

WRITING FOR RECOVERY

A manual for structured writing after disaster and war

* William Yule

** Atle Dyregrov

*** Frank Neuner

**** James W. Pennebaker

** Magne Raundalen

***** Arnold van Emmerik

* Institute of Psychiatry, London, Great Britain

** Center for Crisis Psychology, Bergen, Norway

*** University of Konstanz, Germany

**** University of Texas, Austin, USA

***** University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Introduction

There is a long standing tradition among torture survivors in South America to write testimony that both helps them express their reactions and acts as a record of what happened to them. More recently, James Pennebaker, in a series of analogue (i.e. using undergraduates) studies, has demonstrated how powerful the use of writing about an emotional experience can be in normalising the distressing reactions. This use of narrative technique is increasingly incorporated in cognitive behavioural therapy with adults (Neuner et al 2004; Schauer, Neuner & Elbert, 2005; van Emmerick 2004) and recently with children (Schauer et al, 2004).

These approaches have, to date, been used individually. Given our earlier success in adapting individual-based CBT techniques for use with groups of children adversely affected by wars and disasters, we have similarly adapted the writing/testimony/narrative approach for use with groups of adolescents exposed to or bereaved through war and disaster.

At this stage of development, we have aimed the manual at adolescents, but anticipate that we will develop one for younger children based on the experience we gain in the field. There are also separate instructions for the general war/disaster manual and the bereavement one.

In extending the structured writing, narrative exposure approach to use with traumatised young people, we are aware that we have had to depart from James Pennebaker's original approach of keeping the instructions very general in order to focus the writer's attention on the somatic and sensory memories related to the traumatic experience. Similarly, we have had to remember that in utilising a group format, the writer cannot get individual feedback on what has been written. We assume that this may result in some people obtaining less relief from their symptoms, but we hope that by using a group format, many more adolescents will be in a better state to function normally.

The philosophy behind this manual

When war or disaster strikes, many thousands of children may be affected. They may be separated from their families for some time; homes and schools may be destroyed. Clearly, it is a priority for the community to re-establish safe shelter, schools and other parts of the social infrastructure. We are assuming that schools of some sort have been re-established and that they are the most appropriate places to undertake the writing.

We have also assumed that there may be very few child mental health professionals available to deliver appropriate services in the aftermath of a disaster. This manual is easy to administer and group instructors with some basic knowledge of human responses to trauma and disaster can be selected and trained to instruct the adolescents on their writing. Together with UN organizations such as UNICEF or UNHCR, and/or with NGOs, local personnel can reach out to many adolescents by using this manual.

We suggest a minimum of one-day training in the use of this manual. This training should include how they can refer those in need of more intensive follow-up to appropriate services if they are to be found.

We suggest having two group instructors present because of the pressure involved in responding to the needs of war or disaster-affected children, and to walk around among the writing adolescents if they need assistance in understanding the exercises or with emotional reactions that ensue. One leader takes the lead in giving the instructions while the other monitors the children's reactions to check that they are engaged, seem to be understanding and are not getting upset. It is possible to have many children write at the same time with a recommended maximum of 50. A large number requires a stronger adult presence.

The target group:

This programme is aimed at adolescents aged 12 to 18, who have all experienced a traumatic event such as the Tsunami. Although the format can be adapted to whole classes of adolescents following a disaster, it may be advisable to screen children (see below) to ensure that they have been exposed to the disaster and struggle with the aftermath. However, all children in the affected area will be able to benefit from organising their experience through writing. There is no research that indicates that such writing in any way can harm those who participate. Less affected youth may also benefit from writing, but since they will evidence less distress one would not expect high scores on symptom scales.

The setting:

Ideally, the exercise will take place in a quiet room where the adolescents can write without others overlooking what they write. They will require tables or desks, but if these are not available, then something hard to lean on when writing. The group leader will need to have sufficient sheets of paper that can be stapled together. Pens/pencils must be available for all participants.

The group will meet on three separate days, preferably in the same room, for two short periods of writing each day. The days can be consecutive or spaced further apart. Writing can even be once a week over three weeks if it is difficult to have shorter spaced periods. Although we are encouraging three days of writing, in some circumstances this might not be possible. Even writing on a single day on three occasions is likely to be beneficial. Since the aim is to help the writers confront emotional memories, it is probably best if these sessions can be held at the end of a school day so that they can then go away and think about what they have been writing, and not have to go back to class and concentrate on lessons.

Screening and evaluation:

Before starting, participants will complete a battery of self-completed questionnaires. These will be repeated at the end so that the effects of the writing exercise can be estimated. It is not advisable to complete the questionnaires/assessment on the day of the first writing assignment, but on the day before. If this is hard to do because of logistical reasons, find a day as close to the first writing assignment as possible. Assessment should then be repeated one to two weeks following the last writing assignment and if possible after six months. It is important to have the same code-numbers on the writings and on the assessment measures at each measurement point. Experience shows that adolescents will prefer to have numbers rather than names written on their material. All pages have to be number coded so that screening results can be linked with the written scripts.

Format:

On each of the three days, the participants are asked to write about their innermost thoughts and feeling for 15 minutes. At the end of the period, they place their (stamped) pages in a big box. They are reassured that what they write is treated confidentially – i.e. no one except members of the research team will see what they have written. They are NOT being encouraged to share their experiences or reactions with other members of the group.

After each short session, they adjourn to another room or area where juice and biscuits/cookies are available. The group-leader should have this set up ready before the adolescents come to the writing exercise and also have a co-worker who can ensure that the scripts are placed in the box so that no one else can read them but those who evaluate the intervention.

Group leader instructions:

These are given in detail below. Frequently asked questions with suggested responses will be provided in the light of experience. In general, writers will need to be told where to write their number codes, but the best will be to have the pages pre-coded and ready before assessment and writing sessions. The participants must be reassured about it being a private experience and that only the research team will have access to the assessment instruments and scripts later.

INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO THE GROUP BEFORE THEY START WRITING FOR RECOVERY

Traumatic experiences have the ability to touch every part of our lives. Something like the xxx (war or disaster) can cause death and destruction but can affect us in ways that we never would have thought. Issues of love, death, money, friendship, religion, childhood, and even upheavals that occurred earlier in our lives often come to mind after something like the xxx (war or disaster). These thoughts and feelings are confusing and sometimes overwhelming. The purpose of this project is to help people deal with the thoughts, nightmares, and powerful feelings that result from something like the (trauma) (if applicable: or a series of traumatic events).

In this project, you will be asked to write six times about issues surrounding your experience(s) or the trauma(s). There is good evidence to suggest that this writing exercise can be helpful. The entire procedure will take less than two hours. It may be hard to start, but it may make a big difference in your life. Please try it.

[For the field testing and in research projects: You will be asked to put your writings in the box but what you have written will be read by people who work to better the situation for people who experience major upheavals in their life. By studying how people write and how writing may change over the day they can find out better ways of writing. What you write will be helpful for health workers in helping others, and, at the same time, the writing is likely to help you].

Today's writing topic

When the instructor tells you to begin, we would like for you write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the trauma/traumas. How has this event touched your life? [If it is a series of events that they have experienced just use plural terms that reflect their experience]. You might describe what happened, what you saw and felt, and what you remember. Also, you might tie this event(s) to other parts of your life. For example, how is this trauma or series of critical events related to your childhood, your relation with your parents, other family members, friends, or teachers? How might it be related to people you love? How is it connected to who you would like to become in the future, who you have been in the past, or who you are now? You might even write about how this trauma or these traumatic events are related to the dreams you may be having or some of the thoughts that may be have been haunting you.

You can write about the same event for the full 15 minutes or about different events as they come to your mind. Whatever you choose to write about, however, it is critically important that you are completely honest with yourself.

Really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. Some other issues you might want to write about are to do with what you saw, heard, felt, smelled, what you thought about at the time. You may have found it difficult to share these with other people. If you want to, you have this opportunity to write about all or any of these.

In a few moments, I am going to ask you to begin. Does anyone have any questions? (Pause) (deal with questions) OK, now, when you are ready you can start writing. I will let you know when the 15 minutes are nearly up. If you have any more questions, just ask one of us as we walk around.

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OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room, put your papers in the Big Blue Box. Have a break for ten minutes.

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After the break:

Thanks for coming back. Does anyone have any questions? (deal with these while the stragglers are returning)

In the first writing assignment, you were asked to explore your thoughts and feelings about the event(s). This time you will continue dealing with the same general issues. Now that you have got the idea of writing it all down, this time I want you really to let go and write about all the ways you remember this or these experiences – sights, sounds, smells, memories, thoughts, feelings. You may link it up to other important things in your life. You may want to write about the same thing or about another aspect or event -- it is up to you.

Does anyone have any questions? (Pause) (deal with questions) OK, now, when you are ready you can start writing. I will let you know when the 15 minutes are nearly up.

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OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room, put your papers in the Big Blue Box.

Thank you so much for doing this. We really appreciate the effort you put into this. We know it can be a difficult task that brings up many thoughts and emotions. Thank you so much for doing this. The first day is always the most difficult. Some people can feel upset for a while. It can be like how you feel after seeing a sad or frightening movie. This is quite usual.

This is all we are going to do today. When you come back next time, we will be asking you to write about things in different ways. For many of you, you will find that today's writing will have been very helpful. For others, it may take a little longer. It is a bit like cleaning a wound. It may hurt at the start but then it heals over and you feel really better.

As you leave the room, please drop your papers in the box and as you do, feel that you are letting go of some of these painful experiences. There are some drinks and cookies next door. Help yourselves if you want to. We will see you here again tomorrow [if the writing is to be commenced later rephrase the wording accordingly]. If any of you do feel really upset, it is all right to talk to someone you feel comfortable with.

Thanks again. See you all tomorrow.

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Day Two

Welcome back to the second day of this three day project. Last time, you wrote about your thoughts and feelings about a very difficult event in your life. Today, we will be focusing on other aspects of these events. Again, this will be in two parts. Tomorrow [if the writing is to be commenced later rephrase the wording accordingly] will be the last day where you will be tying everything together.

[ask them how many felt better after yesterday. How many did not. Look around and see there are different ways people react but on the whole, hopefully, a good number feel better already.]

Any comments about yesterday; any questions about what you have been doing?

[deal with comments and questions]

OK, we're ready for the first writing exercise for today. I'd like you explore your thoughts and feelings about whatever emotional upheaval is bothering you the most. I want you to focus on some of the emotions that have come up after such an event(s).

After an event [remember to rephrase if the group have experienced multiple events] like the one you lived through, people often report that they thought they were going to die or that they were responsible for what happened. Many people think this way and we want you to write about what you now know – that you did not die; that you were not to blame.

You can write about the exact same things you wrote about yesterday, or you can write about something different – your family or other powerful emotions or experiences you have not told others about.

Does anyone have any questions? (Pause) (deal with questions) OK, now, when you are ready you can start writing. I will let you know when the 15 minutes are nearly up.

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OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room, put your papers in the Big Blue Box. Have a break for ten minutes.

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After the break:

Thanks for coming back. Does anyone have any questions? (deal with these while the stragglers are returning)

Before the break, you were asked to explore your thoughts and feelings about the event(s). This time you will continue dealing with the same general issues.

Write down the story about what happened to you and maybe include what you did that helped you to survive. A good story has a beginning, middle and an end. Most of you did something active to survive. Try to tell your story about what you

did then. Even though no one else will see your story, you will remember better what you did to survive.

Now that you have got the idea of writing it all down, this time I want you really to let go and write about all the ways you remember it – sights, sounds, smells, memories, thoughts, feelings. You may link it up to other important things in your life. You may want to write about the same thing or about another aspect or event -- it is up to you.

Does anyone have any questions? (Pause) (deal with questions) OK, now, when you are ready you can start writing. I will let you know when the 15 minutes are nearly up.

-o0o-

OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room, put your papers in the Big Blue Box.

Thank you so much for doing this. We really appreciate the effort you put into this. We know it can be a difficult task that brings up many thoughts and emotions. Since you have again been writing about some very important and possibly upsetting things, some of you may again feel upset for a while. This is quite usual.

This is all we are going to do today. Tomorrow [if the writing is to be commenced later rephrase the wording accordingly] will be the final chance to finish writing your story. When you come back next time, we will be asking you to write about things in different ways.

As you leave the room, please drop your papers in the box and as you do, feel that you are letting go of some of these painful experiences. There are some drinks and cookies next door. Help yourselves if you want to. We will see you here again tomorrow (or whatever). If any of you do feel really upset, it is all right to talk to someone you feel comfortable with.

Thanks again. See you all tomorrow [if the writing is to be commenced later rephrase the wording accordingly].

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Day Three

Welcome back to the last day of this three day project. Over the last two days, you wrote about your thoughts and feelings about a very difficult event/events in your life. Today, we will be focusing on other aspects of these events. Again, this will be in two parts.

Any comments about yesterday; any questions about what you have been doing?

[deal with comments and questions]

OK, we're ready for the first of today's writing exercises. You are free to choose to write again the way you did the first two days.

This event has affected not just you, but everyone else around you. The way you think and talk to people about it may have changed. However painful your experiences have been, you will have learned from them.

Think of another person [avoid saying 'one of your friends' as this introduces a social context] who has gone through a similar event/events. Knowing what helped you most or what you would have liked, what would you say to that other person?

Does anyone have any questions? (Pause) (deal with questions) OK, now, when you are ready you can start writing. I will let you know when the 15 minutes are nearly up.

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OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room, put your papers in the Big Blue Box. Have a break for ten minutes.

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After the break:

Thanks for coming back. Does anyone have any questions? (deal with these while the stragglers are returning)

This is the last exercise. Imagine that it is ten years on from now and you are looking back on what happened. How will you want to think about the event/events? What does it mean to you now and what do you think you will see as the most important part when you look back on it in ten years time.

Is there something you have not yet written about that you want to? This is your last time to put these things into the Big Blue Box. As you drop them in the box, then they will go away.

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OK, I want you to finish in a few moments. Finish up the sentence or idea you have at the moment. Now, as you leave the room put your papers in the Big Blue Box and as you do, feel that you are letting go of some of these painful experiences. There are some drinks and cookies next door. Help yourselves if you want to.

Although it may have been hard for you to write over these days you may already have learned that by writing about your experiences you have organised your story better. Hopefully it also has showed you a way to get more control over your reactions and feelings, although some may experience some reactions more over the next days than today. You can use this on your own at any time in the future. It does not need to be done in school or even in a group. You won't have a Blue Box at home, but you can keep or get rid of what you write as you choose.

You have all worked really hard and learned some new ways to help you in the future. Remember to leave all these feelings and memories behind you but please keep the pencil just to remind you of the new skills you have learned

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