

Feeling Upset? Try Writing

adapted from an article by Elizabeth Bernstein



- 1 People who write about a traumatic experience or difficult situation in a manner that psychologists refer to as “expressive writing” – recording their deepest thoughts and feelings – often show improved mental and physical health, says James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas. Dr. Pennebaker pioneered the scientific study of expressive writing as a coping mechanism to deal with trauma back in the 1980s.
- 2 Expressive writing is a specific technique, and it’s different from just writing in a journal. People need to reflect honestly and thoughtfully on a particular trauma or challenge, and do it in short sessions – 15 to 20 minutes for a minimum of three days is a good place to start.
- 3 Expressive writing works because it allows you to take a painful experience, identify it as a problem and make meaning out of it, experts say. Recognizing that something is bothering you is an important first step. Translating that experience into language forces you to organize your thoughts. And creating a narrative gives you a sense of control.
- 4 But there are a few cautions. Expressive writing isn’t a magical cure. It shouldn’t be used as a replacement for other treatments. And people coping with a severe trauma or depression may not find it useful to do on their own, without therapy.
- 5 Yet it can be a powerful coping tool for many, in large part because it helps combat the secrecy people often feel about a trauma, as well as their reluctance to face emotions. “The more you 34, the more trouble you will have with it, because you create a loop of trepidation and apprehension and increasing negative emotions,” says Brian Marx, a professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine and deputy director of the behavioral science division of the National Center for PTSD.

- 6 Why write? Thinking or talking about an event can lead to ruminating, where you become lost in your emotions. But writing forces you to slow down, says Joshua Smyth, distinguished professor of biobehavioral health and of medicine at Pennsylvania State University, who studies expressive writing.

- 7 “The mere act of putting emotions on paper can dampen the neural activity in the threat area of the brain and increase activity in the regulatory area,” says Annette Stanton, chair of the department of psychology and professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA. Dr. Stanton’s research suggests that expressive writing can lead to lower depressive symptoms, greater positive mood and enhanced life appreciation. “Writing can increase someone’s acceptance of their experience, and acceptance is calming,” says Dr. Stanton.

wsj.com, 2020