



## **BUILDING RESILIENCE IN CHALLENGING TIMES:**

Expressive Writing  
Exercises That Help

By Stephen Wilhoit

Stephen Wilhoit is a Professor of English at the University of Dayton and Director of Faculty Career Enhancement at the Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center. He teaches a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses in literature, composition, and creative writing and oversees faculty development programs related to professional development and vocational exploration. He has authored three textbooks (Pearson) and numerous articles on a range of topics, including rhetoric and composition theory, creative writing pedagogy, teaching assistant training, faculty development, and vocational discernment. He can be reached at [swilhoit1@udayton.edu](mailto:swilhoit1@udayton.edu).

**Abstract:** Resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a crucial skill for college instructors to develop. Fortunately, the ability to “bounce back” from trauma can be learned and/or strengthened. This article examines pandemic-related trauma and the psychological benefits that expressive writing offers. The author then presents a sequence of five expressive writing exercises designed to help college instructors identify the sources of trauma associated with COVID-19, reflect on their emotional responses to the pandemic, and build the resilience they need to persevere and thrive.

**Keywords:** resilience, expressive writing, COVID-19 pandemic, well-being, college instructors

In addition to being an English professor at my university, I serve as an associate director of our learning teaching center. In this second role, I’ve worked extensively over the past two years helping colleagues cope with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They’ve come to me for advice on how to address a wide range of emotions stemming from the crisis, including anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness, confusion, and disillusionment. Worn out and burned out, many have had a hard time just hanging on.

At first, I wasn’t sure how to help the faculty and staff who contacted me mainly because I didn’t know how to help myself. I was struggling with the same challenges, even to the point of considering early retirement. When our campus closed due to COVID-19, the work that used to bring joy and meaning to my life now brought stress and uncertainty. Disappointed in my efforts to teach online and isolated from my students and colleagues, I felt powerless in the face of circumstances beyond my control.

In order to cope, I turned to an activity that helped me during other trying circumstances in my life—expressive writing. I hoped that putting my experiences and feelings into words would relieve the anxiety I felt and perhaps provide me the sense of control I needed to persevere. Through lots of trial and error, I eventually developed a sequence of expressive writing exercises that helped me cope with the pandemic-related challenges I was facing and strengthened my resilience.

### **COVID-19, Trauma, and Resilience**

Kira et al. (2021) identify three types of trauma that people experience. Type I is brought about by a single emotional blow, such as the death of a loved one; type II involves a series of blows that continued over time then ended, for example childhood sexual abuse; type III, the most severe, involves continuous, ongoing emotional blows with no known end. Many experienced

the COVID-19 pandemic, with its seemingly endless variants and unpredictability, as a type III trauma, the most difficult to defend against or mitigate.

Resilience is defined as the ability to “bounce back” from trauma—not to avoid it or somehow “cure” it, but to reconcile oneself to it and continue to live a positive life. More specifically, resilience is:

the psychological quality that allows some people to be knocked down by the adversities of life and come back at least as strong as before. Rather than letting difficulties, traumatic events, or failure overcome them and drain their resolve, highly resilient people find a way to change course, emotionally heal, and continue moving toward their goals. (“Resilience,” 2020, para. 1)

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2020) echoes this definition, characterizing resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, threats, or significant sources of stress. . . . As much as resilience involves ‘bouncing back’ from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth” (para. 2).

The APA (2020) identifies three core components of resilience: wellness, healthy thinking, and meaning. Wellness involves taking care of yourself physically and practicing mindfulness; healthy thinking involves accepting change, remaining hopeful, and learning from your past; and meaning involves finding purpose and helping others through difficult times. All of these components can be learned and/or strengthened through practice and conscious attention.

### Resilience and Expressive Writing

When engaged in expressive writing, people record their thoughts and feelings. The writing, whether on the page or the screen, is spontaneous and informal; writers do not concern themselves with matters of surface correction, such as grammar or spelling, or with organization and structure. The writing is free-flowing, personal, and private. The expectation is that no one other than the writer will read the text, unless the writer chooses to share it.

The psychological and emotional benefits of expressive writing are clear. Summarizing years of research, Pennebaker and Evans (2014) conclude:

people who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than they felt before writing.

Similarly, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination, and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheaval. Other studies found improvement in overall well-being and improved cognitive functioning. (p. 11)

However, to build resilience in response to trauma, expressive writing must involve more than a cathartic outpouring of emotions. Instead, writers need to analyze the feelings they express in order to identify how their emotions and experiences are linked. This analysis leads to insights which can propel and empower well-being, help the writer persevere in times of crisis, and guide actions the writer can take to create a better future. In *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Louise DeSalvo (1999) explains the benefit of expressive writing this way:

We can't improve our health by free-writing . . . or by writing objective descriptions of our traumas or by venting our emotions. We cannot simply use writing as catharsis. Nor can we use it only as a record of what we've experienced. We must write in a way that links detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings—then and now—about what happened. (p. 25)

To improve our resilience, we must use expressive writing to better understand the sources of our trauma: what we experienced, how we responded to what happened, and how we might address those feelings now. Employing expressive writing to examine traumatic events in our lives builds resilience by helping us understand and move beyond those experiences. As DeSalvo (1999) explains:

This is because as we write we become observers—an important component of resilience. We regard our lives with a certain detachment and distance when we view it as a subject to describe and interpret. We reframe the problems in our life as challenges as we ask ourselves how to articulate what is on our mind in a way that will make sense. (p. 73)

By analyzing and interpreting our expressive writing, we distance ourselves from the trauma we're experiencing and enhance our resilience by connecting past experiences with present conditions and future possibilities, promoting our well-being, engaging in healthy thinking, and constructing meaning in our lives.

### Expressive Writing Exercise Sequence

As the changes to my personal and professional life brought on by the pandemic began to weigh on me and I found myself unable



to help my colleagues meet the challenges they were facing, I turned for insight to a number of texts that discuss the connection between expressive writing and resilience, for example *Writing as a Way of Healing* (DeSalvo, 1999) and *The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness, or Loss* (Marinella, 2017). Most helpful, though, was *Expressive Writing: Words That Heal* by James Pennebaker and John Evans (2014), which offers a wealth of research on the benefits of expressive writing and a series of writing exercises people can use to build their resilience.

Drawing on Pennebaker and Evans, I began to experiment with various expressive writing exercises to see which might more effectively help me better cope with the stress I was experiencing, address the powerlessness I felt in the face of the pandemic, restore a sense of purpose to my work, and bring joy back into my life. I ended up with a sequence of five exercises that helped me achieve these goals. The exercises are brief enough that you could complete them all comfortably in one sitting. However, you may find it more helpful to complete the exercises over the course of a few days so you have time to reflect on what you wrote in one task before tackling the next. As you complete these exercises, keep these suggestions in mind:

1. Write for a short period of time—anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes. After the time has expired, read what you've written. If you decide you'd like to pursue something you wrote in more detail, complete another brief round of writing and review the results again.
2. Write quickly. Do not edit yourself as you write. Errors in grammar, spelling, syntax, or punctuation are irrelevant. Just let your thoughts flow and get words on the page or screen. Remember, no one but you will see what you're writing unless you choose to share it.
3. If you stall out while writing, quickly reread what you've written, pick a topic or idea to pursue further, and write about that.
4. After you complete each exercise, read and reflect on what you've written. Is there anything there that surprises you, something you hadn't recognized before, that puzzles or interests you enough to think about further?

A quick note of caution: People often feel sad immediately after writing about a traumatic event in their lives. However, these feelings usually pass after an hour or two and afterwards most people feel better and less stressed (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

### Exercise 1: Tell Your Story

The first exercise focuses on narration. How did the COVID-19 pandemic manifest itself in your life? When did you first feel its impact? What has happened to you and those you care about during the crisis? How has your experience of the pandemic changed over time? What were key turning points for you? Everyone's experience of the pandemic has been unique: what is your story, both personally and professionally? As you write about your story, focus on key details—specific events, settings, and people.

Telling the story of your COVID-19 experience is vitally important to building well-being and resilience. As Pennebaker and Evans (2014) write: "Stories are an essential part of who we are. They provide a way for us to understand both simple and extremely complicated experiences. Just as we need stories to convey ideas to others, we also need stories to understand things that happen to us"

(p. 48). Employing expressive writing to explore your experiences during the pandemic can help you identify possible origins of the trauma you may be experiencing now and, as DeSalvo (1999) recommends, attach your current feelings to their sources.

### Exercise 2: Explore Your Emotions

For this exercise, write candidly about your emotional responses to the pandemic. What are your feelings today? How have they changed over time? What is your emotional response to the pandemic's impact on both your personal and professional life? What words best capture the range of emotions you feel or have felt over the past two years: anger, frustration, loneliness, despair, bewilderment, loss, fear, uncertainty? Have you experienced positive emotions at times? Admiration for the way your students have persevered? Hope concerning emerging medical advances? Surprise at how well teaching online went for you? Pennebaker and Evans (2014) explain the task this way: "Write your deepest thoughts and feelings about the trauma or emotional upheaval. . . . In your writing, really let go and explore this event and how it has affected you" (p. 109).

Resilience involves reestablishing emotional well-being following a traumatic event (American Psychological Association, 2020). Acknowledging both what you felt at the time of the crisis and now is crucial to bouncing back from it. Importantly, as you explore your feelings, do not pass judgment on them. Your concern is not whether your emotional responses are right or wrong, whether they are justifiable, or even if they are completely understandable to you at this point. Your emotions just are, so treat them that way while completing this exercise. Be honest with yourself as you write and remember, no one else is going to see what you write unless you want them to.

### Exercise 3: Shift Perspectives on Your Experiences and Emotions

This exercise requires you to shift your perspective and gain some distance on your experiences and emotions. Imagine a friend or family member asks you to explain the relationship between what happened to you during the pandemic and your emotional responses to them. Write out what you would tell that person. To complete exercise 3, you are linking insights you gained from the first two exercises, the story of what happened to you during the pandemic and your emotional responses to the crisis. However, exercise 3 encourages you to gain some perspective on your experiences by analyzing and explaining the connection between key events in your life and your emotional reactions to them. Clarifying the connection supports well-being, encourages agency, and promotes resilience (DeSalvo, 1999). Your writing in this exercise is still informal, personal, and private, but the new point of view you are assuming may help you understand both your experiences and feelings in new, productive ways. Again, do not judge your thoughts and insights as you write, and don't worry if the connections you're exploring are not yet clear. The goal is to get them on the page or screen so you can reflect on them after you've finished writing.

A variation on this exercise advocated by Pennebaker and Evans (2014) is to write about your experiences from a third-person point of view. Instead of using "I," employ a third-person pronoun of your choice ("he," "she," or "they," for example). Pennebaker and Evans (2014) explain why shifting pronouns in your writing may help you better cope with a life crisis:

Changes in pronoun use suggest changes in perspective.

When dealing with something as massive as trauma, it is important to see it from several different angles. No perspective is better or more valid than others; instead, it's important to get a sense of the many dimensions of the trauma you have experienced. (p. 50)

Just this shift in point of view will provide you some psychological distance on your experiences and a new perspective to consider. The insights you gain may help you derive a clearer sense of meaning from your experiences, a central component of resilience (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### Exercise 4: Affirm Your Strengths

What are your personal strengths, gifts, and abilities? What can you do well? As you look at the stressful situations you face, what strengths can you draw on in response? How have you effectively responded to the challenges posed by COVID-19? These can be small successes—for example, something you did in the classroom or at home that helped someone who was struggling or something you did to overcome a difficult situation you faced. If you have a hard time identifying your strengths, consider what other people have identified as your gifts. What have colleagues, family, or friends identified as things you do well? Your strengths can be physical (stamina, energy), intellectual (intelligence, reason), or emotional (empathy, stability). Practice self-compassion and view yourself in the best light possible. Forgive yourself any shortcomings and focus instead on the personal strengths that emerged as you faced challenges posed by the pandemic. The key is to identify the skills, abilities, talents, and gifts that you possess and can or have drawn on in a time of crisis. Do not be modest. Instead, honestly identify what you do well.

Embracing positive emotions and healthy thoughts is crucial to building resilience (Maynard, 2021). As Pennebaker and Evans (2014) put it: “In affirmative writing, we pay attention to the present and look forward to the future by writing about our strengths in body, mind, and spirit” (p. 158). According to Newman (2016), practicing self-compassion and cultivating forgiveness are both crucial to building resilience. This exercise encourages you to pursue both goals.

#### Exercise 5: Envision the Future

For this exercise, imagine what the future will be like when you overcome any COVID-related challenges you are facing today. Though times may seem desperate and hope hard to find, what would a better future be like? You may not know at the moment how you'll arrive at that future, but just imagine what it would entail. Be as optimistic as you like. Focus on key goals you have—for example, how you'd like to live your life when the threat of COVID-19 has passed or how you'd like to build on the lessons you've learned about yourself these last two years.

Though the pandemic has been highly traumatic for many people, looking for positive benefits from the experience is important to building resilience. Research has shown that people who actively look for benefits when writing about traumatic events cope much better than those who do not (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). As you complete this exercise, consider ways you may have benefitted from your experiences during the pandemic, no matter how challenging they've been. Pennebaker and Evan (2014) recommend you consider questions like these: “What things have you learned, lost, and gained as a result of this upheaval in your life? How will these events in the past

guide your thoughts and actions in the future?” (p. 116). According to the American Psychological Association (2020), finding purpose and meaning in traumatic experiences is crucial to building resilience. Writing about the future can help you do this.

### Conclusion

Resilience involves the ability to bounce back from adversity, to continue on in the face of challenges that may seem overwhelming at times. Crises associated with the COVID-19 pandemic caused many educators to become disillusioned with their work, especially as campuses closed, variant seemed to give way to variant with no known end, and the scope of our daily interactions with colleagues and friends were reduced to email exchanges and meetings on Zoom. The real question now, though, is how we will thrive in spite of these challenges. As with other trying times in my life, writing about the difficulties I faced due to the COVID pandemic helped me better understand my experiences and persevere with hope. Expressive writing builds resilience because it encourages mindfulness, promotes self-understanding, and helps people “manage their thoughts and feelings with non-judgment, loving-kindness, and compassion” (Glass, 2019, p. 242).

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