

The *Laws of Life* Essay Toolkit



For Psychologists, Teachers, & Others Who Are Interesting in Promoting Character Development and Increasing Resilience

In 1987, Sir John Templeton held the first Laws of Life Essay Program in Winchester, Tennessee. The Laws of Life Essay Program is a “values narrative” program that helps youth identify their core virtues and improve their character. To our knowledge, this is the first time that narrative (also known as expressive writing) was used in a school-based setting to promote youth development.



Since then, narrative has becoming increasingly popular as a psychological tool, including well-known interventions such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT). There is now a thriving body of scientific literature that examines the wide range of psychological and physical benefits of narrative. However, these programs usually instruct participants to write about a past trauma, and are less suited for universal prevention settings such as classrooms or community groups. This toolkit:

- 1) Describes the results of our Life Paths study, the 1st scientific study of the Laws of Life Program, and related studies on the benefits of narrative.
- 2) Describes how to use the Laws of Life Essay as a prevention and character development tool.
- 3) Describes how to structure narrative programs to maximize benefits.

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<http://lifepathsresearch.org>

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Brief History of the Laws of Life Essay Program

What are laws of life? Laws of life are the core values and principles by which each person lives. Examples include love, honesty and endurance. These values transcend cultures, religions, and nationalities. Still, each person has to discover and nourish these laws of life.

Sir John Templeton founded the Laws of Life Essay in 1987, making it one of the first psycho-educational programs offered in the school system. The program encourages students to reflect on their values. Instead of instructing students what to write about,

Templeton thought it would be better to let them choose their topics and reflect on their own principles. Templeton believed that students would learn more by writing about values, rather than by reading or being lectured about them. Psychological research confirms this is an optimal teaching technique. Since its creation, the Laws of Life Essay program has expanded to thousands of schools, businesses, and colleges throughout the U.S. and the world. Each year, more than 100,000 writers of all ages participate in the program.



John Marks Templeton

About the Life Paths Project

In 2012, the John Templeton Foundation awarded a grant to the Life Paths Research Program to study how the Laws of Life essay program could be used as a source of psychological strength and resilience. The study was based near Winchester, Tennessee, the birthplace of Sir John Templeton and the Laws of Life essay program. The Life Paths team surveyed over 3,000 participants and conducted

over 200 in-depth face-to-face interviews. Participants were asked about their experience with the Laws of Life essay program, as well as about their life stories, character strengths, and resilience. The project's goal was to see whether writing the essay had any positive impact on the participants' lives, whether the essay program participants were different from those who did not write the essay in terms

of their personal strengths and resilience, and whether how participants approached the essay made a difference in its impact.

More details on the study and a list of publications and conference presentations can be found at <http://lifepathsresearch.org>

Narrative as Prevention, Self-help, and Intervention

The Laws of Life Essay can be used in many settings. Other narrative programs often tell people to focus on the worst thing that ever happened to them. Although this has been found to be helpful for people, this approach is limited in several ways.

For one, it can assume too much about what is most on people's minds. For example,

Rosenberg and colleagues did a study with people who had been diagnosed with cancer. The researchers assumed people would want to write about the cancer diagnosis, but it turned out many people wrote about other things that were more important to them.

Another problem with a focus on trauma is that it can require people to seek help and

disclose the trauma before they get the benefits of narrative.

The Laws of Life Essay approach can work for anyone, no matter what happened in their past, who they have sought help from, or what is most on their mind.

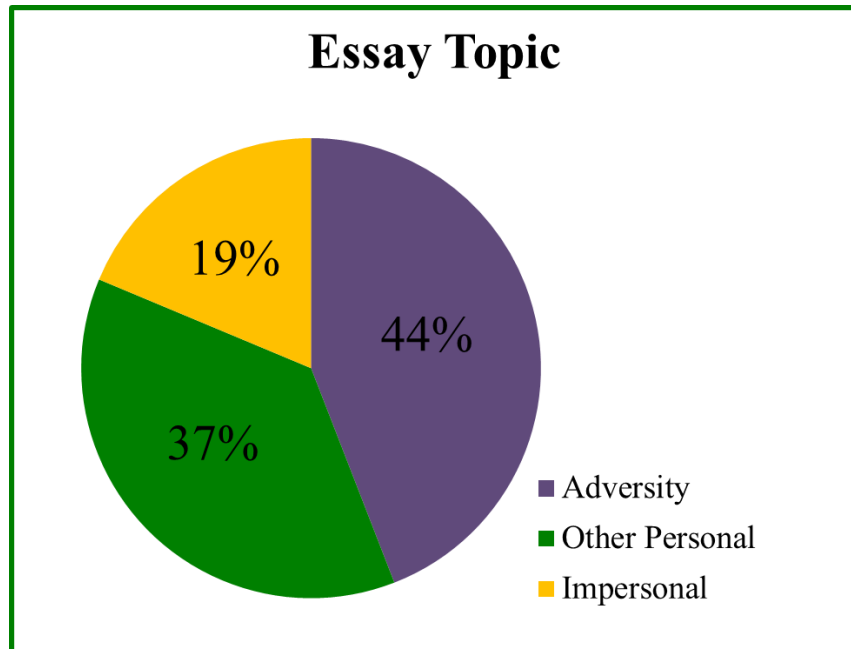
What Do People Write About?

Many people took the opportunity to write about an adversity in their essay.

Adversities were the most commonly chosen topic, selected by almost half of writers in the Life Paths study. Other personally meaningful topics were also common.

Fewer students chose an impersonal topic such as a famous person they admired.

As can be seen in the section on outcomes, those who wrote on adversities or other personally meaningful topics benefited the most.



"I thought, well, if anyone reads this at all, maybe it will make a difference in their life, or make them think, 'Well, you know, I never really thought about honesty that way.'"

"I think for the first time I found my voice when I started to do the Laws of Life essays."

Examples of Personally Meaningful Essay Topics

Here are some topic examples from the Life Paths study.

These are all drawn from essays that demonstrate a connection between a personal experience and life values:

Determination

Forgiveness

Not taking tomorrow for granted

Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you

Not judging others

Triumphs despite terrible odds. Being poor and still succeeding.

Encouraging people and their ideas. And doing anything to help them follow through with their goals.

Following your life rules and making yourself a better person.

Gratitude

How to make yourself happy & not depend on others to do it.

How the power of love affects us throughout our lives.

Benefits of the Laws of Life Essay

The Life Paths project found that engaged essay writers reported **higher levels of 12 current strengths** assessing qualities of self-regulation, meaning making, and current, post-essay well-being.

Engaged essay writers had higher levels of the following strengths & forms of well-being (in order from strongest to smallest but still significant effect):

Endurance
Posttraumatic growth
Purpose
Subjective Well-being
Family Care Meaning Making
Other-oriented Meaning Making
Anger Management
Spiritual Well-being
Moral Meaning Making
Religious Meaning Making
Self-oriented Meaning Making
Coping

Note: The meaning making scales measure different ways that people find purpose and meaning (such as caring for family or others).

Perhaps not surprisingly, we found that participants who reported little effort on the essay, using our new Narrative Engagement Index, were not significantly different than non-writers. It shows that a personal investment in the process is part of what makes it work.

In Their Own Words: Results from the In-Depth Interviews

1) Realizing that sharing your story can help others

"Words can touch people, and it all depends on how you want to touch them. Good or bad."

Stories can be very healing and many people benefit from getting the opportunity to pass on their wisdom to others. This can be especially powerful for people who do not always feel that they have the chance to help others. Starting to understand that words can have power—positive power—on others. This is an under-appreciated benefit of narrative and storytelling. The quotations here and elsewhere are from Laws of Life essay writers we interviewed.

2) Finding your voice

"The last one [essay] was a gateway for me. I owned it. I

was no longer a victim. I was a survivor."

"Finding your voice" means learning how to express yourself and learning how to think about what has happened in your life in a way that makes sense. It helps to think about how events—even the bad ones—have been part of a journey toward the person you want to become. Writing it down or telling it to someone else helps you become the author of your own life.

3) Re-affirming your values

"I think the essay kind of helps me, I guess, put in words what is essentially most valuable to me."

Sometimes you learn things about yourself from the act of writing or storytelling. Many of the people we have spoken to

have mentioned that pausing to tell your story can be a good reminder of your priorities. It is so easy to get swept up in the day-to-day hustle and bustle. Taking some time to focus on values can be beneficial.

4) Finding peace, finding hope

"Just actually sitting down and writing probably helped me find that, that peace...."

What's the difference between someone who has achieved resilience and someone who has not? People who have found their voice, shared their story, and reaffirmed their values often find a sense of peace and a hopefulness that they did not have before.

How to Get the Most Impact

Our study suggests the following to get the most out of the Laws of Life Essay:

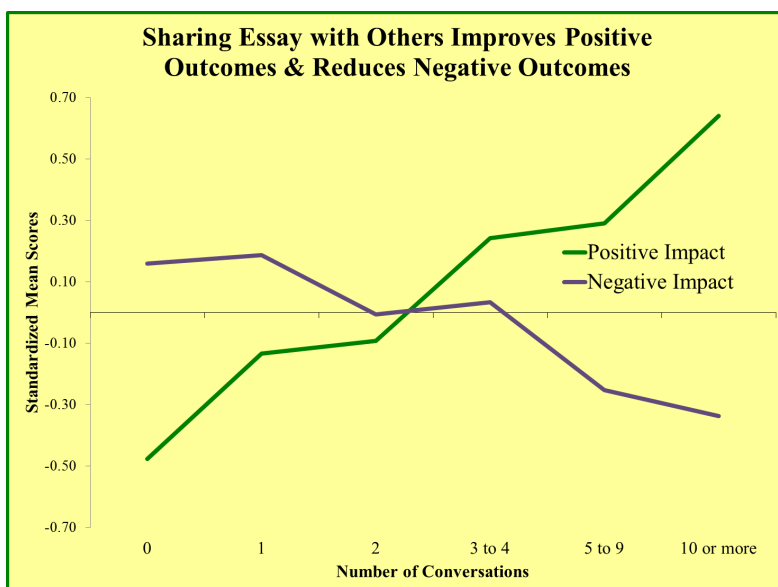
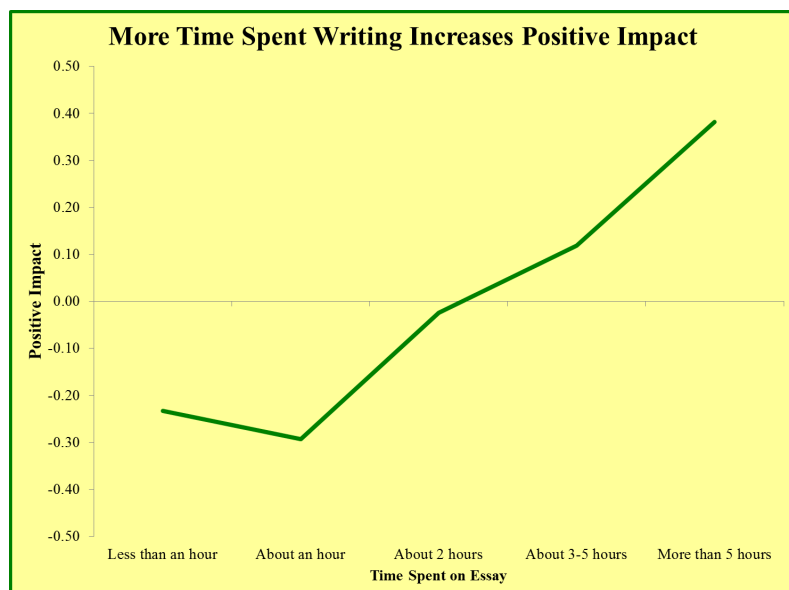
- 1) Allow 2 or more hours for writing.
- 2) Encourage writers to discuss the essay with family, friends, or other writers.
- 3) Provide encouragement to writers.
- 4) Recommend writing on an adversity. If not on an adversity, write about something else personally meaningful, such as a person or an event that inspired the writer. Avoid impersonal topics.

Spend a Few Hours

Narrative has been called the “2-minute miracle.” It is truly remarkable how quickly narrative can have benefits on so many dimensions of psychological and physical health.

However, 2 minutes is probably not the optimum amount of time to get maximum benefit! Our study suggests 2 or more hours to get the most optimal results.

On the other hand, existing research suggests there is no need to commit long-term to keeping a journal or diary to enjoy the benefits of narrative.

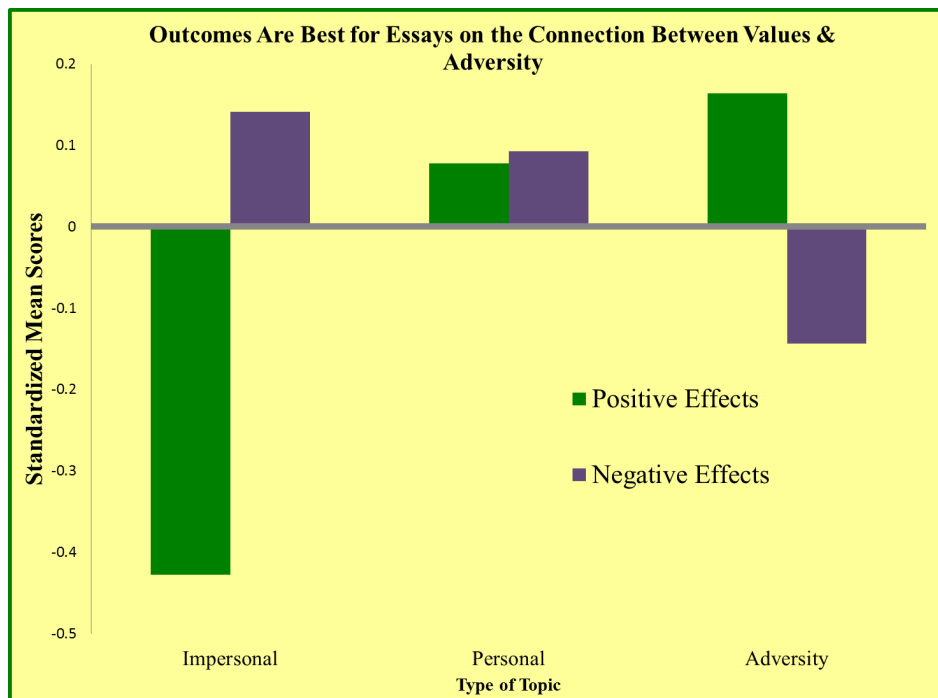


Talk About It!

People also reported that the more they talked about their Laws of Life Essay with other people, the more benefits they experienced. As you can see in the graph, 3 or more conversations with others was associated with more positive benefits and fewer negative outcomes.

People Who Write About Values Forged in Difficulty Get the Most Benefit

People who wrote about Laws of Life they learned from hard times had more positive impact and less negative impact than people who wrote on personal (but not bad) experiences or people who wrote about impersonal experiences.



Step-by-step Instructions for Writing Laws of Life Essays

(partially adapted from a review of several other instructional materials)

The Laws of Life Essay, like many expressive writing programs, usually involves a few sessions spread out over several days. It is good to allow at least 2 hours total time, but the exact timing and number of sessions can be adapted to different settings. Other research has shown that even very brief sessions are helpful, so if only one session is possible, narrative is still worthwhile.

Step 1: Introducing the Laws of Life Essay

When introducing the Laws of Life essay, emphasize the opportunities the writing experience can provide. Writers will have a chance to reflect on past experiences and brainstorm values and ideals that are especially important to them. It is good to provide examples of Laws of Life (such as the Golden Rule) and also some example essays (see <http://lifepathsresearch.org> and other resources at end of the toolkit for some examples). Our research indicates that it is good to encourage writers to link their values—their Laws of Life—with specific experiences from their own lives.

Step 2: Brainstorming and Choosing a Topic

Some participants may need prompting to get started. Let them know it is not unusual to need some time to come up with a topic. Some questions that might help them get started are:

- 1) Have you ever experienced a life changing event (either for good or for bad)? What happened and how did you overcome the challenge of the situation? What would you tell others that may go through the same type of experience?**
- 2) Describe an event or time when you or someone important to you learned a lesson “the hard way.”**
- 3) Who is someone that has influenced you? How has this person influenced you? What law(s) of life does that person demonstrate?**

Encourage writers to choose a personally meaningful topic. They are more likely to be narratively engaged in the writing process when the topic matters to them. Life Paths has found that higher narrative engagement is associated with a more impactful and positive writing experience.

Offer the opportunity to discuss and share the results of this early brainstorming. This is your opportunity to open a dialogue with your writer and find out more about them. Writers who felt encouraged also benefitted the most from the process in the Life Paths study.

Step 3: First Draft

Once your writer has chosen their topic, it is time for them to start writing. Some writers may find it easier to develop an outline before they actually start the writing process. If this is the case, encourage your writer to create an outline section by section with key points they would like to include in each section. In educational settings, it is common to offer guidance on writing an essay. For prevention purposes, you may find this helpful but it is fine to omit, as many other narrative programs used for psychological purposes do not include instruction on writing technique. In fact, for the psychological benefits, existing research shows it is better not to worry too much about spelling, grammar, or sentence construction. Regardless of setting, be sure to allow writers sufficient time to create their drafts; our research found that offering writers at least two hours of writing time lead to a more beneficial experience.

Step 4: Teacher, Peer and/or Family Review

Writers who receive encouragement from teachers, family members, friends, or others get more from the experience. If a supportive peer or family member is available, this can be a helpful step to include, especially if two writing sessions are available. Peer editing and asking friends or family to look over the narrative is an opportunity for them to read over the essay and allows your writer to share his or her experiences and feelings in addition to the writing. Do not be afraid to discuss the various sections of the paper with your writer and why they chose to include what they did in the essay. Again, this is your chance to open a dialogue. Use this as another opportunity to encourage writers—offering support will help them benefit the most from their experience.

Step 5: Sharing

Our results indicate that providing a potential audience is an important component of the Laws of Life Essay program to many participants and this has been a neglected topic in the psychological research on narrative. Many Laws of Life participants said one of their biggest motivators was writing their story in the hopes that it might help someone else.

Depending on the setting, some of this can be done as a group. This has historically been part of the process of the Laws of Life Essay in many school systems. Alternatively, in some settings it might be possible to have these be individual sessions between a counselor and an essay writer.

Many programs might be able to facilitate sharing or publishing in some form, for those who are interested. Such platforms could include online blogs, social media, email, or literary journals. This could be done with or without writers' names attached. Research by the Life Paths Team has found that writers tend to get more out of the narrative experience when they know that others will read their writing. Of course, this should be optional, it is fine to keep an essay private.

Step 6: Evaluation and Feedback

After the writer has crafted and shared their essay, you might find it helpful to ask them a few questions about their views on the experience. To help evaluate the program, we recommend using the 10-item Narrative Engagement Index (Appendix A) to assess which writers invested in the essay. We also have several measures of character development and well-being that can be used to assess outcomes (see page 4 for recommended outcomes). These are available for free at <http://lifepathsresearch.org>.

Sample Excerpts from Laws of Life Essays

These were shared with us by Life Paths participants.

Never Give Up (excerpt)

Two years ago, at the doctor's office for a physical checkup, I was told that there was something abnormal about my heart. After several EKG exams at the hospital, I was diagnosed with a type of congenital heart disease called atrial septal defect. "This meant," the doctor said, "there is an opening in the wall that separates your blue and red blood, which puts you at a higher risk for stroke and heart failure." I was extremely sad to see the worried looks on my parents' faces and to know that the disease may keep me from an active lifestyle. Having been energetic most of my life, I was determined not to let my heart defect turn me into a lethargic and inactive person. That summer, I began running for my heart.

I was horrible at first. My breathing was heavy and I felt dizzy after a few minutes. Yet, I did not stop running because there was an inner voice that told me to not give up. When junior year started, I continued running after school, especially days when I was stressed out. In the beginning, I could run around the track with one lap each interval, but then my endurance improved to five laps, and then even ten laps. I improved to the point which I could run 20 laps without stopping! Seeing me always running by myself around the track, the cross-country coach recruited me to run for the sport. Instead of turning out to be horrendous as my family and friends had admonished me the experience would be, cross-country was an empowering sport..... The night before each race, I would write down many motivational quotes to motivate for the race but the phrase what I always recite to myself constantly is "Never give up." Running is like lifting my feet with wings. With each stride, I levitated myself from the things that once held me back. It has taught me perseverance and that as long I never stop trying, I am capable of going beyond my limits.

The Blessing of Misfortune (excerpt)

Anne Frank once said, "Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands." As we grow, experiences contribute to the emergence of adulthood. For some, this process is daunting and heartrending, while others gradually face life's introduction to heartache.... The resolution of my childhood ensued on the day of March 1, ----. It was a beautiful, sunny morning, and I stood in one place, staring as our barn burned down in flames brighter and higher than I had ever seen.....

My family received gifts of assistance, both financially and physically for months to come. I recollect lying in my bed at night wondering why people thought they should help us. I had never had this close contact with the act of giving and the graciousness of it seemed overwhelming. Neighbors I didn't realize that I had would show up in our yard, just to ask what we lost that needed replacement. Even my family's competitors in the nursery business generously offered a helping hand....

Four months after that sunny morning in March, the most miraculous element of the whole experience occurred. Our neighboring Mennonite church, neighbors, friends, and strangers worked concurrently, from eight o'clock until noon to nearly build a complete new barn and tool shed. During the old-fashioned barn raising, over fifty people became acquainted with another and worked efficiently together, despite the many differences in ethnicities and religions....

Four life-changing months as a twelve year old girl have molded me into the person that I now strive to be. Three of the most important moral values I possess were discovered in that year. I learned that family holds significant importance in any situation, I better understood the dynamic, selfless nature of being an altruistic person, and I developed unchanging faith in the belief that all prejudices can be overcome. I now tutor elementary school children and engage in other volunteer work because I cannot imagine anything else I would rather spend my time doing. I dream of having a career that I can use to benefit others and hope to do mission work in lands both native and foreign. The ability to give, love, and accept is the greatest blessing God has given. Without the blessing of misfortune, I doubt I would have gained this realization.

Appendix A

The Narrative Engagement Index

Roberts, Hamby, Grych, & Banyard, 2015

This questionnaire can be used to assess how much investment a writer made while working on their narrative. More narrative engagement is associated with better outcomes.

References to the Laws of Life Essay may be replaced with other program names.

Suggested answers: Very Much, Somewhat, A Little, Not At All.

1. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay give you a chance to realize you have something important to say?
2. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you face difficult feelings?
3. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you set goals for yourself?
4. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you understand yourself better?
5. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay increase your sense of who you are?
6. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you feel in control of important parts of your life?
7. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you feel more optimistic about the future?
8. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you make your own decisions?
9. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you learn to be yourself, not who others want you to be?
10. How much did writing the Laws of Life Essay help you work through problems and not give up?

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See <http://lifepathsresearch.org> for these papers, conference presentations and other materials on the Laws of Life Essay and the Life Paths study.

Other Research on Narrative:

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Useful Resources

Life Paths Research Program: <http://lifepathsresearch.org/>

Laws of Life Program: <http://lawsoflifeprogram.com/>

The John Templeton Foundation: <http://www.templeton.org/>

Tips on Better Writing Feedback : <http://www.betterwritingfeedback.com/>

Life Paths Research Program's Measurements Packet:

<http://lifepathsresearch.org/strengths-measures/>

Laws Of Life Essay Program Handbook [PDF]:

<http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/ProgramHandbook2013-2014.pdf>

A Teachers' Guide to the Laws of Life Essay Program [PDF]:

<http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/LOL-teachers-manual-web.pdf>

Laws Of Life Essay Program's Tips for Teachers [PDF]:

<http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/writingprompts.pdf>

“Writing and Health: A Practical Advice” by Dr. James W. Pennebaker:

<http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/pennebaker/home2000/WritingandHealth.html>

“Resilience... and 4 Benefits to Sharing Your Story” by Dr. Sherry Hamby:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-web-violence/201309/resilience-and-4-benefits-sharing-your-story>

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**Exploring,
Understanding,
Overcoming**

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The Life Paths Research Program is a research unit of the Department of Psychology at the University of the South that is dedicated to advancing resilience and improving well-being after adversity.

We are located in Sewanee, Tennessee, in the southernmost region of Appalachia. We also have a special interest in understanding and promoting the resilience of rural Appalachian communities.

Dr. Sherry Hamby is the Director of the Life Paths Research Program.

For the Laws of Life Essay study, we partnered with Dr. Victoria Banyard of the University of New Hampshire and Dr. John Grych of Marquette University.

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We'd like to end with a quotation from one of our participants, who wanted to offer a message of hope to others:

***"Your story hasn't been written yet.
The final chapter hasn't been written
yet."***



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