

5-19-2007

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Expressive Writing and Divorce

by

Leonard J. Prazych

**FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES**

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

May 2007

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Abstract

Anger, sorrow, depression, and feelings of failure are a few of the well-documented negative emotions experienced by many persons going through divorce. As such, a variety of techniques and interventions are needed to support those adjusting to their dramatically changing world and corresponding changes in identity. Research studies have shown that expressive writing has proven to be useful for people adjusting to a variety of physical and emotional upheavals. None, however, have specifically researched or addressed the effects of expressive writing or writing therapy intervention on persons coping with the negative emotions caused by divorce. This Masters Thesis will address the topic and propose a model for an expressive writing intervention program designed for persons coping with divorce.

Introduction

A body of existing research suggests that the act of expressive writing appears to improve the general physical and emotional well-being for many people who use this intervention (Pennebaker, 2004; Lepore & Smith, 2002; Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz & Kaell, 1999; Lepore, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) as a safe, easy, and affordable alternative to drugs, alcohol and expensive psychological treatment plans. Whether used as an intervention or as an adjunct to traditional talk therapies with a trained counselor or as a method of self-guided healing, letter writing, journaling, poetry writing and other exercises have proven helpful to some people in dealing with their physical and emotional pain.

Although writing as a form of healing has been acknowledged for more than a century (e.g., see Lepore, 2002, for review), researching the effects of writing for physical and emotional healing is approximately two decades old. It has, however, been researched extensively, as the following pages will describe. The general consensus among researchers and practitioners is that therapeutic writing holds great promise as an easy, effective, self-driven, and affordable alternative for people suffering from a range of physical and emotional maladies that include asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, high blood pressure, anxiety, phobias, and depression. This paper will briefly explore the history of writing as a method of therapeutic healing as well as review and discuss some of the clinical and non-clinical research on its physical and emotional benefits. It will also explore the cognitive mechanisms that seem to be at work in the writing-to-heel process. Finally, it will attempt to answer the question: can expressive writing help heal the emotional pain of someone coping with divorce?

In addition to presenting a review and discussion of relevant research experiments, this paper will contain the results of a survey given to licensed practitioners who indicate that one of their areas of expertise is treating patients coping with divorce. Finally, it will propose a new model of an expressive writing program with exercises specifically designed to help heal the emotional pains of divorce while providing a pathway to growth.

Operational Definitions

This exploration of expressive writing as a way to heal the emotional wounds of divorce begins with defining the terms that will be used throughout this thesis.

For the purpose of this paper, the term *divorcing* will be used to encompass the time prior to legal divorce, whereas the term *divorced* will mean the time after legal divorce. Without disregarding the range of emotions that arise from every stage of the separation and divorce continuum, the story of how one woman demanded a divorce after finding out about her husband's affair will be treated with the same analytical rigor as the husband who, after being divorced for ten years, can't get over the fact that his wife never really loved him.

Expressive Writing will be considered any form of writing in which the writer's true feelings and emotions are written on paper. This can be done in longhand or on computer. Judgments as to the accuracy and proper use of spelling, language, grammar and syntax will be eliminated. The only criteria will be the level of honesty and the genuineness of what is expressed in writing.

Writing Therapy or *scriptotherapy* is an intervention technique (Riordan, 1996)

that employs a specific methodology of having persons – or patients if the exercises are done under the supervision of a professional therapist – write their feelings, emotions and experiences in an attempt to heal their emotional or physical pain. This may consist of patients writing for twenty minutes about how they feel about something in a therapist's office and then discussing it, or it may be a series of writing exercises done alone at home over a period of hours, days, weeks or months, with or without the help of a therapist.

Writing therapy can be considered a form of *Exposure Therapy*, which is a distinct therapeutic treatment technique that encourages a patient to be repeatedly exposed to elements of a traumatic or stressful experience that may have emotionally or physically crippled them. The goal of the exposure is to eliminate avoidance and encourage habituation to negative emotions.

Trauma is defined as an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial lasting damage to one's psychological development, often leading to neurosis (The American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary, 2007). More specifically, the DSM-IV considers individuals who have been "traumatized" as having experienced an overwhelming emotional reaction, defined as "intense fear, helplessness or horror" when confronted by an extremely stressful experience (APA, 2000).

While it can be argued that divorce and the events that precipitate it can in many cases be considered traumatic, especially for the spouse who did not initiate or desire it, divorce does not medically qualify as a trauma. For the purpose of this thesis, divorce will not be considered a trauma but a *significant stressor*, which is defined in medical terms as a physical or psychological stimulus that can produce mental or physiological reactions that may lead to illness (ibid).

Divorce can be considered a major life stressor but it is not considered trauma in the way that a specific incident such as experiencing a brutal rape or witnessing a fatal accident may be. Soldiers' experiences of the horrors of battle notwithstanding, most traumas can be considered single specific events and those who experience them can be helped with both exposure therapy and its subset, expressive writing therapy. Divorce, on the other hand, can be an ongoing process comprised of a series of emotionally disturbing events or stressors that do not necessarily constitute trauma as the DSM-IV defines it.

Writing to Heal: A Short History

In the 18th century, the physician Benjamin Rush instructed patients to write down their symptoms and discovered that the writing process both reduced tensions in his patients and gave him more information about their problems (McKinney, 1976). Gordon Allport (1942) was one of the first psychologists to outline the therapeutic benefits of writing and some of the earliest references to specific clinical uses of writing are found in Landsman (1951), Messinger (1952), and Farber (1953).

Two decades later, Ira Progoff (1975) popularized journaling as a method of healing and growth (Adams, 2006). Progoff makes the distinction, however, that his method does not see diary-keeping as a technique for therapeutic or healing ends but a process by which journaling cumulatively generates energy for writers' lives. While his Intensive Journal Method was never billed as a way for people to deal specifically with the emotional upheaval of divorce, that it can be used during times of conflict and difficulty makes it a potentially valuable for someone coping with it.

There have not been any clinical studies regarding the efficacy of Progoff's journal method (Riordan, 1996) so there is no basis to incorporate it as a proven intervention technique, but can be considered a foundation upon which attention was given to the notion of writing as a way to heal and a steppingstone to more rigorous scientific research that would follow a decade later with the work of James W. Pennebaker.

In 1978, Tristine Rainer published *The New Diary*, a comprehensive guidebook that was for many years the most complete and accessible source of information on how to use a journal for self-discovery and self-exploration (Adams, 2006). Rainer cites her concept as "a widespread cultural phenomenon rather than a system or program of writing." No one individual can be said to have created it but Rainer cites four twentieth century pioneers of psychology and literature as having played roles in conceptualizing the principles of modern journal writing: Carl Jung, Marion Milner, Ira Progoff and Anais Nin, each of whom developed techniques that permit the writer to tap into valuable inner resources.

While it is difficult to argue that the contributions of these four "pioneers" resulted in what could be considered a therapeutic intervention, the four natural modes of expression Rainer cites ---catharsis, description, free-intuitive writing and reflection --- and seven special techniques --- list, portrait, map of consciousness, guided imagery, altered point of view, unsent letter and dialogue --- were later researched scientifically as valuable ways for a writer to transform negative energy into constructive energy that enhances healing. Specifically, it is the act of putting feelings into words that begins the natural process of distancing oneself from the event(s) that finally brings relief and clears

the path to healing. Rainer's contribution to the growing body of literature on writing as therapy, as unscientific as it was, did provide a link to more research by the academic and scientific community in the years that followed.

Although the methods of using writing or journaling for self-discovery and healing, e.g., the work of Progoff and Rainer, experienced anecdotal success, they did not specifically address how or why writing worked on a cognitive level. James W. Pennebaker, a research psychologist, did. He discovered the power of writing by accident while conducting an experiment about traumatic experiences and how they affected the health of those who experienced them (1986). It was these original findings about the effect of keeping traumas secret that led to the first expressive writing study.

The Research

James W. Pennebaker's work encompasses more than two decades of scientific research between opening up about deeply troubling, emotionally difficult, or extremely traumatic events and positive changes in brain and immune function (Lepore, 2002). In carefully controlled experiments, he and his associates discovered that "writing can be an avenue to that interior place...where we can confront traumas and put them to rest — and heal both body and mind" (Pennebaker, 2004). Further, his work provided a foundation for other researchers to explore other relationships and make new discoveries in how writing can heal, the more relevant of which will be discussed here.

In Pennebaker's original study of mechanisms that might underlie the therapeutic usefulness of writing, college students were asked to write either about a traumatic experience or a superficial event for four consecutive days for fifteen minutes a day. To

his surprise, he found that those who wrote about their traumas needed less medical attention in the following months than they had previously. Further, many study participants said that the writing they did during the experiment changed their lives. Ever since then, Dr. Pennebaker has been devoted to understanding the mysteries of emotional writing. He acknowledges that expressive writing does not work with all people who have faced or are facing trauma or emotional upheaval but it has been a remarkably successful technique for many individuals. He also admits that there is no absolute or correct way to write about or get past emotional upheaval.

Because Pennebaker's method of writing for fifteen minutes a day for four consecutive days has been the foundation for other research on expressive writing as a way to heal, it is important to understand the methodology and mechanics of this first landmark study. Fifty students, all reasonably healthy and ordinary young adults, most of whom had just started college, signed up for an experiment in which they knew they would be writing for fifteen minutes a day. The only thing they did not know was what their writing topics would be. By the flip of a coin, they were asked to write about either emotional or traumatic topics or superficial, non-emotional ones. Those who were assigned the emotional or traumatic writing assignment received these instructions:

In your writing, I want you to really let go and explore your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your life...The important thing is for you to really let go and write about your deepest emotions and thoughts. You can write about the same thing on all four days or about different things on different days. Many people have never had traumatic experiences but all of us have faced major conflicts or stressors and you can write about those as well (Writing to Heal.)

The participants performed according to instructions and wrote stories about their parents' divorce, rape, physical abuse, suicide events and a range of other traumas and stressors that could not be categorized. Many left the study in tears and were clearly emotionally moved by the experiment. The real results for the study participants and Pennebaker, however, came in the weeks and months after they finished their four days of writing: those in the expressive writing group made 43 percent fewer doctor visits for illness than the control group who wrote about superficial topics. (Most of the visits were for colds, flu and upper respiratory infections.) Nevertheless, writing about personal traumas resulted in people visiting doctors for health reasons at half their normal rate (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Subsequent expressive writing studies in the 1980s focused almost exclusively on physical visits for illness, but as the number of studies increased it became clear that writing was a far more powerful tool for healing than Pennebaker or anyone else had imagined.

Biologically, the effects generalize across several physiological systems. Labs at Ohio State, the University of Miami, Auckland Medical School in Australia and elsewhere have found that emotional writing is associated with general enhancements in immune function (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Researchers have also found that emotional writing is associated with better lung function among asthma patients and lower pain and disease severity among arthritis sufferers (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz., et al., 1999).

Psychologically, the effects of expressive writing have been researched relative to short- and long-term results. Pennebaker noticed that participants in his research studies felt sad immediately after writing about traumatic subjects but that the sadness, often accompanied by tears, lasted only for an hour or two (Pennebaker, 2004).

Lepore (1997) found that people who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier than before writing and that while writing emotionally may make one sad immediately after doing it, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheavals.

Behaviorally, expressive writing studies have found that students make higher grades in the semester following a writing study (Cameron & Nichols, 1998) Socially, recent studies have suggested that expressive writing can enhance the quality of people's social lives, seemingly making them more socially comfortable, better listeners, talkers and better friends (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001).

Another study involved middle-aged men who had been unexpectedly been laid off from their high-tech jobs after working for the same company for over fifteen years. The experimental group was asked to write about their deepest emotions and thoughts about losing their jobs, and the control group was asked to write about an innocuous subject. Eight months after writing, 52 percent of the emotional writing group had new jobs compared with only 20 percent of the time management participants. Individuals from both groups went to the same number of job interviews. The only difference was that the expressive writers were offered jobs (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994).

These studies have been cited to show how expressive writing has been helpful in healing and enhancing growth in many areas of one's life, but none have addressed specifically how it might help one cope with the emotional upheaval of divorce. Surely, the esteemed Dr. Pennebaker, the lead researcher or co-researcher on more than two hundred journal articles, book chapters and research studies concerning disclosure, inhibition, language, social processes and expressive writing, would have in the course of

his thirty year career written about or researched expressive writing and divorce. If he had not, he would likely know someone who had. A personal e-mail was sent to Dr. Pennebaker with the question and he responded within a day: “No, I haven't done any research on this. It would be a natural however. I can't think of anyone else who has looked at it. Looks like open season for you. Good luck with your work” (Personal Communication, 2007). This e-mail reply was received with both disappointment and excitement. Disappointment in that there were no research studies that addressed the topic of expressive writing and divorce, and excitement in that there were no research studies that addressed the topic of expressive writing and divorce.

Only one study partially addressed the topic of relationship breakup (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). The researchers sought to replicate the beneficial effects of written disclosure and used Dr. Pennebaker's recommendation of writing one 20-minute essay on each of three consecutive days. In addition to the instructions presented on page 10 of this paper, participants were given additional direction for writing each day with the goal of helping them form a coherent story about the breakup. On day one, they were instructed to: “Write as much as you can remember about what your relationship was like before you broke up with your romantic partner.” On day two, they were instructed to: “Write down the events and factors that lead up to your breakup and about the actual breakup.” On day three, they were instructed to: “Write about the aftermath of the breakup.” People in the control group wrote about impersonal relationship topics.

The results showed that the control group experienced a short-term increase in upper respiratory symptoms followed by a return to baseline, whereas the expressive writing group experienced no change in symptoms over time. The mean scores on these

variables changed over time, revealing a pattern of increased emotional detachment from the ex-partner and the breakup. Whether this can be considered “healing” is open for discussion but participants reported significant decreases in resentment toward their ex-partner, caring for their ex-partner, guilt over the breakup, and symptoms of intrusions and avoidance. In other words, they felt better about their breakup after writing about it.

This solitary study offers encouraging results as to the efficacy of expressive writing on a relationship breakup, but other factors should and must be considered. The results achieved with a population of college undergraduates might not necessarily be replicated with a population of older, divorced individuals. The undergrads would have less experience with relationships and would more likely have been involved in a relationship for a shorter period of time. One could also argue that the emotional aftershock of a relationship breakup between undergrads would have significantly less emotional and psychological impact than a couple who have been in a committed married relationship for virtually any amount of time. This speaks to an important point not only in the research process but to the effectiveness of the proposed model of an expressive writing program for persons coping with divorce that will be presented here later: the difference between a controlled experiment and the reality of clinical application.

The important foundational research of Pennebaker and the replication of similar results by others cited here suggests that expressive writing can help people in a variety of physical, behavioral, and social ways, but until these research theories can be extrapolated to adult populations of divorcing people, as opposed to broken hearted undergraduates who participated in Lepore’s experiment, the possibility that writing emotionally can help one heal, remains just that.

Linking Thoughts to Feelings: Cognitive Processing

Expressive writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail and how writers felt about them is the only kind of writing that clinically has been associated with improved physical health and psychological well being. Simply writing about innocuous subjects or writing about traumatic events without linking thought and feeling does not result in significant health or emotional benefits. Both thinking and feeling are involved, and the link is critical. Since it has been demonstrated that expressive writing about stressful experiences produces physical and psychological benefits, changes must be occurring on a cognitive level that can explain how a moderator like writing emotionally may help one heal.

One area of cognitive functioning that seems to explain how expressive writing can help people feel better involves working memory (WM), which is “the capacity for controlled, sustained attention in the face of interference or distraction” (Engle, Kane & Tuoholski, 1999, cited in Lepore, 2002). Working memory is responsible for keeping goal-relevant information active and to inhibit extraneous goal-relevant information. In other words, ongoing or unresolved stressful events, like thinking about one’s divorce, competes for WM resources and affects one’s ability to perform goal-relevant tasks with the proper attention.

When one’s attention is disrupted by emotional or painful events, an information structure is activated and emotional processing — the modification of memory structures that underlie emotions — occurs (Foa & Kozak, 1986). The activation and habituation of anxiety and fear responses is what compels sufferers to seek professional attention. It is here that exposure therapy has emerged as an effective intervention that has been able to

reduce fear, anxiety, and emotional disruptions. Cognitively speaking, the information that short-term physiological habituation has occurred leads to dissociation of response elements from stimulus elements of the fear structure. The consequent lowered arousal in turn facilitates integration of corrective information about the feared stimuli and responses. Representations of lower potential harm obviate the disposition to avoid, thus reducing the associated preparatory physiology: across session habituation occurs (ibid.).

While the researchers were focused more on reducing pathological fear with exposure therapy than the emotional disruptions caused by divorce, one can argue that similar cognitive processes are at work. By following the instructions developed by Pennebaker and validated by Lepore and others about writing one's deepest feelings, the writer is able to integrate new information about one's divorce and thus help reduce repeated intrusions of painful emotional thoughts.

Research studies designed to examine the link between life stressors and WM showed that people reporting high levels of life stress performed more poorly on the Operation Span task (OSPAN), a standard, highly reliable and stable test that measures attention (Klein & Boals, 2001a). The next step was to test whether reducing stress would increase WM. Because of its ability to lessen the effects of stressful experiences, the researchers used Pennebaker's writing paradigm mentioned earlier as a manipulation in two expressive writing experiments (Klein & Boals, 2001b) and discovered that writing emotionally did indeed produce improvements in WM capacity. One could also argue that the subsequent lowered state of emotional arousal allowed new information about the anxiety-producing stimuli to occur.

Because of their weak organization, activation of stressful memories requires little

attention. They are always interfering and intruding on normal attention, and any attempts to suppress them require thoughtful processing (Wegner, 1994, in Lepore, 2004).

Further, suppressing unwanted thoughts not only consumes mental resources, it has the untoward effect of perpetuating the fragmented nature of these thoughts. Until someone going through a divorce can begin to find answers to questions like “How come he doesn’t love me anymore?” or “How will I ever survive as a single person?” working memory will be compromised, thus preventing one from becoming fully functional again.

Theoretically, writing exercises might help one successfully integrate some of the negative emotions associated with divorce and feel better as opposed to constantly thinking about them, which only creates more intrusion on awareness. The intrusions, memories and emotional reactions to stressful events should be particularly salient and easily accessible, thus lending themselves to cognitive modification (Lepore, 2004).

This would suggest that writing about one’s divorce, much like being repeatedly exposed to a feared or anxiety producing stimuli, would likely benefit a patient by allowing intrusive thoughts to be more consistent with existing self and world views.

Lepore (1997) suggests that expressive writing reduces the negative emotional and physiological impact of intrusive thoughts, which is based on evidence that stressor-related intrusive thoughts like “How much is this divorce costing me?” or “What will my divorce do to the children?” lose their emotional sting when individuals are able to express themselves in a supportive and non-constraining social context. Lepore’s research study in which college undergrads wrote expressively about a relationship breakup indicate that expressive writing has a wide range of social, emotional and physical health benefits for individuals coping with stressful events, particularly if they

are experiencing ongoing intrusive thoughts and avoidance response related to the stressor. This study also showed that while writing did not reduce the frequency of unwanted intrusions, it did moderate the effects of them, much in the way exposure therapy would.

The underlying cognitive factors that impact working memory and enhance emotional processing offer a plausible explanation as to how expressive writing and exposure to a feared stimuli can help transform poorly organized representations of stressful experiences into more coherent memory structures that impose fewer claims on attentional resources and thus, may help organize thoughts that permit people to think clearer and experience improved coping, problem solving and health outcomes about their divorce or for that matter, a range of other traumas or stressors.

The Healing Narrative

One way an expressive writer can succeed in achieving the all-important link between thoughts and feelings or feelings to events is with a healing narrative, in which the writer's experience is rendered "concretely, authentically, explicitly and with a richness of detail" (DeSalvo, 1999). A healing narrative can describe how we felt then and how we feel now. It can chart the similarities in differences over time. It can reveal the insights achieved from past painful experiences and "can tell a complete, coherent story, making sense of and giving meaning to what was formally unclear" (ibid).

Cognitively speaking, creating a healing narrative can transform the organization and content of stressful memory constructions. Pennebaker & Seagal (1999) suggest that narrative creation alters the original memory so that it can be summarized, stored and

forgotten more efficiently. Schank & Abelson (1995) suggest that composing a story about a stressful experience reduces the size and complexity of the original experience into smaller unit that lets memory work less hard. They further argue that in the course of narrative creation, memories of negative events become embedded in the story, weakening the accessibility of these bad experiences and lessening the likelihood that internal or external stimuli will activate them. Since memories that are not activated do not require cognitive resources for further processing or suppression, unwanted thoughts theoretically can disappear. At the very least, they are still present but do not cause the interruptions and intrusions to thought that have previously been problematic. This argument fits well with the emotional processing that occurs during exposure therapy and further enhances the role of the healing narrative in writing therapy intervention.

Personal experience in helping a woman write the story of her husband who was murdered at the hands of a mobster provides a real-life example of emotional processing at work. When I was first contacted to help Victoria Stillitano write the story, later to become her healing narrative, of how she met and eventually lost her husband, Frankie, I realized she was a woman still suffering from the trauma of an event that had occurred twenty years prior. She had a story she needed to tell but didn't know how. Her resources were scattered notes and journal entries on a variety of scraps written over the past thirty years. These were mixed with newspaper clippings about Frankie's involvement with the mob, the police or the FBI, on which handwritten notes were scribbled where she believed inaccuracies existed. I helped Victoria organize her notes and her thoughts by structuring the story chronologically, beginning with stories of her own childhood, how she met Frankie, how he got involved with unsavory characters and

the incident that forced them to go into hiding and on the run for three years with their two young children and another on the way. The series of interviews I conducted about each of these events up to the day she last saw him alive and his subsequent funeral, brought up both happy and painful memories, which she openly acknowledged as we worked our way through her lifetime of excitement, love, fear, horror and sadness. When the final manuscript was complete three years later, we shared a tearful reading that allowed her to finally accept, understand, and assimilate the story into her consciousness. She later described it as if the life she was reading about was not her own. It was compartmentalized. It was now “there,” and no longer “in here,” she said, pointing to her heart. She was able to separate herself emotionally from it and sympathize with her character without feeling the emotional pain and intrusive thoughts that had been plaguing her for the past twenty years. Writing her story had allowed her to reappraise and cognitively process the events of her life so she was able to move on. That the book was never published was of little consequence. Victoria had a healing narrative that she would own forever, something she could give to her children who had been too young to know their father, and the gift that would allow her to move on with the rest of her life.

This example of emotional processing via expressive writing demonstrates how one can formulate a cognitive reappraisal of upsetting or unwanted thoughts, thus permitting a new understanding or meaning about a traumatic life event.

Expressive Writing: Who Benefits, Who Doesn't

Theoretically, all types of people should be able to benefit from writing emotionally. Despite the documented evidence about the healthful physical and

psychological benefits of expressive writing, however, not all who write about their traumatic event or divorce will necessarily experience the healing they are seeking nor might they be able or willing to do so for a variety of reasons (Pennebaker, 2004).

One barely detectable difference in those experiencing success with expressive writing is that of gender. Across a large number of studies, males tend to benefit slightly more than females. In addition, people who tend to be naturally hostile and aggressive, as well as out of touch with their emotions, show more health improvements after writing compared with their more easy going, self-reflective counterparts (Smyth, 1998).

Pennebaker (ibid.) suggests that hostile, out-of-touch men may be particularly good candidates for expressive writing because they are the least likely to open up and talk with others. Similarly, people who do not or can not refer to their own feelings when writing about a traumatic event tend not to benefit. Across multiple studies, people who use the most negative emotion words (e.g., hate, cry, hurt, afraid) while writing tend not to benefit much from the writing experience while those that use positive emotion words (i.e., love, care, funny, beautiful, joy) do.

Personality characteristics notwithstanding, people who increase their use of story markers, causal and insight words tend to show the greatest improvements in physical health after expressive writing (Pennebaker, Mayne & Francis, 1997). For example, causal words such as cause, effect, because, reason and rationale suggest that the writer is conveying what may have caused what, which is a good way of understanding an event. They help create the coherent healing narrative mentioned in the previous section and are an important evaluating parameter in expressive writing exercises.

Additionally, recent linguistic research has found that the ability to see an

upheaval from different perspectives may be beneficial in realizing health improvements from writing (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003). Persons who use a high number of first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my, mine, myself) emphasize a personal perspective that is important when writing about traumatic experiences tend to benefit more.

Research also indicates that it is healthy to write from other perspectives, as well. This can be done by changing pronoun use, which changes a writer's perspective and thus, his or her interpretation of an event. When dealing with trauma or in the case of a divorce, writing from different perspectives can enhance understanding and facilitate cognitive processing.

Mental disease or cognitive impairments, i.e., depression, may affect sufferers' ability to write emotionally. Since cognitive processing of an event involves alternating between intrusive and avoidant reactions, people who are unable to make cognitive transformations may not be able to benefit from writing because they may experience prolonged intrusive states or dysfunctional avoidance (Klein, in Lepore, 2004).

In summary, candidates who have the best chance of feeling better about their divorce would more likely be a male than a female; someone who has the ability to be in touch with his or her emotions and have the ability to express them; someone who is able to use causal and insight words in their writing, which also implies a certain level of education and mastery of language; someone with the ability to see things from multiple perspectives and dimensions in order to enhance understanding; and someone who is not suffering from some form of cognitive or mental disability or disease. While this might describe the candidate with the best chance of therapeutic success, it certainly does not mean that others would not experience at least some measure of healing.

What Practitioners Say About Expressive Writing and Divorce

The research presented in this paper has been based on controlled laboratory studies that have not been validated in real-life clinical settings with patient populations. Understanding that this would be a necessary prerequisite and foundation for any effective expressive writing intervention exercise or program for people coping with divorce, it became clear that the perspectives and opinions of professional practitioners should be obtained. After consulting with a practicing psychologist who regularly treats patients coping with relationship and divorce issues, a one-page combination letter and survey form was drafted (See Appendix). The letter was sent with a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) to 94 practitioners (Ph.D. or Psy.D) who were members of the New York State Psychological Association (NYSPA) as of February, 2007, and who stated that one of their interest areas was in treating persons coping with divorce.

Within three weeks of sending out the survey letters, 33, or 35%, were returned. Of those 73%, answered “no” to the question: “Have you ever used writing as a therapeutic tool to help patients who are divorcing?” When asked “If no, why not?” six practitioners stated: “I never thought of it.” Another six said: “It did not seem necessary or appropriate.” Three reported: “I don’t give (homework) assignments.” Two admitted: “I am not familiar with these techniques.” Another two replied: “I have not worked with patients who are divorcing.” Another two said: “Verbal expression of feelings should be sufficient.” One stated: “I have not had patients who would respond to it.” Two had no reply at all.

The variety of responses, even from this small population, raises some questions about the use of expressive writing in real-life clinical situations. Perhaps these

practitioners do not know enough about therapeutic writing or writing's benefits to include in their treatment plans or that if they did, they would not experience success with it. One "no" respondent said "I haven't used writing as a therapeutic tool to help clients; in fact, it's never occurred to me, in part, probably because I have very few, if any, colleagues who do." This practitioner, one might assume, has been practicing for some time (that the answer was written on a typewriter with multiple errors was another clue), which could mean that expressive writing as a treatment technique has not achieved the necessary attention or "critical mass" that would earn it a place in this veteran practitioner's toolbox. This raises the question: Is expressive writing as a therapeutic treatment for people coping with divorce too new for many older practitioners to consider? More research and a more formal survey could provide the answer.

Also worth consideration are the responses from three practitioners who answered "no" to the initial question about using writing for divorcing patients. A later survey question asked: "In your experience, how would you rate the effectiveness of writing as a therapeutic tool with your patients?" They were asked to respond by circling poor, good or excellent. All three circled "excellent." If these responses are any indicator, writing may indeed have its place in a patient's treatment plan, but not necessarily when it comes to divorce. Again, this could be due to issues of the unfamiliarity with the technique or with the level of appropriateness in recommending writing relative to a patient's problem. Again, this population is too small and there is not enough information from which to draw more definitive conclusions other than the fact that expressive writing is not being used by the majority of practitioners who are members of the New York State Psychological Association and who chose to respond to this survey.

As for the remaining 27% who answered “yes” to having used writing as a tool for patients coping with divorce, seven cited journal writing as a method of expression; six of those seven also cited writing letters (sent and unsent) to spouses or partners; and three of those seven also found that writing was helpful in helping their patients deal with obsessive or maladaptive thoughts concerning the divorce. One respondent stated having “excellent” effectiveness with writing interventions and added “some clients, such as those dealing with an affair or going through a divorce, need help in containing the flood of thoughts and feelings.” This answer is consistent with both the clinical research and the anecdotal evidence cited earlier in this paper.

A second respondent who replied “excellent” provided a qualifier that raises a potential obstacle to using expressive writing as therapeutic tool. This practitioner summarized his survey: “Bottom line: writing works great for those who enjoy doing it and turns those off who hate writing or are intimidated by it.” This is a factor that was not addressed in any of the research studies cited earlier in this paper but one that has relevance in a real world clinical setting. None of the participants in the studies cited here were forced; they all did so willingly and knew they would be writing. If they were intimidated or feared they would be judged on their grammar or spelling, one could assume they did not participate in the study. This would also be true in a clinical setting.

As informal as this survey was, it provided some useful insights as to how expressive writing is and is not used in a clinical setting. It also raised more issues that will be described in the next section.

A Model for Expressive Writing Intervention for Divorced Persons

The model described in the following pages will combine elements of more than 20 years of research cited in this paper with information gleaned from the informal survey of NYSPA practitioners. It will be informed by the knowledge gained by formal undergraduate and graduate work in psychology and literature; and it will be supported by more than ten years of personal experience in journaling and expressive writing. The model will draw on the research that has proven to be effective in controlled experiments and combine it with methods that have not been tested in real-life clinical settings. The result will be a structured way of allowing persons coping with divorce to use expressive writing as a way of feeling better and taking a more active role in healing themselves.

Motivation

As in any therapeutic setting, motivation is a primary factor in getting results. Persons coping with divorce have to seek help and follow a treatment plan if they want to feel better. Scenarios may involve seeing a marital therapist, with or without one's spouse, or seeing a traditional therapist alone to address coping issues. Citing the survey of practitioners, the decision to use expressive writing as a part of treatment would not necessarily be one suggested by some therapists when traditional talk therapy has been their stock in trade. Similarly, a patient would need to raise the issue of writing as a way of healing, but the patient may be as unaware of the benefits of expressive writing as the practitioners in the survey. Either the therapist would have to advertise he or she used expressive writing as an intervention or announce it in an introductory meeting and at that point the patient could decide to pursue treatment or not. Expressive writing therapy,

however, has not been described as the sole or primary intervention technique in any of the research studies cited in this paper nor has it been advertised in the list of services offered by traditional therapists surveyed. While practitioners do advertise their services in the mass media, there is no way of knowing precisely how many bill themselves as a writing therapist or list expressive writing therapy as their specialty. A patient would have to have heard of writing's benefit and specifically request it.

The model being proposed here would begin with a campaign of proactively advertising and promoting expressive writing as a way of coping with divorce. It would be advertised first as an informal workshop, in which the benefits of expressive writing would be discussed and supported by literature and information describing the more structured program and exercises that would follow in the weeks or months ahead.

Advertisements for the informal workshop would avoid the words "therapy" or "intervention" because it would imply that the program is being conducted by a licensed practitioner, which it would not be, at least in its early stages. The workshops would, however, have a licensed psychologist in attendance for supervision and intervention, if necessary, and this would be advertised. Advertising that the workshops will include writing as the primary healing technique would also serve the purpose of eliminating people for whom writing is scary, intimidating or unpleasurable. It would also attract those for whom writing is neutral or pleasurable and those willing to open themselves up to a way of healing that they may not have known about prior.

Persons responding to advertisements and word-of-mouth referrals would understand what they would be doing and would have to attend of their own volition. Instead of being unwillingly forced to join a spouse in counseling or seeing a therapist

without knowing what to expect, they would be motivated to attend and motivated to learn about how they can help themselves cope, heal and potentially build a new identity as a divorced person by using expressive writing.

Participation

Once at the initial workshop, which will cost \$10-\$20, attendees will be given a short introductory lecture on expressive writing and its benefits. Even if they choose not to attend the subsequent workshops that will be offered later in the workshop, they would be getting something for their money. Handouts would include some general information and resources as well as a description of this proposed treatment model. In order for attendees to get a “hands on” demonstration and perhaps experience a brief jolt of healing, they will be asked to participate in a short exercise in which they write emotionally for 15 minutes to determine if it is something they would be comfortable doing and if they felt it was something from which they could benefit. This writing topic could be one of several general questions that might include, for example: “How did you feel when you knew you would be getting divorced?” The question would necessarily be personal and emotional in order to elicit a similarly emotional response. Understanding that a group dynamic is also an effective way of support and healing, attendees would be asked if they would like to read their writing out loud but would be under no pressure to do so. They would be reminded that no one has to see, hear or read their written disclosure since that might compromise the full emotionality of the writing, a factor Dr. Pennebaker has expressed in several of his research studies. Theoretically, this participation would create enough emotional impact to convince a portion of attendees to

sign up for and attend three subsequent workshops in which more expressive writing exercises and general education would be given. A cost for the three workshops would be presented with the goal of attaching value to the information because giving workshops for free implies the information contained within is worthless. The cost will be between \$75 and \$100 for all three, or about \$25 per workshop, which is the approximate cost someone with insurance would co-pay a therapist. If uninsured, this reasonable fee would be considerably less than a therapist visit costing \$100+ per 50-minute hour. Insurance will not be accepted. The financial commitment would increase the chances of full participation in future workshops, which would occur on consecutive weeks.

Workshop 1

In the first workshop, attendees will be introduced to the work of Dr. Pennebaker, specifically the instructions for writing exercises that have been shown to improve physical maladies and emotional upheavals. The basic writing technique described on page 10 will be essentially the same but modified to include the details of one's divorce and expanded to compensate for the group dynamic, that is, allowing workshop attendees to use the group time as a way of discussing and clarifying the work at hand. Pennebaker also extends the writing exercises to a fourth day, as opposed to the three recommended in the studies he did and that other researchers used attempting to duplicate his results.

General directions to Expressive Writing Workshop attendees will be modified to reflect the following: For the next four days, you will be asked to write about your divorce. Use the following guidelines:

- Write for at least twenty minutes a day. It's okay to write more but you may not count any extra time spent writing one day to carry over to the next.
- Writing topic. You can write about the same divorce-related event, i.e., finding out about your spouse's affair, realizing you did not love your spouse any longer, etc., on all four days or about different divorce-related events on different days.
- Write continuously. Once you begin writing, write continuously without stopping. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you run out of things to say, simply repeat what you have already written.
- Write only for yourself. You are writing for yourself and no one else. Plan to destroy or hide what you have written when you have finished. Do not turn this exercise into a letter. After you complete this expressive writing task, you can write a letter if you want to, but this exercise is for your eyes only.
- The Flip-Out Rule. If you feel as though you cannot write about a particular event because it will "push you over the edge," then don't write about it. Deal only with things you can handle now.
- What to expect after writing. Many people feel sad or depressed after expressive writing, especially on the first day or two. This is normal. The feeling usually lasts a few minutes or up to a few hours. If possible, plan some time for yourself after your writing session to reflect on what you have been writing about.

Instructions would then be given for each of the four consecutive writing days.

The crux of each day's instructions will be presented here but would be expanded for actual use by workshop participants.

Day 1: Writing Instructions: Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings about your divorce. Really let go and explore how the event has affected you. You can write about how it started, how you felt while it was happening and how you feel now. You can also explore how your divorce is related to who you were in the past, who you are now and who you would like to be in the future. Write continuously for 20 minutes and remember this writing is for you alone. When you are done, complete the post- writing thoughts.

Post-writing thoughts are a numerical evaluation in which the writer rates the degree to which he or she achieved the writing goal of the day. This will be done after each writing session and be used as a personal evaluation of the writing program as a whole. It is also recommended that the writer briefly describe in words how the day's writing went. The evaluation consists of four questions that are to be rated on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being "not at all" and 10 being "a great deal:"

1. To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?
2. To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?
3. To what degree do you currently feel happy?
4. To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful for you?

Day 2: Writing Instructions: Reread the guidelines and complete this task. Today your goal is to examine your very deepest emotions and thoughts about your divorce. You can expand on an element or incident you explored in yesterday's writing or choose another. Today, link your divorce to other areas of your life, including relationships with other family members and your job or career. Also think about how you may be responsible for your divorce. After 20 minutes of writing, complete the post-writing questionnaire.

Day 3: Writing Instructions: Reread the guidelines and complete this task. It is important that you continue to explore your deepest thoughts and emotions about your divorce but the most important thing is to explore how it is affecting your life right now. It is important that you don't repeat what you've written in the first two writing exercises. Write about what you are feeling and thinking about your divorce right now. How has this event shaped your life and who you are? Allow yourself to explore those deep issues about which you may be particularly vulnerable. After at least 20 minutes of writing about your deepest thoughts and feelings, complete the post-writing questionnaire.

Day 4: Writing Instructions: Reread the guidelines and complete this final task. Stand back and think about everything you have been writing about for the past three days and what you have disclosed. Tie up anything you have not yet confronted. What are your emotions and thoughts now? What have you learned, lost or gained as a result of your divorce? How will these things guide your thoughts and actions in the future? Let go and be honest with yourself about this upheaval. Do your best to wrap up your entire experience into a story you can take into the future. After at least 20 minutes of writing about your deepest thoughts and feelings, complete the post-writing questionnaire. Take next days off from writing and bring only your evaluations to the next workshop.

Dr. Pennebaker's original 4-day writing program was for persons to write and review their evaluations alone at home; it did not include instructions on bringing anything anywhere. This model proposes that attendees bring their evaluations only to the workshop, where their importance will be discussed. All writings should stay home.

Workshop 2

Participants would be asked to share their thoughts their 4-day of writing and then be asked to review their evaluations to notice if any changes have been taking place in their lives. If they have noticed positive changes in feelings or behaviors such as sleeping better, drinking less alcohol or taking fewer drugs, thinking about their divorce less, focusing on work more, and having a better understanding of the upheaval, then it will be suggested that expressive writing is probably a good coping system. Participants who did not feel they experienced any positive changes or who were feeling worse would be asked first to look at their evaluations to rethink how they approached the exercises. If they continued to feel poorly, they would be advised to see a qualified counselor.

Participants would then be instructed on the next step in the workshop: writing and editing their healing narrative. Research cited earlier suggested that most people are likely to benefit from writing about their divorce if they can build a coherent story of their experience. A brief lesson about the importance of story elements would prepare them for the writing that would be done at home. They would be asked to consider:

- **Setting:** Describe when and where did they first learned they would be divorcing.
- **Main characters:** Who was involved and what were they doing, thinking and feeling? What were you doing, thinking and feeling before the event?
- **Clear description of the event:** What happened? Did a particular event or incident trigger it? How did you react?
- **Immediate and long-term consequences:** How did the divorce influence your life and the lives of others?
- **Meaning of the story:** What have you learned as a result of it all?

Instructions: for the next twenty minutes, work your divorce experience into a story with a clear beginning, middle and end. Describe the experience and how it affected you and others. What is the meaning of this event for you? In your writing, express your emotions freely and be honest with yourself. Once you begin writing, write continuously for the entire twenty minutes. If your story goes in a direction you don't anticipate, follow your heart. As always, this writing is for you alone. Do not worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. Wait at least two days before re-reading your story with the goal of rewriting and editing it. The purpose is to rewrite it into a more organized, honest and coherent story. You will no longer be asked to freely write by ignoring all of your mind's censors. Now you should look at the logical flow of your writing, your writing style and what you intended to say. Your goal is to make the story better in every way. This may take some time. Spend as much time as you like. Take breaks from your work, come back and re-read your story and continue. Keep in mind your purpose is to work through your experience and this process helps you do exactly that. Bring your completed story, in whatever level of completeness it is in to the next workshop. You will not be asked to read it out loud, and no one will see it but you. But if you would like to or feel the need to, then you may.

Workshop 3

The final workshop will begin by participants verbally sharing the experience of writing their divorce stories, but not necessarily reading them out loud. It would be permitted if someone so felt the need. The number of people reading their stories will determine the length of this final class. Participants would be advised to review the

resource material given at the first workshop ask any final questions. They would also be asked to write a final, anonymous evaluation of the workshop and what if anything, they learned by participating in it. This would be used to enhance the effectiveness of future workshops. As a final note, they would be told they would be receiving a follow-up questionnaire in the next several weeks asking them to evaluate their general health and ability to cope with what is going on in their lives and with their divorce.

As cited in some of the research, the effects of expressive writing are not always felt immediately. Some benefits may take weeks or months to be felt and even then, whether the benefits were directly attributable to expressive writing would be difficult to determine. It is hoped that there would be enough positive benefits that a participant may be interested in attending again to work through more divorce issues. Unlike most traumas, which are a one-time event, the divorce process can be a series of very emotional events and incidences, some of which may require the emotional processing and coping that expressive writing can help.

A final message would offer the services of an Expressive Writing Therapist on an individual, ongoing basis. The thinking here is that some workshop participants may experience enough positive coping and healing strategies to want to continue exploring and growing in a private, one-on-one therapeutic relationship in which expressive writing would be the central intervention technique.

An individual expressive writing therapy treatment plan to help one coping with divorce might be modified to include a variety of exercises that might include letter writing, intensive journaling or poetry while considering the following:

- Feelings about the divorce. Acknowledging the emotions, be they pain, pleasure, ambivalence, confusion or any of the other feelings that best describe what is happening or has happened.
- The divorce story. This may be about how a partner realized there was a problem or didn't realize there was a problem and was blindsided by it. Or that one person was in denial that anything was going on at all. A story exists, with a beginning, a middle and an ending, that being the official declaration of divorce.
- Switching perspectives. If patients switched perspectives and examined the relationship through the eyes of their partner, it may affect their ability to better cope with emotional upheaval. Seeing things in a different perspective may change the way they feel. If they can experience their spouse's true pain, perhaps they could feel compassionate to the point of reconciliation.
- Finding a voice. Divorcing individuals are often too wrapped up in the emotion of their life unfolding before them to concern themselves with finding "a voice." But this can be worked on in the course of a longer expressive writing treatment plan. By default, divorcees cannot concern themselves with pretense. They must express themselves openly and accept what comes out as theirs.
- The writing. A patient could write longhand at a counseling appointment or a workshop and on the computer at home. People would be more likely to be honest in their writing if they were alone and in the familiarity of home rather than under the watchful eyes of a counselor or therapist. The place where patients write might be as important as what is written. The avoidance of new places and distractions would be encouraged.

Conclusion

Expressive Writing as a field of scientific research is relatively new. While the number of experiments conducted over the past two decades have demonstrated that writing emotionally can offer a range of physical and emotional benefits in a variety of areas, the idea of writing about one's problems in a structured and deliberate way does not appear to have gained the widespread acceptance that other "alternative" therapies — art, dance and movement, pet, drama — have. This may improve if the experimental methods performed in laboratories achieve a measure of remarkable success with patient populations in real-world clinical settings.

That there have been no research studies conducted on the potential benefits of expressive writing and persons coping with divorce only reinforces the idea that more research needs to be done in this area. The underlying cognitive processes at work in a patient undergoing Exposure Therapy, a well-established and well-researched area of study, are similar to those who may benefit from expressive writing. There is certainly no shortage of people experiencing the emotional pains of divorce. There does appear to be, however, an increasing demand for easy, effective, and affordable interventions in a medical culture that perpetuates more drugs, more tests, and expensive treatment plans.

To the thesis question of whether expressive writing can help heal the emotional pain of someone coping with divorce, the evidence to date suggests that, yes, it can. The model presented herein would build on what has been demonstrated with some success in the laboratory and attempt to replicate it in a real-world setting, a setting that may be the place to gather data for more research to follow. It is only a start.

DeSalvo (1999) provides an appropriate message that articulates the spirit in

which this thesis was written and the foundation on which future research and work will be performed: “For our writing to be a healing experience, we must honor our pain, loss and grief...we try to find words to describe our sensations precisely, accurately and without distortion...we witness them instead of denying or ignoring them and in this way, we enable ourselves to tolerate them. After doing the work, we most likely feel a shift in our perspective, an enlargement of our sense of self.”

It is through expressive writing that persons coping with the life-altering and emotional upheaval of divorce may be able to “enlarge the self” and thus come to terms with their experience, its aftermath and their futures.

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Appendix

The following is the letter and questionnaire/survey that was mailed to 100 licensed mental health practitioners who have indicated that they work with divorcing or divorced persons:

Hello, my name is Len Prazych. I am a Masters Degree student in the MALS program at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY. I got your name from the NYS Psychological Association Web Site.

As part of my Masters Thesis on *Writing Therapy and Divorce*, I am surveying practitioners about their experiences using writing in its various forms (journaling, poetry, letters) to help patients who are getting divorced. Would you please answer the questions provided below and return your responses in the enclosed SASE?

Thank you very much in advance for your consideration and assistance. If you are interested in seeing the results of this survey or my thesis, please provide your contact info and I will be happy to forward a copy.

1. Have you ever used writing as a therapeutic tool to help clients/patients who are divorcing (circle one)?

YES

NO

a. If no, why not?

b. If yes, what specific assignments or exercises have you given your clients/patients?

c. On which clients/patients (male or female) and in which stage of divorcing (initial, mid, final) do you believe writing as a therapeutic tool has been most effective in your work?

2. In your experience, how would you rate the effectiveness of writing as a therapeutic tool with your clients/patients (circle one)?

POOR

GOOD

EXCELLENT

3. Do you have any additional general comments about the use of writing as a therapeutic tool?