Commentary

Narrative Writing Exercises for Promoting Health Among Adolescents: Promises and Pitfalls

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Objective: The purpose of this commentary is to summarize potential benefits and issues in the use of narrative writing exercises with adolescents. Tips for implementing narratives as a health promotion and prevention strategy in schools and other types of therapeutic settings are also presented. Key Points: Narrative writing exercises have consistently demonstrated positive results at the universal prevention, targeted prevention, and intervention levels. Researchers have theorized that narratives are effective as they help individual’s process thoughts and emotions surrounding adverse events, and are a way to promote positive thoughts about the self and broader ways of thinking. The Laws of Life essay program is an example of an established narrative program that is used nationally in school settings. We present hands-on information and recommendations as to the how to implement a narrative program and cautions to consider. Conclusions: Evaluations of narrative writing exercises have yielded many positive findings, but many important questions remain. It appears that narratives potentially help those at risk for violence or troubling behaviors, but more research in the context of the violence field is needed.

Keywords: values narrative, prevention, expressive writing, Laws of Life, narrative writing

A narrative is a written or spoken account that can be used to describe important life events and beliefs conceptualized as central to the sense of self (Adler, 2012; Burton & King, 2009; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Narrative writing exercises, also referred to as expressive writing exercises, have been used to help individuals who have experienced violence or trauma, and they have repeatedly been shown to have positive effects on the mental and physical well-being of an individual (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Pennebaker (1997), who developed the expressive writing paradigm in this context, had college students write a narrative describing the most traumatic event they had ever experienced, for 15 min a day over the course of 3 days. Students wrote about topics such as family violence, drug problems, and other forms of trauma. It was found that those students who had written about their thoughts and feelings significantly reduced their doctor-visit rates when compared to students who had written about a neutral topic. These health benefits, and many others, have been replicated across an array of studies (Burton & King, 2009; Kears, Edwards, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2010; Low, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007, 2011; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). What is interesting is that the paradigm shows positive effects even for shorter writing assignments (Burton & King, 2008), and whether participants write about negative or positive experiences including values, as long as they write about something personally meaningful rather than neutral (e.g., describing activities of the previous day; Hamby, Taylor, Grych, & Banyard, 2015). They have the potential to be a key part of the well-being enhancement discussed by Howell et al. (2016). For an overview of this commentary, please see Appendix.
The Promise of Narrative Across Levels of Prevention

Universal Prevention Level

The study of expressive writing narratives spans all three levels of prevention: universal, targeted, and intervention. At the universal prevention level, programs are used to address risk factors and prevent violence before they occur (Matjasko et al., 2012). Narratives at the universal level offer the chance to build meaning-making, self-affirmation, and regulatory strengths that can help buffer individuals from the effects of future adversity. Pennebaker’s (1997) original work might be considered an example of universal-level prevention, because he 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. Similarly, 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. The *Laws of Life* essay program is a global school-based universal prevention program that is designed to promote character development (Elias, 2008; Meyer, Meyers, & Veljkovic, 2003; Templeton, 2012; Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). Through values narratives, 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 and colleagues (in press) found that narratives written in school helped participants think differently about adversity they had experienced.

Targeted Prevention Level

A number of recent studies use expressive writing with at-risk youth in urban schools, a clear example of targeted prevention. For example, G. L. Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, and Brustoski’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. Kliewer 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 targeted prevention 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). Narratives could be used to cope with violent acts to help minimize the short-term consequences of victimization immediately after it has happened.

Intervention Level

At the intervention level, expressive writing has been used among patients with chronic medical conditions (Taylor, Wandler, Anderson, Beasley, & Brown, 2003; Warner et al., 2006). For instance, narratives have shown positive results for adults with regard to rheumatoid arthritis, in that patients reported reduced pain levels after writing sessions (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). Unlike values narratives, which can be written by universal audiences, trauma-focused narratives ask the individual to write about events that have already happened in an effort to promote intervention and healing. Trauma-focused narratives are mainly used in trauma-focused cognitive–behavioral therapy (TF-CBT; J. A. Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006). TF-CBT is the construction and processing of a trauma narrative, and through narrative, therapists are able to help youth overcome tendencies to avoid thinking or talking about traumatic experiences. At this level of prevention, narrative seems to enhance coping skills and offers the chance for reflection to process trauma once it has occurred, both key elements of promoting recovery from challenges.

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 discussed the reinterpretation or reappraisal of stressors or problems through writing. Pennebaker (1990) found that participants identified cognitive processes such as gaining perspective on what happened to them as the helpful aspect of expressive writing. Writing about negative events also helps 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) argued 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).

Writing About Positive Events

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 produced positive benefits compared to writing about more mundane daily activities (Burton & King, 2004, 2009). However, individual difference variables—including hostility, emotional expression, and ethnicity—may be important moderators of effects (Austenfeld, Paolo, & Stanton, 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010).

Self-Affirmation

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). Affirmation narratives are used as a type of therapy or intervention and to get the individual to write positively about themselves in order to promote healing and coping, rather than writing about trauma, as in trauma-focused narratives. Sherman et al. (2013) argued that affirmations remind individuals of psycho-social resources beyond an immediate threat and result in a broadened perspective that decreases the threat impact and promotes an approach orientation rather than avoidance.

What is clear from these theories and the research that supports them is that narratives act on both ways of thinking and feeling. They promote reflection and meaning-making after adversity, and strengthen self-regulatory capacities, including positive views of the self, creative problem-solving, and resource identification and coping. All of these aspects of narrative intersect with theories of violence prevention and trauma recovery and suggest that narrative may be an important piece of prevention toolkits.

The Promise of Narrative for Reaching Key Audiences

One of the challenges of prevention is getting strategies of sufficient dose to intended audiences (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014). Narrative writing exercises hold tremendous promise as a prevention strategy because, compared to many other types of programs, they only require small dosages for positive effects. In addition, narrative writing exercises can be integrated into school settings where prevention audiences are available for relatively long periods of time. Indeed, they may be more easily integrated into educational settings where a focus on academics and test preparation are the primary concern. For example, social-emotional learning (SEL) is receiving increased attention. SEL is an educational process for learning life skills, such as character education, restorative justice, and peer mediation (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). Within the SEL framework, the focus is on addressing self-awareness and self-management while promoting problem-solving and relationship management (Espelage et al., 2015; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). 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. Expressive writing is both academic and a part of SEL, and thus is a good example of a social–emotional academic-learning strategy. More specifically, SEL researchers find that emotions at times hindered children’s academic performance (Durik, Weissberg, Dymnick, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elias & Leverett, 2011). These emotional distractions stemmed from a multitude of occurrences and at times caused a detachment from school that put some children at risk for other behavior or health problems. The purpose of SEL is to help children develop skills for regulating such emotions so that they interfere less with the educational process. Expressive writing exercises may be an important tool for promoting SEL. It can provide a set of experiences, whether through writing about adversity or about positive aspects of the self that can help children focus their feelings and thoughts into beneficial writing strategies to bring about emotional regulation.

Pitfalls of Narratives

Though narratives and expressive writing promote well-being, researchers have also found that the use of narratives was not successful in all cases. These results add a cautionary note to discussions about narrative, particularly for groups of individuals who have experienced more extreme stressors. For example, in a study by Kearns et al. (2010), sexual assault survivors were asked to participate in the Pennebaker (1997) expressive writing paradigm, but did not find positive benefits. The researchers question whether the null findings were perhaps due to the nature of the traumatic experiences, which were interpersonal in nature and had happened recently. 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. As noted by Pasupathi, Fivush, and Hernandez-Martinez (2016) in their commentary, narratives are inherently complex. For example, they point out that there is an interpersonal level of narratives in which there are “two sides to every story.” Different perspectives or narratives of an event can occur both between people and within an individual. Conflicts about who is at fault and who was harmed may present a barrier to narratives having the intended prevention effects on individuals (Shields, 2008).

Negative or Null Effects of Narratives

There may be a number of reasons for these negative or null effects, variables that 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 were not enough for individuals to be able to process their experiences fully (Batten, Follette, Rasmussen Hall, & Palm, 2002). What is more, recent work about polyvictimization reminds us that many victims of one form of victimization may have also experienced a combination of other types as well and these combined effects exert particularly negative effects on survivors (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2015). It may be that significant numbers of participants in the studies above were poly victims. Experiences like sexual assault are also associated with stigma to a greater extent than other forms of adversity (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015; Miller, Canales, Amacker, Backstrom, & Gidycz, 2011), and it may be that the combination of adversity and stigma is more resistant to the effects of narrative because of concerns about revealing and disclosure. More research is needed about the benefits of narrative and how the nature of narrative exercises may need to be modified for this population.

A review of the literature on trauma and on narrative also raises questions about other potential pitfalls in using narratives for prevention. Other concerns include an individual opening up too fast about adversity, issues associated with mandatory reporting, overwhelming emotions, and the development of skills necessary to write a narrative. We consider each of these in turn below.
Narratives and Coping With Complex Emotions

One aspect to keep in mind is the issue of an individual opening up too fast and causing an influx of emotions so that their narratives are not healing. Grief counseling is an area in which narratives and the telling of life stories have 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 a mourner is pressured to work through their grief, this can lead to adverse effects, in that they get flooded with emotions they are unable to regulate.

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 (J. A. Cohen et al., 2006; Jordan & Neimeyer, 2003). For example, work by Herman (1992) on survivors of more chronic and complex trauma, the poly victims, suggests that safety and stabilization, including shoring up coping strategies for self-care and emotion regulation, need to take place before spending time examining the trauma and making meaning from it. This does not completely argue against the use of narrative. Rather it suggests that survivors in the early stages of dealing with trauma might benefit more from writing about positive aspects of the self, saving narratives about the adversity itself for later in the recovery process.

Related to this is the concern about 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, And, Felitti, & Nordenburg, 2001). In some cases, narratives focused on trauma should be undertaken only with the guidance of a qualified therapist. Adler (2012) found patients regained their sense of self and agency as well as found improvements in patients’ mental health after writing about their trauma in narratives during psychotherapy.

Most of the research demonstrating the value of narrative writing exercises has been conducted with older adolescents (e.g., college students) and adults, but what about children? Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007) detailed that narratives could be less helpful for children because they are still learning storytelling 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 Narratives as a Prevention Program

Contributing author Rachel Brown has been a teacher for 24 years and has taught and supported the Laws of Life within the classroom for 9 of those years. The Laws of Life is a widely implemented school-based narrative prevention program that is designed to promote character development (Elias, 2008; Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). In recent years, more than 100,000 students around the world have completed the program each year, making it one of the largest school-based programs. This program encourages participants to reflect on and write about their values and how those values developed (Elias, 2008; Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). The program is designed in a way that students are encouraged to identify their own values and meaning from a list of topics. The program is a good example of the type of narrative prevention tools we have been discussing. It gives adolescents the opportunity to write about an adversity or to write about a positive aspect of themselves. We drew upon Rachel Brown’s years of experience as well as the broader literature to come up with the following procedures and recommendations for the use of values narratives. This case example provides an illustration of how expressive writing exercises can be incorporated into educational settings as both academic- and prevention-oriented strategies.

How to Introduce Narratives and Engage Students in the Writing Process

An effective way to introduce the Laws of Life to high school students is for teachers to begin by sharing their own stories. It can be helpful for younger students to get in the habit of writing about their experiences by starting small; for example, by keeping a journal in class. For those students who are unsure of what to write, using a template or topic sentences can also be helpful, such as those provided below.

1. “I am thankful for all the experiences in my life. However what shaped me into who I am today was . . .”
2. “I will never forget the lesson (name) taught me that day in . . .”
3. “We were fortunate to get to spend time with our family and friends that year at . . .”
4. “That day will live in my memory forever because it was the day that I realized I have only one life to live and I must . . .”
5. “I had never really considered the consequences of my decisions. However, the day I (decision, event, etc.) will remain in my mind forever.”

How to Approach Tough Narratives

We know that narratives offer the writer a chance to process their experiences and reevaluate the choices that were made. At times, recalling especially traumatic experiences in a narrative can be viewed as traumatic itself to the writer. A possible way to handle this is to conference on one on one with the student and their narrative. We recommend building rapport with students so that there is an atmosphere of trust during these conference sessions. If the student is particularly upset or troubled by their narrative, it would be helpful for the teacher to inform the student about the guidance department and even go so far as to offer going with the student to see the guidance counselor. Schultz and colleagues (2016) made reference to community connectedness in their commentary, noting that characteristics of communities can be used to enhance healing from traumatic events. Though not traditionally thought of as a community, what we are suggesting is building rapport and involving a school counselor for a student who may
need the help and support to overcome a traumatic experience: The counselor, teacher, and student have the opportunity to become a small community that unite to aid in recovery.

**Tips for Implementing a Narrative Prevention Program**

Empirical research on the effects of different implementation strategies for narrative writing exercises is scant, particularly when these exercises are used with adolescents in a school setting. Yet, narrative writing exercises are offered in schools across the nation. Below are implementation suggestions for teachers who wish to use values narratives in classroom settings.

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 Native American communities. In TF-CBT (J. A. Cohen et al., 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 et al., 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 reframing their experiences (Hamby et al., 2015).

**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 whether 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 because 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—universal, targeted, and intervention—should look more closely at the uses of narrative as a strategy. Narratives would be 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, because they could impede the healing process if improperly used. Writing narratives is one of those lost strategies that we do not necessarily always think about as a first line of learning and growing. The practice of writing a narrative, writing your story, putting words on paper, can be healing and empowering.

**References**


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Appendix

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 universal prevention level, narratives offer the chance to build strengths that can help buffer someone from the effects of future adversity.
3. At the targeted prevention level, narratives can help with boosting 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 intervention 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:
   a. Be flexible: Offer choices of how the person can relate their experiences to you, whether this be in writing, song, poetry, etc.
   b. Provide support: Talk about the narratives in a supportive way with your participant.
   c. Encourage your participants to make the narrative meaningful: The more meaningful the narrative is, the more likely it will have greater positive results.
   d. 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.

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