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Psychology Lab Report:

The Effects of Written Stress Disclosure on the Emotional Well – Being

Name:

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Abstract

The aim of this experiment was to test the effects of writing about intense positive, negative or neutral experiences on the individual participants. In the course of achieving this, the study involved collecting data from participants whose number was 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 ($SD = 7.52$), and female mean age was 30.89 ($SD = 9.60$). The participants were randomly grouped into positive, neutral, or negative written disclosure condition and then asked to write about their respective experiences; after which results were analyzed and conclusions made.

From the results, it was found out that the five most common positive experiences included parenthood, establishing a significant relationship with a life partner, travelling overseas, career, and academic achievements. The five most common negative experiences included future career prospects, current employment, financial concerns, mental health, and relationship issues. It was, therefore, concluded that writing about an intense positive life experience elicited greater positive meaning from the experience compared to any other experiential writing (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, p. 341).

The Effects of Written Stress Disclosure on the Emotional Status

In many psychological studies, it has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that various emotional experience disclosures have various impacts on the individuals who perform these written disclosures. Of the three main events i.e. positive, neutral and negative experiences, the written disclosures about positive experiences has been greatly overlooked (Mann, 2001, p. 27). In view of this fact, this paper, therefore, sought to study the various effects that written disclosures about the entire trio had on the individual participants performing the written disclosures.

According to Baikie & Wilhelm et al., 2005, p. 344), psychotherapy entails performing certain disclosures about individuals upon which psychotherapeutic diagnoses are founded. These written disclosures are usually about past or present negative, neutral, or positive experiences that a client has undergone. Reliable sources have it that disclosure of emotional experiences ought to be encouraged and supported since it is argued that such disclosure is extremely important in reducing the level of emotional disturbance in an individual (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Additionally, several other effects of written stress disclosure include boosting the physical health, lowering certain imaginations about an emotional experience, finding one's true identity as well as creative a cohesive coexistence between the victim and the society at large (Mann et al., 2001, p. 33).

In this study, the materials used were the Ego-Resiliency Scale (ER-89), the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21), the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) and the Positive And Negative Affectivity Scale (PANAS). The ER-89 was used to measure the trait resiliency of the participants; the DASS-21 was used to measure depression, anxiety and stress records responses; the GHQ-12 was used for measuring the general mental and physical health of the

participants and the PANAS was used for assessing the positive and negative ambient moods of the individual participants.

The study, as well, had two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 stated that writing about an intense positive experience will result in a greater increase in positive affect (Frisina, Borod & Lepore, 2004, p. 631) whereas hypothesis 2 stated that writing about an intense positive experience will result in greater meaning finding (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986, p. 276). Eventually, it was found out that those participants in the positive written disclosure condition experienced a greater increase in positive affect in comparison to their counterparts in the negative and neutral events. Hypothesis 2 was equally upheld since the results shown that 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.

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 ($SD = 7.52$), and female mean age was 30.89 ($SD = 9.60$).

Materials

The Ego-Resiliency Scale (ER-89; Block & Kremen, 1996). This 14 item measure of trait resiliency 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 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 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 DASS-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 (GHQ-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 GHQ-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 Affectivity 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 ($\alpha = 0.84$) 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 Tugade and Fredrickson (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 questions: ‘What are/were the long term consequences of this event?’ and ‘What is 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 is 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 (LIWC; Francis & Pennebaker, 1996). All written positive disclosure essays were converted into individual word documents and analyzed through the LIWC program. The LIWC program was used to yield descriptive data on the number of positive 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 LIWC program has been found to correlate with judges' ratings in the range of .37 to .81 (Francis & Pennebaker, 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. Qualtrics 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 ER-89, DASS-21, GHQ, all of which served as distraction questionnaires, and the PANAS. 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 received 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 Tugade & Fredrickson, 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 PANAS, 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 homogeneity of variance with no violations present in the data set. Reviews of the 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, travelling 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 PANAS 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 ($M = -1.12, SD = 5.76$), 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 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, $F(1, 189) = 24.60, p < 0.001$. 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

Generally, looking at the research findings in comparison to the hypotheses that were proposed at the beginning of the study, it can be concluded that the hypotheses were actually upheld. These results here may not have been final and conclusive enough, but they certainly can form a basis for future arguments on psychotherapeutic exercises regarding the same instances. However, the various limitations that may have rocked the entire study cannot be underestimated.

The study indicated 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 (Frisina, Borod & Lepore et al., 2004, p. 631). This was arrived at by subtracting the pre-test from the PANAS score. In order to complement the process, a one-way ANOVA with three levels of the independent variable was done to test the impact of written events on the change in positive affect. Neutral written disclosure conditions results were $M = -1.12$ and $SD = 5.76$; negative written disclosure conditions results were $M = 3.86$ and $SD = 9.54$ whereas those for positive written disclosure conditions were $M = 3.14$ and $SD = 7.34$.

As was mentioned earlier, the five most common positive experiences included parenthood, establishing a significant relationship with a life partner, travelling overseas, career, and academic achievements. On the other hand, the five most common negative experiences included future career prospects, current employment, financial concerns, mental health, and relationship issues. Additionally, the study concluded that 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 (Pennebaker & Beall et al., 1986, p. 276).

Each of these findings can be explained variously. According to Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp (1990), written disclosure of one's past experiences is arguably one of the best ways to find out the effects of one's views and ideas about a certain topic that might have excited them. It is universally believed that disclosing one's past emotional experiences results in positive outcomes both physically and psychologically. For this experiment, participants were asked to care less about punctuation or grammar but to go ahead and write as much as they could about their experience. Comparatively, those participants in the control disclosure conditions decided to settle for the trivial events that could not be matched to those of their counterparts in the positive and negative disclosure conditions. They apparently dug deep into their strong emotional pasts – an exercise which is said to be extremely relieving (Soliday, Garafolo & Rogers, 2004, p. 800). Ideally, it can be said that stable physical and emotional health is highly dependent on more concentration on positive emotional words and the use of extremely few negative emotion words (Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp et al., 1990, p. 529).

The significance of experiential disclosure writing can be greatly attributed to a structured narration with related feelings also being incorporated. In so doing, the resultant emotions out of that experience tends to be slightly easier to manage by that respective individual. Studies have also shown that the conversion of emotions and experiences into written form leads to a change in the way an individual thinks (Pennebaker & Chung et al., 2011). It helps an individual to better understand their emotional experiences as well as manage them well. Several experiments have shown that written disclosure has the effect of improving one's mental health (Soliday, Garafolo & Rogers et al., 2004, p. 800).

Research has shown that positive emotional experience widens the individual's attention as well as their usual processes of thinking. Additionally, it has been argued that positive emotional experience has the effect of improving the operation as well as the possibility of the individual ever benefiting from the positive experiences that they have been through. When an individual writes about his or her life experience, such an individual is believed to have just commenced the self-construction process since written disclosure is strongly viewed as a means of relieving oneself of the past burdens that may have entangled them. According to Slavin-Spenny, Cohen & Lumley, 2011, p. 1002, positive life disclosure is a critical task because of its ability to bring about self-understanding and self-discovery to the individual.

Despite the fact that many of the findings of this study were universally binding, it was marred by a few shortcomings that may be improved in future studies. One such limitation was the use of **Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) 2007** to measure participants' extent of disclosing their experiences in written format. Clearly, it can be seen that LIWC is not effective enough to differentiate the level of participants' emotional expression from written disclosure. It may be recommended that subsequent experiments for similar tasks be carried out by including both self-reported measure of written emotional disclosure as well as an objective measure of written emotional disclosure. Additionally, it could be recommended that a self-report questionnaire be used in future by participants to analyze their willingness to participate in the written disclosure experiment. This could be done at the end of the writing exercise. It can also be seen that the study was, to some extent, silent on determining the extent to which the participants disclosed their opinions and ideas about the events that they were describing. Again, some refinements can be done here in future research.

References

