

# Affectability of positive and negative written personal accounts



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Expressive writing paradigm, positive and negative affect, positive meaning finding finding and positive affect. An individual's conduct of thoughts and feelings disclosure relating to aspects of their life is often utilized through expressive writing as a therapeutic strategy. This act is more formally recognized as the expressive writing paradigm (Nicholls, 2009), describing the health benefits of expressive writing production. Rebuttals against this theory include its lack of a clear definition in regard to the reasons it proves an effective therapy (Sloan & Marx, 2004), though its effectiveness remains undisputed.

Expressive writing in studies can include a variety of different topic suggestion in analysis of any emotion from traumatic events to immense positive experiences. Emotional expression has been shown to effect general satisfaction positively or negatively dependent on the correlated emotion to the subject of concern. Further enhancing this suggestion is the notion of strengthened self-efficacy through emotional expression (Kirk, Schuster, & Hint, 2011). Already, implications of its use in positive regard becomes more applicable in applying positivist more generally as a result of written divergence.

Writing has proven a powerful tool across studies in both mental and physical responses. An experiment conducted on Swedish athletes found a positive correlation between the writing of positive self-talk and reaction times (Seedater, Spender, & Sør-Darlene, 2012). Another more extreme case of expressive writing incorporation was used in a 2012 study. This study focused on the positive outcomes of the experience and was found to exhibit

positive effects on common survivor constraints as fatigue, intrusive thoughts, post-traumatic stress and so on.

Yet another study of interest involves the SE of expressive writing, though not with an observer's direction of positive or negative affect. This study simply engaged participants to write down their traumatic experience. Outcomes of which included decreased physician visits and use of aspirin over time (Baneberry & Bell, *Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding*, 1986). These studies lie among a multitude of others (Kelly, 2012) - all of which indicate a significant positive impact of expressive writing on general satisfaction (Baneberry & Chunk, 2007).

One argument against this expressive rating paradigm is that the use of written emotions is not necessarily the promoter of positive affect. Instead, the act of expressing emotions in any form will release tension of the event (Baneberry, 1997). Expressive writing may be said to provide means for structure and organization of an individual's emotions in a way they may never have thought about, or never have wanted to think about (Baneberry, 1997). This written account allows for little emotional repression if the participant involves themselves entirely in the process.

This leaves open the argument that different harpies may produce different results and with a society of subjectivity, this argument remain undisputed. Nonetheless, expressive writing cannot be undermined as a sound means for effective therapy. Interestingly, a study set forth to decipher whether written trauma showed increased positive affect than vocalism the trauma in a public setting (Fez, Valances, & Gonzalez, 1999). The study found that a

written account of the trauma proved more negatively provoking than revealing in a public setting.

Although further research needs to take place on this issue, it is hypothesized that written trauma is too intense, flooding emotions that the participant found more anxiety provoking than in a setting amongst other trauma victims. Linked to the term, as mentioned, are a number of different theories. As is with the case with many psychological theories, a singular theory is not applicable. To some, this may prove reason to avoid its use (Kelly, 2012). It may also be argued, however, that subjectivity among individuals necessitates more than a singular theory.

Of these theories is the concept that the act of interacting with an emotional vent in a more analytical sense may provide an outlet (Baneberry, 1997). It is thought that this outlet may reduce a traumatic influence of the event or enhance and remind of a pleasant memory. Furthermore, interacting with the event forces the individual to structure and organize an event in a way that they may have not previously thought about, or have wanted to think about. It is thought that this may bring clarity of the situation, release and perhaps even closure through self-efficacy.

These theories are described as the immediate cognitive changes through the act of expressive writing. The more long term theories include the release of memories that may have had impact on the working mind. This theory suggests that as expressive writing is further indulged, immediate arousal of the memory diminishes (Baneberry, 1997). This becomes especially essential with traumatic events which tend to lose emotional

arousal over a number of expressive writing sessions. With this act of release, a biological theory arises in that anxiety and other illnesses as a expression writing is that of a more social front.

A study on holocaust victims valued that 70% of survivors had not shared information socially (Baneberry, 1997). After writing and talking about these experiences with researchers. Many were able to then share them with others, providing further therapy in a social context (Baneberry, 1997). Many studies are devoted to uncovering expression writing and the theory behind it. So too have studies encapsulated the long-term effects on well-being of its use as a therapy. Fewer studies examine expression writing in its immediate effects on an individual.

This study focuses on the immediate effects of emotional writing on an individual's affect. With previous studies in mind, it is hypothesized that a positive affect will be correlated with exposure to positive experience writing; whereas a negative affect will be correlated with exposure to negative experience writing. Method Participants Participants were 173 (129 females) undergraduate students from an Australian tertiary education institution. The mean age of the participants was 30.19 years (SD = 9.17); male mean age was 28.14 (SD = 7.2), and female mean age was 30.89 (SD = 9.60). Materials. The Ego-Resiliency Scale (ERR-89; Block & Kramer, 1996). This 14 item measure of trait saliency uses a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from does not apply at all (1) to applies very strongly (4). The scale is reportedly highly reliable ( $\alpha = .76$ ) with example items including: 'I am more curious than most people' and 'I quickly get over and

recover from being startled'. Resiliency was calculated by summing scores from all 14 items with higher scores indicating greater resiliency.

The Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DADS-21; Loving & Loving, 1995). This 21 item measure of depression, anxiety and stress records responses on a 4-point Likert scale from never (1) to almost always (3). The DADS-21 is reportedly highly reliable ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Example items include "I find it hard to unwind" and "I felt that I wasn't worth much as a person". The General Health Questionnaire (GHZ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988). This 12-item measure of general mental and physical health utilizes a 4-point Likert scale from not at all (0) to quite a bit (3).

The reported reliability of the GHZ-12 ranges from .82 to .86. Example items include whether participant have "lost much sleep over worry" and "been unhappy and depressed". Positive and Negative Affectively Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1998). This 20-item scale was used to assess positive and negative ambient mood. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the emotions 'right now' on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very slightly or not at all (1) to extremely (5). Both the positive mood scale ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) and the negative mood scale ( $\alpha = 0.4$ ) are considered highly reliable. Example positive mood descriptors included interested, excited, strong, proud and inspired. Example negative mood descriptors included distressed, upset, guilty, irritable and nervous. Positive affect is calculated by summing scores from all 10 positive items, with higher scores indicating greater positive affect. Positive meaning finding. A series of questions adapted from those reported by Tugge and Frederickson (2004)

were administered in order to assess the degree to which participants found meaning in their described event.

To prompt meaning finding, participants completed two open ended the significance of the event? Specific meaning finding questions included: 'To what extent do you feel you might benefit from this situation in the long term? ; 'How likely s it that there is something to learn from this experience? ; and 'How easy is it to find meaning in the described event? Ratings for these questions were made on a seven- point scale, ranging from not at all (1) to extremely (7). Meaning finding was calculated by summing scores for these three questions. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2007 (LAIC; Francis & Baneberry, 1996).

All written positive disclosure essays were converted into individual word documents and analyzed through the LAIC program. The LAIC program was used to yield descriptive data on the number of costive and negative emotion words, and insight words used in the written disclosure pieces. In addition it was used to generate percentages of insight words used in the extended response positive meaning finding questions. The LAIC program has been found to correlate with Judges' ratings in the range of . 37 to . 81 (Francis & Baneberry, 1996). Procedure Data were collected from participants in either face-to-face or online first-year classes.

Upon commencing the class, participants were introduced to the session as one on emotions. Qualities was the software program used to host the online survey. Participants were asked to pay close attention to instructions provided during the testing session. The session commenced with the ERR-

89, DADS-21, GHZ, all of which served as distraction questionnaires, and the PANS. Following completion of these, the experimenter informed participants that they would complete a 15 minute writing task and that it was important that they tried to type for the entire 15 minutes.

Participants were randomly assigned to the positive, neutral, or negative written disclosure condition. Participants in the positive written disclosure condition achieved the following instructions: Write about the most intensely positive experience of your life. Write about the experience in as much detail as you can. Really get into it and freely express any and all emotions or thoughts that you have about the experience. As you write, do not worry about punctuation or grammar; Just really let go and write as much as you can about the experience.

Participants in the negative written disclosure condition were instructed to do the following: For the next 15 minutes write about the most important personal problem you are currently facing in your life. Write about the experience in as much detail as you can. Really get into it and freely express any and all emotions or thoughts that you have about the experience. As you write, do not worry about punctuation or grammar; Just really let go and write as much as you can about the experience. Continue writing until you are instructed to stop by the researcher.

Finally, those in the control condition were asked to write about the activities of their day thus far in the most structured and detailed format possible (for an example see Tugge & Frederickson, 2004). The experimenter stopped participants at the end of the 15 minutes and directed them to continue with



the rest of the experiment. The remainder of the test consisted of a post-test PANS, positive meaning finding and demographic questions. Once completed, participants were debriefed and provided with experimenter contact details should they require further information regarding the experiment.

Results Prior to running the statistical analyses all data were screened for normality and positive written disclosure statements revealed participants chose to write about a wide variety of positive experiences. The five most common positive experiences included parenthood, establishing a significant relationship with a life partner, traveling overseas, career, and academic achievements. The five most common negative experiences included future career prospects, current employment, financial concerns, mental health, and relationship issues.

Hypothesis 1 stated that writing about an intense positive experience will result in a greater increase in positive affect. To examine whether positive affect increased, change in positive affect scores were calculated by subtracting the pre-test from the post-test positive PANS score. A one-way ANOVA with three levels of the independent variable (positive, neutral, or negative written disclosure task) was performed to test the impact of the written tasks on change in positive affect. Results revealed that there was a significant difference between the neutral ( $M = -1.12$ ,  $SD = 5.6$ ), negative ( $M = -3.81$ ,  $SD = 9.54$ ), and positive written disclosure conditions ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 7.34$ ) for change in positive affect scores,  $F(2, 173) = 12.14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Post hoc analyses using Bonferroni adjustments revealed that the differences between the positive and negative, and the positive and neutral

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conditions were significant to the .001 level for change in positive affect.

This finding suggests that participants in the positive written disclosure condition experienced a greater increase in positive affect following the task, compared to those in the neutral and negative conditions.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that writing about an intense positive experience will result in greater meaning finding. A one-way ANOVA was calculated to compare meaning finding scores between the three conditions following the written task. Results revealed that there was a significant difference between the neutral ( $M = 14.60$ ,  $SD = 4.20$ ), negative ( $M = 15.46$ ,  $SD = 4.35$ ), and positive written disclosure conditions ( $M = 19.24$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ) for meaning finding scores,  $F(2, 189) = 24.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Post hoc analyses using Bonferroni adjustments revealed that the differences between the positive and negative, and the positive and neutral conditions were significant to the .001 level. Participants who wrote about an intense positive life experience elicited greater positive meaning from the experience, compared to those who wrote about a negative experience, or the day's events. Discussion This data indicates that writing about positive and negative experiences increases and decreases affect accordingly, in conjunction with neutral conditions.

The data also represents a greater meaning finder in participants engaged with positive written expression as opposed to negative and neutral conditions, with negative written expression producing the lower meaning finder of the two. With the hypothesis of the expressive writing paradigm in mind, it may be said that obtained results support this suggestion. In

previous mention of the term, the expressive rating paradigm has been supported in many studies over long periods of time and through rather more intense conditions; such as the example of breast cancer survivors (Lu, Ghent, Young, Gawk-Singer, & LOL, 2012).

Furthermore, previous studies focus greatly on the expression of traumatic instances (Baneberry, 1997) quite the opposite in that negative expressive writing produces a negative affect and lower meaning finder among participants. These results, however, are compared to that of writing positive experiences and so it may be said that a decreased score would be expected. Alternatively, being a cross-sectional design, perhaps more interesting results would be compiled from a series of written expression of the same account in the case of a negative experience.

From previous studies, it is implied that regular written expression of a negative experience may produce positive results, contrary to those shown in this study. One of the implications of this study may be related to indulging regularly in written accounts of positive experience to improve positive affect and meaning finding. Future studies, however, would benefit from the analysis of regular positive written expression. As is shown in previous studies with that of traumatic events, increased confrontation through written expression is shown to reduce negative affect.

It may be possible that the opposite effect adhere to regular confrontation of positive experience. Perhaps this positive experience would decrease in positivist, or even have a reverse effect over time. The limitations of this study include, primarily, the tested participants.

Undergraduate psychology students may not accurately represent the population. Many other studies of the same caliber have an inclination to testing of traumatic situations among a particular sub-group. Interesting would be the results obtained from a randomly selected participant group, and measuring them both for instant results and results over a number of tests.

A further limitation may be described in the means in which data was collected. Lending to an intrusive subject matter, a face-to-face collection in class may not yield the greatest results. Anonymity to observer aside, students sitting within close proximity to another student may feel threatened by invasion of privacy and not reveal inner most feelings, effecting results. Furthermore, participation in the study was of a compulsory status. This may have affected the amount of effort students put into discussion as opposed perhaps to an individual actively seeking treatment or even involvement in a study.

To prevent possible confounds in the future, ideally, participants would be of a random selection of willing volunteers. If unattainable however, it may prove advantages to separate students among the class too radius in which their test cannot be overlooked. Despite these limitations, this study shows promising results by suggestion that positive expression writing increases positive affect and greater meaning finding. These results may prove useful in a variety of situations and therapies; though further testing should be undergone to discover the extent of its effect.