

Making sense of past experiences

This exercise will help you make sense of your past experiences.

The overall goal is to reduce focus on the most distressing 'snap shots' of the disaster event, and to put all of the pieces or fragments of memory relating to the event together and in sequence. By better organising memory fragments, thoughts, feelings and reactions to the disaster or other troubling events or situations, the overall memory becomes clearer and more structured, and interpretations of the event can become more balanced, less distressing or frightening. Making sense of disaster in this way can help a broader recovery process.

It is also important to understand that starting the process of writing about your experience in detail can often temporarily increase distress. Where this occurs, at the conclusion of the writing task it may be helpful to use a distress management strategy such as controlled breathing, here-and-now grounding technique, or progressive muscular relaxation. Scheduling a pleasant activity such as a walk, craft work or meeting a friend afterwards may also be helpful.

Example

Here is an example story written by a woman who was involved in a car accident. The story is to illustrate how much detail could go into your story.

Car accident example

I was on my way home from work, driving my regular route. I was listening to the same radio program I listen to every day. I got to the intersection, the one with the big petrol station, and the light was red so the cars stopped.

I was thinking it was busy at the petrol pumps... I had to wait for the cars and pedestrians to pass. There was a young couple and a young man with a beard who crossed the intersection. When the light turned green I started moving forward like the other cars. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the car in the lane next to me suddenly stop, but I didn't know why, I remember hearing their brakes. I couldn't see anything.

Suddenly there was a person right in front of my car. He hit my windscreen and I saw him fall down. I could tell it was a young man... I didn't know where he had come from... I started to panic, I felt my heart in my mouth... and sweat down my back. I couldn't see him and I didn't know if he was OK... or if he was alive.

All of the traffic had stopped around me. I got out of my car. There was a smell of diesel, people were rushing around me. I saw the young guy collapsed on the road. I remember feeling sick. A woman called an ambulance. I was thinking 'what do I do?' and I was shaking. There was a lot of noise and people were standing around; a lady asked me if I was OK... but all I could think was, 'is the young man OK?' The ambulance arrived and started to help him. The police arrived. They said that other people told them the young man was trying to run across the road which is why I hadn't seen him. I drove home feeling shaky. I told my partner - he was so reassuring. I felt much calmer after speaking to him.

Even now when I think about it, I get a bit sweaty, but I know it wasn't my fault. I don't drive as much as I used to, but I'm working on that.

Write your own

Handwrite or type your story and include as much as you can remember – your thoughts, feelings, reactions. If you don't want to write your story, an alternate option is to tell your story into a voice recorder (such as the recorder on a mobile phone).

Keep these questions in mind:

- "What happened?"
- "What was I thinking?"
- "How did I feel?"
- "What could I see?" and "What could I hear?"

It's OK to also write about what the experience means for you now:

- "How do I feel about that now?" and "What do I think about that now?"
- "Would I have changed anything if I could?"
- "Is there anything that I learned?"

In doing this activity, pick a time and place where you can have as much privacy as possible. Write down your subjective units of distress scale (SUDS) before you begin and again at the end of the task. If you need to stop writing or recording your story, you can continue where you left off at a later time.

You might find this exercise very upsetting at first, but over time your feelings will become less overwhelming every time you read or tell your story. Writing will help you to organise your thoughts and feelings, see things in the whole context, allow you to get a different perspective on things, and reflect on your experiences.

Record your SUDS before the writing exercise.

Completely relaxed										Completely stressed out
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Now write your own story.

My story

After you have written your story

- It might be helpful to use one or more of the breathing techniques, the here-and-now exercises, or one of your favourite relaxing activities.
- It is a good idea to write your story again, perhaps several times, putting in more details or different thoughts, new learnings or reflections each time.
- Re-read the story each day until the next session. Ask yourself some questions like:
 - "How did it feel to read my story this time?"
 - "Do I have any new thoughts about it?"
 - "Do I think differently about any of it now?"
 - "Is there another way I could look at this?"
- Each time you re-read your story, you'll begin to better process what has happened, and see your experience in a broader context, helping you to become less distressed when you think or talk about it.
- If you found this exercise helpful, you can also write about other distressing things that have happened since the disaster.

Record your SUDS after the writing exercise.

Completely relaxed										Completely stressed out
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10