



# They used Expressive Writing with their Therapist



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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effect that expressive writing could have as an intervention for improving self-compassion, anxiety, depression, and stress associated with relational distress in a therapeutic environment. Participants will be split into two groups, and both will attend therapy with a focus on a relational problem in their life. The control group will receive 8 talk therapy sessions, while the intervention group will receive 5 talk therapy sessions and 3 sessions focusing on an expressive writing assignment. Participants will be screened for recent traumatic events, will need to be over the age of 18, and will need to be open to discussing their problems related to anxiety, depression, stress, self-compassion, and relational distress with a therapist. Participants will be asked to complete various measures prior to the treatment, after the final therapy session, and again at a later time to identify whether the treatment has longer-term effects

### INTRODUCTION

- ❑ Studies comparing neutral writing and expressive writing found a relationship between expressive writing and decreased psychophysiological distress interpreted as increased emotional regulation during and after the writing (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Teresa et al. 2020).
- ❑ Effects of expressive writing are stronger when the number of sessions increases, and the topics becomes more specific. The intervention is also less effective when self-directed (Reinhold et al., 2018).
- ❑ Varying pronoun use over the course of an expressive writing intervention has been shown to have a stronger effect on improving physical and mental health—specifically—writing second-person pronouns. This language difference may create distance that mitigates the stress of self-disclosure. (Seih et al., 2008; Seih et al., 2010).
- ❑ Using inspiration from an expressive writing design, researchers attempted to evaluate if the effects of disclosure through writing could be imitated through conversation with a friend. All participants reported increased life satisfaction following the intervention (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015).
- ❑ In a document addressed to utilizing expressive writing in a clinical setting, Pennebaker provides clinical implications and considerations, including timing and content of writings (Pennebaker, 2010).

### PRIMARY AIM AND HYPOTHESES

- ❑ R1: Would an expressive writing intervention that utilizes processing and discussion about a relational conflict in a therapeutic environment improve anxiety, depression and stress more than therapy without an expressive writing intervention?
- ❑ R2: Would an expressive writing intervention that utilizes processing and discussion about a relational conflict in a therapeutic environment increase self-compassion in the individual more than therapy without an expressive writing intervention?
- ❑ H1: Individuals participating in the expressive writing exercise with a focus on a relational conflict will show a greater decrease in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to participants in the control group.
- ❑ H2: Individuals participating in the expressive writing exercise with a focus on a relational conflict will show a greater increase in self compassion compared to participants in the control group.

### METHODS

#### Participants

- ❑ Adults 18+ experiencing relational distress
- ❑ Sample size: 100 participants
- ❑ Ability to attend therapy or have a private space for telehealth sessions

#### Procedures

- ❑ All materials will be completed through an online survey program, accessible through a link emailed to the participant
- ❑ All participants will complete measures prior to treatment (T1)
- ❑ Participants will be randomly placed into the treatment group or control group
- ❑ The intervention group will complete 3 talk therapy sessions, then 3 expressive writing sessions, and then 2 additional talk therapy sessions. During the expressive writing sessions, participants will talk about the event they wrote about using 3rd person pronouns
- ❑ The control group will complete 8 talk therapy sessions
- ❑ End of treatment after 8 sessions for all participants. All participants will complete the measures after the final session (T2)
- ❑ All participants will complete the measures 6 months following treatment (T3)

### MEASURES

#### Participants levels of stress, anxiety and depression

- ❑ Participants levels of stress, anxiety, and depression will be measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) at T1, T2, and T3
- ❑ Participants levels of self compassion will be measured using the Self Compassion Scale (SCS) at T1, T2, and T3

### RESULTS

- ❑ Means between the control group and treatment group will be compared at the T1, T2, and T3 level for each measure (DASS and SCS) to determine if the intervention group has statistically significant differences in their scores.
- ❑ Results of the DASS will be analyzed as a linear regression at the T1, T2, and T3 level for both the control and treatment group to determine the rate of change between groups.

### Discussion

#### Clinical Implications

- ❑ This study contributes to literature that already supports expressive writing as a method to decrease emotional distress.
- ❑ This study may inform future research on effective interventions when doing relational work with an individual.

#### Social Implications

- ❑ Individuals facing chronic distress may benefit from an intervention that can be easily replicated at home or outside of therapy
- ❑ Individuals who struggle with relational distress may inadvertently cause harm to another—by finding an intervention that is accessible and effective, it may aide in unknown positive effects.

#### Limitations and Future Research

- ❑ This study should be replicated with diverse populations to determine who the treatment may be effective for. The participants in this study were not specified by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. and the impact may change based on these factors.
- ❑ This study should be replicated with individuals facing specific relational problems to determine the contexts in which expressive writing is a helpful intervention (such as divorce, work conflict, parenting stress, etc.).
- ❑ This study should be replicated among different clinical approaches, theoretical orientations, and with consideration for individual therapist differences.