

A Mixed-Method Study Exploring Expressive Writing as a Brief Intervention Targeting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education Students: A Focus on the Qualitative Findings

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Abstract : In recent years, the mental health of Higher Education (HE) students has been a growing concern. This has been further exacerbated by the stresses associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, placing students at even greater risk of developing mental health issues. Support available to students in HE tends to follow an established and traditional route. The demands for counseling services have grown, not only with the increase in student numbers but with the number of students seeking support for mental health issues, with 94% of HE institutions recently reporting an increase in the need for counseling services. One way of improving the well-being and mental health of HE students is through the use of brief interventions, such as expressive writing (EW). This intervention involves encouraging individuals to write continuously for at least 15-20 minutes for three to five sessions (often on consecutive days) about their deepest thoughts and feelings to explore significant personal experiences in a meaningful way. Given the brevity, simplicity and cost-effectiveness of EW, this intervention has considerable potential as an intervention for HE populations. The current study, therefore, employed a mixed-methods design to explore the effectiveness of EW in reducing anxiety, general stress, academic stress and depression in HE students while improving well-being. HE students at MDX were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) The UniExp-EW group was required to write about their emotions and thoughts about any stressors they have faced that are directly relevant to their university experience (2) The NonUniExp-EW group was required to write about their emotions and thoughts about any stressors that are NOT directly relevant to their university experience, and (3) The Control group were required to write about how they spent their weekend, with no reference to thoughts or emotions, and without thinking about university. Participants were required to carry out the EW intervention for 15 minutes per day for four consecutive days. Baseline mental health and well-being measures were taken before the intervention via a battery of standardized questionnaires. Following completion of the intervention on day four, participants were required to complete the questionnaires a second time and again one week later. Participants were also invited to attend focus groups to discuss their experience of the intervention. This will allow an in-depth investigation into students' perceptions of EW as an effective intervention to determine whether they would choose to use this intervention in the future. Preliminary findings will be discussed at the conference as well as a discussion of the important implications of the findings. The study is fundamental because if EW is an effective intervention for improving mental health and well-being in HE students, its brevity and simplicity mean it can be easily implemented and can be freely available to students. Improving the mental health and well-being of HE students can have knock-on implications for improving academic skills and career development.

Keywords : expressive writing, higher education, psychology in education, mixed-methods, mental health, academic stress

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