

HEALING WITH FOCUSED EXPRESSIVE WRITING (FEW)

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Dr. James W. Pennebaker, J. W. Beall, and colleagues began studies in the 1980s in the field of personal disclosure to test if there were any positive effects of journaling on chronically ill patients. Journaling is a cathartic exercise that helps individuals sort out their feelings and bring repressed emotions to the surface where they can be addressed. It has long been held in the mental health field that people with “massive life stressors” exhibit a variety of health issues. Pennebaker wanted to know if Focused Expressive Writing (FEW) could lessen the number of complaints.

Suppressed thoughts don't disappear, but gets buried in the subconscious mind using energy that the individual needs for daily living. Through research, Pennebaker discovered that a significant percentage of individuals, who expressed their feelings through journaling, experienced a sense of well-being and became more energetic. Once the negative emotions were released, the body was freed from chronic activity or hyperarousal and the patient started to feel better. FEW is one of the most effective ways to address negative emotions that are buried in the subconscious mind (Symonds, 1954).

In instances of chronic illness, such as diabetes or leukemia, stress levels become overwhelming producing extreme physiological and emotional distress. Not wanting to discuss their condition with loved ones, patients engage in massive suppression, which makes them sicker.

Because family and friends have their own pain, it can be difficult for the patients to discuss their illness with them. Focused Expressive Writing (FEW) or journaling is a proven way to help patients get free of internal stress by writing their personal narrative without burdening those they love.

The FEW exercise is as follows

For 20 minutes, the patient writes nonstop. This is done for 3 - 4 consecutive days. The individual must write about the most stressful or traumatic event that they can remember. The assignment is to be taken seriously and written in detail without regard for grammar or spelling. If the patient runs out of things to say before the 20 minutes expires, s/he must continue writing some portion of the narrative in more detail.

The content should be written as a narrative or story, rather than as a list of complaint(s).

Next, the individual needs to integrate the story into life experience and then look for something good that came from it, such as, wisdom, courage, survival skills or compassion for others, i.e., they must find some meaning from their pain.

Individuals who wish to improve their psychological or physical well-being can benefit from Focused Effective Writing (FEW). It is a therapeutic exercise whereby they are allowed to write about anything they wish without fear of judgment, since no one reads the narrative other than the patient.

When Pennebaker explored the benefits of FEW on healthy university students, he found that those who completed the writing exercise got a boost in their immune system and an increase in t-helper lymphocytes, an indication that FEW benefits even hale and hearty college kids. In 1998, Smyth found that FEW participants had a 23% improvement in mental health, reported visiting their doctor less, with a subsequent decrease in illness. Since journaling benefits the healthy, Smyth wondered if it would help the sick.

The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) published the results of Smyth's study, "Effects of Writing about Stressful Experiences" in 1999. It was the first clinical study that demonstrated that journal writing was medically beneficial to chronically ill patients.

From October 1996 – December 1997, a study was conducted to find out if journaling about stressful events had a positive impact on chronically ill Rheumatoid and Arthritic patients. There was a Board-Certified Rheumatologist to monitor rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) participants and specialists from the American Thoracic Society were present to monitor asthma patients. Each had a set of guidelines to monitor progress.

Patients who took part in the Focus Expressive Writing (FEW) exercises received a 23% boost in their mental health, reported going to the doctor less often and reported having less pain and decreased suffering.

Before conducting their experiments, the arthritis and thoracic specialist each had a theory. The first hypothesis was that after four months, participants with Rheumatoid Arthritis and those with Asthma should have a reduction in symptoms; and the second hypothesis was that the improvements could be clinically measured. Both hypotheses were overwhelmingly positive.

Smyth wrote an article titled the *Effects of Writing about Stressful Experiences*, there were 32 participants with a medical history of Rheumatoid Arthritis and 39 with Asthma who took part in the study. All participants were nearly equal in age, income, number of children, sex and employment status. After the initial Focused Writing (FEW) test for Asthma participants, there was a 63.9% increase in lung capacity. After four months of journaling, the increase was even greater at 76.3%.

However, the control group showed no change. In addition, results for the participants with Arthritis were slower to detect and only showed up after four months of journaling; whereas, participants with asthma displayed a positive upshot after just two weeks.

Conclusion

Although this is good news, there is still much research needed. First, in both groups, RA and Asthma, half of the patients were unaffected by the journaling exercises. Secondly, how does focused writing work? Is there a connection between the brain and writing that promotes catharsis or was something else at work? How did writing promote a 63.9% increase in lung capacity? In addition, some participants felt much pain when they first began to write, but it decreased, why?

Many do benefit from journaling for instance, a severely depressed woman named Mary, had been seeing a therapist for a number of years without any improvement in her condition. She tried FEW and almost immediately began to show significant improvement in sleep patterns and mood. She'd also been out of work for some time, unable to keep a job because of her severe depression. After six weeks of focused journaling, she was much improved and started looking for work and before long she found a job and was able to continue working because she'd gained a more positive outlook on life.

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