by writing must reverse or be alleviated at some point after writing, but prior to measurement of health outcomes. Further research on factors contributing to this shift would enhance an understanding of the manner in which writing about stressful events produces health benefits.

In summary, when individuals express their emotional upheavals in writing, their mental and physical health improves in the long term. However, counselors must anticipate a paradoxical increase in short-term (immediate) anxiety and other emotions during writing and be prepared to help their client to process these emotions appropriately.

FACTORS RELATED TO EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Accumulated evidence suggests that writing about stressful events can play a significant role in influencing health and well-being. It is important, however, to investigate the parameters of written self-disclosure.

Individual Differences

Very few personality or individual difference measures have distinguished among persons who do or do not benefit from writing. Many commonly examined variables

were found to be unrelated to outcome, including age, anxiety (or negative affectivity), and measures of inhibition or constraint (Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999).

It seems, however, that expressive writing may be more effective for men than for women. Smyth (1998) reported in his meta-analysis that the effect size of expressive writing was related to the percentage of men in the studies, or that men benefit more than women from expressive writing. Dindia and Allen's (1992) meta-analysis confirmed that men disclose less than women do, and narrative reviews suggest that women disclose more on emotional topics than men (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). This finding suggests that people who are less emotionally open seem to benefit more from expressive writing. Because traditional gender roles make it less likely for men to disclose traumas and related emotions than women (e.g., Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992), men may experience greater benefit due to lower prewriting levels of emotional expression. Men tend to use more problem-focused coping strategies (Ptacek et al., 1992) and may focus more on the actual trauma when writing—a difference that may facilitate the beneficial effects of disclosures (Pennebaker, 1993; Solomon, Avitzur, & Mikulincer, 1990). Finally, many men seem to have a dispositional deficit in the cognitive processing and regulation of emotion, a condition called "alexithymia" (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). It is interesting that Páez et al. (1999) found that individuals high in dispositional difficulty in describing feelings, that is, high in alexithymia, showed a greater improvement in well-being after expressive writing than did persons low in alexithymia. Finally, Christensen et al. (1996) investigated another variable, hostility (the related concept of aggression is considered to be related to gender; see, for example, Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), and found that high-hostile participants benefited more from writing than did those who were low in hostility.

Educational, Linguistic, and Cultural Effects

Writing about stressful events has been studied using groups of varying educational levels, in several languages, and in different countries. In the United States, writing about stressful events has produced similar benefits for such diverse groups as senior professionals with advanced degrees and maximum security prisoners with little education. Differences among college students' ethnicity or native language have not been related to outcome. In addition, the writing paradigm has consistently produced positive results among French-speaking Belgians (Rime, 1995), Spanish-speaking residents of Mexico City (Domínguez et al., 1995) and Spain (Páez et al., 1999), multiple samples of adults and students in The Netherlands (Schoutrop, Lange, Brosschot, & Everaerd, 1996), and medical students in New Zealand (Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, Davison, & Thomas, 1995).

Spacing and Length of Writing Time

Participants in various experiments have been asked to write for different lengths of time and at assorted intervals. They have written for only 1 day and as many as 5,

and typically on consecutive days, but spaced to as much as a week between sittings. The length of each writing session has been from 15 to 30 minutes, although one study asked participants to write for only 3 minutes for 1 day. Smyth's (1998) meta-analysis suggested strongest effects are related to the treatment ranging over more days, but with the length of the individual sessions not related to writing effectiveness; that is, writing once each week over a month may be more effective than writing four times within a single week. The therapeutic process (e.g., the meaningful integration of negative information) may progress over a period of time, increasing benefits to writers (Horowitz, 1986; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Similarly, prolonged exposure strategies are thought to provide greater opportunity for improvement (Foa & Riggs, 1993). This was supported in a study by Pérez et al. (1999), who found the expected positive writing effects with typical sessions (3 days and 20-minute sessions), but not with very brief sessions (1 day and a single 3-minute session). It is interesting that participants' self-reports of the value of writing do not differ between shorter or longer writing groups.

Topic of Disclosure

The topic of trauma-related disclosures about which participants were requested to write (past trauma, current trauma, or either) is relevant to outcome (Smyth, 1998). It seems that instructions do not affect overall effect size, but participants writing only about current traumas had well-being outcomes superior to those of participants solely instructed to write about *any* traumas (either past or current). Addressing ongoing traumas more intimately linked to daily life tends to produce greater positive change than addressing past traumas that may be less relevant to daily life. However, participants assigned to write about any trauma (past or current) had physiological outcomes superior to those of participants assigned to write about only past traumas. This seems counter to inhibition theory, which maintains that past traumas should carry the greatest physiological load and produce more benefit when disinhibited (cf. Lutgendorf, Antoni, Kumar, & Schneiderman, 1994). Likewise, choice of topic may selectively influence outcome. For beginning college students, for example, writing about emotional issues related to commencing college influences grades more than writing about unspecified traumatic experiences (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990).

Writing Versus Talking About Traumatic Events

Several studies have compared writing and talking about stressors. Talking was done either into a tape recorder (Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Margulies, & Schneiderman, 1994) or to a therapist (Donnelly & Murray, 1991). Although these studies found similar long-term biological, mood, and cognitive effects, there is some evidence that writing produces more immediate (short-term) distress. Such feelings may be a requisite part of the change process, and, if carefully monitored, producing them quickly can be a benefit and not necessarily a liability.

Client Characteristics

Much of the writing efficacy research has been conducted with nonclinical participants. However, there is evidence that writing may not be effective with some groups of individuals with impairments. Those failing to benefit (at least in the absence of additional, concurrent interventions) include persons with disordered cognitive processing; those with severe depression; or recently bereaved, older adults (Strobe & Strobe, 1996). Similarly, Gidron, Peri, Connolly, and Shalev (1996) found that in a group of patients with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), half assigned to write and orally expand about their traumas got worse (compared with those in a control group)! These authors noted that writing might not benefit PTSD patients in the absence of other interventions. Such studies sound a cautionary note about the use of written disclosure exercises with certain clinical and other at-risk groups.

Overall, the effects of written disclosure seem relevant and generalizable across age, sex, race/ethnicity, social class, and education level when used with appropriate caution and good judgment. Careful selection and monitoring of clientele is imperative.

IMPLEMENTING EXPRESSIVE WRITING IN EMPLOYMENT COUNSELING CONTEXTS

As indicated, expressive writing has been used successfully in numerous controlled studies (e.g., Donnelly & Murray, 1991; Murray & Segal, 1994). Given these results, expressive writing could be a valuable intervention for employment counseling. The following are suggestions for using expressive writing effectively.

A Caveat

Before considering specific suggestions for expressive writing exercises a question that has not been well addressed in the literature must be discussed. Should the writing be completed within the counseling session or assigned as homework to be performed between sessions? Given the very private nature of the exercise, it may be desirable to use the technique as homework assignments. Yet, because of the intense negative emotions that may be elicited, it might be safest with especially labile clients to give them time to write in-session where their responses and aroused feelings can be processed and a determination made that they are emotionally situated to leave the counseling environment. Because many counseling interventions (e.g., confrontation; Soper, Miller, & Wells, 1983) tend to elicit strong emotions, employment counselors should be adequately prepared to take appropriate action, as necessary.

However, for many if not most clients, it would be quite acceptable to assign expressive writing as homework. Even then, clients should be told that the exercise can be intense and the counselor might suggest that they establish a specific place and time to do the homework, one that is both comfortable and private, with ad-

equate time to “come down” from the experience before needing to move on to other commitments and responsibilities. Certainly, those clients given writing homework need to understand that if they need or desire support, either during or after the writing exercise, there is a mutually acceptable means of obtaining that support, whether it is a telephone call to the counselor or a particularly receptive friend, or even an e-mail message to those persons.

How To Write

Given the preceding caveat, the following is a possible prototypical expressive writing methodology, one geared to the homework setting, but quite adaptable to the counseling office. Clients would be asked to write for 15 to 20 minutes once or twice a week, ideally for a minimum of 3 or 4 weeks. This schedule is flexible enough to allow the work to be tailored to clients’ resources and situations while meeting the criteria of efficacy established by the research. Clients would be best served if asked to write about their most intense thoughts and feelings related to the current unemployment experience. Possible instructions might be as follows:

Twice a week, for the next 3 weeks, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about your current unemployment. Try to allow 2 or 3 days between each writing exercise. Consider a set place you can use each time you write. Also, a consistent schedule for writing is helpful, such as Monday and Friday, or Wednesday and Sunday.

In your writing, I’d like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and ideas. Also, as you write, consider how your current situation affects your daily life. You may write about the same issues or aspects of your situation at each sitting or on different ones.

Don’t be concerned about your spelling, grammar, sentence structure or handwriting, if you write by hand. Once you start writing don’t stop until the time is up. It is okay if you run a little long or short. It is common to find that it gets easier to write as you do it.

Any of your writing that you wish to share with me will be considered confidential within the limitation already discussed when we started our relationship. (after Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999, p. 71, and others)

It is usual practice to have clients bring in their written homework and discuss or process it with the counselor, but this is not a rigid requirement. Some adequately benefit from merely writing their thoughts and feelings, whereas others will want to expand upon what they have produced and receive relevant feedback.

When given as an in-office assignment, it is appropriate to either remain in the room while the client writes (doing some activity of one’s own, so as not to seem to be lurking over the client or awaiting completion of the work) or to leave the room for the agreed-upon period. Some offices allow two-way mirror observation and may be appropriate, but only if the client knows this is a possibility and has agreed to it.

Processing of expressive writing materials is not unique to vocational counseling. One’s usual theoretical orientation and professional preferences can be continued. However, it is not unusual to see a variety of patterns in the way material is produced and presented. Some clients build up to the most intense disclosures, whereas others “get them off their chests” immediately. Some continue with new and insightful disclosures up through the final writing assignment and, indeed, may wish to

negotiate continued writing activities, whereas others will start to wind down one or two writing sessions before the agreed-upon finish. None of these patterns is wrong, and any pattern can be discussed with clients if it seems that they are seeking premature closure.

As a final reminder, we emphasize that the counselor must always remain aware of evidence that expressive writing is not an appropriate intervention with all unemployed clients. Because research suggests that clients with PTSD, severe depression, and others may not benefit from expressive writings, it behooves the counselor to consider others who may not be appropriate candidates. Although further research is needed to clarify who are most and least appropriate candidates for this intervention, counselors must use particular caution and careful monitoring when prescribing expressive writing experiences for those who are considered at-risk or who are experiencing acute reactions to trauma (Gidron et al., 1996).

SUMMARY

Although it is not to be applied without some caveats and it is not appropriate for everyone, expressive writing has been shown to be a viable way to therapeutically address problematic negative emotions that are related to traumatic vocational experiences. Some researchers have shown that this technique can foster positive employment outcomes for individuals who have lost their jobs. Employment counselors have been provided theoretical and empirical background on using expressive writing as a vocational change technique, have been given information on how to use expressive writing effectively, and have been advised of appropriate cautions.

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