

# Who benefits from disclosure? Exploration of attachment style differences in the effects of expressing emotions

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## Abstract

Pennebaker's disclosure paradigm is a powerful manipulation: writing or talking about emotional experiences has positive effects on health. Nevertheless, the effect does not work for all people and some studies, including those of the highly emotional event of bereavement, have failed to demonstrate any effect at all. This paper reviews empirical evidence and proposes an integrative model to help explain discrepant findings and assess individual differences in the manipulation's effectiveness. Taking bereavement as exemplary of an attachment-related loss experience, it examines the relationship between styles of attachment, internal representations of the self and other, and patterns of disclosure in the coping process. Research has shown disturbances in disclosure among insecurely attached persons. We argue that secure persons are less likely to benefit from the disclosure paradigm, since they are better able to disclose in ways that further the adjustment process in their everyday lives. Targeting persons with insecure attachment styles and providing attachment-style-specific disclosure instructions are likely to increase the power of the manipulation. Our examination of these individual difference patterns is compatible with recent cognitive and linguistic analyses underlying the disclosure paradigm's impact on health.

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## 1. Introduction

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.”  
[Shakespeare, *Macbeth*]

“Grief, keep within and scorn to show but tears. . . Distain to sigh, for so can slender cares, Which but from idle causes, grow.”

[Line from the 16th Century poet Danyel]

Is it beneficial to our health and well-being to share the troubles of stressful life events such as bereavement, as Shakespeare advocates, or, should we contain our grief, to avoid an incremental effect on our negative emotions, as the words of Danyel suggest? Research by Pennebaker and colleagues during the last two decades indicates that disclosure about upsetting experiences, through writing or talking, is beneficial to one's health (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997a, 1997b). This positive effect of emotional expression has been shown to pertain to diverse domains, including

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varied traumatic experiences, job loss, imprisonment, or even less extreme adaptations, such as coping with the stresses of college life. However, some investigators who have tried to replicate such results have either found only limited support, or have failed to find any positive effects of disclosure. Furthermore, a distinct but relevant body of research by Rimé and his colleagues, on the impact of social sharing of emotion on recovery, indicates that merely sharing an emotion with others does not alleviate the emotional impact of an upsetting event, although people retain the belief that it actually does help (e.g., Rimé, 1999; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Phillipot, 1998; Zech, 2000).

Even when positive effects are found in disclosure studies, the manipulation will not necessarily be working for everyone. It is even possible that for some persons and/or for some topics, such confrontation of emotions may work negatively (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Many studies of the impact of debriefing after traumatic events—which typically involves the expression of thoughts and emotions connected to the trauma—have failed to demonstrate the efficacy of such a technique (for reviews, see Rose & Bisson, 1998; van Emmerik, Kamphuis, Hulsbosch, & Emmelkamp, 2002).

What, then, are the salient characteristics of individuals for whom the manipulation does, versus does not, work? And why does not sharing one's emotions work so well in some studies, or for some life events? With a few recent exceptions (e.g., Cameron & Nicholls, 1998; Paez, Velasco, & Gonzalez, 1999), little research has investigated personality or individual difference variables, to distinguish between those who do versus do not benefit from the disclosure manipulation, or to link these with the particular situations under investigation (Pennebaker & Keough, 1999). More fundamentally, while earlier research explored the range of stressful situations and experiences that people could usefully write about (e.g., from moving to college to coping with prison or unemployment), recent theoretical analysis has focused on cognitive and linguistic processes that may underlie the efficacy of the disclosure paradigm (e.g., Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 2003; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Despite such developments, there has been no theoretical framework to guide assumption-building, channel research and systematically investigate individual differences.

In this article we review the empirical evidence and propose a theoretical explanation for discrepant findings, to suggest when and for whom disclosing emotions about upsetting experiences will further recovery from negative life events. Following our own line of research, to focus examination of this broad area on one specific life stressor, we take the experience of bereavement as exemplary, indicating how our conclusions can be generalized to other domains that have been investigated using the paradigm. The life stressor of bereavement lends itself to examination of the disclosure paradigm. It has, after all, been classified as the life event requiring the most intense readjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Since it encompasses at least as much upheaval as many of the stressors investigated by Pennebaker do, the disclosure effect should be easily replicable in the case of this stressor. In fact, it is generally believed that individuals need to confront their loss experiences and do their grief work. Although it seems reasonable to assume that confronting one's grief in written or verbal disclosure should support the grief work process, as we will elaborate below, most studies have failed to find positive effects (e.g., Bonanno, Keltner, Holen, & Horowitz, 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1999; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991; Wortman & Silver, 1989, 2001). These negative results need theoretical explanation too.

In summary, our aims are twofold: we want to explore underlying patterns to explain when disclosure does (not) work for people, and we want to apply the emergent model to further our understanding of coping with one stressor in particular, namely, bereavement. This analysis enables integration of two major theoretical and empirical research areas: we incorporate Pennebaker's Self-Disclosure Health Model within the attachment theory framework, to guide research and increase the power of predictions about adaptation to stressful life experiences.

## 2. The writing paradigm: efficacy and explanation

Pennebaker and colleagues developed a paradigm whereby people are induced to disclose their thoughts and feelings about emotional topics (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; for recent reviews, see Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001). Inducing disclosure in participants is expected to have a healing effect. For the most part, participants are asked to write, rather than speak, about their personal experiences. Typically this is done in a laboratory, with random assignment to a manipulation or control group. The former group is asked to write about assigned topics for 3 to 5 consecutive days, 15 to 30 min each day. Most importantly, instructions include such phrases as “. . . *really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. . .*”, thus encouraging

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