EXPRESSIVE WRITING AND COPING WITH JOB LOSS

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In an experiment with 63 recently unemployed professionals, those assigned to write about the thoughts and emotions surrounding their job loss were reemployed more quickly than those who wrote about non-traumatic topics or who did not write at all. Expressive writing appeared to influence individuals' attitudes about their old jobs and about finding new employment rather than their motivation to seek employment.

The loss of a job is frequently cited as one of the top ten traumatic life experiences, along with divorce or the death of a spouse. The negative effects of job loss on physical and psychological health, particularly in middle-aged workers and during lengthy unemployment, are well documented (e.g., Ivancevich & Matteson, 1984; Quick & Quick, 1984).

Traumas such as job loss provoke powerful emotions, like anger and fear, that are often difficult to comprehend. There is a natural desire to discuss these feelings and the experience with others. Such discussion allows empathy and support to emerge and also helps the traumatized person attain a perspective on the experience. However, events that are humiliating or embarrassing may not be discussed. Indeed, surveys of those who have experienced a sexual trauma, a divorce, or the death of a spouse have found that these individuals often actively hold back or inhibit discussion of their personal traumas (see Pennebaker [1989] for a review).

This study was specifically designed to address the emotional effects of job loss by testing the impact of disclosive writing on subsequent reemployment activity and success. We began with the idea that, like certain other traumas, such as divorce or sexual abuse, job loss trauma may be one about which people do not readily speak and that this inhibition may seriously impede their progress toward reemployment. An intervention that alleviates this negative impact would be a powerful new tool for those in search of

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work and those, such as outplacement professionals, dedicated to assisting others in their search for work.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

A recent psychosomatic theory of inhibition holds that the inhibition of thoughts, feelings, or overt behaviors is a form of psychological and physiological work (Pennebaker, 1989, 1993). When an individual must actively keep from talking about an important experience, the work of inhibition can be seen in short-term increases in autonomic nervous system activity, which serve as a cumulative stressor, increasing the likelihood of psychosomatic diseases. An additional problem associated with such inhibition is that it reduces individuals' ability to cognitively process or work through the many aspects of the distressing events (e.g., Horowitz, 1976). The failure to resolve the events results in continued ruminations and negative emotions, which can exacerbate health and psychological problems. Reducing the work of inhibition by confronting the upsetting experiences should reduce autonomic nervous activity, and, over time, lower the incidence of stress-related diseases.

Support for this theory has accumulated from several projects. Questionnaire studies with 200 corporate employees found that having at least one significant trauma in their lives about which they did not talk was related to heightened incidence of major (e.g., cancer, hypertension) and minor (colds, flu) health problems (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). Using college student samples, investigators have found that individuals who have been randomly assigned to write about personally upsetting topics for three to five consecutive days evidenced fewer physician visits than control subjects who write about superficial topics (Greenberg & Stone, 1992a, 1992b; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990). Other studies have associated variations of this writing procedure with enhanced immune function in college students (Esterling, Antoni, Kumar, & Schneiderman, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) and improved liver enzyme effects among university employees (Francis & Pennebaker, 1992). On the basis of the effects found in this series of studies on disclosive writing, we proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Unemployed professionals who disclose their deeply felt experience of job loss in writing will show less stress, as indicated by self-report measures and physiological markers (blood pressure, weight, and heart rate) than unemployed professionals who do not do so.

Postexperimental questionnaires from the disclosure studies cited above indicated that putting upsetting events into words changed how participants dealt with past events and ongoing life circumstances. Various disclosure studies have indicated that encouraging individuals to write or talk about personal upheavals is associated not only with improved physical health, but also with reduced absentee rates among employed adults (Fran-

Writing also allows people privacy and the freedom to express themselves without concern for another's reaction. Given this anonymity, the writing strategy has potential for addressing the negative emotional and physical reactions of individuals who feel inhibited about talking about their job loss. Confronting the multiple dimensions of job loss in writing may help people organize and give meaning to the events (Silver & Wortman, 1980). Once the experience is verbalized, a person can understand and attain closure of the trauma. Indeed, these cognitive benefits may ultimately aid general problem-solving skills and boost the motivation to obtain reemployment and the quality of reemployment.

Hypothesis 2: Unemployed professionals who disclose their deeply felt experience of job loss in writing will show increased motivation to obtain new employment, as evidenced by their phone calling, letter writing, and interviewing behaviors.

Most previous studies that have focused on techniques to help displaced workers, such as the job search training in outplacement programs, have not looked at the potential benefits of self-disclosure. One exception is a large-scale field experiment with the unemployed conducted by Caplan, Vinokur, Price, and van Ryn (1989). Of particular relevance to the present study was a component of their program that encouraged participants to disclose their thoughts and feelings about their predicaments. Although it was not possible to statistically tease out the unique effects of self-disclosure, self-disclosure processes and their correlates, including positive reinforcement from trainers in the program and direct effects of cognitive training, were ultimately correlated with measures of greater success in reemployment. Thus,

Hypothesis 3: Unemployed professionals who disclose their deeply felt experience of job loss in writing will show greater success in achieving reemployment than those who write about other job-related but nontraumatic topics and those who do not write.

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects in the study were 63 professionals (62 men, 1 woman), with a mean age of 54 years (representing of range of 40 to 68 years) and an average tenure of 20 years with their former employer, a large computer and electronics firm. Subjects had held engineering or other professional positions with the company. They were voluntarily recruited to the Writing in Transition Project from Drake Beam Morin, Inc., an outplacement firm, following
a large-scale layoff from their company. At the time of the study the length of unemployment was five months for all subjects.

Approximately 100 clients in the outplacement project were made aware of the Writing in Transition Project. All potential subjects were informed that the project involved a writing process that was expected to benefit them in their search process. Forty-one of the subjects volunteered for the study and were randomly assigned to either the experimental writing ($N = 20$) or the control writing ($N = 21$) conditions. A third group of individuals who did not sign up for the writing phase of the study were included as nonwriting controls ($N = 22$). Although this group's members were unable to participate in the writing phase because of scheduling concerns, they were willing to complete questionnaires both before and after the study. Like the other subjects, they had full access to the outplacement services throughout the course of the project. Analyses showed that this group did not differ from the other subject groups on any of the premeasures. Simple one-way analyses of variance comparing the three groups revealed no significant differences among them on age, gender, or race or on their initial self-ratings or their consultants' ratings of them on their search-related behaviors, using the Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire. We further discuss the contents of this questionnaire and the other questionnaires used in the research later in the methods section.

**Procedures**

**Initial data collection.** A week before the actual writing began, we met individually with the subjects and informed them that the study would require them to write for five consecutive days, for 20 minutes each day. The subjects completed an experiment consent form, a questionnaire on their health, and a Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire. Then, their age, height, weight, blood pressure, and heart rate were recorded.

**Writing phase.** One week following the initial meeting, the five days of writing began. Each day just prior to writing, the subjects met briefly with an experimenter (one of the authors) to go over the instructions for writing. Experimental subjects were instructed to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding the layoff and how their lives, both personal and professional, had been affected. The writing control subjects, or nontrauma group, were instructed to write about their plans for the day and their activities in the job search. We stressed to the trauma group that they should delve deeply into their emotions but told the nontrauma group to report plans and avoid revealing opinions or feelings about their situation.

Following each 20-minute writing session, each subject filled out a "daily writing questionnaire"; subjects identified their questionnaires and essays by code and put them into a box to secure anonymity. This procedure was followed for each of the five writing days. On the fifth day, in addition to the daily questionnaire, subjects were asked to fill out a "final writing day questionnaire" and the Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire. Subjects were thanked for their participation in the Writing in Transition Project and
asked to return in 12 days to again have their blood pressure, heart rate, and weight recorded and to fill out the Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire again. This process was repeated in the last week of each of the next three months. Subjects were informed that, following all data gathering, the results would be disclosed to them.

**Pre- and postwriting data collection.** Additional data were collected prior to and throughout the study. Subjects kept interview logs and turned them in to their outplacement consultants, with whom they met periodically. The outplacement center kept records of the number of phone calls received by all clients and of the number of job-related letters generated by clients. Although it was impossible to confirm their absolute accuracy, the interview, phone call, and letters data were considered good indicators of job search activity. Subjects did not know that these records were kept and analyzed as part of any research effort. We gathered similar data for the 22 nonwriting control subjects.

Each time a subject filled out a questionnaire, his or her outplacement consultant completed a consultant questionnaire on that particular client. These questionnaires were also filled out for the 22 nonwriting subjects. In addition to gathering all these data, the experimenters and consultants closely monitored who among the subjects successfully gained employment.

**Early termination of the study.** The writing phase of the experiment took place in July 1991. The original plan was for the study to end one year later. Four months after the writing phase of the project ended, we discovered that subjects in the experimental condition were being rehired at a significantly higher rate than those in either control group. It was decided to terminate the study, to explain the findings to the subjects and to invite them to another week-long writing session identical to that initially conducted.

**Questionnaires**

Several self-report questionnaires were used in this research; copies are available from the third author.

The health questionnaire lists 70 ailments or health complaints, such as flu, diabetes, and stroke, and asks subjects to indicate which they had in the last year. The questionnaire items were selected from the Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness (PILL, Pennebaker, 1982) and the Southern Methodist University (SMU) Health Questionnaire (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989), both of which have been shown to be internally consistent (α's = .72-.82) and reliable over time (test-retest r's = .70-.91). For the present data, the overall alpha at pretest was .83.

The Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire consisted of 12 face-valid items concerning job search activity, motivation, and anxiety levels in the career transition period (α = .87). Additional items tapped specific behaviors occurring in the week prior to questionnaire administration; an example item is “How many alcoholic beverages have you consumed?”

The daily questionnaire assessed to what extent subjects experienced various physical symptoms (racing heart, upset stomach) and negative
moods (anxiety, fatigue) immediately after writing each day. To evaluate the experimental manipulation, additional questions assessed how personal subjects' writing was that day and how much emotion they revealed.

The final writing day questionnaire included questions on subjects' feelings during the Writing in Transition Project as well as feelings toward the study itself. An example is "How difficult has it been for you to write in the last week?"

Each subject's outplacement consultant also completed the Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire, referencing the subject. A high correlation between the two sets of questionnaires \( r_{55} = .62, p < .01 \) provides some evidence of the construct validity of the self-report questionnaire.

**RESULTS**

Analyses were performed on self-report data collected from subjects and their outplacement consultants, physiological data, and behavioral data on job search activity. Because some subjects got jobs and dropped out of the study, all data were not available in the months following the writing. For this reason and others (such as subjects being ill), we often performed analyses with reduced numbers of observations. Table 1 gives means and correlations among the primary variables of interest.

**Manipulation Checks**

Results of \( t \)-tests of items from the questionnaire administered daily indicate that subjects in the experimental condition rated their essays as more personal \( (\bar{x} = 4.92, t_{39} = 2.83, p < .01) \) over the five-day writing period than did those in the control group \( (\bar{x} = 3.79) \). Subjects in the experimental group also indicated that they revealed more emotions \( (\bar{x} = 4.93, t_{39} = 6.40, p < .01) \) than did control subjects \( (\bar{x} = 2.60) \) over the five days of writing.

**Essay Content**

The central themes of the various essays, as we categorized them, focused on the emotions surrounding and problems of finding a new job (28 percent of the essays), conflicts surrounding family and love relationships (14%), financial concerns (12%), recounting the day the writer was laid off (12%), feelings related to leaving the old employer and co-workers (11%), general feelings of rejection (7%), and assorted concerns such as health (4%), dealing with authority (3%), the outplacement firm itself (2%), and miscellaneous other issues (7%). From all indications, subjects were as open in revealing issues that they had not discussed with others as college student subjects in similar writing studies have been (Pennebaker, 1989).

**Effect on Employment**

Following the five-day writing period, subjects were monitored for their success or failure in attaining employment. Three months after the writing
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>1. Age</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
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<td>2. Percentage accepting new job</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>- .04</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3. Transition-search, self-report</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>- .10</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4. Transition-search, consultant</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>- .12</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.59*</td>
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<td>5. Letters</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>- .10</td>
<td>- .01</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td></td>
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<td>6. Calls</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>- .01</td>
<td>- .01</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.30*</td>
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<td>7. Systolic blood pressure</td>
<td>127.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>- .08</td>
<td>- .07</td>
<td>- .11</td>
<td>- .17</td>
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<td>8. Diastolic blood pressure</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>- .25</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>- .24</td>
<td>- .12</td>
<td>- .03</td>
<td>.63*</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Heart rate</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>- .16</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>- .09</td>
<td>- .04</td>
<td>- .15</td>
<td>.08</td>
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* Statistics are based on all subjects in all three conditions (N = 63) for all variables except the physiological measures, which were collected only for those who wrote (N = 41). The Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire, letters, telephone calls, and physiological data were collected before the experiment started and subjects were assigned to condition.

* p < .05, two-tailed test.
week, 5 subjects in the experimental group got jobs, no writing control subjects got jobs, and 2 nonwriting control subjects got jobs. After eight months, only 5 of 21 (23.8%) writing control subjects had accepted full-time jobs, 3 of 22 (13.6%) nonwriting control subjects had accepted employment, and 10 of 19 (52.6%) experimental subjects had found full-time employment (see Figure 1). An analysis of variance between conditions using job as the dependent measure (1 = job, 0 = no job) yielded a significant difference ($F_{2.59} = 4.36, p = .018$) between those who got jobs and those who did not. Orthogonal contrasts using the mean-square error term indicated that the experimental subjects were more likely to gain full-time employment than either the writing controls ($t_{59} = 2.10, p = .04$) or the nonwriting controls ($t_{59} = 2.89, p = .006$). The two control groups were not different from each other ($t_{59} = 0.77$, n.s.).

When all types of accepted jobs (full-time, part-time, and contract) were counted, 68.4 percent of the experimental subjects had jobs, compared to 47.6 percent of the writing controls and 27.3 percent of the nonwriting controls. Although the three groups were significantly different ($F_{2.59} = 3.72, p = .030$), orthogonal contrasts indicated that the experimental group was significantly different from the nonwriting control group ($p < .01$), but the writing control group did not differ from either the experimental group ($p = .19$) or the self-selected nonwriting control group ($p = .18$).

**FIGURE 1**
Subjects Accepting New Jobs

![Graph showing the percentage of subjects accepting new jobs over time, with three lines representing experimental, writing control, and nonwriting control groups.](image-url)
Self-Reports

A between and within repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the pretest Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire and the two posttest questionnaires revealed no differences between the control and experimental groups on baseline pretest measures of job search-related activities, energy levels, motivation levels, frustration and anxiety levels, and personal behaviors. However, following the experiment, the level of alcohol consumption of the two groups changed. Using a reduced group of 34 (control = 18, experimental = 16), the analyses revealed experimental subjects drank less alcohol six weeks following the study than did control subjects ($F_{2,64} = 2.98, p < .058$).

Other repeated-measures ANOVAs yielded no difference between groups for self-reports of job search activity on the Transition-Search Behavior Questionnaire filled out by subjects and consultants. There were no other significant differences between groups on other behavioral items, including such behaviors as exercise, difficulty falling asleep, or pain relievers taken.

A series of between and within repeated-measures ANOVAs on the number of job-related phone calls, letters, and interviews generated prior to the study and in the months following showed no significant differences between groups. Further analysis revealed no differences between those who did and did not get jobs on these variables. Physiological data also were not correlated with getting a job.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results supported Hypothesis 3: Subjects who wrote about the trauma of losing their jobs were significantly more likely to find reemployment in the months following the study than control subjects. Interestingly, contrary to Hypothesis 2, these effects were not mediated by measures of heightened motivation. That is, subjects in the experimental condition did not receive more phone calls, make more contacts, or send out more letters than controls.

These results confirm the importance of people’s addressing the psychological issues of job loss to achieve the ultimate goal of reemployment. Further, the study results caution both outplacement practitioners and job seekers about overlooking this psychological processing and engaging in immediate job search activity. Although certainly it is true that job seekers must engage in phone calling, letter writing, and interviewing activities to obtain new positions, our results suggest that those who do so having addressed their emotions and cognitively reappraised their situations may do a qualitatively better job of searching for new positions than those who do not. This qualitative difference may affect individuals’ success in finding reemployment and the speed with which they do so.

In the course of our interactions with subjects during the initial phase of the study, it was apparent that most subjects had very powerful emotions about their termination experience, even though it had been almost six
months since their departure from their jobs. Subjects in both writing conditions tended to divulge to us the nature of the personal problems they were experiencing. Anger and hostility were quite prevalent in these sessions. This anger went far beyond the job search and was apparently putting great strain on the individuals' relationships and their general demeanor. Our review of the experimental subjects' essays also revealed such anger and bitterness as a recurring theme.

Writing about the thoughts and feelings surrounding job loss may enable terminated employees to work through the negative feelings and to assimilate and attain closure on the loss, thus achieving a new perspective. Doing so may create a shift in the individual's orientation that allows getting past the negative emotions, preventing them from resurfacing and perhaps sabotaging the job search in, for example, a job interview.

The results did not support our first hypothesis by showing differences between groups on the various physiological measurements and health self-reports. This finding may be explained, at least in part, by the nature of the setting. The outplacement center from which the clients conducted their job searches served as a social support and network center for the clients. Studies have shown that having a social support network of family or peers can reduce the intensity of the negative feelings following a trauma and can even blunt physiological reactions to a major stressor (Cassel, 1976; Feldman & Brett, 1983; Quick & Quick, 1984). Also, the subjects in the study had been unemployed for nearly six months, an amount of time sufficient to allow them to adjust to the many new situations they faced. The subjects themselves were adamant that the writing process would have been more useful to them at the time of departure from their jobs than it was several months later.

That self-disclosure through writing about thoughts and feelings surrounding job loss influenced reemployment success is promising and corroborates earlier work with adjustment to college among freshmen undergraduates. These findings, together with those of Caplan and colleagues (1989), suggest that, coupled with the traditional services of an outplacement center, self-disclosive writing can facilitate the job-search process.

Many questions remain unanswered. We do not yet know what actually takes place cognitively after an individual translates the thoughts and feelings surrounding a trauma such as job loss into language. Also, what is the actual difference in the job search—for example, in interviews—that may make a job seeker who has resolved emotions more appealing than one who has not? Both experimenters and subjects agreed that earlier writing sessions may have been more helpful than sessions six months after the layoffs. What is the optimal posttrauma time for introducing this coping strategy? The group we studied was primarily composed of middle-aged engineers, who are, at least stereotypically, not very emotionally expressive and might particularly benefit from a structured intervention designed to get them to express themselves. Would different types of job seekers benefit to the same degree as our subjects? Additional experiments with broader populations
and larger groups, as well as further study of the essays produced by subjects in this and similar studies, are warranted.

Finally, despite limitations, the Writing in Transition Project offered unique insight into the problems faced by professionals following job loss. The results also indicated a clear message to both job seekers and the outplacement practitioners. The job search—career transition process needs to address the psychological issues of job loss, as well as to emphasize job search activity. The coping strategy of emotionally disclosive writing is an intervention that can effectively address this need in an outplacement setting.

REFERENCES


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