EXPRESSIVE WRITING FOLLOWING DIVORCE:
THE MODERATING EFFECT OF SELF-COMPASSION

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors Degree
With Honors in
Psychology
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MAY 2011

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Abstract

Emotional disclosure following a negative life event is widely regarded as a beneficial behavior (Pennebaker, 1993). Expressive writing (EW) interventions promote beneficial physical and psychological outcomes (Frattaroli, 2006). This study focuses on the moderating role of self-compassion (SC) in the effects of expressive writing on the course of emotional recovery for people coping with a marital separation. Divorcing adults ($N=105$), were assigned to one of the three expressive writing conditions: traditional expressive writing (TEW), narrative expressive writing (NEW) or a control writing group. Participants completed the revised Intrusion of Events Scale (IES-R; Weiss & Marmar, 1997) during each initial laboratory visit, 3-month follow-up, and either a 6-month or 9-month follow-up. Expressive writing assignment in conjunction with participants’ observationally rated self-compassion had a significant effect on emotional intrusion at the 3-month follow-up such that individuals rated as low in SC, who were assigned to either experimental expressive writing condition, as compared to those in the control condition, evidenced a significant increase in level of event-related emotional intrusion over the 3-month follow-up period. This effect remained significant after accounting for competing variables.

[183 words]

Keywords: Expressive Writing, Divorce, Self-compassion, Intervention
Introduction

In the wake of a negative life event, such as divorce, the most common course of action is to ‘let it all out’—to disclose the swell of thoughts and emotion surrounding the event to the next willing ear or empty page. This process of emotional disclosure has long been considered not only normal, but also beneficial to one’s physical and psychological wellbeing (Frattaroli, 2006). To capture this natural process, Pennebaker and Beall established an expressive writing (EW) paradigm, which involves a pen-and-paper experimental disclosure intervention that could be investigated in the laboratory (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Traditional expressive writing paradigm (TEW) instructs participants to write continuously for 15-20 minutes about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a personal traumatic event (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2004). The results of this paradigm were surprising: participants who were assigned to the EW condition reduced their number of health-care visits by half in the two months following the experimental intervention (Slatcher et al, 2004). Since this initial experiment, many studies have examined the effectiveness and validity of EW as an intervention through experimental variations on instruction, context, and population. Although a great deal of research explores the possible mechanisms involved in the effects of EW on psychological and physical health-related outcomes, a consensus on this topic has yet to be reached. A recent meta-analysis of 146 EW studies determined that overall evidence suggests EW does promote beneficial physical and psychological outcomes, although the
combined effect size of her analysis is relatively small ($\text{effect size} = .075$) (Frattaroli, 2006). The major questions for the EW literature are how does this effect operate and who is most likely to respond to EW.

Three major theories surround the experimental disclosure literature: Inhibition, Self-Regulation, and Cognitive Processing. Inhibition theory dominated the early experimental disclosure literature and stems from the Freudian concept of catharsis, which suggests that the repression of emotional expression following a distressing event can have detrimental effects on a person’s wellbeing (Pennebaker, 1997). Tests of this theory have largely demonstrated its insufficiency in explaining the emotional disclosure effect. This notion was made salient in the results of a study that evidenced similar positive health outcomes between groups writing expressively about real or imaginary traumatic events. These results suggest that cathartic release is not at the heart of the intervention’s efficacy (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996). Self-Regulation theory emphasizes writing’s restorative effect on depleted self-regulative resources and how writing about events in terms that clarify higher level goals in the motivational hierarchy influences the process of integrating negative events into a “life story” (King, 2002). In her paper testing this theory, King argued that writing solely about the traumatic aspects of a negative event impedes understanding of the mechanisms writing employs to achieve insight and cognitive organization about that event (King, 2002). In support of this theory, King demonstrated that writing about one’s “best possible self” (writing about
one’s life as if everything were ideal) produced improved psychological wellbeing, whereas TEW showed no significant improvements (Frattaroli, 2006). This type of intervention is thought to increase participants’ sense of control over traumas and stressors because it clarifies higher level goals rather than reinforcing lower level goals that reside in controlling event-related ruminative, fragmented thought (King, 2002). Cognitive Processing theory posits that the process of putting abstract emotion into words promotes the development of insight about the trauma and thereby integrates an organized concept of the event into one’s self-understanding (Pennebaker, 1993).

From the Cognitive Processing theory of change arose a modified version of the TEW paradigm: The Narrative Expressive Writing (NEW) paradigm instructs participants to compose a coherent and organized account of the traumatic event (Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp, 1990). After pooling the results of his first five EW studies, Pennebaker discovered a linguistic link that connected the benefiting groups of each experiment: participants who benefited most from the paradigm evidenced an increase in use of causation and insight words (i.e. because, effect, know, think) (Frattaroli, 2006). This increase in cognitive mechanistic words reflects the theoretical rationale of the modified paradigm in that reprocessing a traumatic event more methodically and coherently should promote an individual’s awareness of different dimensions of the event and allow them to view the event in a different, less intrusive way (Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002). In theory, this change in perspective promotes a
decrease in event-related distress (Lutgendorf et al, 2002). Having this sense of organization surrounding the traumatic event is also believed to give the writer a greater sense of control over their life, which makes the emotional effects of that experience more manageable (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

In a recent study investigating the potential of narrative writing instruction to enhance the benefits of traditional expressive writing, participants assigned to a NEW condition (who demonstrated higher levels of narrative structure overall) showed greater mental health gains and both NEW and TEW conditions were associated with lower levels of perceived stress and depressive symptoms as compared to the Control writing condition (Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell & Agee, 2010). The authors suggest based on these findings, that forming an emotional narrative regarding personal stressors has beneficial effects on mental health (Danoff-Burg et al, 2010).

The literature reviewed above suggests that cognitive processing may be an important mechanism for explaining the effects of EW. In this paper, we examine whether NEW can improve adjustment (relative to TEW and control writing) for people who have recently experienced a marital separation. When relationships come to an end, many divorcing adults experience a sense of mental confusion, disbelief, apprehension, and a loss of hope for the future (Baumeister, 1991; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Weiss, 1975). Creating a restored sense of mental or cognitive organization is a critical task for coming to terms with a dissolution experience (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). As fundamental beliefs
about our social worlds and ourselves get disturbed, physiological stress reactions often ensue. In the stress and coping literature, two aspects of cognitive organization—adaptation and narrative coherence—have proven robust predictors of individuals’ emotional and physical adjustment to difficult life events. Cognitive adaptation theory, applied most completely to the study of chronic illness (Helgeson, 1999), holds that successful adjustment to traumatic experiences hinges on individuals’ abilities to maintain or develop a positive outlook, gain a sense of personal control or mastery, and restore self-regard. Moreover, research on narratives following loss and other stressful life events suggests that individuals who are able to construct an organized and coherent account of a painful event benefit because thoughts and feelings can be more completely integrated (Capps & Bonanno, 2000; Pennebaker & King, 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Richards, 1997). The development of narrative coherence is believed to underpin meaning making and benefit finding strategies that are presumed critical in “resolving” or recovering from a social disruption (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000; Neimeyer, 2000), and several lines of inquiry have demonstrated that meaning making protects against health relevant biological stress responses (Bower et al., 1998; Epel, McEwen, & Ickovics, 1998; Taylor et al., 2000). Given this basic science research, the current study was designed to determine if NEW, which is based on the tenets of cognitive adaptation theory, would promote adjustment to divorce. Evidence to this end would provide clear
support for the Cognitive Processing theory of EW, however, we do not yet know whether expressive writing, in general, has benefits for people coping with a recent marital separation—herein lies a main effect question: Does an EW paradigm reduce the level of divorce-related emotion intrusion over three months among divorced participants? Based on this literature, we hypothesize that relative to participants in a Control writing condition, those assigned to both experimental (NEW/TEW) conditions will show greater overall improvement in emotional recovery over three months.

*Expressive Writing for Whom? Self-compassion as a Moderator*

When confronted with the dissolution of a marriage, it is common for individuals to engage in negative appraisals of themselves and of their relationship. *It’s all my fault; I failed my partner; I wish I could have been everything they wanted; I should have acted differently.* These self-incriminations are essentially distorted perceptions of causality; it is well known that the more individuals invest in thoughts of regret and longing, the worse their corresponding outcomes tend to be (Sbarra et al, 2011). An important goal of the divorce literature is to gain understanding of what predicts and influences positive outcomes and resiliency in the face of marital separation. Here, we turn our attention to a question of moderation.

Self-compassion (SC) has risen as a variable of interest in the psychological zeitgeist as a unique example of positive emotion. A trifold construct, self-compassion is defined by the combination of its three subcomponents: self-kindness, mindfulness, and
common humanity. “Self-kindness” involves taking warm and understanding attitude toward the self during trying situations rather than dwelling in negativity. “Mindfulness” in the context of SC requires a person to take a balanced approach to negative emotion such that repression of or over-indulging in these feelings is avoided in favor of level-headedness (Neff, 2003a). “Common humanity” requires the acknowledgement that suffering is a universal and defining feature of mankind; humanity is mortal, vulnerable and prone to imperfection. These features work together to represent an individual’s ability to view their failures and hardships as part of the common human experience with a balanced frame of self-reference and equanimity to emotion, especially during distressing experiences (Neff, 2003a).

In a previous study, observational scoring of self-compassion was identified as a unique and viable predictor of the course of emotional recovery over the span of three months following marital separation. This effect demonstrated that, compared individuals rated as high in SC, individuals rated as low in SC evidenced higher levels of divorce-specific emotional intrusion at study entry, and this effect persisted over 9 months (Sbarra et al, 2011). This translated to a slower course of emotional recovery in low SC participants as compared to high SC participants, which was indicated by a slowing in decreases of IES-R scores over time. Participants high in SC evidenced lower initial levels of emotional intrusion and demonstrated faster decreases in IES-R scores
over time. This effect was shown to be robust and remained significant when the model was controlled for competing variables (Sbarra et al, 2011).

The current study extends this initial research by asking whether divorce participants who are rated as more self-compassionate benefit more from the EW paradigm than those who are less self-compassionate. In other words, do observer ratings of self-compassion moderate the effect of the EW paradigm on divorce-related emotion intrusion over three months? We hypothesize that participants judged to be high in SC will evidence greater decrease in divorce-related emotional intrusion in the TEW/NEW conditions than those participants rated as low in self-compassion. We do not expect SC to be associated with Control writing.

Methods and Procedures

Participants

Data for the present study were collected at the University of Arizona both as part of a NIH/NIA-funded examination (R21AG#028454) of adult divorce adjustment and as part of an investigation of self-compassion as a predictor of divorce-related emotional recovery, which was funded by an Honor Undergraduate research grant awarded to the first author. Participants were 109 (38 men) recently divorced, community-dwelling adults, with a mean age of 40.4 years old (SD = 10 years). The average reported length of marital relationship was 13.5 years (SD = 103.10 months), with an average length of
separation of 3.8 months prior to the initial laboratory visit (SD = 2.1 months). Thirty-one percent of the sample was legally divorced, 20% were legally separated, and 46% were physically separated, but had not taken legal action (the remainder of the sample did not provide this information). Four female undergraduate students at the University of Arizona served as expert judges. All judges were unacquainted with the participants whom they rated.

Procedure

Data for this study were collected prior and during participants’ scheduled laboratory visits. One to two days before their initial lab visit, participants completed a physical paper copy of the IES-R, which they received in the mail. Upon their first lab visit, participants were asked to reflect mentally on their past relationship and separation experience for 30 seconds before speaking freely for four minutes continuously into a digital recorder about their strongest thoughts and feelings regarding the separation experience, in a stream-of-consciousness (SOC) fashion. Four expert coders, who were unacquainted with the participants, all aspects of the greater marital transition study and the project’s hypotheses, judged each participant on all 12 items of the short-form Self-compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b). For behavioral coding, this scale was adapted from the original self-report scale and translated into divorce-specific, third person items.
At the conclusion of each initial laboratory visit, participants were randomly assigned to one of three expressive writing (EW) conditions based on Pennebaker’s original paradigm (Pennebaker, 1997). These include: Traditional Expressive Writing (TEW), Narrative Expressive Writing (NEW), and a Control writing group. Participants completed their first of three EW days in the laboratory and the two final days of writing at home. The TEW condition instructed participants to write freely and continuously for 20 minutes about their strongest and deepest emotions surrounding their marital separation experience; this condition encouraged a stream-of-consciousness form of writing. The participants assigned to the NEW condition were given the same general instructions as to the duration and topic of their writing, but were instead instructed to create a coherent and organized narrative recounting their divorce experience. Each writing day was organized around a different narrative theme (writing Day 1 asked participants to tell the story of the end of their relationship; Day 2 instructions were to narrate the separation experience; Day 3 instructions were to create a positive ending of the divorce story). Participants assigned to the control writing group were instructed to spend twenty minutes writing continuously about mundane and unemotional topics such as how they spend their time. The initial writing session was completed at the first laboratory visit, then participants completed 20 minutes of writing per day for the two days following the laboratory visit, which resulted in three total writing days.
Following the first laboratory visit, participants returned for a 3-month assessment follow-up assessment in which they again completed the main outcome variable.

**Measures**

*Divorce-related demographics.* Information was collected on the length of time (in months) that had passed since the end of the separation.

*Divorce-related psychological adjustment.* Psychological adjustment was operationalized using the 22-item Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IESR: Weiss & Marmar, 1997), which includes items such as “I thought about it when I didn’t mean to” and “I had trouble concentrating.” Higher scores reflect greater emotional intrusion, somatic hyperarousal, and avoidance behaviors following the recent separation experience. Internal consistencies of the IES-R were high in this sample (αs = .89-.93). The IES-R covaries with other measures of divorce-related psychological adjustment and is a valid measure for assessing subjective emotional responses over time following the end of marriage (Mason, Sbarra & Mehl, 2010).

*Self-reported optimism.* A modified self-report version of the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) was used to assess optimism at each participant’s initial lab visit. This scale was modified to refer specifically to the separation experience. For example, “Since the separation, I usually expect the best.” This current adaptation should be regarded as reflecting state-like rather than trait-like
divorce-specific renderings of the construct. This scale evidenced high internal consistency at the first study visit (αs = .90).

*Observer-rated self-compassion.* The four judges listened to each participant’s 4-minutes SOC recording about their thoughts and feelings regarding their separation experience. Judges rated each participant based on sound files using a modified version of the short-form SCS (Raes, Pommier, Neff & Van Gucht, In Press). All SCS items were reworded from first-person to third person (for behavioral coding) and were made to refer specifically to a divorce experience. For example, the SCS item, “*When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.*” Was re-worded to read, “*When describing something painful about the divorce, this person seems to take a balanced view of the situation.*” This modified items were scored using the same 5-point Likert-type scale as the original self-report inventory, therefore, identical to the original SCS, participants who scored high on the total summary score evidenced greater self-compassion. Inter-coder agreement (ICC[2,k]) for each of the 12 items was computed and averaged across observing judges. These judges demonstrated relatively high agreement in identifying participants’ self-compassion during the SOC task (ICC = .77). There were no significant differences sex in judge-rated self-compassion by participant sex, t(103)=1.62, p = .21.
Data Analysis

Using linear regression, statistically independent planned contrasts were computed in order to test the hypothesis that individuals in either experimental expressive writing condition (TEW or NEW) would evidence greater divorce-related psychological adjustment over three months than individuals in the control condition. EW represents the contrast variable that compares the two experimental writing conditions (coded as .3333, respectively) to the Control condition (coded as -.6666). No significant differences in outcome measures were evidenced between the two experimental groups; thus they were collapsed into one contrast variable in order to compare them collectively to the control condition. Multiple regression analyses were conducted with IES-R score from the 3-month follow-up visit as the outcome measure of interest. The first models tested the planned contrast (EW) variable and conducted exploratory analyses that considered mean self-compassion and the interaction variable of EW assignment and self-compassion (EW X SC) as potential moderators. The next series of models included demographic variables (length of separation, participant sex) as well as covariates of interest (self-reported optimism and Visit 1 IES-R) to determine if the main effect was retained after accounting for competing predictors.
Results

Table 2 shows the bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the study variables. As shown in the table, expressive writing condition was positively correlated with level of emotional intrusion (IES-R) at 3 months ($r = .215$). Also, mean self-compassion was strongly, negatively correlated with IES-R scores at both the initial visit and the 3-month follow-up ($r = -.585$ and -.398, respectively).

Table 1 shows the final results predicting change in IES-R scores over the 3-month follow-up period. The full model predicting psychological adjustment outcome at the 3-month follow-up was significant, $p < .001$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .62$, $R^2 = .389$. Significant main effects were evidenced for EW condition and self-compassion, which were qualified by a significant EW X SC interaction ($\beta = -.649$, $p < .05$). To examine whether observer-ratings of self-compassion moderated the main effect of expressive writing on psychological adjustment we used the IES-R 3-month follow-up score as the dependent variable with writing condition (EW), the centered self-compassion mean, and the Expressive Writing X Self-compassion interaction term entered into the regression model. As shown in Table 2, after accounting for IES-R scores at the initial visit, EW condition had a significant effect on IES-R at Visit 3; however because the EW X SC interaction effect is significant, we focus on the interpretation of the interaction effect below. Expressive writing condition, in conjunction with observationally rated levels of self-compassion, significantly predicted change in divorce-specific IES-R scores over
three months such that, on average, participants assigned to either experimental conditions evidenced significantly elevated in the IES-R 3-month outcome measure as compared to participants in the Control condition.

As shown in Figure 1, this EW main effect seems to be primarily driven by level of self-compassion such that participants judged to be low in self-compassion, who were assigned to either experimental expressive writing task (TEW or NEW), evidenced a significant increase in divorced-related emotional intrusion over the 3-month follow-up period as compared to those participants in the control condition (Mean IES-R 3-month = 1.6, \( r_{\text{effect size}} = .7, \text{SD} = .65 \)). The interaction effect between writing condition and level of observer-rated self-compassion on IES-R outcome scores remained significant after accounting for IES-R scores measured at each participant’s initial visit, self-reported optimism, length of separation (in months), and participant sex.

Discussion

Although expressive writing is associated with psychological and physical health benefits, there is little consensus in the literature concerning for whom the paradigm is most beneficial (Frattaroli, 2006). In the present study, contrary to the main effect hypothesis, we observed both experimental forms of EW to be associated with worse outcomes in divorce adjustment relative to control writing. We found that this main effect was driven almost entirely by participants observed to be low in self-compassion, and it
is this population who evidenced the greatest increases in IES-R scores over the three-month follow-up period.

What processes might explain the SC X EW effect? One explanation is that emotional writing is particularly harmful for some people. In this study, we find that people who are judged to treat themselves with less kindness and empathy (when discussing their divorce), who see their divorce as having negative implications about themselves (rather than being a part of the shared human experience); and, who have a greater tendency to become over-involved in their emotional experiences (when discussing the divorce) do particularly worse when asked to focus their writing either emotionally or as a narrative—on the separation experience. For these people, EW may induce rumination, which extends distress over time. This type of unconstructive repetitive thought has been shown to promote depressive symptoms, anxiety, and difficulties with physical health (Watkins, 2008a,b).

An interesting contradiction to our finding exists in the literature that demonstrates EW as a buffer against maladaptive rumination. In their paper investigating the topic, Sloan and colleagues show that individuals with a higher propensity toward brooding following a negative life event benefit from NEW such that these participants report fewer depressive symptoms up to six months following the EW paradigm (Sloan, Marx, Epstein & Dobbs, 2008). The authors attribute these outcomes to the participants’ ability to re-structure maladaptive cognitions and confront negative thoughts and feelings.
about the event through writing about it in an organized manner (Sloan et al, 2008). The differences in outcome between these two studies could be attributed to the disparate nature of the respective study populations. Sloan and colleagues’ study population consisted of first-year undergraduate students who wrote about varying topics ranging from assault (24%) and an illness or injury to themselves or family member (24%) to family conflict (12%) and death of a close friend or family member (12%) (Sloan et al, 2008). Recent traumatic experience was not a qualifying variable for entry into this study and was not a factor that was accounted for in the results. In the present study, however, all participants were recently separated from their significant other (mean = 3.8 months prior to first laboratory visit), therefore the divorce (as recent a traumatic event) would potentially be more emotionally intrusive.

The methods of Sloan’s study, however, provide insight into another potential explanation: opportunity for habituation. Over the 3 consecutive writing days participants in this study on rumination were given instruction to write in a narrative fashion for 20 with consistent instruction to write about the negative event with as much emotion as possible and relate it to their daily lives with an added instruction to “wrap-up” the narrative on the third writing day, whereas participants in the present study sample were instructed to tell the story of the end of their relationship on Day 1, narrate the separation experience on Day 2, and create a positive ending of the divorce story on Day 3. Consistent with the theory behind the imaginal exposure component of prolonged
exposure therapy (PE), which is used primarily in populations suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, recounting the trauma experience only decreases anxiety upon habituation of the narrative (Foa, Zoellner, Feeny, Hembree, & Alvaraz-Conrad, 2002). Habituation of a trauma narrative occurs after recounting the story repeatedly until the patient is able to confront it without experiencing a conditioned fear response or elevated anxiety (Foa et al, 2002). If habituation is not yet achieved, a patient is likely to experience higher levels of anxious and depressive symptoms (Jaycox, Morral, & Foa, 1998). In the present study, participants may not have had the opportunity to achieve habituation of their divorce narrative due to the variation in instruction and narrative focus over the three writing days, which may influence a different mindset depending on the requirements of the day’s specific instructions. This discrepancy could potentially explain the increase in divorce-related emotional intrusion following EW in low SC participants assigned to either experimental condition.

The findings from this study suggest that before prescribing EW for people following a divorce, we must first seek to understand if they are the type of people who will benefit from reflecting deeply on their experiences. Although EW has been shown to promote wellbeing in many studies, for some populations, the current findings indicate that EW can have unintended negative consequences.
References


Expressive Writing Following Divorce

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1063-1078.


Figure 1: Effect of experimental expressive writing on IES-R score, showing influence of self-compassion on main effect.
Table 1: Final multilevel model results predicting change in IES-R scores over the 3-month follow-up period.

### Results of Regression Models

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*Dependent Variable: z-scores COMBINED INTRUSION-HYPERAROUSAL SCALE*
Table 2: Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables.