Narrative Writing Exercises for Promoting Health among Adolescents:

Promises and Pitfalls

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Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this commentary is to present the benefits and strengths narrative writing at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level of prevention. We also present tips for implementing narratives as a prevention strategy in schools and other types of therapeutic settings. **Key Points:** Narrative writing exercises have consistently demonstrated positive results at the primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention levels. Researchers have theorized that narratives are effective due to helpful nature of being able to process thoughts and emotions surrounding the event, as well as a way to promote broader ways of thinking and to encourage positive thoughts about the self. The *Laws of Life* essay program is an example of an established narrative program. It has been used in school settings for many years and is nationally recognized. We propose tips how to implement narrative writing as a prevention technique.

**Conclusions:** Despite the positive results of narratives, we are left with a few more questions. Does the modality of the narrative affect the impact? Narratives are particularly helpful when the author writes about something meaningful. How do you motivate a non-writer? Narratives can be a first line of defense if used correctly, helping those at risk for violence or troubling behaviors.
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A narrative is a written or spoken account that can be used to describe important life events and beliefs (Adler, 2012; Burton & King, 2009; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Narrative writing exercises, also referred to as expressive writing, have been used as a tool to address violence or trauma, and have repeatedly been shown to have an effect on the mental and physical well-being of an individual (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Pennebaker (1997) developed the expressive writing paradigm in which participants were asked to write a narrative, describing the most traumatic event they had ever experienced, for 15 minutes a day over the course of 3 days. Participants in this study were college students. They wrote about topics such as, family violence, drug problems, and other forms of trauma. Afterward, the participants were followed during the school year and it was found that those who had written about their thoughts and feelings significantly reduced their doctor-visit rates when compared to participants that had written about a neutral topic. These results are consistent across an array of studies that utilize the writing paradigm in regards to health benefits (Burton & King, 2009; Low, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), and psychological distress (Kearns, Edwards, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2010; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). What is interesting is that the paradigm shows positive effects even for short writing assignments (Burton & King, 2008) and whether participants write about negative or positive experiences, as long as they write about something personally meaningful rather than neutral (e.g. describing activities of the previous day; Hamby & Taylor, 2015).

The Promise of Narrative Across Levels of Prevention
The study of expressive writing narratives spans all three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. At the primary level, programs are used to address risk factors and prevent violence or behaviors before they occur (Matjasko et al., 2012). Narratives at the primary level offer the chance to build meaning making, self-affirmation, and regulatory strengths that can help buffer someone from the effects of future adversity. For example, Pennebaker’s original work (1997) recruited a general sample of college students. While students were asked to write about adversity, they were not selected as a group who were already symptomatic. What is more, work by Burton and King (2004) on writing about positive aspects of the self show health benefits among participants without requiring that they have experienced an adversity to write about. Moreover, the Laws of Life essay program is a global school-based primary prevention program that is designed to promote character development (Elias, 2008; Meyer, Meyers, & Veljkovic, 2003; Templeton, 2012; Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). Students are asked to reflect on and write about a value that they believe transcends cultures and religions, which can often lead to writing about traumatic and personal experiences (Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). Work by Banyard, Hamby, de St. Aubin, Grych (2015) found that narratives written in school helped participants think differently about adversity they had experienced.

Insert Table 1 about here

A number of recent studies use expressive writing with at-risk youth in urban schools, a clear example of secondary prevention. For example, Cohen et al’s (2009) work on self affirmation writing demonstrated positive effects for students from underrepresented groups, helping them to overcome racist stereotypes that can decrease academic performance. Kliwer et al (2011) found that school-based expressive writing decreased aggressive behavior among seventh graders who lived in violent, high crime urban neighborhoods. In a meta-analysis by
Travagin, Margola, and Revenson (2015), the authors reviewed studies examining the use of narratives with adolescents. Adolescents faced with health complications, difficulties transitioning from middle to high school, and body image concerns were impacted positively when asked to engage in expressive writing. At the secondary level, narratives may help with boosting protective factors to counteract the influence of risk factors (i.e., alcohol or drug abuse, witnessing violence or abuse, etc.). Narratives could be used to cope with violent acts to help minimize the short-term consequences of violence immediately after it has happened.

At the tertiary level, expressive writing has been used among patients with chronic medical conditions (Taylor, Wallander, Anderson, Beasley, & Brown, 2003; Warner et al., 2006). For instance, narratives have shown positive results for adults in regards to rheumatoid arthritis (Danoff-Burg, Agee, Romanoff, Kremer, & Strosberg, 2006). Research related to violence and trauma found expressive writing carried similar benefits to face-to-face psychotherapy sessions (Resick et al., 2008). This level helps build the skills needed for developing meaning making and offers the chance for reflection to process trauma once it has occurred and to promote recovery.

**Underlying Mechanisms of Narratives**

Theories about why narrative writing exercises are powerful include both cognitive and emotional processes. With respect to writing about adversity or traumatic events, Pennebaker (1997) and others discuss the reinterpretation or reappraisal of stressors or problems through writing. Pennebaker and colleagues (1990) found that participants identify cognitive processes like gaining perspective on what happened to them to be the helpful aspect of expressive writing. Writing about negative events also can help individuals attend to and label their emotions. As a form of exposure, expressive writing can work against emotional avoidance and promote the
mobilization of emotion focused coping resources (Low et al., 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010). Lu and Stanton (2010) argue that “self-regulation” is at the heart of the effects of narrative and involves both cognitive reappraisal processes and emotional processing. Other theorists have emphasized the benefits of narrative writing for meaning making, which is a complex synthesis of cognitive, affective, and motivational elements (e.g., Adler, 2012; McLean & Pratt, 2006).

More recently, researchers have moved beyond an exclusive focus on writing about negative life events to exercises in writing about positive events, positive aspects of the self and future goals (Burton & King, 2004, 2009). This work draws from Fredrickson’s (2001) “broaden and build” theory, which postulates that positive emotions generated when writing about valued aspects of the self promote broader ways of thinking, including more creativity. This further leads to finding new coping strategies. In this model, it is emotions that change cognitions rather than vice versa, although both processes are involved. Writing about positive aspects of the self also seems to produce positive benefits compared to writing about more mundane daily activities (Burton & King, 2004, e.g., 2009). Individual difference variables including hostility, emotional expression, and ethnicity, may be important moderators of effects (Austenfeld, Paolo, & Stanton, 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010).

Another possible explanation for the health-promotion effects of narratives is the idea of self-affirmation; writing to affirm one’s important values, attributes, and actions (G. L. Cohen et al., 2009; G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). The idea is to use self-affirmations as a type of therapy or intervention and to get the individual to write positively about themselves in order to promote healing and coping. Sherman and Hartson (2013) argue that affirmations remind individuals of psychosocial resources beyond an
immediate threat and result in a broadened perspective that decreases the threat impact and promotes an approach orientation rather than avoidance.

The Promise of Narrative for Reaching Key Audiences

One of the challenges of prevention, is getting strategies of sufficient dose to intended audiences. It is no surprise that there are a multitude of prevention programs, including family and school-based programs. However, many programs tend to focus on one level of violence prevention, whether that be primary, secondary, or tertiary. Recent research on prevention limits the scope to a linear view of the programs: one sample and one solution for the problem. Banyard (2014) reviewed articles that focused on college campus-based prevention of violence against women, and encourages researchers to resist siloing potential risk factors and use a combination of prevention tools. Another challenge of evidence-based programs is the fragmented view on what works to prevent violence. There is a such a massive quantity of literature evaluating prevention programs, that is becomes difficult to interpret what may be useful for a particular population or setting (Matjasko et al., 2012). What is more, the amount of proposed theoretical models for violence prevention is overwhelming and segregated rather than integrated to promote more generalizable programs that work (Banyard, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2013). On the other hand, the theories explaining and research of narratives is positive and informative.

We do know that narratives can be helpful because they may be more easily integrated into educational settings where a focus on academics and test preparation are the primary concern. Expressive writing is both academic and a part of social-emotional learning (SEL), which is a good example of a social emotional academic learning strategy. Within the SEL framework, the focus is on addressing self-awareness and self-management while promoting
problem solving and relationship management (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). SEL is an educational process for learning life skills, such as character education, restorative justice, and peer mediation (Espelage et al., 2015). Expressive writing is very much linked to SEL in that a narrative asks an individual to reframe their experiences in a way that promotes self-reflection. While in school, students learn through their teachers, classmates, and from the support of their families; however, emotions can lend a hand in sabotaging or hindering a child’s academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elias & Leverett, 2011). These emotional distractions can stem from a multitude of occurrences and can cause a detachment from school that could put a child at risk for other behavior or health problems. Through SEL and narrative writing, a child could focus their feelings and thoughts into beneficial writing strategies to bring about emotional regulation. On the other hand, there are pitfalls to take into consideration if one were to try implementing a narrative program into their school curriculum or as a prevention technique.

**Pitfalls of Narratives**

Though narratives and expressive writing have been found by the majority to yield positive results, research has found that the use of narratives is not successful in all cases. For example, in a study by Kearn, Edwards, Calhoum, and Gidycz (2010), sexual assault survivors were asked to participate in the Pennebaker Expressive Writing Paradigm (1997) as many women are deprived of the chance to emotionally process their experiences. However, the paradigm did not work as hypothesized as the physical, emotional, and traumatic stress benefits were not still evident at the 1-month follow-up. Similar results were found when using the paradigm to reduce the presence of suicidal thoughts in young adults (Kovac & Range, 2002). Ullman (2011) found that narratives produced negative effects for sexual assault survivors,
especially when the victims received negative responses from others about their experiences. In this case, the narrative exercise was more harmful when the victims reported that telling others about their experiences was not helpful.

There may be a number of reasons for these negative or null effects, variables which should be considered when examining the role of narratives in prevention. For example, in the studies above, researchers hypothesized it is possible that short writing sessions are not enough to be able to process the experiences fully (Batten, Follette, Rasmussen Hall, & Palm, 2002). Other concerns include an individual opening up too fast, issues associated with mandatory reporting, overwhelming emotions, and the development of skills necessary to write a narrative.

One aspect to keep in mind is the issue of an individual opening up too fast so that their narratives are not healing. Grief counseling is an area in which narratives and the telling of life stories has not been viewed as being effective. Much of the literature on grief counseling suggests that mourners are likely to cope with and overcome the loss of a loved one in their own time (Jordan & Neimeyer, 2003; Larson & Hoyt, 2007). When the mourner is pressured or insisted upon to work through their grief is where the problem lies. Similarly, from a narratives perspective, expecting an individual to process their trauma immediately after it happens may also have the same effects as grief counseling. Individuals might not be ready to deal with their experiences and thus the healing nature of narratives may not be effective.

Mandatory reporting may hinder the responses and benefits of narratives as well. Individuals are required by law to report child abuse and neglect, even if they read about it in a written narrative. A writer may be less inclined to share a story that includes abuse that happened to them or someone they know. Therefore, the healing process that narratives offer never has a chance to begin because the writer afraid of others finding out about their trauma.
Another concern is the notion of overwhelming emotions occurring when writing a narrative. At times, traumatic experiences can cause such an influx of emotions that the individual may dissociate or distance themselves from the experience (Edwards, Fivush, Anda, Felitti, & Nordenburg, 2001). If this happens, the narrative becomes null and void as the writer may not remember the event accurately or may not construct the narrative at all.

Narratives are very useful to adults, but what about children? Fivush (2007) details that narratives could be less helpful for children because they are still learning story-telling skills. Across middle childhood, children continue to develop the cognitive and social emotional skills that enable them to tell more coherent and emotionally expressive stories. Of course this varies among children and depends upon the individual development of these narrative skills. The effects of narratives may not be as beneficial to children as they are to adults.

Navigating the Pitfalls

Contributing author RB has been a teacher for 24 years. She has taught and supported the Laws of Life within her classroom for nine of those years. In the following interview, she discusses the Laws of Life program, tips to encourage student writing, cautions about disclosure, and suggestions for introducing a writing program into the classroom or organization.

How do you introduce the Laws of Life to your students?

RB: “To introduce this task, my class talks about the fact that in the state of Tennessee writing is a skill that the Tennessee Department of Education says is lacking. So we write all the time. One of the ways that I get my ninth graders to start writing is to talk about their story. I start by introducing my story to them. Some are based on current experiences and some are based on past experiences that we’ve had. At my high school the Laws of Life essay is written when students are in 12th grade. By beginning in the 9th
grade, we can help the students form a habit of writing their story so that they can do a better job by the time they are seniors. Writing and journaling practice is like other things; practice allows us to get better. So we start out by writing paragraphs in a journal about something that happened yesterday or something that happened last week, or something like that. Putting words on paper is sometimes a new concept for the students.

*How do you prompt students that were not sure what to write?*

*RB:* “We go through writing a paragraph. We write a paragraph together, and I give them a template. We write it on the board. I give them a topic sentence that’s very open-ended, and then they have to fill it in. So it’s almost like a fill-in-the-blank kind of exercise, and we do a couple of those.”

*How do you discuss disclosure with your students?*

*RB:* “I tell them upfront that their thoughts are their own. We are all going to write our thoughts down every day, and we are going to keep it in a locked cabinet. I tell them, ‘The only person that’s going to see what you write is me unless it covers one of those conditions like child abuse or drug and alcohol abuse that I am required by the State of Tennessee to report.’ I work hard to build a sense of trust with my students so that they know if they need or want to talk to me about any issues, I will listen or I will get them help by referring them to the counselors. Thankfully, in 24 years of teaching, I have not had a problem with students refusing to write or be honest about their feelings. I have had kids tell me all sorts of things. I’ve had some kids come to me and tell me that there is some sexual abuse going on, and they want help. Others have gotten tired of drugs being used and they want help. The students know that those issues have to be reported
and usually they are seeking help. If I feel inadequate in dealing with an issue I can confidently ask a counselor for help or advice.”

*What do you do to support the kids that got upset when they write their essay about adversity?*

*RB:* “Generally, we conference one on one. I do that with every student, so that doesn’t necessarily call attention to specific students. Usually we’ve been together for a period of time in which I have tried to build an atmosphere of trust. The trust allows them to really start talking about some adverse issues. They always know however, they have the right to refuse to discuss anything with me but that I am available. They can always write down their needs and I will read it. I let them know that there is a guidance department that if they really are upset and they really need help, we can contact them and is necessary I will go with them. Once a classroom teacher has actually built some trust and a rapport with a student, it helps sometimes to actually be supportive of that child in a counseling situation.”

**Tips for Implementing a Narrative Prevention Program**

1. **Be flexible:** It might be daunting for someone to write a narrative, but offering them other options to formulate ideas (e.g., drawing, writing poetry) to help the writing process may ease the transition. Various modalities of narratives might work better for different culture groups, such as oral storytelling being more culturally congruent in American Indian communities. In Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT; Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006), children are asked to recall traumatic events in the element they choose (stories, pictures, songs, etc.).

2. **Provide support:** Talk about the narratives with your writer. Go through it with them and discuss what they wrote in a supportive atmosphere.
3. **Encourage writers to make the narrative meaningful**: The more meaningful the narrative, the better the benefits will be. A writer is likely to experience more positive benefits from a narrative when they write about something that is especially meaningful to them (Hamby, Taylor, Grych, & Banyard, 2015).

4. **Share your own stories with your writer**: The more you open up about yourself and build trust and rapport, the more likely your writer will want to share too. Your story does not have to be extremely personal; share something happy or a memory that stands out to you as particularly meaningful. There is a great deal of research that demonstrates that conversations with others changes our resulting narratives of the experience (Cuc, Ozuru, Manier, & Hirst, 2006; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010). The more conversations a writer has about their narrative, the more beneficial they perceive the writing process to be in terms of re-framing their experiences (Hamby, Taylor, Grych, & Banyard, 2015).

*RB*: “The teacher has to be intentional about including writing and journaling in their lesson plans and in their curriculum. Writing narratives, I think, is one of those lost strategies that we don’t necessarily always think about as a first line of, and I don’t want to say defense, but as a first line of learning. Narrative writing is not as valued as it once was. Non-fiction and persuasion is the star of the writing world now but teaching students to write, I believe begins with getting them to tell their story. The practice of writing a narrative, writing their story, putting words on paper, can be healing and empowering. Writing your story can open the door to a great future.”

**Taking the Next Step**

Using a narrative for prevention is promising, but there is still more we need to know. One of the questions that we have as a group is if it matters if the writer uses a different modality
to convey their stories. For instance, does one get the same benefit from narratives by drawing a picture, writing a song, or writing poetry instead of writing a narrative? Obviously drawing or writing a song would not be ideal for everyone as there are those who cannot draw or write lyrics, but we are interested in whether similar effects have been found when using unconventional narrative techniques.

People interested in violence prevention at all levels -- primary, secondary, and tertiary -- should look more closely at the uses of narrative as a strategy. Narratives would be very useful to help those who have gone through troubling experiences to process their emotions and feelings before the experiences have a chance to impact them negatively. Narratives can also be a first line of defense, helping those at risk for violence or troubling behaviors. However, we advise anyone wanting to use narratives to take into consideration the cautions that we have discussed in this commentary as they could impede the healing process if improperly used.
References


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Table 1

Key Points and Theories Regarding the Use of Narratives as Prevention Strategy

1. Narrative writing exercises have shown repeatedly positive results when they are used as a prevention program.
2. At the primary prevention level, narratives offer the chance to build strengths that can help buffer someone from the effects of future adversity.
3. At the secondary prevention level, narratives can help with bolstering protective factors to counteract the influence of risk factors, such as drug or alcohol abuse, and witnessing violence or abuse.
4. Narratives also aid in building the skills needed for developing meaning making and offers the chance for reflection to process trauma and promote recovery at the tertiary level.
5. Theories suggest that narratives are effective because they give an individual the opportunity to reinterpret and reappraise stressors or problems through writing.
6. Narrative writing can also generate positive emotions that can promote broader ways of thinking.
7. Writing self-affirmations as a form of narrative writing asks the individual to write positively about themselves in order to promote healing and coping.
8. Narratives can be easily integrated into educational settings when used in congruence with social-emotional learning, which promotes self-awareness, self-management, problem solving, and relationship management.
9. Tips for implementing narratives - Be flexible: offer choices of how the person can relate their experiences to you; whether this be in writing, song, poetry, etc. Provide support: Talk about the narratives in a supportive way with your participant. Encourage your participants to make the narrative meaningful: The more meaningful the narrative is, the more likely it will have greater positive results. Lastly, do not be afraid to share your own stories with your participant; the more you open up about yourself, the more likely your participants will want to share with you too.

Note: See text for further discussion of these and other recommendations.