

# Using Reflective Writing as a Nursing Intervention: Review of the Literature



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# Effects of Expressive Writing Interventions

“Over 150 studies and three meta-analyses (Frattaroli, 2006; Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004; Smyth, 1998) have found expressive writing about a stressful event leads to improved mental and physical health benefits” (Boals, 2012, p. 393).

More recently, systematic review of expressive writing interventions in cancer patients (Merz, Fox, & Malcarne, 2014)

# Research Question

- What are the health outcomes of expressive writing interventions in adult patients?
- Method of Literature Review
  - Databases: CINAHL, MEDLINE, PsycArticles, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences
  - Key words: Expressive writing, health outcomes, nursing
  - Inclusion criteria: Middle aged + aged, research, empirical, peer-reviewed, English, 2008 to current, RCT
  - Cross-referenced
  - Exclusions: Pilot studies, caregivers, healthy populations

# Expressive Writing Defined

- Private and guided writing exercise designed to improve health by prompting emotional and cognitive processes
- Writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events

# Results

- Sample sizes varied from 31 – 848
- Most common medical diagnoses breast and other forms of cancer
- Most common expressive writing intervention 3 twenty minute writing sessions for 3 or 4 consecutive days
- Gaps between sessions days to weeks
- Most common follow-up 1, 3, 6 mos.
- Most common design three or four groups including expressive writing (EW) about diagnosis and factual/superficial writing control group; some control groups received normal care (Gellaitry et al, 2010)

# Significant Positive Health Outcomes Between Writing Groups

- QOL measures
  - Early breast cancer survivors (Craft et al, 2012)
  - Hematopoietic stem cell transplant survivors with moderate to severe survivorship problems (Rini et al, 2013)
- Lower scores DASS stress subscale (Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012)
- Satisfaction with emotional support (Gellaitry, et al 2010)
- Decreased depression scores (Beck Depression Inventory and Patient Health Questionnaire-9 score) (Krpan et al, 2013)
- Reduced intrusive thoughts for women with breast cancer reporting low emotional support (Low et al, 2010)
- Greater use of mental health services during study (Mosher et al, 2012)

# Mediators

- Peer helpers (Rini et al, 2013)
- Emotional support (Low et al, 2010)
- Length of time since diagnosis
- Inhibition about expressing thoughts, feelings (Jensen-Johansen et al, 2013)
- Level of distress (Jensen-Johansen et al, 2013)
- Avoidance
- Length of time post intervention (Henry et al, 2010)



# Expressive Writing Not Supported

- Traumatic injury patients at risk for PTSD (Bugg et al, 2009)
- Presurgical stress management intervention for breast cancer patients (de Moor et al, 2008)
- No effect on mood, QOL, health utilization in breast cancer patients (Gellaitry et al, 2010)

# Conclusion

- Time and cost-effective
- Easily administered
- Satisfaction of participants
- Subjective usefulness of expressive writing high
- No long term negative effects
- Further study

# Implementing a Standardized Expressive Writing Intervention

Over the next four days, I want you to write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the most upsetting experience in your life. Really let go and explore your feelings and thoughts about it. In your writing, you might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. How is this experience related to who you would like to become, who you have been in the past, or who you are now?

Many people have not had a single traumatic experience but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors in our lives and you can write about them as well. You can write about the same issue every day or a series of different issues. Whatever you choose to write about, however, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts.

# Warning

Many people report that after writing, they sometimes feel somewhat sad or depressed. Like seeing a sad movie, this typically goes away in a couple of hours. If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics.



# Visible Ink: Individually Tailored Writing Intervention for Cancer Patients

- Positive effects
  - All respondents would recommend program
  - Positive distraction
  - Fosters personal growth

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