

Expressive Writing Toolkit

For Frontline Workers and
Human Rights Defenders
Working in Crisis

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Acknowledgements

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Cover Photograph: Farah Sankari, Akkar.

Foreword

Expressive Writing as a self-care tool for social workers, human rights defenders and others:

Traumatic and stressful experiences have some very specific biochemical effects on the brain. In particular, they can affect the way in which memory is processed, even disrupting the important process of being able to recount experience or tell a coherent life story. Research has repeatedly shown that the ability to tell a clear and coherent life story is one of the best indicators of good mental health.

Recent psychotherapeutic research has demonstrated that story-telling is how human beings give meaning to their life experiences. Life story telling gives a meaningful shape to those experiences, setting out a past, present and future, and in doing so establishes an understanding of life's purpose. It is through story-telling that human experience can be rendered meaningful.

This idea is vital to our understanding of the therapeutic value of life-stories of all kinds, but is particularly interesting for clarifying the specific usefulness of expressive and creative forms of writing rather than purely factual disclosures of traumatic details in the case of trauma.

As Expressive Writing draws on imagination as well as memory, those affected by traumatic events use these story-telling approaches to help detach and reimagine those events from new points of view. And it is through detaching from the traumatic past and imagining other ways of feeling and seeing that these participants can create a future meaningful life story for themselves as they give meaning to their past experiences, both painful and otherwise.

Stressful or traumatic memories are labelled and stored differently from non-traumatic memories by the brain. Traumatic memories tend to be more disorganized, fragmented and non-chronological and this disorganization can lead to such memories feeling ever-present on the one hand, and without clear meaning or context on the other, resulting in negative and lasting effects including feeling overwhelmed. Social workers and human rights defenders are likely to be at the front line of stressful experiences at work and this toolkit of expressive writing techniques is designed to enable one method of addressing those stressors.

Expressive Writing directly targets the reduction of intrusive thoughts and unhelpful avoidance of everyday experiences by gradually guiding participants to write about a full range of life events, both good and bad.

In doing so, the participants are able to forge a new “life story” for themselves – one that takes into account supportive and loving experiences as well as other events by reflecting deeply and staying focused on each event and each feeling for a set period of time. As a result, participants should experience a reduction in anxiety and a stronger sense of resilience and emotional strength.

The effectiveness of Expressive Writing for supporting mental well-being has been found across diverse groups in studies conducted in the US, Mexico, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Iraq, Lebanon, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Research projects using Expressive Writing have included college students, maximum security psychiatric inmates, unemployed engineers, holocaust survivors, women victims of sexual violence in conflict, refugee communities and diverse patient cohorts who suffer from chronic pain, arthritis, asthma, breast cancer, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Conclusions

Expressive Writing is a cost-effective, easy to use tool to designed help people cope with upheavals of many kinds. The exercises in this project have been specially adapted for use by Social Workers during and after the COVID-19 outbreak, and they outline a program which would be suitable for any care worker or human rights defender in high-stress arenas. Expressive Writing enables the development of a ‘coping tool-kit’ of strategies that can help guard against burnout and depression and alleviate the symptoms of these after the fact.

The stress and trauma experienced by frontline care workers in any particular crisis is unique and pervasive. It has the potential to wreak havoc on those workers by interfering with normal cognitive functioning and disrupting social relationships. Guided writing about stressful events or trauma can enable those workers to express and explore their emotions, both good and bad, to better regulate their coping behaviours, and to reflect and reimagine those events from new points of view. In doing so, they can think more clearly, be more focused, and enjoy the support provided by closer social relationships. Expressive Writing not only helps participants to produce coherent life stories but can also provide a sense of control over that life story: through the act of writing, the storyteller becomes in charge of their own story.

Dr Siobhan Campbell and Dr Meg Jensen

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Expressive Writing: The Exercises and Guidelines

What is 'Expressive Writing'?

Expressive Writing is creative or imaginative writing, usually arising directly from life experience, which allows for thoughts and feelings to be expressed as part of the writing. It is a particular type of coping strategy often used for survivors of trauma, in which they write out their thoughts and feelings about a stressful or traumatic experience in various ways.

Expressive Writing has been found to improve physical and psychological health. In regard to Post Traumatic Stress, in particular, expressive life writing has been shown to have a number of benefits including improved coping and posttraumatic growth (or the ability to find meaning in and have positive life changes following a traumatic event), as well as reduced PTS symptoms, tension, and anger.

It has been adopted as a form of writing therapy and was developed as primarily by a James Pennebaker in the late 1980s. His studies showed that allowing thoughts and feelings enter into writing was therapeutic for the group who undertook it, as evidenced in comparison with the control group who wrote as objectively and neutrally as possible about selected topics. The Campbell-Jensen approach is adapted for use in humanitarian/crisis settings and is called Expressive Life Writing.

About the Exercises

Much of the background thinking for the exercises adapted for this handbook comes from Pennebaker and other leaders in the field of writing therapy, also known as bibliotherapy, such as Kathleen Adams and Nicholas Mazza. The exercises here, re-adapted for use by front-line workers, often working in crisis situations, are the culmination of several years of research by Dr. Siobhan Campbell (The Open University UK) and Dr. Meg Jensen (Kingston University UK). Their *Expressive Life Writing Handbook* (Beyond Borders, 2016) created the Campbell/Jensen methods for expressive writing and telling after conflict and in conflicted environments.

Participants begin with shorter exercises to establish a positive relationship with the practice of expression through words before moving towards exercises that more expressly elicit thoughts and feelings.

The final exercises allow for a raised awareness of the self. They move to using words to generate insights lodged in stories that can create a

separation between the participant and the events—what we described earlier as ‘detaching’—and allow for moving on from traumatic experience.

Before you engage with expressive life writing, you should be aware that writing in this manner may engage feelings which you may want to discuss with a support professional. Though the exercises here may be self-administered, this is still the case. We advise therefore that you take the ‘Brief resilience scale’ questionnaire below. The resilience scale is a tool with which to measure the ability of people to bounce back from the stress, and the one from Smith and colleagues (2008) is highly recommended (Windle et al., 2011). In terms of your answers, this is how the authors advise interpretation:

BRS score	Interpretation
1.00-2.99	Currently experiencing feelings of Low resilience
3.00-4.30	Currently experiencing feelings of Normal resilience
4.31-5.00	Currently experiencing feelings of High resilience

If you are in the ‘Low’ range, we advise that you seek support from your organisation, institution or local care-givers. They may arrange for further support for you. When you have accessed that support, you can ask them if partaking in expressive life writing could be part of that, if you wish. What is important to note is that low resilience is not a fixed state, and that it can often depend on your current circumstances. Highly resilient and medium resilient people may become less resilient due to their environment.

If you are in the ‘Normal’ or the ‘High’ range, we note that this is not a fixed level of feelings of resilience and that you may well also need support so it’s best to know where to access that before you begin expressive life writing.

The BRS is on the next page. Fill this out first and then read the above again before you begin. If you or your organisation is working with the Expressive Writing Project (Campbell/Jensen), you will have a separate information sheet and consent form and these will set out the supports available to you.

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)

	Please respond to each item by marking <u>one box per row</u>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
BRS ₁	I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
BRS ₂	I have a hard time making it through stressful events.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
BRS ₃	It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
BRS ₄	It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
BRS ₅	I usually come through difficult times with little trouble.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
BRS ₆	I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1

Scoring: Add the responses varying from 1-5 for all six items giving a range from 6-30. Divide the total sum by the total number of questions answered.

My score: _____ item average / 6

At the beginning of the exercises below, we encourage you to do two stress-relieving exercises.

After every four exercises of expressive life writing, there is another stress-relieving exercise. You may of course do these at any time throughout the process.

Preparing to Write – Exercises for relieving stress

In preparing to write expressively, these exercises will help you feel less tense and will begin to release your inner voice and creativity.

We suggest that you do both of these the first time you come to use this toolkit. After that, you can do one or the other and you can sometimes do both.

Tense and Release exercise

(adapted from the EAMH-SL, PFA manual)

purpose: to release tension and to prepare to write

timing: 5 to 8 minutes

resources: a safe place in which to sit down or to lie down, preferably with no noise interruptions

PROCESS:

- Begin standing/sitting/lying down.
- Breathe in, tense everything in your body – make your hands into fists, draw your shoulders back, brace your legs, squeeze your toes, squeeze your face muscles.
- Breathe out deeply through your mouth (a big sighing sound), releasing all the tension. Let the shoulders and hands soften. Let the legs be really heavy, toes relaxed. Relax the belly, the face, the jaw, and feel the skin of the face softening.
- Repeat this several times. Notice the difference between tensing and releasing. Enjoy the feeling of softness and heaviness when you relax. With each breath out, imagine you are letting any bad feelings melt away into the ground.

You can explain: By tensing our muscles and then releasing them, we can see where we are holding tension. We can relax these areas and release the stress also.

ALTERNATIVES:

Using Hands to Release Stress

- Make a fist with one hand.

- Take a breath in and imagine you are squeezing any worries, anger and frustration you feel into your fist. Hold your breath.
- Now squeeze your hand really tight, taking hold of those worries. Breathe out deeply, releasing your fingers and letting the stress and worries go.

Safety:

The exercise should take place in a calm and safe environment with no noise interruptions.

Note: this exercise is also suitable for groups. The above can be used to provide instructions to a group.

Bit by bit body scan

Purpose: to reconnect with each area of your body in turn. This can have the effect of 'waking up' zones of the body as well as waking up the imagination.

Timing: this is best done slowly over 20 minutes if you can. But it can still have a positive effect if done for less time.

Resources: a safe place to lie down, without noise if possible.

PROCESS:

- Sit or lie down in any way that you feel comfortable. Close your eyes. You may like to move your arms away from your body in a relaxed fashion.
- Feel the rising and falling of your chest and stomach with each breath in and out.
- Take a few moments to listen to your whole body, from head to toe, the feeling of the air on your skin, and the places where your body touches the floor or chair.
- Take a deep breath in, and breathe out any tension in your body.
- Now concentrate on the tips of your toes. See if you can feel them, give them a wiggle!
- Imagine, as you breathe in, sending the breath down into your toes. As you breathe out, release all tension from the toes.
- Imagine a feeling of relaxation beginning to flow from the tips of your toes across the soles and tops of your feet. This feeling of relaxation may be warm, or cool, or simply calm and soft.
- Let this feeling of relaxation start to flow up to your ankles, and then past your ankles to your calves, shins and knees.
- Let this feeling of relaxation rise up the legs to the front and back of the thighs. Breathe in some softness into the whole of the legs, and

breathe out, imagine all the heavy muscles of the legs relaxing down away from the bones.

- Allow the feeling of relaxation continue to spread up through the body, into the lower stomach area and the back.
- Allow the flow of relaxation to rise higher, travelling up your back and front, to your chest and upper back. Feel the area around your collarbones widen and relax. Allow there to be softness at your heart. Allow your shoulders to relax down into the ground.
- Let your upper arms relax, then your elbows, lower arms, and wrists. Feel the relaxation spread to your hands. Feel your opened palms, the softness at the tip of each finger and thumb. Let your hands be heavy, and relaxed.
- Allow your shoulders to relax even further. Allow the neck to be long and easy, as the feeling of relaxation flows higher, into the back of the skull (heavy and grounded).
- Feel the relaxation spread through your jaw, your mouth, your cheeks, and nose.
- Feel your eyelids, heavy and relaxed. Feel the softness behind the eyes.
- Can you notice your eyebrows relaxing, your ears relaxing and the skin around your mouth relaxing?
- Let the relaxation spread further to the crown of your head.
- Your entire body now is relaxed and calm.
- Take a deep breath, breathing in openness and ease... and release the breath. Breathe out any remaining tension. (Do this three times)
- If you notice any remaining areas of tension, allow your awareness to rest here for a few moments. Breathe in, and let your breath flow into that area. Feel the breath out carry the tension away. Return to a sense of your whole body resting here, feeling the relaxation flowing throughout your whole body, from your head to your feet to your heart.

SAFETY: The exercise should take place in a calm and safe environment with no noise interruptions.

Note: this exercise is also suitable for groups. The above can be used to provide instructions to a group.

Now you can begin to write!

Writing expressively, even for a few minutes per day, can have a profound beneficial effect. Your thought processes and your mood can benefit in surprising ways.

Before you write, do one of the stress- relieving exercises above. Or, as you progress through this tool-kit, you will see other examples of breathing and de-stressing exercises. If you prefer these, do one of these before you write.

If you can, find a place to write in which you feel comfortable. If possible, ensure that there will be no interruptions for the fifteen minutes that you will set aside to write. Some participants like to set aside 15 minutes at the very start or at the very end of the day.

These writing suggestions and prompts are designed to allow you to start writing in short bursts, sometimes with just single word responses. They are designed to be fun and easy to do. There are no wrong answers!

The suggestion is that you begin with 15 minutes, which includes doing a stress relieving exercise. Once you have written for a few days for that length of time, you can add another 5 or 10 minutes to your writing time. Or, you can do 15 minutes in the morning and 15 at one other point in the day.



Getting Started

- it just takes five minutes to begin!

Sit in a place you feel comfortable and take a moment to feel how your breath goes in and out, in and out, a few times before you begin.

Using the following as your prompt, write your responses, trusting that your first thoughts are true to you and therefore valuable. What are the 3 things you like most about yourself?

1.

2.

3.

What are your best traits?

What is the biggest compliment you have ever received?

What makes you proud?

What are 3 facts about you that not many people know?

1.

2.

3.

What is your favourite song? What does it mean to you?

Build on getting started

Now write five sentences on one of your memories that still brings you joy. Say when and where it happened. Say how you felt then and how you feel now.



Taking hold of the present moment

You may feel that you don't have time but this is an exercise that you can do on a day like that as it only takes 5 minutes.

'Detaching', even for these few minutes, to jot something down for the following, can generate real effects.

1. Even in the midst of my busy life, I am grateful for these three things:

1.
2.
3.

2. Three expectations that I have for today are:

1.
2.
3.

3. I am highly skilled at some of these and I'm pretty good at others (circle your skills and add more underneath)

Listening	Supporting Colleagues	Empathising
Doing my job well	Showing Patience	Retaining Good Humour

4. I am also good at the following things (in my family, in my life outside And...

5. What I like most about myself today is



Seeing the world up close

Noticing the smallest details of life can help us to cope with the largest changes in life.

Write to describe something you have seen, as if to someone who cannot see it. They will need to know the details of shapes and colours, of sounds and even smells. You can also use touch by saying 'if I were to touch the..... (gate, bark, petal, wall etc) it might feel like.....

What you notice will be particular to you and that's what makes this a form of expressive writing

Try one of these:

- what I can see out of my window at home or at work
- what I noticed on my way to work or to the store
- a view I saw that remains in my mind



Writing to your best 'you'

Writing to yourself as 'you' can feel good. You feel 'seen'.

It can be a way of acknowledging what you have been through as well as a way of looking forward.

The warm-up (5)

You have things you dislike that are unique to you.

It might be salt that won't pour or umbrellas that break at the first gust of wind. It might be the way your colleague's leg shakes the table in the canteen or the way the day darkens early in winter.

Write a sentence to yourself, filling in your particular dislikes. Remember that the 'you' is your *self* – complex and unique!

You are a great person but your dislikes include

.....

And

and when it comes to other people, the thing you most dislike is when they

Now you have warmed up -

Try this. Write quite quickly and don't worry about what you write. You can always do it again another day – with different results! (10 minutes)

Before this stressed period or crisis period, you enjoyed these three things:

You liked to

You felt happy when.....

You were most relaxed when.....

During this stressed or crisis period, there were changes, but you found other, maybe smaller things, to sustain you in your life:

You smiled when.....

You allowed yourself to cry when.....

You were aware of the help of others when.....

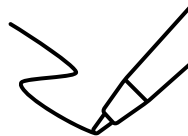
And for the future, what would you like to envisage for yourself?

These can be big or small things. Maybe think of something that you can definitely make happen (like having some nice food), then one that's a bit of a stretch (like taking up a hobby or sport) and then one that is an aspiration (like a holiday).

You plan to

You will enjoy doing this:.....

You hope for this to happen:.....



Breathing exercise: Belly Breathing

PROCESS:

When we are stressed our breathing becomes shallow, high in our chests, and we forget to breathe deeply into our bellies.

This exercise will help you to calm yourself through focusing and controlling the way in which you breathe. Please read the instructions through, and then begin:

- Close your eyes.
- Bring your hands to your lower belly with your two middle fingers touching.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Take a long, deep, gentle breath in, and so that your belly gets bigger (keep your shoulders relaxed). You should find that your middle fingers will pull apart slightly as the belly expands with the breath.
- Breathe out slowly, feeling how the belly comes in and the middle fingers touch again.

Do this abdominal breathing a minimum of ten times (Breathe In/Breathe Out x 10).

SAFETY: Remember it is important that the exercise should only take place in a calm and safe environment with no noise interruptions.



Transitions and Transformations

Transitioning into a post-crisis world – whatever that looks like to you - is going to be a challenge.

Keeping up your writing practice can be a daily and a weekly support in this.

Remember that you are the same person as your pre-stressed self, even though you may be marked by the experience. You may be able to bring newly learned aspects of yourself forward to the future.

Writing about transformations

It's a good idea to think in terms of events or occasions when something changed. Those occasions will come to your mind if you take a few minutes to think about them. Is there a time you felt embarrassed? Is there a time when you said something you shouldn't have? Is there a time when you learned something that has stayed with you?

When you remember something that has emotions attached to the memory, you are likely to think about the details. And it's the details that make all the difference.

You might recall a time you learned a new skill, or when someone said something surprising, or when you discovered you were right, or wrong, about something. These are the kinds of memories that stay in our minds.

Take a few minutes to jot down three ideas for these transitions (one sentence or note of five words each is good)

When this happened:

The time that:

I remember the moment when:

Now, choose some (or all) of the following starter words and write a very short story (10 or 12 sentences) about a time when you experienced a transition or transformation.

Do give a sense of when and where it was, and what exactly happened.

Before.....

During.....

After.....

Until.....

Every

That day

You can end this reflection with a sentence about how you felt at the time, and how you feel about this now.

Then, I felt:.....

Now, looking back, I feel:



Looking back from a far distance

You have just turned 200 years of age. Taking either the Covid-19 experience, or your experience of another crisis time, or memorable happening, attempt this exercise. The crisis happened over 100 years ago.

A 30-year-old you know asks you what your take-aways were from that time.

Use these questions as a way in to write 10 or 12 sentences which are a kind of story of your experience.

What do you say that you learned personally?

What do you think you learned about yourself?

What lessons did society learn or were there things learned locally to you that you remember?

You might end the story with a sentence that starts 'If I knew then what I know now, I would..... '



Writing your life – both the good and the bad!

Writing can reach to the truth and that truth is often messy, just like real life.

When people call health workers 'heroes', you may feel pride or a mixture of pride and discomfort. It can be difficult to think of yourself as a hero. Some days you have are better than others, like everyone else. Perhaps it's easier if we allow for both the ups and the downs, the good days and the bad days.

Take ten minutes to write down two or three things for each of these:

What is your greatest accomplishment?

What are you most thankful for?

What would your ideal day be?

What is a fault of yours that you would change if you could?

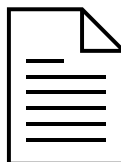
Now, think of a person who has done something to inspire you. This can be someone you know or someone you have never met. Something about their life or what they say or write has inspired you in some way.

For some, this will be a famous person in popular culture. For others, it might be their grandmother or other relative.

Now take 10 minutes to write about how this person is different from you. Say why they have inspired you and say what characteristics or habits they have that you do not have.

At the end, try this: write one sentence that begins – if I were to be more like (name the person) in my life, the one thing I might change is:

.....



The Past in the Present

Isolation and solitude are heightened by stress and crisis but paradoxically, our need to connect with each other is acute. The generations are forced apart – children and grandchildren cannot be in the presence of parents and grandparents. And families of health workers and carers are deeply affected, with many staying away from their loved ones.

We long for connection, all the more so because we cannot have it.

This set of prompts rests on the idea of the letter. And perhaps the handwritten letter might yet have its time again? The letter is a point-in-time pen portrait. It captures expressively a set of feelings and a situation because it uses a personal authentic voice.

In this exercise, you can write exactly as if you are writing down the conversation you have in your mind. A letter can let you express the most important things, without interruption.

You might like to do one of these, or two if you've time. Think about what the person you are addressing might like to know about your life and what you have been going through. Sometimes just describing the harder times in our lives can bring some relief from anxiety.

Write a letter to someone you have not seen for a while

Write a letter to someone you care about

Write a letter to someone you work with or have worked with in the past



Tree pose exercise (a well-being exercise)

SAFETY: Remember it is important that the exercise should only take place in a calm and safe environment with no interruptions.

PROCESS: Find a space to stand in where you have enough room to stretch your arms out without touching anything/anybody.

Bring your feet hip-width apart, with your toes pointing forward.

Rock slightly forward and back, and then find your centre point, standing tall. Relax your shoulders.

Close your eyes.

Think about your feet. Relax your toes, spread them wide.

Imagine there are roots growing out from your feet into the earth, spreading wide, just like the roots of a tree.

Imagine how strong those roots are. Just like a tree, those roots help you to be strong and steady, and grow up tall from the earth.

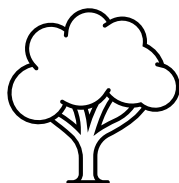
Imagine those roots are helping you to draw in good things, just like roots. They help you to draw in nourishment, and they help you to grow stronger and taller.

Feel how that goodness can travel all the way up through your body, through your legs, to your belly, up to your heart, growing tall like a tree, and up to the top of your head.

Relax your shoulders.

Now, breathe that goodness from the depths of the roots to the tips of your arms which are the branches. Let your arms rise up from your sides as you breathe in. When you take in that full breath, hold it, arms outstretched or arms upwards, for a few seconds, then let it out slowly.

You are now ready to return to the writing.



Letter from the future

Imagine yourself either five years from now or a decade from now.

You will still be the same person, but you will have had other experiences, other joys and other moments of transformation.

In this exercise, you are going to write, as if from your future self, to you as you are now.

First think about these questions for a moment:

What has your future self to say that might be supportive and calming of how you feel right now?

What will the distance of time provide to your future self?

Now write some headings that your future self might find important (these might or might not be the same things that are important to you now).

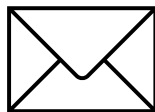
Possible themes for a letter might include:

You in relation to family; or you in relation to your work or career; or you in relation to things you enjoy like music or walking or reading or gossiping.

Now that you have some themes jotted down, write a letter to your present self from the future.

Open it with where you now are and what you are now doing. Then say a few sentences about each of the themes to your present self.

Finish with some words of wisdom that your future self wants you to hear.



Scrap-booking your life story

This exercise is adapted for Expressive Writing from a creative writing exercise called 'Scrap booking' in *Take Ten for Writers* by B. Neubauer (2009, p68).

Scrap books are blank books into which people glue special memories and mementoes such as tickets, souvenir programmes, ribbon from a bunch of flowers, notes from other people and such like.

Sometimes it's fun to use a writing prompt to lead into a short story from your own life. A writing prompt is sometimes a phrase or snippet of words which you can react to and use as a place to start writing from. In this exercise, the 'scraps' are a bunch of phrases.

All thoughts are good thoughts in terms of writing. There is no wrong way to do this!

In this exercise, you need to imagine yourself choosing one of the two piles of scraps. You can pick number 1 or number 2 below.

From the pile that you pick, you will use one scrap or phrase to help you give your story a title. The title doesn't have to use the words in the scrap but it might be inspired by them.

You will use two other scraps to help you make up the content. Here again, you don't need to use the words in the scrap itself but what you write down when you read the scrap are your ideas for the story.

In the same way, you will use one scrap to help you think of an ending.

Pick from 1 or 2 below for your 'pile' Just pick quickly – without reading what's there too closely.

1. The name of the first place you travelled as an adult; the chorus of a song you have had stuck in your mind; the first line of a nursery rhyme you remember; the name of a character from a movie you saw as a child; a favourite vegetable; what you would ideally put into a smoothie; the name you used to wish your parents had called you.

2. A description of your childhood bedroom; two kinds of footwear you have; the name of a favourite thing you cook in an oven; an expression you use a lot; a wish you had that came true; a smell you like and why; the last place you visited as a tourist; a description of the last time you bought an item of clothing.

Now, using and adapting as you go, pick one thing that gives you a title and a couple of things that you can fit into an anecdote from your life, along with one more thing that leads you to an ending. The story you come up with may seem whacky or whimsical, or it may be quite moving.

But one thing is certain – it is expressively *you*. Well done for trying this! And don't worry about how silly it may be. The concept of serious playfulness underpins this kind of writing. And our emotions often become most expressive when we are doing associative writing like this.



Further fun letters

Now you have established a writing practice, you can try these free-writing exercises when you make your time to write.

5-minute notes –You can decide whether to send or not!

A note to yourself with a secret you have not told anyone else

A note of apology that's long overdue

A note to someone you've lost touch with over the years

10-minute letters

A note of thanks to your favourite creative person

A letter of praise to someone dear to you

A letter to a loved one to be opened on a special birthday

A story-based exercise to sum up your initial phase of expressive writing.

This is a two-part exercise. You write a story from life in the first part. You reflect on how you feel about the process of writing in the second part.

Each part of this exercise can be done in ten minutes, but you may prefer to take twenty minutes for part one and a further ten minutes for part two. It's up to you. At this stage you know best what works for you.

Part 1: First take a few minutes to think about incidents within the past year that have been important to you. These could be in your life at work or in your home life, or elsewhere. You will know that the event or circumstance was something important if it comes to mind quite quickly.

Pick one of these incidents that you would like to write about.

Now, for each of the following, jot down some initial phrases, words or sentences:

1. What happened?
2. Who was there?
3. What time of day did this happen and in what season?
4. What setting did this happen in? Were there sights or sounds or textures that you associate with this setting?
5. How did you feel about this incident at the time and how do you feel about it now?
6. Why do you think that it matters to you? Why might you recall it so vividly?

Now you are going to use your notes to write a short scene (10–12 sentences) describing what happened. You have the option to use the third person point of view and the past tense. That would mean that instead of saying 'I' as in 'I did this', 'I went there', you would use your name: Jean did that, Jean went there. This is a suggestion that can help see the scene as a story.

Try to give some sense of the place, of the other characters involved and of the time. A descriptive sentence about the setting can help to do this, such as 'The hallway was crowded and noisy' or 'It was cold and dark outside...' etc.

Towards the end, give a sense of why this incident mattered to the main character. How does that main character feel about it now?

When drafted, re-read your scene, considering whether there's a better sentence to open it and to end it. You may find that the first couple of sentences can be eliminated from a first draft as they are often just there as a way to get going. See if, on re-reading, you need every sentence that you have.

You have now written something you can call a story and you can return to this and revise it later on.



Part 2: To reflect upon how you feel about doing expressive writing, you can use the 'Weather Model' (Maclean 2016). This provides a simple way to think about the process. It invites you to think and reflect using the following stages:

Sunshine – what part of your experience with Expressive Writing went well?

Rain – What didn't go well?

Lightning – what came as a shock or surprise?

Fog – what didn't you understand or wish were made clearer to you?

Take five minutes to write down something about your experience of expressive writing, and about this summarizing exercise in particular using the four 'weathers' as your prompt. The beauty of this model is that it is, in itself, expressive. It allows you to express the full range of feelings you may have had during this process, the good, the bad and the neutral.

Well done! You have now completed several expressive writing exercises. Hopefully, you have also experienced something of what it offers as a self-care tool.

To continue with the process you've begun, and to capitalise on your abilities, we invite you to keep up with daily writing. Making an appointment with yourself at the same time in the day is one way to do this. And it can be done quite quickly as you have seen.
