



Shaya Kass, PhD

Mindful About Life

A better you via the science of positive psychology!

Shaya@MindfulAboutLife.com

Writing away your stress

We all have stress in life. The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote, “If you really want to escape the things that harass you, what you’re needing is not to be in a different place but to be a different person.”

So how do we become the “different person” that is not stressed and harassed? There are many techniques one of which is called “expressive writing” in which you simply write about a stressful or traumatic experience for 20 minutes on three to five days.

Monica Kenneson and 5 of her colleagues did a study with first year undergraduates. Do you remember how stressful your first year of college was? Of course, they asked the students to fill out a bunch of surveys about stress levels and even measured the levels of the stress hormone “cortisol” in their saliva before the experiment.

She asked the students to write for 20 minutes about a single stressful or traumatic event. It doesn’t get much cheaper or easier than that. Just write about any stressful situation for 20 minutes. The researchers

never even asked to read the writing. Just write for 20 minutes about a stressful situation. The control group wrote about a nature scene or walking directions.

The follow up measure wasn’t until three weeks after the writing. This really is a question of whether the improvement sticks or fades pretty quickly. And sure enough, the people who wrote about nature had little or no change in their salivary stress hormone levels. And the people who wrote about stressful events? It dropped by about half! And the mental health surveys improved quite a bit for the experimental group as well with little change for the control group. One point I do have to make is while there was a lot of improvement, the statistics did not show a significant change, which was surprising.

But the participants did certainly feel like the expressive writing helped them even a year later. This is definitely one technique you should have in your “toolbox” to, as Seneca wrote, “to be a different person”!



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You can reach Dr. Shaya Kass at Shaya@MindfulAboutLife.com or at 1-800-544-0559

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