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Healing Through Writing: Insights from Research

Key words: expressive writing; health; exposure therapy; traumatic experiences

Introduction

Stressful and traumatic experiences are constant companions of human beings. To a great extent, the quality of human life depends on their ability to cope with the various adversities they encounter. It is natural to human beings to share their emotions with others, expecting support and relief from emotional burden. One of the dominant ideas in this direction endorses the view that confrontation and cognitive processing of the subjective emotional experience related to trauma are

beneficial for health (Foa & Kozak, 1986; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). In contrast, research shows that suppression, repression and denial of emotional processing have a negative impact on mental and physical health (Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993). Exposure therapies, especially talking with others (talking cure), have been very popular throughout history. Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of catharsis (expression of emotions in a socially appropriate ways) as a form of therapy based on the idea of healing of emotional blockages by uninhibited talking. Almost all forms of psychotherapy concur that talking about emotional experiences is an important component of the healing process (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1962; Rogers, 1951). It is possible that the

A B S T R A C T

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has demonstrated that writing about traumatic or stressful events or experiences has a positive impact on physical and psychological health. This paper reviews the research findings related to expressive writing and health, in clinical as well as non-clinical populations. Research findings

comparing the health benefits of vocal and written disclosure of traumatic experiences are addressed. Possible pathways or mechanisms through which expressive writing affects health are discussed. Finally, major issues that need serious attention from researchers in this area for future research are suggested.

act of describing the emotional pain triggers transformation and even thriving.

The benefits of emotional expression are not limited to verbal expression. Recent research has shown that encouraging individuals to write down their thoughts and feelings about past traumatic events produces better mental as well as physical health (Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Smyth & Pennebaker, 2001; Pennebaker, 1990). Expressive writing provides a secure way of purging one's emotional experience without any risk of a negative impact from the other's inappropriate response. Expressive writing provides the opportunity for more cognitive processing and integration of traumatic experience in memory. It leads to higher emotional awareness and fosters better regulation of emotion and coping with distress.

Writing and health: research evidence

Over the last two decades, a growing body of scientific research, mainly by James Pennebaker and his colleagues, has shown the positive impact of writing on health. Pennebaker and his colleagues proved, using experimental studies, that disclosing painful memories can lead to better health. They used the standard experimental design by assigning a group of participants to an experimental condition and another to a control condition. Subjects in the experimental condition are asked to write about the most traumatic experiences of their life, while subjects in the control condition are asked to write about a superficial topic. Participants are usually instructed to write about their assigned topic for 3–5 consecutive days, for 15–20 minutes each day (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Pennebaker reported that through the process of writing one is able to organise the facts related to overwhelming experiences, which in turn helps to resolve them. Studies with undergraduate participants showed that written emotional disclosure resulted in improvement in various health parameters such as improved immune functioning (Esterling *et al*, 1994; Pennebaker *et al*, 1988), reduced health care visits and fewer physical symptoms (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), increased college grade point average (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Pennebaker *et al*, 1990) and better mood (Greenberg *et al*, 1996; Lepore, 1997; Murray & Segal, 1994; Smyth, 1998). Research investigating the benefits of writing about traumatic experiences has also been conducted in other samples such as prostate cancer patients (Rosenberg *et al*, 2002), unemployed professionals (Spera *et al*, 1994), asthma and rheumatoid arthritis patients (Smyth *et al*, 1999) and prison inmates (Richards *et al*, 2000). These beneficial effects of expressive writing were

found across cultures and in diverse samples (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001).

Smyth (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of 13 studies of expressive writing about trauma by healthy participants that used the controlled writing method. This meta-analysis indicated significant long-term health gains in the disclosure group over the control group ($d = 0.47$, $p < .0001$). Effect size indicated an overall 23% improvement in the long-term health of the participants who wrote down their traumatic experiences compared with the control groups. Smyth (1998) suggested that, for physically and psychologically healthy individuals, the effects of expressive writing are similar to those of other psychological, behavioural and educational treatments. Frisina, Borod and Lepore (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of nine expressive writing studies with clinical populations, and also reported a significant positive effect on health ($d = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). However, when separate analyses were conducted for physical health outcomes in medically ill populations, and psychological health outcomes in psychiatric populations, significant effect was found for physical health outcomes ($d = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) but not for psychological health ($d = 0.07$, $p < 0.17$). Although the effect size for the clinical populations was smaller than in studies with healthy participants, overall the meta-analysis suggests a positive impact of expressive writing on various health parameters.

Vocal vs. written expression of emotions

Some studies also compared the health benefits of verbal and written expression of emotions. Murray, Lamnin and Carver (1989) assigned undergraduate students randomly to one of the three conditions: writing about a traumatic event, writing about a trivial life event, or talking to a therapist about a traumatic event. The results indicated that the participants who wrote about their traumatic experience expressed stronger emotions and increased negative feelings after each session than participants in the psychotherapy condition. Psychotherapy resulted in less negative mood, increased positive cognitive changes and adaptive behaviour. These results suggest that the expression of emotion may be necessary but not sufficient for cognitive re-appraisal and change. Donnelly and Murray (1991) in a similar study with undergraduates reported that both writing and psychotherapy resulted in a decrease in negative mood and increase in self-esteem. However, this study showed that the writing group exhibited an increase in negative mood and a decrease in positive mood immediately after the first session, but demonstrated greater overall positive mood than the psychotherapy group after four sessions. These results suggest that

the benefits of writing depend on the number of sessions of writing. In another study, Murray and Segal (1994) instructed one group of undergraduate students to write, and another group to talk into a tape recorder, about one of the most traumatic and upsetting experiences of their life for 20 minutes per day over a four-day period. The results demonstrated that both groups (vocal and writing) reported significant improvement in their feelings about themselves and an increase in positive cognitive changes.

These studies reveal that both psychotherapy and written expression of emotions could be beneficial. However, it appears that traumatic writing may increase negative mood immediately, but prove beneficial if pursued for several sessions.

Writing as therapy: possible mechanisms

Although the exact mechanism by which expressive writing affects health is not yet clear, many possible explanations have been propounded. Pennebaker (1985) posited that the inhibition of emotions related to negative or traumatic experiences may cause heightened autonomic arousal and obsessive thinking about the event. In the long run, such inhibition may cause various psycho-somatic illnesses due to the cumulative effect of stress or emotional burden. On the other hand, disclosure (talking or writing) reduces the stress of inhibition and increases overall well-being. Pennebaker (1985) suggests that we want to share our traumatic experiences with others, expecting social support. However, sharing experiences with others could be detrimental to self-esteem in the case of negative or inappropriate responses from others. In contrast, expression or disclosure through writing does not carry the risk of social rejection and so should gradually lower the stress, emotional burden and risk of psycho-somatic illnesses (Pennebaker, 1993).

The benefits of expressive writing were also explained in terms of cognitive processing. Expressive writing converts emotions and images into words and consequently changes the thinking about and perception of emotional experience. Ehlers, Hackmann and Michael (2004) in their cognitive theory of trauma processing suggested that re-experiencing and verbalising thoughts and memories related to trauma may lead to elaboration and integration of traumatic experience into the conscious autobiographical memory. Inhibitions and unpleasant intrusions may decrease or cease as a result. Expressive writing helps in the organisation of traumatic memory and the development of integrated schemas about the self, other and the world (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992). It helps in the development of coherent narratives of emotional experience over time. Coherent narrative is an indicator of increased cognitive processing and better integration of the

upsetting experience. Several empirical investigations are finding support for this idea. Smyth and colleagues (1999) in an indirect test instructed the participants to write about a traumatic experience in either an organised or an unstructured way. The results showed that only organised writing resulted in improvement in health and mood. Several investigations have consistently shown that use of more positive emotion words, a moderate number of negative emotion words, and words indicating increased cognitive processing (such as 'understand' and 'realise') are associated with improvements in health (Pennebaker, 1997; Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Klein & Boals, 2001).

So it seems that expressive writing has a positive impact on health by alleviating emotional inhibitions and stress from the psychosomatic system. It also provides opportunities for better integration of emotional experience into the memory, and consequently assists in the development of adaptive schemas related to self, others and the world.

Conclusions and future directions

As reviewed above, expressive writing about traumatic experiences shows potential benefits for physical as well as psychological health. Although the mechanisms through which expressive writing affects health are complex and still far from clear, the evidence suggests that it decreases emotional inhibitions and cumulative stress. It also helps in the integration of upsetting experience into the memory, and consequently in development of adaptive schemas related to self, others and the world. The implication of this research is that expressive writing could provide a simple and cost-effective therapeutic intervention method for general as well as clinical populations. It could also be used as an adjunct to other psychotherapy, especially for clinical populations (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). Expressive writing provides opportunities to express emotions without the risk of negative responses from others, which offers added advantage over speaking about deeper emotional experiences to others. Writing provides a medium through which one can honestly purge emotions without distortions. Most of the research found that writing about traumatic or upsetting events for a minimum of 15 minutes a day for at least three or four consecutive days shows beneficial effects. Some studies also suggest that traumatic writing may increase negative mood immediately, but does not appear to pose any long-term risk and proves beneficial if pursued for a few sessions. Empirical evidences also indicates that more structured approaches to expressive writing and use of more cognitive and emotional aspects of experience are helpful (Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999).

Although research in expressive writing is growing very fast, many questions are still far from clear. The underlying mechanisms between expressive writing and health are still elusive and needs attention. Although several explanations of the health benefits of expressive writing have been propounded, they are based mainly on theoretical understanding rather than empirical data. The effects of expressive writing on social life and the role of individual differences (such as personality traits) on health outcomes could be other pertinent areas for future investigations. The possibility of post-traumatic growth or thriving as a result of expressive writing could be an interesting area for future investigation. A growing body of research suggest that, as well as experiencing negative symptoms of post-traumatic stress, many victims report positive changes after facing the trauma. These positive psychological changes, experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances, are termed post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). For most trauma survivors, post-traumatic growth and distress co-exist, and the growth emerges from the struggle with coping, not from the trauma itself. This growth is reflected in personality development and psychological well-being. It is possible that expressive writing can facilitate the post-traumatic growth or thriving process.

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