

Expressive Writing

Four consecutive days of writing your deepest thoughts and feelings about something hard.



15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate

1 Why you should try it

Most of us have gone through times of great stress and emotional upheaval. This exercise gives you a simple, effective way to deal with these challenges and the difficult feelings they bring up. Research suggests that completing this exercise can increase happiness, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, strengthen the immune system, and improve work and school performance. These benefits have been shown to persist for months.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. Exactly as designed: **four consecutive days** (that's your 4 sessions). Optional day 5: write from the perspectives of the other people involved.

2'

12'

1'

2 Set up

MIN

Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed. Choose an emotional challenge that has been affecting your life — something extremely personal and important to you, but something you can handle now (don't write about a trauma too soon after it happened if it feels overwhelming). Keep the same topic across the four days.

12 Write your deepest thoughts and feelings

MIN

Write continuously about your deepest emotions and thoughts about this challenge. Really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write only for yourself; don't worry about spelling or grammar; don't stop to reread.

1 Close the notebook

MIN

Stop when the timer goes. Don't reread today. Note the date and time and how you feel in one word — that's the seed of your journal entry.

Take care. This practice can stir up strong feelings for a day or two — that's expected, and it's why the topic should be one you can handle now. If it becomes overwhelming, stop and reach out: Counseling and Wellness Center, 718.940.5853, bkwellness@sjny.edu.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** Day by day: did the writing get easier, harder, or different in kind? Did the story start to organize itself?
- **Prompt:** Pennebaker's claim is that turning a mess into a story makes it manageable. True for you?

4 Evidence that it works

Pennebaker, J. W., Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., & Glaser, R. (1988)

Compared with a control group that wrote about superficial topics, participants who wrote about traumatic experiences for four consecutive days reported greater happiness three months later, visited the doctor less than usual during a six-week period following the writing exercise, and seemed to have a healthier immune system.

5 Why it works

When we experience a stressful event or major life transition, it's easy to ruminate over that experience; thinking about it can keep us up at night, distract us from work, and make us feel less connected to others. Expressive writing allows us to step back for a moment and evaluate our lives. Through writing, we can become active creators of our own life stories — rather than passive bystanders — and as a result feel more empowered to cope with challenges. Transforming a messy, complicated experience into a coherent story can make the experience feel more manageable.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Pennebaker, J. W., Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., & Glaser, R. (1988). Disclosure of traumas and immune function: Health implications for psychotherapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 56(2), 239–245. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.56.2.239>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/expressive_writing. Practice sources: James Pennebaker, Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.