



The Effects of Positive Reframing on Emotional Stress and Well-being

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SHORT ABSTRACT

Research on the effects of expressive writing consistently shows improved health and well-being outcomes. This study expands Pennebaker's (1997) expressive writing paradigm to include a positive reframing (meaning-making) condition. A second major difference is that our study assesses physiological responses (e.g., heart rate, vagal tone) during the experimental sessions. Results indicate that heart rate, respiration, and vagal tone improved over time.

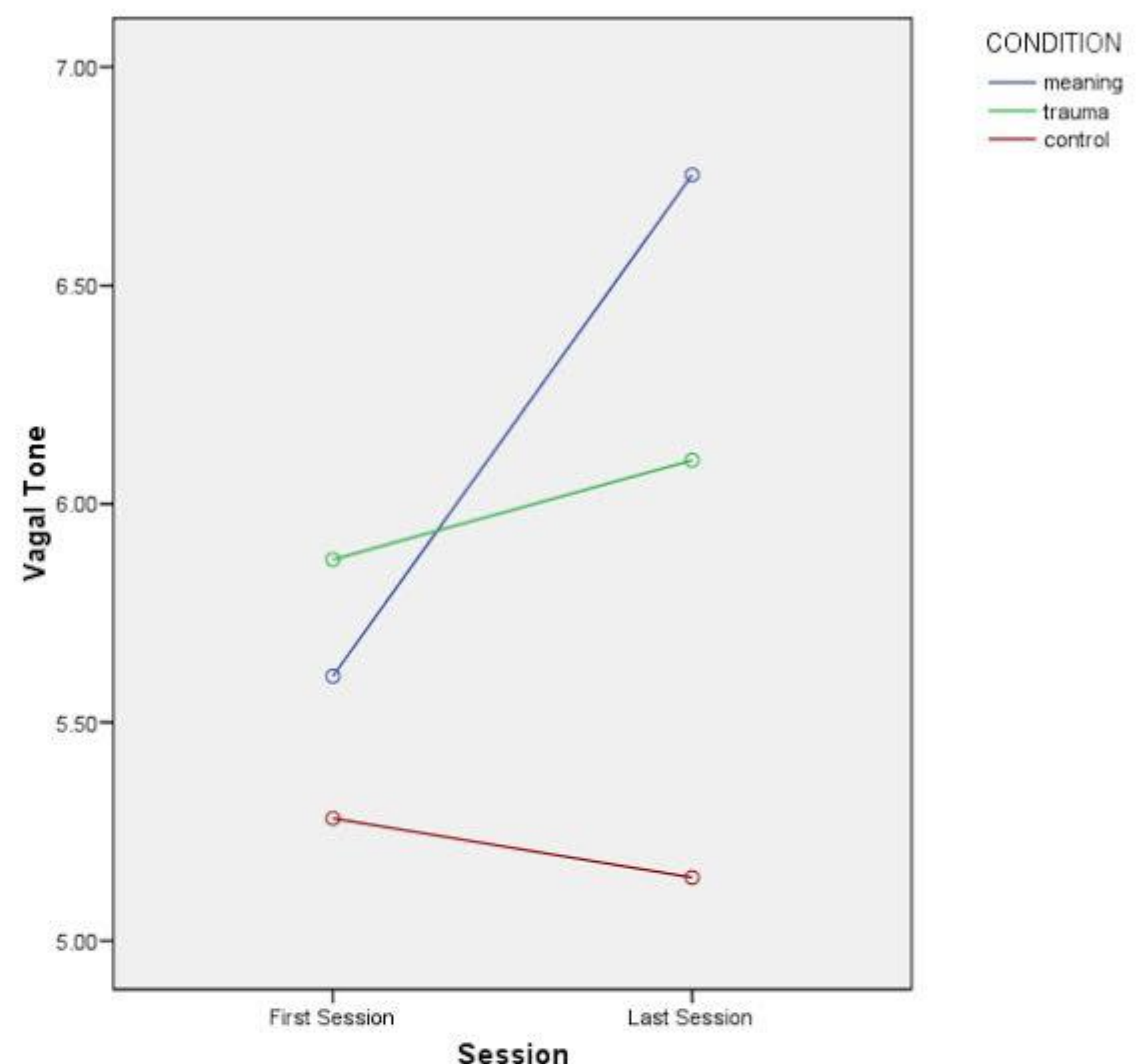
INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have shown that writing about emotional experiences results in improved health and well-being. In Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm, participants are instructed either to write about emotional events or neutral topics. Those assigned to the emotional writing condition typically display physical and psychological health improvements compared to the control condition (Pennebaker, 1997). This study differs from previous work in that we incorporated a cognitive restructuring component where subjects are asked to reframe an emotional experience in positive terms (i.e., meaning-making). A second major difference is that our study assesses physiological responses (e.g., heart rate, respiration, vagal tone, and sympathetic NS responses) before, during and after writing sessions.

METHOD

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: standard writing, meaning-making, control. Subjects wrote for at least two sessions and most wrote for three sessions. During each of the sessions, baseline physiological measures are taken while the participant viewed a neutral video for three minutes. Next, participants were instructed to write continuously for 15 minutes after which participants again viewed the neutral video while post-writing physiological measures were recorded. Lastly, participants were asked a series of questions about the experience they elected to write about (e.g., "how traumatic was the experience you just wrote about?").

RESULTS



Nineteen subjects (9 males, 10 females), ranging in age from 18 to 49 years of age, with a mean age of 26.8 years (sd = 9.04) served as participants:

- ♦heart rate improved (decreased), $F(2)=.059$ $P=.943$
- ♦respiration slowed, $t(11) = 1.860$
- ♦vagal tone improved, $t(11) = 1.740$

Differences between conditions:

- ♦The vagal tone was highest for the meaning group, followed by the trauma group, and then the control group, $F(2) = 1.553$
- ♦Heart rate and respiration improved for those in the meaning making condition.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that writing about a traumatic event has positive effects over time as indicated by physiological measures. Further, the meaning-making condition appears to be an improvement over Pennebaker's standard writing paradigm.

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