

## Activity: Recovering From Trauma

Research has found that many people feel better physically and mentally after writing about difficult emotional experiences they've faced, whether traumatic or not. Psychologist James Pennebaker created a simple writing exercise that multiple studies indicate is particularly helpful. If you choose to try it, you'll get more out of it by following these guidelines.

- Find a time and place you won't be disturbed, such as at the end of the day.
- Promise yourself to write for at least 15 minutes on 4 consecutive days.
- Write any way you like: by hand, computer or recording yourself talking.
- Write just for you, so you can be completely honest with yourself. Don't worry about grammar or spelling, just get your ideas down.
- Don't worry if you feel a little down after writing; sometimes sadness is part of healing. Most people report feeling better soon after.

You can write about the same thing each day or different things. Follow your feelings. Focus on things you find yourself worrying about too much, things that cloud your thoughts and dreams, things that are getting in the way of your life, things that you've been avoiding. If you feel you aren't up to writing about something, just choose something else. If you've just experienced a trauma, you may want to wait a while. Sleep it off. But if it's still troubling you after a few weeks, writing about it could help.

### Dr. Pennebaker's Writing Exercise

“Over the next four days, I want you to write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about an upheaval or issue in your life that is weighing on you. Really let go and explore your feelings and thoughts about it. In your writing, you might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. How is this experience related to who you would like to become, who you have been in the past, or who you are now?”

“Many people have not had a single traumatic experience but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors in our lives and you can write about them as well. You can write about the same issue every day or a series of different issues. Whatever you choose to write about, however, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic, read *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal* by James Pennebaker, Ph.D. and John Evans Ed.D.