

The Wider Lens

REFLECTIVE WRITING SERIES · 2 OF 5 · SELF-DISTANCED WRITING

Writing about a difficulty from a little further away

When something is painful, we often see it up close, replaying it as if it's happening again. Research on self-distancing suggests that stepping back, in how we see ourselves and in time, can ease distress while still helping us make sense of what happened.

UP CLOSE

Through my own eyes

Where we often start: in the middle of it, with feelings loud and details vivid. That's understandable.

A STEP BACK

As a caring observer

Seeing yourself as a kind friend might, using your name or "you", may help create some psychological distance from the situation.

FURTHER BACK

From the future

Imagining how this may look with time can highlight that difficult feelings often change.

Before I begin, my distress feels

0 = calm · 10 = the most distressed I can imagine



1

Up close: what's the situation, and how is it affecting me right now?

Keep this part brief. You'll step back in the next prompts.

2

A step back: write about the same situation using your own name or "you", as if gently describing a friend.

For example, "Alex has been carrying a lot since..." or "You've been trying so hard to..."

3

Further back: imagine looking back on this a year or more from now. What might you notice or understand differently then?

You don't need to be sure. Simply wonder what might have shifted.

4

Back to now: what would that future you gently suggest you do, or remember, this week?

After writing, my distress feels

rate again; any change, or none, is useful to notice



What the research suggests

In studies, reflecting on a stressor from a distant-future viewpoint, or as an observer, tended to reduce distress compared with reliving it, partly by highlighting that feelings can change. Effects vary from person to person.

Go at your own pace

Writing about difficult experiences can bring up emotions. Pause whenever you need to, or come back to the exercise when it feels manageable.

When you finish

Take a moment to notice how you feel. A little grounding, movement, or time away from the page can help you transition back into your day.

SOURCES

Bruehlman-Senecal, E., & Ayduk, O. (2015). This too shall pass: Temporal distance and the regulation of emotional distress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108(2), 356–375. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038324>

Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2011). Making meaning out of negative experiences by self-distancing. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20(3), 187–191.

Park, J., Ayduk, Ö., & Kross, E. (2016). Stepping back to move forward: Expressive writing promotes self-distancing. *Emotion*, 16(3), 349–364.