

# Trauma & Writing

Harvard Health

Writing is no stranger to therapy. For years, practitioners have used logs, questionnaires, journals and other writing forms to help people heal from stresses and traumas.

Researchers are only beginning to get at how and why writing may benefit the psyche, and why some people appear to benefit more than others. There is emerging agreement, however, that the key to writing's effectiveness is in the way people use it to interpret their experiences, right down to the words they choose.

When researchers first started studying expressive writing, the prevailing theory was that it might help people overcome emotional inhibition. According to this theory, people who had suppressed a traumatic memory might learn to move beyond the experience once they expressed their emotions about it. But it's not quite that simple. Instead, multiple mechanisms may underlie the benefits of expressive writing.

The act of thinking about an experience, as well as expressing emotions, seems to be important. In this way, writing helps people to organize thoughts and give meaning to a traumatic experience.

Or the process of writing may enable them to learn to better regulate their emotions. It's also possible that writing about something fosters an intellectual process—the act of constructing a story about a traumatic event—that helps someone break free of the endless mental cycling more typical of brooding or rumination.

Finally, when people open up privately about a traumatic event, they are more likely to talk with others about it—suggesting that writing leads indirectly to reaching out for social support that can aid healing.

Timing also matters. A few studies have found that people who write about a traumatic event immediately after it occurs may actually feel worse after expressive writing, possibly because they are not yet ready to face it. Patients should wait at least one or two months after a traumatic event before trying this technique.

Even with these caveats, however, expressive writing is such an easy, low-cost technique—much like taking a good brisk walk—that it may be worth trying.