**EXPRESSIVE WRITING – on your own**

 For the **SHARE** program *(Christopher Gilbert, PhD)*

The main researcher and developer of this technique is James Pennebaker, psychologist at U. of Texas.
 His major book is “Opening Up by Writing it Down.” Expressive writing has both mental and physical health benefits, and helps manage negative emotional experiences that don’t fade on their own.

**PREPARING TO WRITE**

First, decide on an experience, problem, or issue that “needs to be dealt with” – that you’re ready to work through. It may be recent or may have bothered you for years. Experiences to focus on might include trauma, rejection, regret/guilt, anger, shock, loss of a relationship, disgrace or embarrassment, or someone’s death. There may be something you’ve never talked about, or something you avoid because it’s just too painful. But pushing such things away gives them power. This therapeutic technique is a chance to put something behind you.

You may not want to begin with the biggest issue or worst experience – but pick something that truly bothers you, especially if you have not talked it through with anyone and have not written about it.

**WRITING**

After you’ve decided on something to work with, write about it continuously for at least ten minutes, on a computer or by hand. Let your feelings flow and keep writing what comes up. Describe not simply the bare facts, but your deep feelings and why it hit you so hard. If 10 minutes is not enough, write more. This is not meant for someone else to read but for yourself only, and you may choose to destroy it after writing it. Otherwise, reread it later and think about it.

Putting feelings into words is the heart of the technique. Doing this uses the most developed part of your mind, and helps you stand back from the raw experience in order to make sense out of it. This includes seeing the larger picture, reflecting on why it affected you, and interpreting the issue in a new way. Emotional traumas may seem frozen in time, but expressive writing helps “unfreeze” the memories by developing a larger perspective and increasing the emotional distance from them.

The goals are to feel less at the mercy of your emotions, make more sense of what happened, understand the factors that made it come about, and decide how to handle it. Writing about a major emotional issue helps you process it and change your response, rather than avoiding it or postponing closure – like a wound that never heals.

Ideally, try to write daily for a few weeks and see if you begin to feel better. The quality of the memory of should become less “hot” and more tolerable. Extensive research over the last 25 years has shown the beneficial effects on health of expressive writing done for just a few weeks, assuming there is something big that needs to be talked or written about. Stress-related problems such as chronic pain, blood pressure, mood, sleep, immune function, and general functioning usually get better.

If all this sounds promising to you, take a look at Pennebaker’s book (mentioned at the top of the page) or do an internet search for “expressive writing.” Don’t let your past sabotage your present.