



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

EXPRESSIVE WRITING

"Let your emotions guide your hand to the paper and watch how your sorrows can turn into beauty. For tears relieve your body but writing relieves your heart."

— Raneem Kayyali

OVERVIEW

Students explore their stresses and emotions through writing, which can help them feel empowered to cope with challenges.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When students are dealing with an emotional challenge
- When students are unsure of how they feel about something

TIME REQUIRED

- Less than 30 minutes (over four days, if possible)

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College
- Adult

MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil/Pen

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand that stepping back and taking time to evaluate their lives is an important process for making sense of their emotions
- Understand that they can feel more connected to their lives through writing
- Understand that writing can lead to feelings of empowerment and encouragement to take action

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a quiet moment to write about something that has been emotionally challenging for you--choose an event that you can handle, not a recent traumatic event. If you have the time, write for 20 minutes. Notice how you feel after you finish.
- Do you think writing about an emotional event is relevant to your students' lives, both in and out of school? Would they agree?
- Does this practice privilege your values over theirs in any way? For example, do you think that exploring your emotions is important to managing them, whereas students and parents do not?
- If your beliefs differ, is it possible to honor these differences in a way where none are viewed from a deficit lens?

INSTRUCTIONS

- Explain to students that most of us have gone through times of great stress and emotional upheaval—this is a normal part of life.
- Ask them about the strategies they use to help them through these times.
- Tell students that research has found that writing offers a simple, effective way to deal with challenges and the difficult feelings they bring up. The exercise they are about to do will give them an opportunity to try it.

- Ask students to think about an event in their life that has affected them emotionally that they would like to write about. If they cannot think of anything, they could also write about something important and personal to them.
- Guide students to choose an event that they can handle--they should not write about a trauma too soon after it has happened if it feels too overwhelming.
- Let students know that they will be writing for twenty minutes. [If you have the time in your schedule, let them know that they will do this same exercise over four consecutive days.]

WRITING TIPS

- Students should not worry about spelling or grammar
- Students should write only for themselves. Communicate to students that you will not be reading their work.
- Students should not be disturbed during the writing session.

CLOSURE

- In partners, small groups, or as a whole class, ask students to reflect on this exercise.
 - Do they agree with the research that writing can help work through some of the difficult emotions that challenging situations bring up?
 - Did they gain any insight into their experience or how they felt about it?
 - Would they do this exercise again or would they change it in any way?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What worked or didn't work for you in leading this practice? How did the students respond to the practice? Would you change anything for next time?
- Do you notice whether students are responding to emotional challenges in life with a different attitude after engaging in this practice?
- What adjustments were made to the practice based on student and family input? How did it go? (We encourage you to share your experience with other users in the comments section.)
- Did students discuss how this practice might relate to or be helpful or unhelpful in their lives?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Compared with a control group that wrote about superficial topics, [participants who wrote about traumatic experiences](#) for four consecutive days reported greater happiness three months later, visited the doctor less than usual during a six-week period following the writing exercise, and seemed to have a healthier immune system.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

When students experience a stressful event or major life transition, it's easy for them to ruminate over that experience; thinking about it can keep them up at night, distract them from school work, and make them feel less connected to others.

This exercise provides a simple, effective way to deal with these challenges and allows students to step back and evaluate their lives. Through writing, they can become active creators of their own life stories—rather than passive bystanders—and as a result feel more empowered to cope with challenges.

SOURCE

[James Pennebaker, Ph.D.](#), University of Texas at Austin

The University of Texas at Austin Office of Public Affairs