

Disclosure Writing with the Use of Manipulating Writing Instructions: A Disclosure Writing Study

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that writing about traumatic life events has both physical and psychological long term benefits. James Pennebaker and his colleagues (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) suggested that both negative and positive disclosure writing instructions could be useful in understanding positive life events, not only the negative life events. The purpose of this study is to experimentally investigate the order in which participants write about their positive or negative perspectives of life events through an expressive writing paradigm and manipulate the order of instructions that includes negative-only expression, negative to positive expression, positive negative expression, and neutral writing expression. It is hypothesized that writing about negative events then positive events could allow for a greater increase in positive affect, in contrast to writing about strictly negative events or strictly positive events. Once individuals have written about a negative topic then a positive topic, it could help make individuals gain an understanding about a negative event and view positive events with great meaning, without allowing for rumination and negative mood. Undergraduate students were instructed to complete a writing task for fifteen minutes for two days. Follow up evaluations were administered two weeks after the second writing task, asking participants to rate their meaning in life, their health and wellbeing, and positive and negative effectiveness (PANAS). This experiment could determine that the order in which participants write could change the writing paradigm from the completely separating life experiences into strictly negative expression and strictly positive expression. In conclusion, results showed that writing about negative and positive events created further benefits of writing allowing individuals to put negative events in perspective while focusing on the presence of positive life events.

Keywords- disclosure writing, wellbeing, positive and negative affect, trauma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Unforeseen disturbances in life can greatly influence an individual's social, physiological, and psychological reality. A main goal in the field of psychology is to understand and develop ways in which to lessen the impact of those traumatic experiences that are detrimental to an individual. Currently, there is a large body of research that supports the idea that writing about particularly traumatic life experiences can have a positive effect on well-being. They found that writing about trauma results in immediate increased negative mood, but long term positive emotional enhancement (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser,

& Glaser, 1988; Donnelly & Murray, 1991). Also, researchers found that when individuals disclose their thoughts and feelings about a traumatic life event through writing, it is beneficial to their health (Greenberg & Stone, 1992; King, 2001; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker, 1997, 2000; Smyth, 1998) and may enhance positive self-perception, resulting in a stronger self-concept (King, 2001; Pennebaker & Keough, 1999).

Creating a meaningful life narrative and expressing ourselves in writing oftentimes helps us gain knowledge about our present, past, and future selves. Writing about traumatic events often causes the opposite to happen when disclosing oneself in writing (Horowitz,

1986). It can result in ruminative cognitive effort and cause a contrast of the perception we have of ourselves (Janoff-Bulman, 1997). Because of these reasons, writing about traumatic events could interfere with the rationality of an individual's story and can damage their positive view in which they see themselves (Resick, 1993). King (2001) suggested that in contrast to disclosing about negative events in writing, writing about one's life goals or something more positive could establish catharsis, thus creating a level of insight, clarification, and understanding of personal emotions which may organize an individual's priorities, which may assist physical wellbeing and improvements in psychological functioning (Pennebaker 1997).

Disclosure writing can repair the damaged perception of one's life events and result in a stronger perception of one's life, by facilitating insight of a particular traumatic event and providing understanding of those life events (Pennebaker et al., 1997). Many researchers suggest that disclosing traumatic events nurtures positive beliefs about oneself because it enhances self-regulation, self-empathy, gain insight and feelings of control (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996; King, 2001). Coming to an understanding about traumatic events may additionally give new strength to personal growth, while enhancing the realization that change is a vital part of healthy living (King & Miner, 2000).

Research findings suggested that subjects exposed to expressive writing improved their emotional well-being and physical health, however, there is great debate amongst those research findings as to whether the expressive writing paradigm with positive, neutral and negative expressions have an impactful effect on moods. When subjects were asked to write about traumatic and stressful events (Pennebaker & Beall 1986) explored the positive benefits of written negative disclosure and found that those participants who wrote about their deepest thoughts and emotions of negative events, had significantly greater positive effects on their health. This research was further investigated by researchers (King & Miner 2000) who found that writing about a traumatic experience enabled participants to get the events off their chest and bring about any traumatic experiences that were not previously disclosed, an opportunity to have a better outlook on the situation and provide closure through written disclosure.

In a previous research study, participants who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings reported significant benefits in both objectively assessed and self-reported physical health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Although there is a great amount of research on the effects of expressive writing on physical health, there is not much research done on the benefits of expressive writing on the psychological and emotional health aspects. Research has focused greatly on the effects of writing about negative experiences but not so much on the processing of positive experiences.

The purpose of this study was to experimentally investigate the positive and negative perspectives of life events through the expressive writing paradigm and manipulate the order of instructions that includes negative-only expression, negative to positive expression, positive negative expression, and neutral writing expression. It was hypothesized that negative to positive disclosure writing instructions could allow for a greater increase in positive affect, in contrast to those participating in the negative only or positive to negative disclosure writing tasks. Once individuals have written about a negative topic then a positive topic, it could help make individuals gain an understanding about a negative event and view positive events having great meaning without allowing for rumination and negative mood. Undergraduate students were instructed to complete a writing task for fifteen minutes for two days. Follow up evaluations were administered two weeks after the second writing task, asking participants to rate their meaning in life, their health and wellbeing, and positive affect and negative affect schedule (PANAS). This experiment could determine that the order in which participants write could change the writing paradigm from the completely separating life experiences into strictly negative expression and strictly positive expression.

II. METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants are 64 undergraduate Psychology students from The University of Southern Mississippi completing the study, voluntarily for extra- credit experimental points.

Procedure

Data was collected from participants online. After the completion of the informed consent document, participants were assigned randomly to groups through Qualtrics software program, (positive-negative, positive-positive, positive-neutral, neutral-negative, neutral-positive, neutral-neutral, negative-negative, negative-positive, and negative-neutral) and asked to complete two writing tasks over two days for 15 minutes. They were emailed to return to complete the second day's writing task.

After the participants completed a writing task, they were to complete a post-test with demographic questions contrived from PANAS (Watson et al. 1985), College Activities and Behaviors Questionnaire (CABQ) (Pennebaker 1990) to test for wellbeing and meaning of life-Meaning of Life Questionnaire (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). A follow-up questionnaire two weeks later was given to the participants to rate their well-being (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), the meaning of life, and positive and negative effects.

Participants in the negative (only) written disclosure condition received the following instructions:

"For the next 15 minutes, you are asked to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. All of your writing will be completely confidential; only researchers will have access to your writing. Don't worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up." You will be awarded 1 credit after completion of today's task. You will receive an email for Day 2's task tomorrow. You must return to complete that day's task to receive 1 credit.

Participants in the positive to negative written disclosure condition received the following instructions "to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most intensely positive experience of your entire life or an extremely important positive issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now."

Participants in the negative to positive written disclosure condition received manipulated instructions of writing from negative to positive.

"For the next 15 minutes, you are asked to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now.

Finally, those in the neutral control condition were asked to write these instructions:

"For the next 15 minutes, you are to write about your plans for the day in as much detail as possible (Pennebaker et al., 1996). In your writing, we'd like you to be as objective as possible, by concentrating on the facts and details of how you spend your time. We are not interested in your emotions or opinions; rather we want you to try to be completely objective. Feel free to be as detailed as possible."

The remainder of the test consisted of a post-test PANAS and demographic questions. Once completed, participants were debriefed and provided with experimenter contact details should they require further information regarding the experiment. Follow up

evaluations will be administered one month after the second writing task, asking participants to rate optimism, coping ability, and positive and negative effectiveness. These experiments will allow me to test my hypothesis that the order of disclosure writing instructions plays an important role in the effect of writing about emotional experiences, both positive and negative.

III. RESULTS

Prior to running the statistical analyses all data were screened with very little limitations present in the data set, to be discussed in the discussion portion. The difference scores of positive affect, negative affect, meaning in life were calculated by subtracting the day 2 from the week 2 positive PANAS score. Found that writing about a positive experience will result in a greater increase in positive affect and meaning in life. An ANOVA with three levels (3x3) of the independent variable (positive, neutral, or negative written disclosure task) was performed to test the impact of the written tasks on change in positive affect to negative, positive to positive, and neutral to positive scores. 3 (Day 1 writing: positive, neutral, or negative) x 3 (Day 2 writing: positive, neutral, or negative) analysis of variance. The only significant effect was on the main effect of Day 2 writing. Those who wrote about positive events found meaning in life more than those who wrote neutral or negative events, $F(2, 40) = 9.73, p < .001$. A two-way interaction of Day 1 and Day 2 writing on meaning in life was marginally significant, $F(2, 40) = 2.30, p = .075$. Figure 1: This graph depicts the significance of the presence of meaning of life on Day 2.

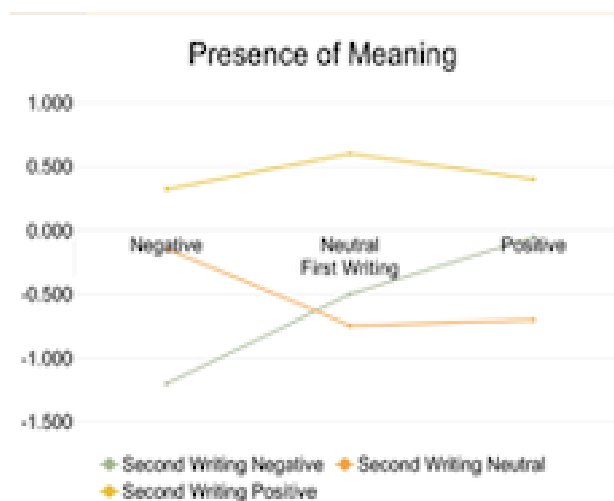


Figure 1: This graph depicts the significance of the presence of meaning of life on Day 2.

Participants in the positive written disclosure condition on Day 2 experienced an increase in positive affect following the task, compared to those in the neutral and negative conditions.



Figure 2: This graph depicts the positive effect of life when writing negative to positive in follow-up study.

I cleaned up the data here by running a statistical analysis again when including more time for the participants to participate. One of the main problems I had when running the analysis was that my sample size was too small. The deadline quickly approached for the students to participate and they were only able to participate in the first part of the study, not the follow-up study, thus skewing my results. Participants who wrote about a positive life experience elicited a positive meaning in life from the experience, compared to those who wrote about a negative experience, or the day's events, however a small sample size did not allow for very accurate results.

IV. DISCUSSION

Some studies focused strictly on negative disclosure tasks which are clearly beneficial as discovered by (Smyth et al., 2008). In this present study, it focuses on negative, positive, and neutral conditions, not just strictly negative and strictly positive. The current study supported the findings of (Burton & King 2004) who researched a similar research study with the exception of a control condition being assessed. The writing paradigm in this current study is different from previous research studies by Burton and King (2004) and Pennebaker (1998), because it focuses on both positive and negative events, not strictly positive or strictly negative.

The current study found that the main effect of Day 2 writing on meaning in life. It seems that completing the writing task with positive events enhances the presence of meaning in life because data shows greater significance than writing about neutral or negative events. Completing the writing positively influenced a cognitive aspect of well-being by enhancing meaning from the actual experience, compared to those who wrote about a negative experience, or the day's events. This could be because they come to terms with what happened and have a better understanding of the

situation in their life. The hypothesis in my study could have resulted differently had there been a larger sample size, however, the current study is still ongoing data collection and has shifted from disclosure writing to adding a virtual reality storytelling component. New data will be added to my new theory. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of writing about both happy and negative life experiences on one's mood and healing process. As a researcher, I have always relied on writing and the media to help me get through life's challenges. We have instant access to media in our modern environment. I intended to further merge my interests in neuropsychology, trauma, and media after completion of this current study.

V. CONCLUSION

This chapter's objective is to offer a comprehensive review of the expressive writing paradigm. Since its introduction in the 1980s, number of researchers have investigated its effectiveness's factors and limits. The realization that its worth cannot be described by a single cause or hypothesis has perhaps been the most intriguing development. Ultimately, expressive writing produces a cascade of impacts. An increase in physical health is one of the chapter's most significant outcomes. This review supports the therapeutic and preventative applications of writing and argues that writing about distressing situations may enhance mental and physical health. In addition, empirical data shows that these results may have been mediated by alterations in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. It has been shown that writing about the feelings and information surrounding a distressing experience increases short-term negative emotions and decreases pleasant emotions.

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