

Introduction to Written Exposure Treatment

Survivors of traumatic experiences often go through changes in their physical reactions, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in the wake of such experiences.

Examples of changes in physical reactions may include increased fatigue, nausea (feeling sick to your stomach), sweating or chills, shock, dizziness, chest pains, trouble breathing, and numbness.

Examples of emotional changes may include increased nervousness, fear, grief, depression, hopelessness, helplessness, anger, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, guilt, and vulnerability.

Examples of changes in thinking may include increased thinking that your future will be cut short, difficulty in remembering things, trouble making decisions, confusion, difficulty concentrating, “flashbacks” or reliving experiences, nightmares, intrusive or unwelcome thoughts, too many thoughts at once, thinking about suicide, and memory gaps.

Examples of changes in behavior may include increased startle, hypervigilance, being withdrawn from others, being overly dependent upon others, changes in appetite, changes in sleep, increased substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, medication), problems with emotional or physical intimacy, inability to trust or have loving feelings, apathy, loss of spirituality, risk taking, and suicidal impulses and behaviors.

Each person may differ in the ways in which these reactions are experienced. Some may be very familiar but others may not. Many of these reactions become part of the trauma survivor’s everyday life and do not seem unusual to him or her. Take a moment to think about how many of the above symptoms you experienced since the traumatic event.

The manner in which a survivor attempts to cope with his or her trauma symptoms also has an impact on everyday activities. If a trauma survivor has recurring thoughts and memories of a trauma, he or she may attempt to avoid them by using substances (alcohol and/or drugs), becoming a workaholic, staying away from other people, or using anger and aggressive behavior to either distract oneself or remove any reminders of the trauma from the current circumstances. These strategies may give the trauma survivor short-term relief but over the long-term can be problematic for a variety of reasons. In other words, sometimes a

survivor's attempt to cure or to cope with reactions to a traumatic event can become a problem in and of itself.

Importantly, approaches that one might use to deal with nontraumatic events do not work very well in dealing with trauma. People will sometimes tell trauma survivors to "forget about it" and to get on with their lives. This approach may work well in many different situations, but one does not just forget about traumatic events.

One of the reasons that this advice does not work is that events that are experienced as traumatic are remembered differently from nontraumatic events. The memory of a trauma may be stored in a splintered fashion as a protection from reexperiencing the full impact of the trauma. Consequently, survivors may have amnesia for large segments of time surrounding the trauma. Or they may remember some details of past traumas but may not have any feelings attached to these memories. They may experience overwhelming anxiety or fearfulness without understanding the cause. Certain situations may trigger "flashbacks" to earlier traumas, and they might feel that they are actually reliving the past.

To successfully recover from the traumatic event, it is important that you confront that experience by recounting it, repeatedly, in as much detail and with as much emotion as possible. By repeatedly recounting the event, you will be able to correct for the splintered fashion in which the memory may have been stored. You will also find that recounting the experience will result in you feeling like you have more control over the memory rather than feeling as if the memory controls you. Over the next several sessions, I will be asking you to repeatedly recount the trauma experience by writing about the experience.

Written Exposure Therapy

Date: _____

Session: _____

Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS) Recording Form

Use the following scale to rate your discomfort before AND after the writing task:

0-----10-----20-----30-----40-----50-----60-----70-----80-----90-----100
No Anxiety / Most Anxiety /
Distress Distress Ever Felt

Beginning SUDS: _____

Session 1 Writing Instructions:

Over the next 5 sessions I would like you to write about your trauma. Don't worry about your spelling or grammar. I would like you to write about the details of the trauma as you remember it now. For example, how the trauma event happened and were there other people involved. In writing about the details of the trauma, it is important to write about the specifics of what happened and what you were feeling and thinking as the trauma was happening. Try to be as specific in recounting the details as possible. It is also important that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts about the trauma. You should also keep in mind that you have 5 sessions to write about this experience, so you don't need to be concerned with completing your account of the trauma within today's session. Just be sure to be as detailed about the trauma as possible and also to write about your thoughts and feelings as you remember them during (and immediately after) the trauma.

For your first writing session, I'd like you to write about the trauma starting at the beginning. For instance, you could begin with the moment you realized the trauma was about to happen. As you describe the trauma it is important that you provide as many specific details as you can remember. For example, you might write about what you saw (e.g., headlights of the car approaching you, person approaching you), what you heard (e.g., car horn, screeching tires, person threatening you), or what you smelled (e.g., blood, burning rubber). In addition to writing about the details of the trauma, you should also be writing about your thoughts and feelings during the trauma as you remember it now. For example, you might have had the thought, "I'm going to die," "this can't be happening," or "I'm going to be raped?" And, you might have had the feeling of being terrified, frozen with fear, or angry at another person involved. Remember, you don't need to finish writing about the entire trauma in this session. Just focus on writing about the trauma with as much detail as possible and include the thoughts and feelings you experienced during and immediately after the trauma. Remember, the trauma is not actually happening again, you are simply recounting it as you look back upon it now.

End SUDS: _____

At Conclusion of Session:

You will likely have thoughts, images, and feelings concerning the trauma you just wrote about during the course of the upcoming week. It is important that you allow yourself to have these thoughts, images, and feelings, whatever they might be, rather than trying to push them away. Please try to allow yourself to have whatever thoughts, images, and feelings that may come up.

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Session 2 Writing Instructions:

Today, I want you to continue to write about the trauma as you look back upon it now. If you feel that you didn't get the chance to completely describe the trauma in the last writing session, then you can pick up where you left off. If you completed writing about the trauma event in the last session, please write about the entire trauma again. While you are describing the trauma, I really want you to delve into your very deepest feelings (e.g., fear, shock, sadness, anger) and thoughts (e.g., "Is this really happening?" "I'm going to die"). Also, remember to write about the details of the trauma. That is, describe the setting; the people involved; and what you saw, heard, and felt. Remember that you are writing about the trauma as you look back upon it now.

End SUDS: _____

At Conclusion of Session:

As I stated at the end of the first session, you will likely have thoughts, images, and feelings concerning the trauma you just wrote about during the course of the upcoming week. It is important that you allow yourself to have these thoughts, images, and feelings, whatever they might be, rather than trying to push them away. Please try to allow yourself to have whatever thoughts, images, and feelings that may come up.

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Session 3 Writing Instructions:

In your writing today, I again want you to continue writing about the trauma event as you think about it today. If you have completed writing about the entire trauma you experienced, you can either write about the trauma again from the beginning or you can select a part of the trauma that is most upsetting to you and focus your writing on that specific part of the experience. In addition, I would also like you to begin to write about how the traumatic experience has changed your life. For instance, you might write about whether or not the trauma has changed the way you view your life, the meaning of life, and how you relate to other people. Throughout your writing, I want you to really let go and write about your deepest thoughts and feelings.

End SUDS: _____

At Conclusion of Session:

As I've stated previously, you will likely have thoughts, images, and feelings concerning the trauma you just wrote about during the course of the upcoming week. It is important that you allow yourself to have these thoughts, images, and feelings, whatever they might be, rather than trying to push them away. Please try to allow yourself to have whatever thoughts, images, and feelings that may come up.

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Session 4 Writing Instructions:

I want you to continue to write about the trauma today. As with your writing in the last session, you can select a specific part of the trauma to write about; that is, the part of the trauma that was most upsetting to you. Today, I would also like you to write about how the trauma event has changed your life. You might write about if the trauma has changed the way you view your life, the meaning of life, and how you relate to other people. Throughout the session I want you to really let go and write about your deepest thoughts and feelings.

End SUDS: _____

At Conclusion of Session:

As I've stated previously, you will likely have thoughts, images, and feelings concerning the trauma you just wrote about during the course of the upcoming week. It is important that you allow yourself to have these thoughts, images, and feelings, whatever they might be, rather than trying to push them away. Please try to allow yourself to have whatever thoughts, images, and feelings that may come up.

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Session 5 / Final Session Writing Instructions:

Today is the last session. I want you to continue to write about your feelings and thoughts related to the traumatic event and how you believe this event has changed your life. Remember that this is the last day of writing, so you might want to try to wrap up your writing. For example, you might write about how the traumatic experience is related to your current life and your future. As with the other writing sessions, it is important for you to delve into your deepest emotions and thoughts throughout the session.

End SUDS: _____