

A LINE ON LIFE

1/22/95

Why Does Disclosure Help? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In various forms of psychotherapy, it seems to help clients when they disclose what has happened to them, especially if they express the feelings they experienced when the events occurred. What results come from disclosing our feelings to others?

"Having people tell their story brings about change."

Studies have shown that it is critically important to share emotions you experience, rather than merely revealing facts. One study demonstrated this with women who had given birth. Half were merely questioned about their pregnancy and daily lives, while the other half were asked detailed questions about their emotional reactions to their pregnancy and delivery. Six weeks after their interviews, mothers who discussed their emotions not only recovered better, but they had fewer unpleasant memories of the delivery than mothers who did not share their emotions.

If we purposely **suppress** our feelings – avoid thinking about our feelings or disclosing them to others – this can have even more negative consequences. The more we purposely try *not* to think of something - the more it returns to haunt us. As an example, try not to think of a "white polar bear." Notice that the more you try to push its image out of your mind, the more vivid it becomes. You become preoccupied with the very thought you are trying to forget! As long as you are concentrating on suppressing the thought, you have little time or effort left over to focus on everyday tasks that you need to complete. When you disclose feelings to others, this can stop the thoughts from reoccurring.

A physical analogy would be that of a painful blister. As long as the blister is filled with its fluids, its pressure and painful throbbing distract you. Once you prick the blister, the fluids are released, and the pressure and throbbing are both reduced. Although there still might be some pain involved, it no longer seems so dreadful. The healing process can begin, even though a scar might remain.

Unlike the neutral polar bear example, we usually try to suppress emotions and thoughts that we believe are too bad to be considered by ourselves or shared with others. However, once they are disclosed – and not judged negatively by those who hear them – they lose most of their threatening features.

Suppressed emotions also effect us physically. Non-disclosure is a "risk factor" for headaches and back pains. When people actively suppress their feelings, their immune system is also affected. One study explored the effectiveness of a Hepatitis B vaccine. Of those receiving the vaccine, half – chosen at random – were asked to write about

traumatic experiences and to focus on emotional aspects they had not discussed previously. The remainder – a control group – wrote about trivial matters. The researcher concluded, "*Compared to the control group, subjects in the emotional expression group showed significantly higher antibody levels against Hepatitis B over the subsequent six-month period.*" This indicates a stronger immune response among those who expressed their emotions.

There is always some **risk** in revealing your emotions. It is safer to reveal emotions to those who are **not judgmental** toward you for having these feelings. In addition, good listeners keep everything they hear **confidential** – private information will not be shared with others without your consent.

In a study done on 1,126 Viet Nam veterans, the more they talked to others about their experiences, the less distress they currently experienced. However, the experience was different for those who talked with people who were not empathetic to their experiences. These veterans experienced more distress, wanted to avoid thinking about their experiences more, and were less able to stop thinking about their experiences than those who spoke to supportive listeners. Similar effects have been seen with parents who have lost their children to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) and California residents who had lost their homes to repeated fires.

If something has happened that is really bothering you, talk to someone who is empathetic and trustworthy. If you can't find a friend who has these traits, get professional help from a psychologist, social worker, minister, counselor or physician. Although you might be hesitant to take the risk, it will be worth the chance you take.

If these alternatives seem unacceptable, you can still get some relief if you write your feelings in a diary or journal – whether or not you decide to have someone else read them.

* Adapted from Beth Azar's article, "Research plumbs why the 'talking cure' works," in the [*APA Monitor*](#), November, 1994, page 24.