

## "Writing As Healing" Exercise

### **Purpose**

To explore the use of writing as an aid in healing, especially in illnesses related to immune system hypersensitivity, such as asthma.

### **Overview**

Students begin with a teacher-led discussion of recent research, which has found measurable improvements in patient symptoms even four months after their participation in a brief writing exercise about a stressful event in the patients' lives. Students are then asked to write a brief essay about a very stressful event in their own lives and to document their physical reactions before, during, and after the writing process.

### **Time**

1 two-hour session for the discussion of the research, essay writing and post-writing sharing. The essay can also be assigned as a homework piece with a discussion following the next class period.

### **Key Concepts**

Research has documented that writing can be a productive way to reduce stress and even diminish symptoms of immune hypersensitivity-related illnesses.

Writing about stressful events can be a helpful way of coping, even minimizing physical symptoms associated with stress.

### **Skills**

Creative writing  
Journal writing

### **Materials**

Paper  
Writing Materials  
Article provided

### **Background**

Many illnesses are to some extent a function of normal bodily processes gone awry. Immune system diseases are a good example of this principle. Asthma in some cases is an overreaction of the immune system to harmless stimuli such as dust, or pollen. Many asthmatics notice that a stressful experience can bring on an asthma attack. While the mind/body connection is not well understood, some research has been done on ways to engage the body in its own defense. A 1999 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association describes improvements in patients' symptoms after an intervention consisting only of a brief writing exercise. A synopsis of the article is provided for teachers (<http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/9904/13/writeoff.stress/>). This exercise helps students think about the application of these current scientific findings to their own lives. Students are asked to use writing in a new way, not for communication with others but for self-exploration.

This exercise is in contrast to the whole group intervention methods students may be exploring for their school as part of the Air Module role play. Teachers can raise the

issue of the difference between what might benefit an individual and what interventions can be applied to a population.

### **Procedure**

1. Read the following article in class. Explore the following questions:
  - ❖ Can the students identify some physical symptoms associated with stress?
  - ❖ What ways besides writing can one deal with stressful events?
  - ❖ Why might writing in particular be useful in healing?
  - ❖ Do you ever write in a journal, just for yourself?
2. Choose a stressful event from their own life. Have them draw a line about two-thirds to the right of the page down the whole length of each sheet. Students should then write a two-page essay about the experience on the left-hand side of the line. On the right hand side of the line, they should note any physical responses they have either as they are writing, or responses that they recall happening at the time of the event. This can be written as a letter to a person (not meant to be sent) or a poem about the event. Students should consider putting aside the usual academic emphasis on grammar and spelling and instead to focus on not censoring themselves as they write. The idea is to get feelings and thoughts down on paper without judgment.

**Students should be given the option of not turning in the papers to the teacher if they choose. If the teacher feels this may enhance the usefulness of the exercise it could be announced at the start as non-graded work.**

3. Share their reactions to the writing process and relate their findings to the findings of the scientists in the introductory article. Does writing only for yourself change the writing process? Is it easier? Harder? Does this give insight into other research that might be done? Other treatments that might use writing to heal?

### ***Ethics Note:***

The teacher should encourage students to choose an event about which they feel comfortable writing. The patients in the 1999 study were asked to write about the most stressful event in their lives but for our educational purposes it would be best to avoid deeply traumatic experiences as the subject of the exercise. As always, teachers should be prepared if students do come to them seeking further counseling about an event they have explored in their work.

### **Student Assessment**

Give the following creative writing components to each student as a guide to their creative writing products:

- ❖ Identify a stressful event in their life
- ❖ Draw a line about two-thirds to the right of the page down the whole length of each sheet and write a two-page essay about the experience on the left-hand side of the line.
- ❖ On the right hand side of the line note any physical responses at the time of the event and/or while writing about the event
- ❖ Answer the questions
- ❖ If relevant, practice reading this story aloud in a convincing manner
- ❖ If relevant, be prepared to answer questions concerning your creative writing product

Assign points for the following components of the critical writing products:

- ❖ Was a particular stressful event identified?
- ❖ Was this stressful event described?
- ❖ Were the associated physical effects described?
- ❖ Were the questions answered
- ❖ If relevant, could the student answer questions from the audience about their story?

**Writing helps control chronic asthma and arthritis: A single writing exercise eased symptoms for up to four months**

CNN

April 13, 1999

Web posted at 4:08 p.m. EDT

(2008 GMT)

<http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/9904/13/writeoff.stress/>

CHICAGO (CNN) -- In a report on a new study, researchers say people with chronic asthma or rheumatoid arthritis saw improvement in their symptoms for up to four months -- after writing a single essay about their illnesses.

Dr. Joshua Smyth of North Dakota State University was the lead author of the study, released on Tuesday ahead of its Wednesday publication in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). Smyth tells CNN, "The take-home message in this study is that psychological factors have an impact on illness, and that at least this is one way of dealing with it."

Researchers assigned 112 patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis to one of two groups. Members of the first group were told to write an essay about the most stressful event of their lives. Those in the control group wrote about emotionally neutral topics.

Four months later, the patients who wrote about traumatic experiences had measurably better health status than those in the control group.

"These gains were beyond those attributable to the standard medical care that all participants were receiving," the authors write in their article.

Asthma patients in the experimental group showed an average 19-percent improvement in certain lung functions compared to the control group patients, who showed no change.

And arthritis patients who penned their more traumatic experiences showed an average drop in overall disease severity of 28 percent compared to the control-group patients.

The JAMA study appears to support what many psychologists and people with chronic illnesses believe that emotional factors can have an impact on a patient's well-being.

Breast cancer survivor Musa Mayer wrote about the trials of her illness and now teaches others to put their pain into words.

"The simple act of putting it on paper, or on that (word processor) screen, what you feel at the most deep level, is healing in and of itself, I believe," Mayer tells CNN.

In the JAMA article, the study's authors write that they don't know "whether these health improvements will persist beyond four months or whether this exercise will prove effective with other diseases."

In an editorial published in the same edition of JAMA, Dr. David Spiegel of Stanford University School of Medicine suggests it's important to combine psychological care with traditional medical care.

"Ventilation of negative emotion, even just to an unknown reader, seems to have helped these patients acknowledge, bear, and put into perspective their distress," Spiegel writes.

(Correspondent Holly Firfer contributed to this report.)