



Writing About Intensely Positive Experiences

Happiness

Intervention

5-10 min

Client

Yes



Goal

This exercise aims to increase the client's mood by writing about a positive experience for three consecutive days.



Advice

- Why does this exercise work? Past research has shown that writing about positive emotional experiences can lead to improvements in well-being similar to those that emerge when writing about negative experiences. For instance, King and Miner's (2000) study showed that writing only about the positive aspects of a traumatic experience was associated with the same health benefits as writing about trauma. Moreover, King (2001) showed that participants who wrote about their best possible future selves showed physical health benefits and enhanced psychological well-being after writing. Based on these findings, King (2001, 2002) suggested that writing about topics that allow individuals to understand better their emotional reactions may facilitate physical health, regardless of the emotional tone of the writings themselves.
- It is important to note that the present writing activity does not have to be long. Even when participants write for as little as two minutes, they experience benefits from writing about something good.
- Although this exercise can be used as a relatedly simple tool to induce a positive mood, research on the Broaden and Build Theory (1998) suggests that the effects may reach beyond "feeling good." According to the Broaden and Build Theory, positive emotional experiences can have enduring benefits for the individual. For instance,

research supports the effects of positive mood on creativity and efficient problem solving (Isen, 1999, 2001). In other words, the positive emotions that may arise from this exercise may also positively contribute to the client's coping skills.

- Note that Burton and King's study (2004) did not include long-term measures of mood or well-being. As a result, whether the positive effects of this exercise persist over time is unclear.
- One of the greatest pitfalls of doing this exercise is that it focuses too much on evaluating positive feelings. Typically, writing tends to invoke organization, integration, analysis, and a methodical approach. Although this is beneficial in the context of negative feelings (i.e., when processing negative events), it might interfere with the experience of positive feelings (i.e., when processing positive events). For example, processing a joy analytically, step by step, may lead to the consideration of the possible counterfactuals (e.g., "What if I had not been at the right place at the right time?"), to the questioning of one's good fortune (e.g., "Who am I to deserve this?"), or to the deliberation of possible downsides (e.g., "My friends might be very jealous now"). Consequently, a systematic analysis of positive events through writing could be detrimental as it may reduce the pleasure associated with them and even result in negative emotions, such as guilt or worry (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). Therefore, clients should be encouraged to focus on describing the event and the feelings rather than on analyzing them.



References

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Instructions

In this exercise, you are going to write about positive experiences. You will complete this exercise for three consecutive days.

Instructions for day 1:

“Think of the most wonderful experience or experiences in your life, happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music, or suddenly “being hit” by a book or painting or from some great creative moment. Choose one such experience or moment. Try to imagine yourself at that moment, including all the feelings and emotions associated with the experience. Now write about the experience in as much detail as possible, trying to include the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that were present at the time. Please try your best to re-experience the emotions involved” (Burton & King, 2004; p. 155).

Instructions for day 2:

“You may either write about the same experience as yesterday, or you may choose a new one” (Burton & King, 2004; p. 155).

Instructions for day 3:

“You may either write about the same experience as yesterday, or you may choose a new one” (Burton & King, 2004; p. 155).