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The Effects of an Expressive Writing Self-Help Strategy Among First Year Undergraduates

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Purpose: At a rural Appalachian liberal arts college, students reported higher stress levels, more traumatic experiences, and poorer physical and psychological outcomes than national counterparts. These data served as the impetus for this study that was part of a multimodal campus-wide health promotion and disease prevention initiative for first year undergraduates. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of an EW intervention on quality of life health outcomes among first-year undergraduates as evidenced by physical and mental summary scores on the SF-36 Version 2 (SF-36v2) Health Survey. A secondary aim was to investigate the effects of an EW intervention on stress among first-year undergraduates as measured by the salivary cortisol biomarker. A third goal was to determine the feasibility and value of an EW self-help intervention for dealing with stressful or traumatic experiences among first year undergraduates.

Methods: A mixed methods design was used. The SF-36v2 uses normative data from the 1998 and 2009 general U.S. population sample to compare test subjects. The T- score based scores have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Higher numbers indicate better health. (QualityMetric Health Outcomes Scoring Software 5.0 Users' Guide, 2016).

Results: A nonrandom sample consisted of 39 first year undergraduates. Every other participant was placed in an EW intervention group who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a stressful or traumatic event or a control group who wrote about neutral topics. Of the 39 initially enrolled students, 32 (18: intervention, 14: control) completed the study. The participants completed four 20 minute writing sessions on four consecutive days between the hours of 5 pm and 9 pm. Pre-test data were collected using the SF-36v2 health survey immediately prior to the initial writing session along with the collection of a salivary sample using the drool method. Three weeks following the final writing session participants provided post-test data using the SF-36v2 health survey and a salivary sample using the drool method. A 16 item exit survey using Qualtrics was sent via email to participants at one year. Pre and three - week post-intervention data in the form of saliva samples and SF-36 Version 2 Health Survey results were analyzed along with an exit survey given at one year.

At all time points the total sample, experimental and control groups scored above the national norm in physical health. On the contrary, at all time points the total sample, experimental and control groups scored below the national norm in mental health. From pre to posttest, there was an increase, although not statistically significant, in the SF-36v2 Mental Health Component Summary Score of the experimental group compared to the control group. The Physical Health Component Summary Score showed little change from pre to posttest in either group. Cortisol levels for the entire group showed a decrease, although not statistically significant, from pre to posttest. One explanation for the lack of statistical significance is that during the time of the study there were two student suicides on the small private college campus. As expected, the counseling center was inundated with visits related to the suicides. An alternative explanation is the study participants were concurrently engaged in other health promotion and disease prevention strategies targeting first year undergraduates. Despite lack of statistical significance, data from the exit survey validated the effectiveness of the EW intervention. For instance, respondents wrote in the exit survey that the EW intervention was "definitely therapeutic," and "helped us to move on" [from past trauma]. In response to the item, "Writing about my deepest thoughts and feelings related to a

stressful or traumatic event was helpful” 71% of respondents answered affirmatively. No participant requested to see a counselor in conjunction with the study.

Conclusion: First year undergraduates in particular find the transition to college stressful, and many, despite access to mental health services, come with concerns about the stigma, privacy and anonymity in seeking counseling (Hussain et. al., 2013). In healthy educational environments, available resources promote learning to address life challenges; vulnerability opens opportunities for developing resilience with toolkits of strategies to combat stressful and traumatic experiences. This analyses suggest that EW is a feasible, low-cost, accessible self-help intervention that may augment a comprehensive toolkit of strategies for vulnerable first year undergraduates.

Title:

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Keywords:

expressive writing self-help intervention, health promotion among undergraduates and mental and physical health quality of life

References:

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Abstract Summary:

This mixed methods study investigated the effects of an expressive writing intervention for first year undergraduates in a rural Appalachian liberal arts college. The impetus for the study came from data indicating incoming students fared worse than national counterparts in several health outcomes.

Content Outline:

I. Background

- A. Stress, mental and physical health of incoming undergraduates
 - 1. National trends
 - 2. Regional statistics in rural Appalachia among economically disadvantaged
- B. Literature review of main variables
 - 1. Mental and physical health quality of life
 - 2. Stress
 - 3. Expressive writing as a therapeutic intervention

II. Study Purpose

- A. Investigate the effects of an expressive writing intervention (EW) self-help among first year undergraduates
- B. Research Questions
 - 1. What are the effects of an EW self-help intervention on the mental and physical health quality of life among first year undergraduates?
 - 2. What are the effects of an EW self-help intervention on salivary cortisol levels among first year undergraduates?
 - 3. How effective is an EW self-help intervention in dealing with stressful or traumatic experiences among first year undergraduates?
- C. Design – two group pre- posttest mixed methods
- D. Recruitment and Sample
 - 1. Population of 410 first year undergraduates, 39 participants signed consent and 32 completed all phases of study = 82% completion rate
 - 2. Demographics of sample
- E. Instruments
 - 1. SF-36 Version 2 (SF-36v2) Health Survey
 - a. Mental Health Component Summary Score
 - b. Physical Health Component Summary Score
 - 2. Salivary cortisol levels analyzed using ELISA
- F. Procedure
 - 1. Staging the room
 - 2. Obtaining salivary cortisol samples using drool method
 - 3. Completion of demographic survey and SF-36 Version 2 (SF-36v2) Health Survey
 - 4. Every other participant assigned experimental or control
 - a. Experimental group writing instructions
 - b. Control group writing instructions
 - 5. Twenty minute writing sessions on 3-4 consecutive days
- G. Analysis
 - 1. Saliva samples - standard procedure for competitive enzyme-linked immunoassay (ELISA)
 - 2. Descriptive and inferential statistics of data
 - 3. Thematic analysis used for open-ended responses
- H. Results
 - 1. Physical quality of life remained unchanged
 - 2. Mental quality of life increased from pre- to posttest
 - 3. EW as self-help intervention – “definitely therapeutic”
 - 4. Themes of open-ended responses

- a. Death of loved one
- b. Stress of college transition
- c. Unspecified prior trauma

III. Conclusion

- A. EW is low-cost, easily taught skill as a therapeutic self-help intervention among first year undergraduates
- B. Analyses suggest EW may be effective self-help skill in a multimodal toolkit For first year undergraduates

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Professional Experience: For the past 12 years I have studied reflective writing as effective pedagogy in nursing education and expressive writing as a therapeutic self-help intervention within community practice settings. Below are a few examples of related presentations, publications, and research. In addition, I have been a faculty member for over 37 years including 12 years in higher education administration. Kennison, M. (2014, July). Using reflective writing as a nursing intervention: Review of the literature, Paper presentation, STTI Research Congress, Hong Kong. Kennison, M. Reviewer for book proposal. (2014). A Very Short Guide to Writing in Nursing. Oxford University Press. Kennison, M. (2012). Developing reflective writing as effective pedagogy. Nursing Education Perspectives, 33, 306-311. Kennison, M. (2006). The evaluation of students' reflective writing for evidence of critical thinking. Nursing Education Perspectives, 27, 269-273. Kennison, M.M. (1999). A case study in care. RN, 62(1), 46-48.

Author Summary: Dr. Kennison currently serves as the Susan V. Clayton Chair of the Baccalaureate Nursing Program and Professor at Berea College. For the past ten years she has collaborated on presentations, publications, and research related to reflective and expressive writing.

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Professional Experience: I began my teaching career in 2004, as a full-time Assistant Professor of Nursing. Upon completion of the PhD, terminal degree, I was promoted to Associate rank. I am a Certified Nurse Educator. I have participated in global health nursing by serving on medical mission teams, and by co- leading a service learning global health course for an interdisciplinary group of undergraduate students. My current focus of research is stress in the undergraduate student and bridging the gap between academia and practice through active partnerships.

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Professional Experience: I have been a nurse for 28 years. I am currently on the research team investigating the effects of expressive writing among first year undergraduates. In addition to this I have been a clinical faculty adjunct for 10 years and a faculty member for 3 years. During the past 13 years I have utilized reflective journaling as an effective pedagogy in clinical and didactic nursing education. I am also a Nurse Faculty Leadership Academy (NFLA) scholar and during this 20 month experience I had the opportunity to personally participate in reflective journaling.

Author Summary: Dr. Ponder is a 1989 graduate of Berea College, and she earned an MSN and DNP at the University of Kentucky. She is currently Director of Education and Professional Development at Baptist Health Richmond in Richmond, Kentucky. Prior to this position she was clinical adjunct at Eastern Kentucky University teaching in pediatric nursing for ten years and assistant professor at Berea College for three years.

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Professional Experience: I obtained both a BSN (2000) and MSN (2001) from the University of Virginia. I received my PhD in Nursing from the University of Kentucky in 2011. I am a board-certified public health clinical nurse specialist. My nursing experience is primarily in the field of community and public health nursing. I worked with the University of Kentucky's Good Samaritan Nursing Center for over 10 years, a nurse-managed center focused on meeting the health care needs of vulnerable populations in Kentucky, specifically with children, homeless adults, and uninsured adults. I currently work in nursing education and focus on research on health promotion and disease prevention in the community.

Author Summary: Lisa M. Turner, PhD, RN, is a board-certified public health clinical nurse specialist. Dr. Turner is co-chair of a campus-wide wellness initiative focused on increasing student's knowledge about stress and enhancing stress management skills. Her research interests focus on health promotion and disease prevention, vulnerable populations, and access to care.