

Writing About Intensely Positive Experiences

A large body of research has shown that writing about important and traumatic life experiences causes robust improvements in a wide variety of indicators of well-being (for an overview, see Smyth, 1998). Although most writing studies have involved writing about negative emotional experiences (see King, 2002, for a review), research has increasingly been focusing on exploring writing topics that include positive experiences.

In a study by Burton and King (2004), mood measures were taken before and after participants wrote about either an intensely positive experience (IPE) or a neutral topic for 20 minutes each day for three consecutive days. The results showed that writing about IPEs was associated with an enhanced positive mood along with significantly fewer health centre visits for illness, compared to controls.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to increase the client's mood by writing about a very positive experience for 20 minutes each time, over three consecutive days.

Advice

Why does this exercise work? Past research has shown that writing about positive emotional experiences can cause similar improvements in well-being compared to writing about negative experiences. For instance, a study by King and Miner (2000) 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 as well as enhanced psychological well-being after writing. Based on these findings, King (2001, 2002) suggested that writing about topics that allow individuals to better understand what their emotional reactions mean, 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 a long activity. In fact, even when participants wrote for as little as two minutes, they experienced benefits from writing about something good.
- Although this exercise can be used as a simple tool for inducing a positive mood, research on Broaden and Build Theory (1998) suggests that the effects may reach beyond "feeling good". According to Broaden and Build Theory, positive emotional experiences can have enduring benefits for the individual. For instance, research provides evidence for the effects of positive mood on creativity and efficient problem solving (Isen, 1999, 2001). In other words, the positive emotions that may arise as a result of this exercise may also positively contribute to the client's coping skills.
- Note that in Burton and King's study (2004), no long-term measures of mood or well-being were administered. As a result, it remains unclear whether the positive effects of this exercise are persistent over time. However, we take a shower for hygiene each day, so a healthy and beneficial habit is always advised.

Tool description

Instructions

In this exercise, you are going to write about positive experiences. You will complete this exercise over 3 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 in 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.”

Instructions for day 3

And again, “You may either write about the same experience as yesterday, or you may choose a new one.”