

Effects of Expressive Writing on Psychological Distress among Scholarship Awardee Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To identify the effect of expressive writing on depression, anxiety, and stress among scholarship awardee nursing students.

METHODOLOGY: The study was conducted at one of the nursing academies in Aceh, Indonesia and data was collected in January, 2024. A quasi-experimental one-group pre-test-post-test design was used. The samples comprised fourth and sixth-semester students selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria include students who have experienced at least one of the components of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, or stress), ranging from mild to severe. The remaining samples after screening consisted of 38 students. The intervention consisted of expressive writing, comprising six sessions conducted over three weeks, and was evaluated using the DASS-21 questionnaire.

RESULTS: Expressive writing was significantly effective in reducing depression (p-value = 0.014), anxiety (p-value = 0.00), and stress (p-value = 0.00).

CONCLUSION: Educational institutions are recommended to integrate expressive writing into health support programs for scholarship awardee students with depression, anxiety, or stress, in the mild, moderate, severe, and very severe categories. These efforts are expected to help improve mental well-being.

KEYWORDS: Psychological distress, depression, anxiety, stress, expressive writing

INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders are becoming increasingly more concerning among teenagers, young adults, and undergraduates compared to other age groups. An estimated 20% of adolescents experience mental health problems that affect interpersonal relationships, academic performance, or lead to suicide or other maladaptive behaviour¹. This phenomenon can be attributed to many stressors, including the transition from secondary school to higher education, academic pressure, social adaptation, and adjustment to independence. Previous studies on the determinants of mental disorders in undergraduates reported a relationship between academic pressure, social isolation and loneliness, stigma and discrimination,

childhood trauma, and unhealthy lifestyles². Various stressors for students, which can harm mental health, include individual and others' expectations, lack of time, new types of social relations, new living environment, financial difficulties, higher standards in higher education, and examinations³.

Scholarship recipients are a group of students with high academic and social responsibilities. These individuals are required to maintain high academic performance to continue receiving financial assistance while also facing tremendous expectations from sponsors, families, and the campus community. The high level of pressure can cause significant psychological burdens in the form of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Descriptive studies have shown that nursing scholarship recipients experience high levels of psychological distress, specifically anxiety and stress, due to academic pressure and the fear of losing sponsorship when performance declines⁴. Another study of 262 college scholarship recipients found that most respondents experienced academic and emotional stress stemming from the demands of maintaining grades, administrative burdens, and concerns about financial uncertainty⁵.

Data from the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (NCHA), a survey of more than 157 institutions and 98,050 students, showed that 53% of students experienced moderate to severe stress. Meanwhile, 20.2% had depression, and 27.8% reported anxiety (American College Health Association, 2019). As stated by the 2018 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), over 19

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million Indonesians aged over 15 years have mental and emotional disorders. In addition, more than 12 million people in the same age range are known to experience depression.

Psychological distress, an unpleasant condition comprising symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, constitutes a critical threat to students' well-being. Depression is associated with feelings of sadness, loss of enthusiasm, loneliness, hopelessness, difficulty sleeping, and not being able to do anything. Meanwhile, anxiety is related to feelings of tension, anxiety, worry, anger, and fear⁶. Previous studies have shown that health students suffer from high levels of psychological distress⁷.

Scholarship recipient students have various demands and greater responsibilities. The demands of lectures can create pressure, leading to stressful conditions⁸. The presence of mental disorders reduces undergraduates' abilities, concentration, and energy levels, causing obstacles to achieving learning performance and increasing the risk of being expelled from school⁹.

Proper treatment is essential to reduce psychological distress in students. One of the solutions is expressive writing. A study conducted by **Argudo (2021)**¹⁰ concluded that the intervention has a positive effect on helping students relieve academic stress at the university level. According to **Baikie et al. (2012)**¹¹, expressive writing has been shown to impact both physical and psychological health. It is a well-structured, written emotional disclosure intervention to process stressful experiences¹², facilitating the release of emotions and burdens from the mind, allowing for the channelling of stressors¹³.

Based on the description above, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing psychological distress among scholarship-awardee nursing students at one of the private universities in Aceh. This location was selected because, based on observations and interviews, students felt helped by financial assistance from scholarship providers. However, some responsibilities must be followed, for example, being active on campus by participating in committees or organizations and attending morning assembly. These students are also required to have a GPA of at least 3.00, must graduate on time, create a student-centred program, be loyal to the campus, and show seriousness to maintain high achievement (both academic and non-academic). Students who fail to achieve the target in accordance with the provisions are punished and may have their scholarships terminated. This high expectation poses a significant challenge and pressure for students. Another urgency, as recorded, is that not many have implemented expressive writing interventions for students receiving scholarships.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This quantitative study used a quasi-experimental, one-group pre-test-post-test design. A pre-test was administered before treatment, and a post-test after treatment. This study was conducted at the Nursing Academy, Banda Aceh City, Indonesia. The location was selected because students reported feeling stressed by the burden and responsibility of being scholarship recipients, as observed and confirmed through interviews.

Population and Sample

The population consisted of all students receiving scholarships at the Nursing Academy in Banda Aceh city, totalling 74. The final sample was selected and screened using the DASS-21 questionnaire. A quasi-experimental method was used with a group pre-test-post-test design. Respondents who experienced one of the components of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) from mild to very severe, totalling 38 students, were given an expressive writing intervention 6 times for 3 weeks. The expressive writing stage consists of four sessions, including;

Session 1: Introduction/Initial Writing

Session 2: Analysis/Writing Practice

Session 3: Comparison/Feedback

Session 4: Self-Application

After the intervention, the level of psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21 instrument.

Instrument

The effectiveness of the intervention was measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) questionnaire, which was assessed by comparing the results of two measurements, namely a pre-test and a post-test, within the same group. DASS-21 is a set of 3 self-report scales designed to measure the emotional state of depression, anxiety, and stress, totalling 21 questions. The DASS-21 score is multiplied by 2 to obtain the final score.

Data Analysis

The DASS-21 score was multiplied by 2 to obtain the final score. Data collection was conducted from January 3 to 19, 2024. Before administering the intervention, students were directed to complete the questionnaire as a pre-test to assess psychological distress. The results obtained were screened for psychological distress in accordance with the inclusion criteria. After completing the selection process, expressive writing therapy was provided to 38 respondents in two rooms, six times over a period of three weeks, as per the previously discussed time contract. The last process was carried out to re-evaluate psychological distress by providing a questionnaire sheet as a post-test stage. The collected data were then analyzed using a computer program with a paired t-test.

Ethical Statement

This study obtained ethical approval from the

Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, with No. 11200712093.

RESULTS

The characteristics of respondents comprised independent variables consisting of age, gender, marital status, current academic level, GPA, parental education, and pocket money from parents.

Table I: Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	F	%
Gender		
Female	35	92,1
Male	3	7,9
Age (Years)		
<20 (Late Adolescent)	33	86,8
>20 (Early Adolescent)	5	13,2
Parents Education		
Primary school	5	13,2
Secondary school	29	76,3
Bachelor	4	10,5
Grade Point Average		
(2,76-3,00) Satisfying	13	34,2
(3,01-3,50) Very satisfying	19	50,0
(>3,50) Praise	6	15,8
Grade		
II	28	73,7
III	10	26,3
Marital Status		
Single	38	100
Parent's occupation		
Merchants's	2	5,3
Worker	5	13,2
Entrepreneur	6	15,8
Farmer	15	39,5
House wife	6	15,8
Fisherman	2	5,3
Retiree	1	2,6
Driver	1	2,6
Pocket money from parents		
Rp. 100-500 Thousand	2	5,3
Rp. 600-1 Million	35	92,1
Rp. >1 Million	1	2,6

Table I shows that most respondents (33, 86.8%) were in their late teens. In terms of gender, the majority were females (35; 92.1%), and 100% of participants were unmarried. A significant proportion of the respondents, namely 19 (50.0%), obtained a GPA in the very satisfactory category, while the most common current academic level was Level II in 28 respondents (73.7%). Based on the educational history of parents, the majority, namely 29 respondents (76.3%), have a secondary education. The parents of 15 respondents (39.5%) worked as

farmers, and in terms of pocket money, the majority (35, 92.1%) hold a monthly allowance of 600,000-1 million.

Table II: Frequency of Psychological Distress (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress)

Psychological Distress	Pre test				Post test			
	F	%	Mean	SD	f	%	Mean	SD
Depression								
Normal	25	65,8	6,95	5,613	34	89,5	4,37	3,597
Mild	4	10,5			3	7,9		
Moderate	9	23,7			1	2,6		
Anxiety								
Normal	3	7,9			24	63,2		
Mild	4	10,5	12,79	4,639	3	7,9	6,42	4,391
Moderate	20	52,6			10	26,3		
Severe	7	18,4			1	2,6		
Very Severe	4	10,5			0	0		
Stress								
Normal	22	57,9			35	92,1		
Mild	9	23,7	15,00	6,022	3	7,9	7,32	4,418
Moderate	5	13,2			0	0		
Severe	1	2,6			0	0		
Very Severe	1	2,6			0	0		

Table II shows that out of 38 respondents before the intervention, 25 (65.8%) did not experience depression, 9 (23.7%) had moderate, and 4 (10.5%) experienced mild depression. After the intervention, 34 (89.5%) did not experience depression, and 9 reported an increase. Four respondents (10.5%) who felt symptoms of mild depression before the intervention decreased to 3 (7.9%) after the intervention. A total of 9 respondents (20.9%) who experienced moderate depression decreased to 1 (2.6%) after intervention.

Before the intervention, 20 respondents (52.6%) experienced moderate anxiety symptoms, 7 (18.4%) had severe anxiety, 4 (10.5%) had mild and very severe anxiety, and 3 (7.9%) were normal. After being given the intervention, most respondents no longer experienced feelings of anxiety, namely 24 (63.2%). For respondents who experienced mild anxiety after being given the intervention, the number decreased to 3 (7.9%), and moderate anxiety decreased to 10 (26.3%). Symptoms of severe anxiety decreased to 1 respondent (2.6%) after being given the intervention, and very severe anxiety decreased to none.

For the stress variable, before being given the intervention, most respondents, namely, 22 (57.9%), did not feel symptoms of stress, but 9 (23.7%) felt mild, 5 (13.2%) felt moderate, and 1 (2.6%) felt severe and very severe stress. After being given intervention, the majority no longer feel symptoms of stress, namely 35 respondents (92.1%) or an increase of 13 from the previous 22 (57.9%). After receiving intervention, 3 respondents (7.9%) reported mild stress, a decrease from 6 of the previous 9 respondents (23.7%). In contrast to moderate, severe, and very severe stress symptoms after being given intervention, none felt these symptoms (0%).

Table III: Effect of Expressive Writing on Psychological Distress

Expressive Writing	Mean	SD	<i>p</i> value
Depression			
Pre test	6,95	5,613	0,014
Post test	4,37	3,957	
Anxiety			
Pre test	12,79	4,639	0,000
Post test	6,42	4,391	
Stress			
Pre test	15,00	6,022	0,000
Post test	7,32	4,418	

Table III shows that expressive writing can reduce psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). The t-test yielded a p-value of < 0.05, suggesting that expressive writing can reduce psychological distress among scholarship recipients at the Nursing Academy in Banda Aceh city.

DISCUSSION

Various studies have shown that younger age groups experience higher levels of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress. This vulnerability is associated with important developmental stages and transitions during this period, including the shifts from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood, and from school to university or the workplace. The transitions can cause changes in feelings and behaviour, with various manifestations¹⁴. A previous study reported that expressive writing affects the tendency for depression in students¹⁵. Expressive writing was also effective in reducing depression among adolescents¹⁶.

Depression arises from an individual's perceptions of themselves and the environment. People with depression tend to engage in self-blame due to cognitive distortions about themselves and the environment. These individuals often draw insufficient conclusions and have a negative outlook during the process of self-evaluation and interpretation of events. Reports have shown that expressing emotions and experiences through writing can facilitate an individual's process of adapting to stress and life changes¹⁷. This result differs from another study, which found that expressive writing did not reduce depression among vocational high school students in Surabaya¹⁸. The difference in results is presumably due to the intervention being delivered via Zoom and to subjects being less cooperative, as evidenced by their refusal to turn on their cameras during the meeting. This refusal prevented the observer from monitoring participation during expressive writing. Despite these limitations, the study reported some positive outcomes, including at least one participant expressing relief and gaining insight into life experiences.

This study shows that expressive writing can reduce anxiety. Similarly, a previous study found that expressive writing is a significant anxiety-reducing strategy when facing exams¹⁹. This intervention is also effective in reducing anxiety in people with physical disabilities²⁰. In general, anxiety is defined as a manifestation of rejection by individuals that causes feelings of fear. It is also related to the development of trauma, such as separation and loss. Individuals with low self-esteem are reportedly prone to anxiety²¹. Stress arises when expectations exceed an individual's ability. A person who cannot meet the demands of life will feel a state of tension within themselves. Meanwhile, prolonged, unresolved tension develops into stress²². Expressive writing is effective in reducing stress among awardee nursing students. This result is consistent with another study in which expressive writing reduced stress levels in students²³. The intervention has a positive effect on helping students relieve academic stress²⁴. It was also effective in reducing stress among students²⁵.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, expressive writing is effective in reducing psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) among scholarship-awarded nursing students. This study suggests the need for expressive writing as a preventive and promotive effort for students, and that further interventions can be combined with other generalist therapies to optimize students' mental health. During the study, several limitations were encountered, including limited time due to respondents' busy teaching and learning schedules. The different lecture schedule mandated efficient time management to carry out the intervention. Furthermore, the sample size was limited to one institution due to time constraints. There is also the possibility of bias in the results, as respondents engaged in other activities, such as listening to music, watching movies, and going for walks, to reduce psychological distress.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Sari N: Conducted the study and drafted the manuscript.

Fithria F: Conducted the research and contributed to revising the manuscript.

Asniar A: Conducted the research and contributed to revising the manuscript.

Jannah SR: Participated in revising the manuscript.

Yusuf R: Participated in drafting and revising the manuscript.

All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

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