

Using Writing to Manage Stress

PURPOSE

Expressing your thoughts and feelings in writing and reflecting purposefully on what you've written can improve your ability to cope with challenges and manage stress, ultimately helping you understand and find meaning in your experiences. Use this technique to organize your thoughts, identify and address your feelings, and learn to see experiences from multiple perspectives.

HOW TO DO IT

Step 1. Disregard these common misconceptions.

Misconception: You need to know what you want to say before you start writing.

Reality: You may not be able to predict or plan what you write, and that is okay.

Misconception: Telling the truth is dangerous.

Reality: You are free to keep what you write private, which means that telling the truth is safe. Furthermore, telling the truth is necessary to benefit from this work.

Misconception: You must suffer to write well.

Reality: You may write about painful topics; in that case, you are likely to see the experience from a new angle and ultimately lessen your suffering. Of course, you may also write about pleasant or neutral topics.

Misconception: You are not allowed to ask for help.

Reality: You are absolutely allowed to ask for help! Members of the KSU community can seek help from many resources including the KSU Writing Center and Counseling and Psychological Services.

Step 2. Write expressively about both facts AND your feelings about those facts.

- Write honestly; unless you *choose* to share your writing, only you will ever see it.
- Allow imperfection; don't be concerned with proper grammar or spelling.

Facts:

actual events, your actions/the actions of others, your words/other people's words

Feelings:

anger, anxiety, belonging, curiosity, disappointment, embarrassment, empathy, excitement, fear, frustration, gratitude, grief, happiness, jealousy, joy, loneliness, love, overwhelm, regret, sadness, shame, surprise, vulnerability, worry

Step 3. Reflect in writing on what you have written.

- Use "I" to center the experience on yourself.
- Use past tense to describe how you felt and present tense to show how that feeling has changed: *I understood _____; now I understand _____.*
- Complete these sentence stems as you reflect on your writing. *As I read what I have written,*
 - *I notice _____.*
 - *it surprises me that _____.*
 - *it pleases me that _____.*
 - *it concerns me that _____.*
 - *I wonder _____.*

Keywords and phrases to help you reflect:

arose from, became relevant for, began after, believe, ended when, expect, feel, happened when, hope, know, question, realize, resulted from, understand, wonder

Remember: feelings can change—but only with time AND reflection. Often, writers' initial responses include disempowering words; their written reflections tend to be more empowering.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE**Exercise 1: 5-Minute Freewrite + Reflection**

Write without stopping for five minutes following this one rule: don't stop until you hear the timer. You may want to consider the following as you begin:

- How do you feel about doing this exercise?
- Describe a powerful moment you recently experienced.
- Write about a challenge you are facing or a challenge that you recently faced.

After you've written for five minutes, read over your writing. Notice themes and your reactions to what you've written. Then, write a reflective note for up to five minutes.

Exercise 2: Pongo Poem¹ + Reflection

Fill in the blanks below to write your own poem. After you've written your poem, read over it. Notice themes and your reactions to what you've written. Then, write a reflective note for up to five minutes.

Poem title: Taking First Steps, by _____ (your name)

The first step can be the longest

When you want to _____ (give up alcohol, break up with someone, ???)

The first step can be the most challenging

When you fear _____ (failure, hurting someone you care about, ???)

The first step can be the hardest

When you fight against _____ (your need to forget, a desire to take the easy way out, ???)

The first step is often the loneliest

When you don't know if _____ (friends will reject you, family will blame you, ???)

The first step can be an opening

Where the possibilities include _____ (a healthier life, new relationships, ???)

The first step can be an ending

When you think you will lose _____ (independence, the courage of your will, ???)

The first step can be a joy

When you celebrate _____ (sobriety, a new life on your own, ???)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Some people feel better equipped to manage stress after a single writing/reflecting session while others notice a difference only after several sessions. Just remember that you don't have to write or reflect alone: the [KSU Writing Center](#) and [KSU Counseling and Psychological Services](#) are here to help.

¹ Gold, Richard. "Taking First Steps." Pongo Teen Writing, 2009, www.pongoteenwriting.org