

Expressive Writing for Resilience: Writing to Heal

Expressive writing (EW) – “writing only for one’s self” – is a *low-cost, accessible therapeutic intervention* that uses writing about a traumatic, stressful, or emotional event to improve both emotional and psychological health.

proven to ↓ lead to

- Reduction in physical symptoms of cancer
- Decrease in pain, heart rate, blood pressure
- Better sleep, higher daytime functioning
- Higher white blood cell counts
- Improved mood/performance on various tasks



OUR QUESTION

Can EW be a meaningful exercise for our college-aged peers?



An EW participant completes an exercise at Duke’s Student Wellness Center.

OUR APPROACH

32 participants engaged in the most common form of EW (**Pennebaker Paradigm**) through mixed methodologies and filled out post-writing reflections (**PWRs**) after completing **4 prompts**. After each writing prompt, every participant answered the question

To what degree was this writing valuable and meaningful for you?

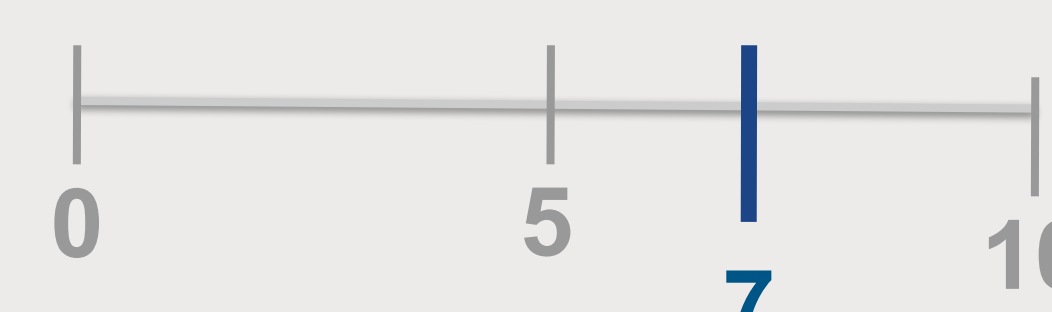
on a **scale of 1 to 10** and briefly described how their writing went.

We then determined the **median meaningfulness values**, by prompt, for all participants and extracted themes/quotes from participants’ brief descriptions.

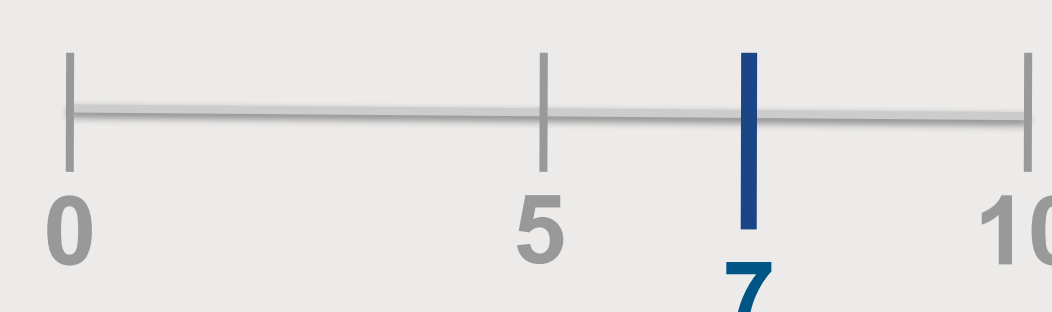
1. Write about a traumatic event for 10-20 minutes.



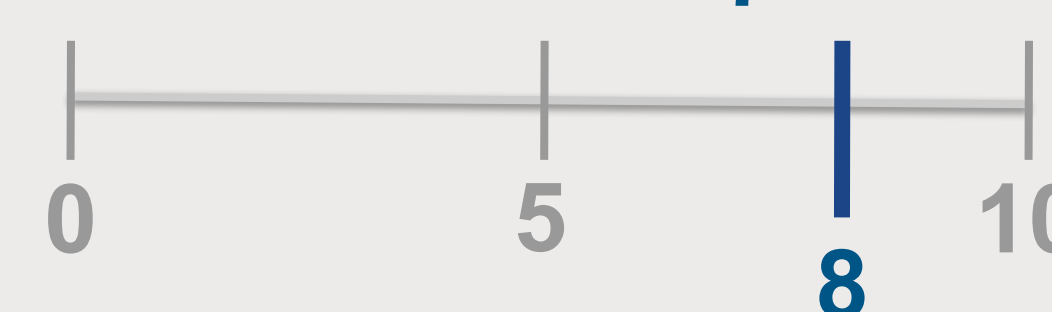
2. Spend another 10-20 minutes writing about the same event.



3. Write about the event from a different perspective.



4. Wrap up your writing about this event in a meaningful story.



SELECT QUOTES

“[The writing] felt like a reflective experience that made me consider the experience’s impact on the rest of my life.” -Anonymous

“[It gave me] acceptance of who I was and [a] realization that it doesn’t have to be who I will become. Unbroken. Defiant. Resolute.” -Anonymous

“[EW was] a helpful way to slow down and reflect — to think through the experience and figure out some of the underlying stressors that are still present from the experience.” -Anonymous

THEMES THAT EMERGED

self-
reflection

vulnerability

forgiveness

finding hope
and peace

letting go,
moving on,
release

WHAT WE FOUND

- Intervention was valuable (medians all > 5/10). **Suggests EW may be meaningful to clinical populations – like pediatric cancer survivors and their caregivers.**
- Constructing a meaningful story was the *most* valuable exercise for participants (8/10).
- Exercises allowed participants to express thoughts/feelings they may never have shared with anyone before.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

- Optimize an EW intervention for use with adult pediatric cancer survivors and their caregivers in **Summer 2019**
- Expand awareness of EW at Duke
- Suggest an EW curriculum on the value of mindfulness in healthcare for pre-med undergrads

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Contact Ray Barfield at raymond.barfield@duke.edu and/or John Evans at jfevans77@gmail.com.

References & Acknowledgements

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