

## Dealing with Guilt Through Writing

### Coping

 Intervention

 20 min

 Client

 Yes

Pennebaker and Beall (1986) developed expressive writing as a coping exercise for people who have experienced a traumatic experience. It involves writing about one's thoughts and feelings concerning the stressful event. It is suggested that confronting a stressful or traumatic event through expressive writing helps people categorize the experience into a meaningful framework that serves a cathartic function. According to Pennebaker and Beall (1986), to not talk about or otherwise confront major stressors in one's life places cumulative stress on the body and subsequently increases the chance of stress-related diseases. A large body of research supports the use of expressive writing for psychological and physical health (see Frattaroli, 2006, for a review).

Guilt is an emotion that often accompanies traumatic or stressful events. Take, for example, a fatal car accident, where a speeding driver hits and kills a pedestrian. This driver will undoubtedly feel immense guilt as a result. Other less severe but stressful examples include infidelity, bankruptcy, or job loss. Such experiences would undoubtedly lead the 'wrongdoer' to develop feelings of guilt.

Expressive writing may help people who are experiencing cope with feelings of guilt in response to a traumatic or stressful life event. A typical expressive writing intervention consists of 4 sessions of 20 minutes each during which clients write continuously about their thoughts and feelings. This tool adapts the typical expressive writing method by including structured questions to help clients conceptualize the situation (including their thoughts and feelings regarding the situation), explore an alternative, preferable ending to the situation, and then identify lessons learned from the exercise. This intervention tool is designed to be completed on three separate days/occasions.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts Ph.D and Lucinda Poole Psy.D.



### Goal

The goal of this tool is to help people confront feelings of guilt that are tied to a traumatic or stressful life event.



## Advice

- Clients should be aware that the benefits of expressive writing emerge over time. Expressive writing is not a quick fix. Directly after expressing, participants typically report feeling worse and more physiologically aroused.
- Clients should be encouraged to write about the emotional rather than the factual aspects of an emotional event.
- If clients want to share what they wrote, encourage them to talk about it rather than read it. This is especially important in group settings, as talking about their emotions gives them the freedom to alter the story slightly, and thus avoid hurting others' feelings, or to address other issues that may be more relevant in the current context of therapy.
- It is not up to the therapist to decide whether a client should feel guilty about a given situation and, therefore, complete this exercise. Unless clients themselves report feeling strong and/or long-lasting guilt and shame, they should not be encouraged to write about it.
- Encourage clients to take extreme care when storing their writings at home. If found by family members or friends, deeply personal writings can be devastating.
- Be careful that writing does not turn into another form of rumination. If clients have not found the task helpful after three writing occasions, try something else.
- When appropriate, use the Apologizing Effectively exercise in the Toolkit to complement this intervention.



## References

- Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental disclosure and its moderators: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132(6), 823.
- Niles, A. N., Haltom, K. E. B., Mulvenna, C. M., Lieberman, M. D., & Stanton, A. L. (2014). Randomized controlled trial of expressive writing for psychological and physical health: The moderating role of emotional expressivity. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 27(1), 1-17.
- Pennebaker, J.W., & Beall, S.K. (1986). Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95(3), 274-281. doi:10.1037/0021-843X.95.3.274
- Pennebaker, J. W. (2010). Expressive writing in a clinical setting. *The Independent Practitioner*, 30, 23-25.
- Rodriguez, L. M., Young, C. M., Neighbors, C., Campbell, M. T., & Lu, Q. (2015). Evaluating guilt and shame in an expressive writing alcohol intervention. *Alcohol*, 49(5), 491-498.



# Dealing with Guilt Through Writing

## Instructions

Over the next three days, your task is to write about something that makes you feel guilty or ashamed. In your writing, allow yourself to let go completely and explore your very deepest thoughts and emotions.

### Day 1: Reflection

1. What makes you feel guilty?

2. How do you feel right now about this? What feelings and emotions are present?

3. What thoughts show up when you think about this situation?



### Day 2: The preferred choice

In as much detail as possible, write about the beginning of the event (identified on Day 1) as you remember it. Then, add a different, more preferable ending to this story so that the situation would have ended more positively. Consider how you would have ideally liked this scenario to turn out and then allow yourself to go there in your writing.

### Day 3: Lessons learned

How would you summarize the lesson(s) you learned from this experience?

What kind of future behavior would demonstrate that you learned from this lesson?



How will you use the insights that you gained from this exercise in the future?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray background, intended for the user to write their response to the question above.