



# INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE PRACTITIONER

It was the early 1980's that professor James Pennebaker stumbled on a finding that prompted him to explore further. People who reported having a highly traumatic experience and who kept the experience a secret showed far more health problems than people who openly talked about their trauma.

His research also showed that, compared to people who were told to write about non-emotional topics, those who wrote about trauma showed improved physical health.

*"[...] emotional writing boosted immune function, brought about drops in blood pressure, and reduced feelings of depression and elevated daily moods." (The Secret Life of Pronouns, 2011)*

Your help as a practitioner can be hugely beneficial to your client. When reading or listening to your client's writing, try to discover in what way the client is expressing their emotions. Are there any signs of emotions being talked over too quickly or being suppressed? Is there repetition in their choice of vocabulary?

If clients are using a high number of what is referred to as 'negative emotion words' in their writing, this is not only a sign that something is wrong but also a sign that it may be time for you as a therapist to intervene.

Pennebaker found that the more people used positive emotions while writing about emotional upheavals, the more their physical and mental health improved in weeks and months after the experiment.

Pennebaker's research also concluded that people whose health improved the most from writing used only a moderate number of negative emotion words.

*"People who expressed negative emotion language at very high rates did not benefit from writing - almost as if they were awash in their unhappiness." (The Secret Life of Pronouns, 2011)*



This means as a helping professional it is your job to make sure that a client uses a healthy mix of positive and negative emotional words to express themselves.

You can do this by asking your client to describe:

- The situation from both a positive and negative point of view.
- Both the positive and negative emotions they experienced.
- What good things a certain negative experience led to later in life.

Note that it's not about stimulating your client to be overly positive or negative in a forced way. Rather, it's about helping your client to use a healthy mix of positive and negative emotional words when expressing themselves, correcting the imbalance between the two.

To summarise, when discussing your client's writing with them, try to discover:

- The reason why they are sharing these particular emotional experiences.
- What kind of adjustment the client is showing in their writing.
- Whether they are using a healthy balance between positive and negative emotional words to express themselves.

## **START WITH YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

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You can start by telling your client that - as with the rest of the therapy - nothing they share in writing will be read by anyone without their consent, including you.

Let your client decide whether they want you to:

- Read all of their writing.
- Read only what they feel comfortable sharing with you.
- Don't read any of their writing.
- You can also ask your client to read aloud what they feel like sharing. This way you can gauge their response, hear their tone and see their emotions.



## EXPLAIN THE GOAL OF THESE WRITING EXERCISES

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Make it clear what the goal of the writing exercise is before the client starts. This should prevent frustration and strengthen the client's resolve to follow through.

The client should not be concerned with anything else except writing a certain amount of words for a certain amount of time. We have found this approach works best with writing exercises.

Instruct your client not to be concerned about:

- Spelling or grammar
- Word use (all curse words allowed)
- Consistency
- Sticking to a topic
- Whether their writing is "any good"
- Anyone else but you reading their writing
- Succeeding or failing
- Writing too much

Know that your client often carries not just their problems within them, but also the solutions. Writing is a way to extract both the problems and the solutions. As a helping professional, you facilitate and guide them through this process.

It is why it's recommended that you, the practitioner, have done these writing exercises yourself before giving them to a client. Insight is key!