Brief Report

Confidants’ Feedback and Traumatic Life Events
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One hundred six undergraduate (83 women and 23 men) completed surveys concerning their most traumatic life event, the feedback they received following their disclosure of the event to others, and how they felt after the disclosure. Results indicated that the better they felt after disclosure, the less disturbed they were by thoughts of the event at the time of the study. In addition, the more personal the trauma was, the worse they felt after their disclosure, and the more disturbed they were about the trauma. However, no significant relation existed between the positivity (e.g., supportiveness) of their confidant’s feedback and their present degree of disturbance. Implications for understanding the complex relation between confiding traumatic events and resolving feelings surrounding those events were discussed.

KEY WORDS: confidants’ feedback; traumatic life events.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable correlational and experimental research has demonstrated that disclosing traumatic events to others is related to subsequent decreases in psychological and physiological problems (e.g., Pennebaker, 1985; Pennebaker, 1989; Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & O’Heeron, 1984). For example, Pennebaker and O’Heeron (1984) found that among spouses of both suicide and accidental death victims, illness rates and rumination over the death were negatively correlated with the

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degree to which the spouses confided with friends. In another study, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) demonstrated that subjects who were instructed to write about both the facts and emotions surrounding a trauma had fewer health center visits in the 6 months following the study than did subjects who were instructed to write about a trivial event.

One reason talking about or writing about traumatic events can be useful is that confiding in another person can help the traumatized individual "forget" the event by reducing the emotional, physiological response that is associated with trying to suppress the unwanted thoughts surrounding the trauma (Pennebaker, 1985; Wegner, 1989). This idea has been supported by informal studies involving suspected criminals who were given lie detector tests. The studies have shown that upon confessing a crime, suspects typically became much less physiologically aroused and acted far more relaxed, despite the dire consequences of their confessions (Pennebaker, 1985).

People feel better after disclosing traumatic events; yet, they often fear disclosure and actively avoid sharing their experiences with others (Pennebaker, 1985, 1989; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). For example, Silver et al. (1983) found that incest survivors who reported having one or more confidants had lower levels of psychological distress, better social adjustment, and higher levels of self-esteem than those who had no confidants. However, the social stigma associated with incest and rape may inhibit survivors from confiding in others (Silver et al., 1983). Pennebaker (1985) proposed that, "In such cases, the act of not discussing or confiding the event with another may be more damaging than having experienced the event per se" (p. 82). In essence, people may harm themselves by actively avoiding disclosure of traumatic events for fear that they will receive negative feedback from their confidants (Pennebaker, 1985).

Is this fear of receiving negative feedback rational? How do others respond to disclosures of trauma? Although Pennebaker and other researchers (e.g., Pennebaker, 1989; Silver et al., 1983; Wegner, 1989) have examined the role of confiding traumatic events to others, they have not explored the role that confidants' feedback following disclosure plays in how helpful the disclosure ultimately will be.

The central purpose of the present study was to examine the relation between the positivity (e.g., supportiveness) of the feedback individuals received after disclosing a traumatic event and how disturbed they felt about the trauma at the time of the study. In addition, we examined (a) what lifetime events individuals considered to be most traumatic, (b) whom they considered their most important confidants, (c) what kinds of feedback they received from their confidants, (d) the relation between how personal (i.e., private or stigmatizing) the event was and how disturbed they were by the