Expressive Writing for Resilience: Writing to Heal

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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.

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**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.

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**THEMES THAT EMERGED**

- self-reflection
- vulnerability
- forgiveness
- finding hope and peace
- letting go, moving on, release

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**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.

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**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

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**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

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**OUR QUESTION**

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

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**References & Acknowledgements**


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**WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

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

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