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Resources

Expressive writing can be a valuable tool for helping people deal with traumas and emotional upheavals. However, although many people receive great benefit from writing, others don't. If, after trying expressive writing, you feel as though you haven't gained any benefits at all, or if you still need help in coping with your experience, please seek the professional advice of a physician, psychologist, or counselor.

Depression and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Traumas have the potential to set off a cascade of biological changes that result in a host of mental and physical problems. If you are deeply depressed or disoriented because of a traumatic experience, writing should not be your first course of action. In such a state, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to put the many pieces of your horrible experience together. It is also likely that your judgment of the experience may have been impaired.

Major Depression

In the days immediately following a shattering experience, most of us feel sad, upset, and really down in the dumps. However, if you have been extremely depressed for several weeks, and your experience of depression includes crying, overwhelming feelings of sadness or emptiness, and a striking loss of energy, you may be experiencing a major depressive disorder. Other symptoms can include a loss of interest in pleasure, loss of appetite, insomnia, inability to

concentrate, and even recurrent thoughts about death. Many people with this disorder have trouble even getting out of bed in the morning.

If you feel as though you may be suffering from major depression, seek professional help. There are a number of promising treatments including medication. Indeed, there have been some impressive advances in drug treatment over the last fifty years. Medications can offer a relatively fast way to diminish the effects of some of the most devastating moods of a trauma. Once some of these symptoms have lifted, expressive writing and other treatments can be far more effective.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Only since the 1980s have the medical and psychological communities begun to appreciate how life-threatening traumas can produce their own sets of problems. Posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, occasionally surfaces in the days and weeks after an extreme trauma in which the person directly witnessed or experienced a life-threatening event. Car accidents, rape, robbery, and kidnapping frequently result in PTSD-related symptoms. In the weeks after the event, people with PTSD will often have vivid memories or dreams of the event. They report feeling extremely anxious much of the time, often accompanied by a sense of dread, which causes them to start avoiding any reminders of the trauma. Other symptoms often seen with depression may appear.

PTSD can be debilitating both emotionally and socially. As with major depression, PTSD is generally treatable in several ways. Both medication and psychotherapy are recommended. Once the most severe symptoms are in check, expressive writing may be particularly beneficial.

Where to Find Help

If you feel that you need help in some way, consider contacting any of the following people or agencies. Every moderately large city has a number of groups or centers that can help you.

Immediate, life-threatening help. If you are suicidal, feel as though you are a danger to yourself or others, or feel as though you are truly falling apart, call 911.

In crisis, need to talk to someone by phone. In most areas, there are telephone crisis counselors. These are generally indexed under names such as Crisis Hotline, Community Mental Health Services, sometimes Victim Services. If your distress is the result of a specific type of trauma, there is likely to be an organization with a toll-free number to call. Some current groups include the following:

<i>Agency</i>	<i>Trauma specialty</i>	<i>Phone Number</i>
American Red Cross	Natural disasters, fires, chemical spills, community-wide disasters	866-438-4636
Depression Hotline	Depression and depressive feelings	800-826-3632
National Domestic Violence Hotline	Spouse abuse, child abuse, other forms of family violence	800-799-7233
National Organization for Victim Assistance	Victims and witnesses of crimes	800-879-6682
Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network	Sexual abuse	800-656-4673
Suicide Awareness: Voices of Education	Suicide crisis and education	800-784-2433

If you have access to a computer, there are literally dozens of crisis groups available to get more information. Many of these groups can provide you with someone to talk to about your problems. Use any search engine, and simply enter the type of crisis you are dealing with, for example, “cancer diagnosis,” or “depression.”

Need to see a physician or therapist. If you are experiencing a severe depression or symptoms of PTSD, see your physician or a psychiatrist, especially if you are open to taking medication. If you do not have a regular physician, consult the yellow pages or call your local physician referral network. If you would prefer to discuss your issues with someone, a psychologist or another licensed mental health specialist is recommended.

Additional Readings for a General Audience

There are a number of excellent books available that can supplement many of the ideas discussed in this workbook. Some that I particularly recommend include the following:

Abercrombie, B. 2002. *Writing Out the Storm: Reading and Writing Your Way Through Serious Illness or Injury*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Adams, K. 1994. *Mightier Than the Sword*. New York: Warner Books.

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Rosenthal, N. R. 2002. *The Emotional Revolution: How the New Science of Feeling Can Transform Your Life*. New York: Citadel Press.

Sapolsky, R. M. 1998. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (revised edition). New York: Freeman.

Seligman, M. E. P. 2002. *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.

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The expressive writing research has been based on hundreds of studies. The articles listed below were either cited in the book or are directly relevant to the expressive writing literature. To get a more comprehensive list of related research, go to my web page: www.psy.utexas.edu/Pennebaker.

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Depressed and Anxious, Item 3635 \$19.95
Is He Depressed or What?, Item 4240 \$15.95
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The OCD Workbook, Item 4224 \$19.95
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The Interpersonal Solution to Depression, Item 4186 \$19.95
Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life, Item 4259 \$19.95
Dialectical Behavior Therapy in Private Practice, Item 4208 \$54.95
The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook, 4th edition, Item 4135 \$19.95
Loving Someone with OCD, Item 3295 \$15.95
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