



An Introduction to Expressive Writing



This booklet is for anyone living or caring for someone with heart failure.

When you are first diagnosed with any serious medical condition, it can be confusing and emotional. Heart failure is no exception. This booklet is your guide to learning about expressive writing, a powerful tool to navigate the emotional ups and downs of living with heart failure.

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Welcome to Writing the Heart

If you have been diagnosed with heart failure, this booklet is for you. In it, we introduce expressive writing, a writing process that research has shown to be beneficial in helping you cope with the emotional upheaval experienced in the diagnosis of a severe illness. You will also learn how to use this kind of writing on your own, helping you express and relieve the turbulent emotions that often accompany a heart failure diagnosis.

You'll also be introduced to Writing the Heart, a workshop led by Sharon Bray facilitated by The Heart Hub. The workshop provides a safe space to share your experiences and feelings with a supportive community of other heart failure patients.

"The writing process has given me the freedom to write whatever needed to come out without the fear or clamouring of my inner critic."

- Former participant, Writing the Heart program

What is expressive writing?

Expressive writing is a process of writing freely and honestly about the emotions and thoughts resulting from a stressful or traumatic life event.

- It is writing that helps individuals express and process their emotional turmoil resulting from stressful or traumatic life events.
- It involves brief, timed writing sessions encouraging you to convey personal thoughts and feelings about these upsetting experiences.
- The writing is done freely, without worrying about style, spelling, punctuation, or grammar.

The health benefits of expressive writing

For over 30 years, psychologist James Pennebaker and his colleagues have studied the health benefits of expressive writing. Studies have been conducted with many different groups, including cancer and cardiac patients, war veterans, those experiencing sudden job loss, and many others. They confirmed that confronting trauma can have powerful effects on the body.

Expressive writing research studies have demonstrated several health benefits, including:

- Improved quality of life
- Improved mental and physical health
- Helping to make sense of difficult emotions
- Lowered blood pressure/heart rate
- Improved immune system functioning
- Improved quality of sleep and easing of pain
- Positive changes in the way we feel about our health
- Becoming more engaged in self-care

Expressive writing research has also demonstrated several cognitive benefits, such as:

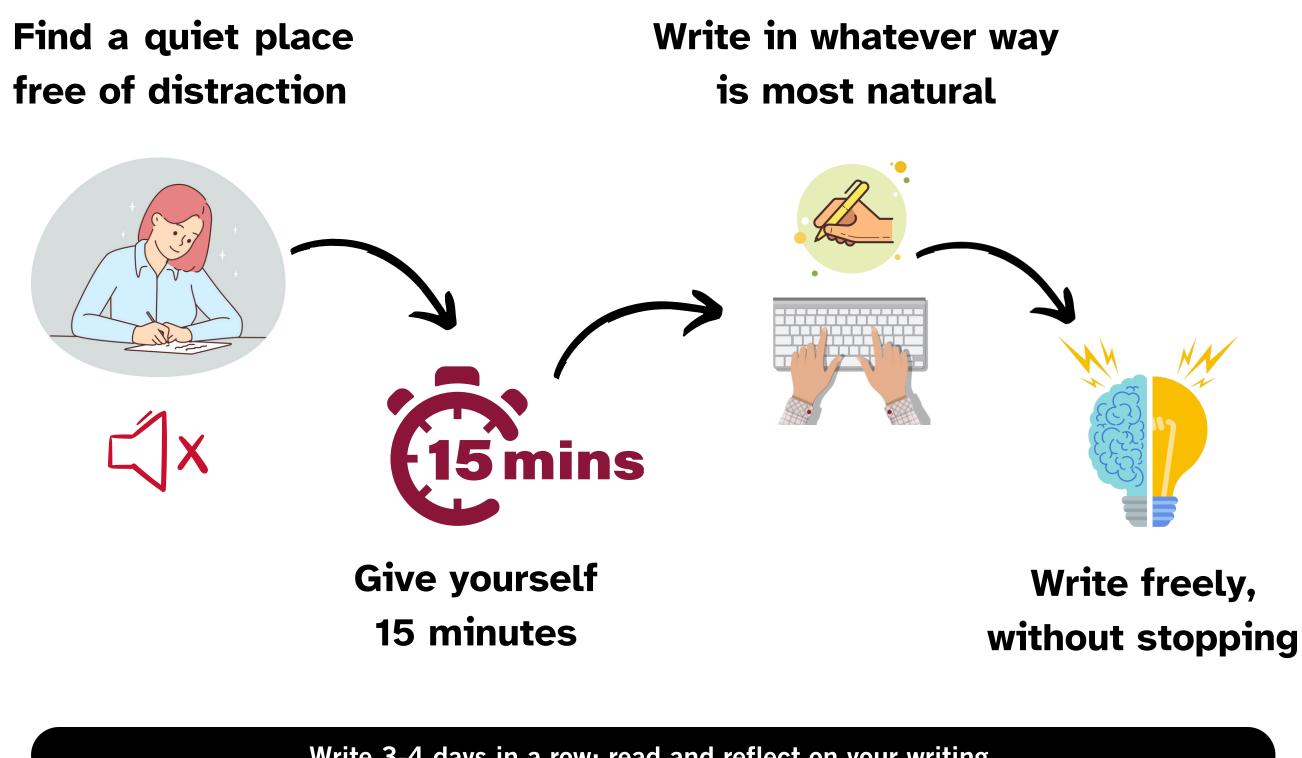
- Translating your emotions into words
- Making your thoughts and events more concrete
- Encouraging reflection and "sense-making" of your experiences
- Making linkages between your feelings and upsetting events
- Releasing negative emotions that can impact health and emotional well-being
- Reclaiming your voice, often temporarily silenced by illness or a serious medical condition.

(Source: Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain, by James W. Pennebaker PhD and Joshua M. Smyth, PhD. The Guilford Press, 2016)

"That's the way writing often starts, a disaster or a catastrophe...by writing I rescue myself under all sorts of conditions...it relieves the feeling of distress."

-William Carlos Williams, MD & poet

Getting Started: Writing Alone

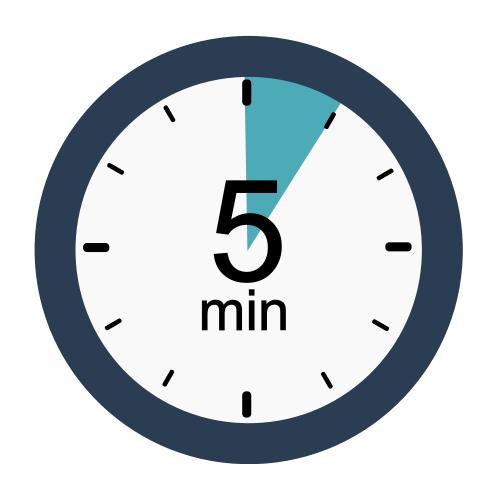


Write 3-4 days in a row; read and reflect on your writing

Writing prompts and time limits: Expressive writing exercises begin with a "writing prompt" or "trigger." All writing is timed; why? Timed writing forces release, helping you get to the truth of your experience. The time limits encourage you to write freely, fast and without stopping to review or edit.



Writing prompt #1: Trying it out: Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Set a timer for five minutes and respond to this question without stopping until the five minutes are up. Remember, one of the most important rules of expressive writing is to keep your pen (or fingers on the keyboard) moving. Write quickly. Do not stop to re-read and correct grammar, spelling or punctuation.



Prompt 1: How did you feel when you first heard the words, "You have heart failure"?			



At the end of five minutes, STOP!

Read over what you've written. How did it feel to write under pressure? Were you surprised in any way by what you've written?

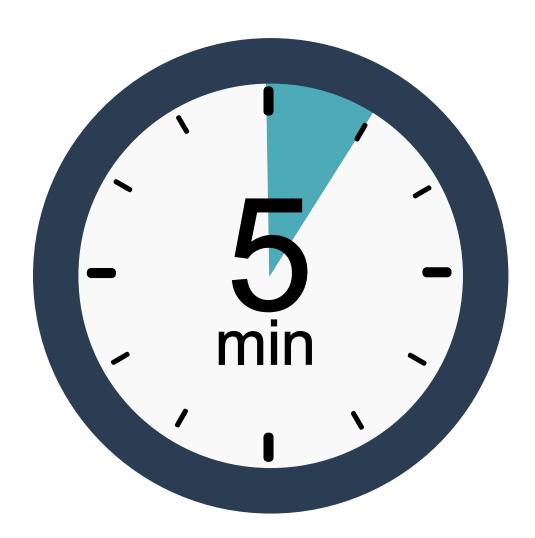
Underline any words or phrases that stand out for whatever reason. The underlined words may be used as prompts for you to explore in greater detail later. For example, if you underlined the word 'fear ', you might explore what specifically you fear about your condition and how it affects your daily life.

As you begin writing in a way that can be most healing for you, try these suggestions: Don't be afraid to dive deeply into your experiences and emotions. Remember, this is a form of self-care, a way to prioritize your emotional well-being during a challenging time.

Writing prompt #2:

"And the body, what about the body?" the poet Jane Kenyon wrote while suffering from a terminal illness. We may feel, when diagnosed, that our body has somehow betrayed us.

Have you felt a sense of betrayal by your body since you've been diagnosed with heart failure? Once again, set your timer for <u>5</u> minutes and write without until the time is up.



Prompt 2: How have your feelings about your body changed since your diagnosis?



The most healing kind of writing

"I will tell you something about stories. They aren't just entertainment. They are all we must fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have stories."

-In Ceremony, by Leslie Marmon Silko, 1978

Stories are uniquely human; they are how we communicate with one another and make sense of our experiences. Our stories are often temporarily silenced when we are diagnosed with a serious illness. Expressive writing helps you reclaim your stories in those challenging times.

Writing that is most healing takes us to the important and more profound stories of our experiences. Think about the icebergs that float in the Arctic Ocean. What is visible is only a tiny part of an iceberg. The larger, more significant part of it is well beneath the surface.



Your most important and emotional stories are also often hidden beneath the surface. Reading and reflecting on the words and phrases you've underlined helps to take you deeper into your experience. The words or phrases you underline are "doors in" to the deeper story hidden beneath the surface.

Writing prompt #3

For this prompt, think about your life experiences with heart failure or another challenging life event and answer the following question: "What is the story I most want to tell?" It could be a secret, a fear, or something that happened in the past. Try to get to your deeper story by taking 10 minutes to describe what you want to write about and why it matters to you.



Prompt 3: Wha	at is my secre tell?	most want to	D



Read and reflect once again, read over what you've written, underlining any words or phrases that stand out for any reason.

Notice which words or phrases have more power for you than others.

One or more of those words or phrases you've underlined can be an invitation to be explored more deeply later.

"I am the only one who can tell my story and say what it means."
-Dorothy Allison, writer

Writing on your own: some tips

If you want to use expressive writing independently, prompts are a helpful way to ignite your writing. It's useful to keep all your writing in one notebook or file so you can go back and read what you've written. In doing so, you may discover additional emotions or events to write about.

Some additional writing prompts to try on your own:

- What do you fear?
- What gives you hope?
- What would you change if you could?
- Write a letter to your heart
- Today, I feel like...
- Sometimes, I worry about dying.
- What frustrates me most is...
- What are you grateful for today?

Remember, anything can be a writing prompt, such as a photograph, a quote, an object, a line from a favorite poem, or your most recent visit with your physician. One important caveat: If you're writing alone, you might sometimes fall down a rabbit hole, that is, ruminating and feeling worse. It's a key reason why expressive writing is best done in a timed approach. Time limits help to keep you from ruminating or falling into that rabbit hole. If you begin feeling worse after writing, pause for a few days and then try again. However, if you continue to feel bad, it's wise to talk to someone about your feelings.

Writing together: group workshops

Expressive writing is a practice you can do alone or in a group setting with other heart patients. Once or twice each year, **The Heart Hub** offers the **Writing the Heart** workshop, a six-week online writing program for heart failure patients led by Dr. Sharon Bray. Writing together in a group setting can provide additional support and lessen the feeling of navigating heart failure alone.

The "Writing the Heart" program is limited to 14 registrants who are living with heart failure. The group meets once each week for six weeks in a 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ hour session.

Each week, participants write together in response to various prompts like those you've experienced in this booklet. All writing is done within specific time limits, typically 5 to 15 minutes. The workshop is designed to be a supportive experience for anyone living with heart failure. For more information on the "Writing the Heart" program, contact **The Heart Hub (ourhearthub.ca.)**



Your facilitator: Sharon Bray, Ed.D.

For more than two decades, Dr. Sharon Bray has led expressive writing groups in community, educational and medical institutions in the US and Canada, including the Omega Institute, University of Illinois, Pacific School of Religion, Stanford Cancer Center and the Stanford University Medical School, among others. Most recently, she led groups at Gilda's Club of Greater Toronto and the UHN Center for Living Organ Donation. In 2021, she designed and led the "Writing the Heart" workshop series through the Ted Rogers Centre for Heart Research.

Sharon is among the heart failure patients of Dr. Heather Ross at the Peter Munk Cardiac Center.

Sharon earned her Master's in educational psychology from Mt. St. Vincent University, Halifax, before completing her EdD at OISE, University of Toronto before her later studies in creative and transformational writing. A former instructor for UCLA extension's "Writers' Program," teaching creative nonfiction and transformative writing, she is the author of two books on writing and healing with cancer patients and several articles on the power of expressive writing.



"The sessions evoked ...a whirlpool of emotions as I tried to pen down my thoughts and feelings inspired by the prompts. Sharon's words of encouragement have empowered and healed us throughout the weeks."

-former participant, Writing the Heart workshop

Writing from the workshops

Three Poems by H.C. Kean

Hope

Ever present but out of reach
The elusive nymph shows
her rewards not often enough

Like a spring we would gulp from her benefits
Like an ocean we would drown in her beauty

Alas, we only get glimpses of her flesh though the dancing shadows of our forest floor

Mantra for a broken heart

I came into this world with a few holes in me and I plan to leave it with a few more

There is nothing of life if there is nothing of love

Snapshot

In this photo I am realizing that life isn't fair. 5 years old, laying on a small gurney with bars surrounding me – it was like I was in a cage. The girl laying in the bed beside me, looking at me. She reached her hand through the bars to touch me and she asked "are you afraid?"

Then the nurses came and wheeled her away, into the operating room. I was alone in the holding area waiting to be next. I never found out who she was or what happened to her but from that brief encounter I knew she was my friend and that none of this was fair

Todd C. To My Heart

To my heart

You are weak; you are broken; you have many faults
You were brought into this world with a piece of you missing.
But you are what completes me, what makes me whole

Because I am strong, I am not broken,
Your brokenness is my strength.
You've pushed me to love and live with every ounce of my being.
Simply because I don't when you'll decide to quit on me.

I live with that fear, the fear you'll give up and take me with you. But I have so much living and loving left to do.

K.M. Be Still...

I'm here. I'm here.
Beat-beat.Thump-thump.
In-out. In-out.
Swish.

Slow down. Be still. Have faith. You are. In-out. In-out. Swish.

Look around. Breathe in.

Go slow. Stretch.

Use my power.

Thump-thump.

I'm here.

I hold you. Sustain you;
Pull you in,
Push on you.
Beat-beat. Thump-thump.
Still here

Mary R. Letter from my Heart

Thank you for taking care of me

I am trying all the time

I didn't intend to let you down, but I'm trying to make it up to you.

I appreciate all you do for me

You're tending to me as you would the grass in an unwell neighbour back yard

You're there when I need you

I intend to try my best to keep beating for you for many years to come I don't mean to scare you at times

I know that when I do I cause you to worry about me

I appreciate you listening to our doctors and doing what you are told It makes it much easier on me to perform well

I know you can't see me....and I have limited vision from where I lie We will work together to visualize each other to get and stay well. Our lives have changed, but I'm still here for you, marking time with every beat.



