



Write Your Wrongs

Expressive writing may bring relief to body and mind.

While living with arthritis can create stresses most people might not even think about, a technique called expressive writing may bring relief, both mentally and physically.

For example, maybe you're angry because pain is keeping you from joining friends on a shopping trip or playing with your kids – again. You may be stuck in anger.

“But in addition to anger, you probably also feel grief, loss and a lack of control over the circumstances,” says clinical psychologist Mark Lumley, PhD, psychology professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. “Expressive writing can help bring forward those less-accessible feelings besides anger that don't always have a voice. Writing this way reduces inner conflict and provides you a better sense of emotional balance – and perhaps even less pain – when you express those feelings on paper.”

In fact, research has found that people

with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) showed improvements in pain, stiffness and joint mobility after expressive writing about stressful experiences, says Joshua Smyth, PhD, a professor of biobehavioral health and medicine at Pennsylvania State University, author of the 1999 study. Smyth also is co-author

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with James W. Pennebaker, PhD – considered the father of expressive writing – of the 2016 edition of *Opening Up, The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*.

“Writing about stressful or challenging experiences allows you to disclose [to yourself] your thoughts and

Ready to Write?

- Choose an intensely emotional issue that affects you now. This might be coping with your arthritis or some event that is important to you.
- Write continuously about it in a safe, quiet location without disruptions. Write long-hand or on a computer, or use a digital recorder if writing is painful.
- Don't know what to write about? Try a different perspective; for example, write in the third person one day.
- Don't worry about spelling, style or grammar.
- Know your writing is for your eyes only.
- Do this for four consecutive days in sessions of about 30 minutes.

feelings, helping you make sense of them,” Smyth says.

Unlike journaling, which is usually ongoing and often emotional but may lack direction or reflection, expressive writing is done over just a few days with the purpose of encouraging the writer to process his thoughts and feelings in a careful and reflective way.

“The idea is to promote change and growth in response to challenging events, rather than simply spinning your emotional wheels in an unproductive way,” Smyth says.

Try expressive writing to access uncomfortable feelings, says Lumley. “Writing only about your physical health or symptoms probably won't be that helpful, but pulling together and expressing all of your feelings related to your health probably will be,” he says. —STEPHANIE STEPHENS