

Written Exposure Therapy (WET)

Note to Therapist:

The WET protocol is an evidence-based, trauma-focused treatment that may lead to a clinically significant reduction in PTSD symptoms over five treatment sessions. The first treatment session is 60 minutes in length. You can provide your client with information about reactions to trauma, PTSD, and WET, followed by a 30-minute written trauma narrative session.

During the following four 30-minute sessions, the client completes the narrative alone, and later you can offer feedback on the prior session's trauma narrative. Sessions may occur weekly or more often as indicated by clinical presentation, severity of PTSD symptoms, and client availability. For more specifics, see Sloan and Marx (2019).

How does WET differ from prolonged exposure (PE) and cognitive processing therapy (CPT)?

- There is no "homework" in WET therapy.
- Research suggests there are lower attrition rates than PE or CPT.
- You do not engage the client in cognitive restructuring.

Five 30-minute writing sessions in which your client is directed to write about a traumatic experience in detail, paying particular attention to their thoughts and emotions that occurred at the time of the event, can result in a reduction of pathological fear and subsequent PTSD symptom reduction. The client learns that:

- The trauma memory is not dangerous and can be experienced without significant distress.
- Distress associated with remembering the trauma is transient.
- Emotional distress gradually reduces with time.
- Physiological responses, such as rapid heart rate and sweating, are not dangerous.
- High negative affect can be tolerated.
- It is possible to develop new ways of thinking about the trauma event and its meaning.

Clients generally write by hand, which takes longer and allows them to engage with the memory. It is a slower process that allows them to think through what happened next, who was there, and what was said, because they are writing about it.

Sloan, D. M., & Marx, B. P. (2019). *Written exposure therapy for PTSD: A brief treatment approach for mental health professionals*. American Psychological Association.

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Objective

To facilitate a structured and gradual approach to confronting and processing distressing or traumatic memories through written narrative, promoting emotional healing and desensitization.

What to Know

Written Exposure Therapy (WET) is a therapeutic technique that involves writing about a traumatic event to process and confront difficult emotions. This worksheet will guide you through the process of engaging in written exposure therapy.

Over five sessions, you will choose a single traumatic memory. It is important that this event is vivid, stressful, and specific. In the moment, you will focus on the emotions and sensations that arise. Keep focusing on what comes up for you and welcome all feelings. For 30 minutes, you will include as many details as you can remember. Start at the most triggering moment, and finish when you felt safe.

The goal is to write for as long as you can. Afterward, you will share your reaction to the entire process with your therapist. This may include naming distressing sensations or thoughts. This will dictate the course of future sessions.

The remaining sessions return to the target memory alongside therapist check-ins. There are no take-home assignments.

Ensure you are in a comfortable environment that is safe, secure, and free of distractions. Settle into the space. Note how you are feeling.

You (or your therapist) will set a timer for 30 minutes. Write the entire time. Use the past tense. Include as much clarity and detail as you can.

What to Do

Please complete each section honestly and thoughtfully.

Think about a specific traumatic event that you would like to work on during this written exposure therapy exercise. It could be something recent or from your past. Write a brief description of the event below.

Review what you wrote and look for any patterns or common themes. Are there specific thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations that stand out? How do these patterns relate to the traumatic event? Write down any insights you gained from this review.

Before speaking with your therapist about the writing process, think about what aspects of your writing you would like to share. Consider what you found challenging, what you discovered about your emotions, and any questions you might have. Jot down a few notes or thoughts to help guide your conversation with your therapist.

During the next session with your therapist, share your writing and your reflections on the process. Be open and honest about your thoughts and feelings and use the notes you prepared as a guide. Your therapist will help you explore your experiences further and provide support as you work through any difficult emotions that arise.

Remember that written exposure therapy can be intense, and it is normal to experience a range of emotions during and after the exercise. If you feel triggered or overwhelmed, communicate this to your therapist during your session.

WET is often an ongoing process. You can continue to engage in writing exercises as you feel comfortable, gradually working through different aspects of the traumatic event and its effects on your life. Be patient with yourself and recognize the progress you make along the way.

After completing the WET exercise and discussing it with your therapist, engage in self-care activities that help you relax and soothe any emotional discomfort. This could include spending time in nature, practicing deep breathing, journaling about your thoughts, or engaging in a creative activity you enjoy. What will you do?
