



Brief report

Brief report: A qualitative evidence synthesis of the psychological processes of school-based expressive writing interventions with adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Expressive writing interventions consist of brief writing sessions on thoughts and emotions and are known to yield positive benefits on adolescents' mental health. However, the psychological mechanisms explaining these effects are not clear.**Method:** This review explored the psychological processes underlying school-based expressive writing interventions with adolescents. A thematic synthesis of qualitative research consisted of identifying, appraising and summarizing the qualitative evidence of eligible studies.**Results:** Only six of the 510 identified studies met the inclusion criteria of this review. Results provide some validation for *cognitive-processing*, *emotion-regulation*, and *disinhibition* as psychological mechanisms underlying school-based expressive writing with adolescents.**Conclusions:** However, these conclusions are still preliminary because of the paucity of the qualitative evidence found, both in quantity and quality. We recommend that more rigorous and in-depth qualitative research be undertaken to: 1) explore adolescents' subjective experience about the expressive writing intervention, using in-depth individual interviews; 2) thoroughly assess the content of students' texts written during the intervention; and 3) document the process of expressive writing interventions through observational methods. The results of such investigations would support the development and implementation of school-based expressive writing-type of interventions adapted to adolescents.

The psychosocial dimension of health is very important during adolescence, with the potential for mental health problems to worsen as young people move through later stages of life (World Health Organization, 2016). Programs aimed at the promotion of well-being and prevention of common mental health problems during adolescence have proven to be effective (Lovallo, 2015; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). Since adolescence represents a particularly crucial developmental window, such programs are greatly needed.

Expressive writing is a psychological intervention to help cope with difficult life experiences (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). It consists of three to five brief sessions, in which participants write about their “deepest thoughts and feelings” about a negative or traumatic personal experience (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 162). This low-cost, low-tech intervention can be easily implemented in school settings (Taylor, Jouriles, Brown, Goforth, & Banyard, 2016), an important attribute since in-school programs have been shown to be more useful in impacting adolescents' mental health than out-of-school programs (Clarke, Morreale, Field, Hussein, & Barry, 2015).

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The effectiveness of expressive writing has been assessed in multiple quantitative studies and reviews (e.g., Frattaroli, 2006; Smyth & Arigo, 2009), which report positive mental health outcomes. While these studies are mainly focused on adult populations, a recent meta-analysis reported smaller but nonetheless positive mental health outcomes on adolescents' psychological well-being, such as a reduction in levels of anxiety, depression, and aggressive behaviors as well as an improvement in social adjustment (Travagin, Margola, & Revenson, 2015). However, expressive writing-type interventions can, in some cases, be detrimental, as was the case in a study showing an increase in the level of anxiety and depressive symptoms in a group of young adolescents exposed to stressful experiences of everyday life (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007).

Understanding the underlying psychological processes¹ of expressive writing with adolescents would help tailor this type of intervention to adolescents' developmental needs. This would allow to guide the implementation of school-based expressive writing interventions with adolescents, help enhance its effectiveness and reduce potential harmful effects (Travagin et al., 2015; Travagin, Margola, Dennis, & Revenson, 2016).

It is widely known that qualitative studies are better suited to understand the complexity of subjective experience in real-life context (Groleau, Young, & Kirmayer, 2006). It is therefore timely to review the qualitative evidence on school-based expressive writing interventions for adolescents to better understand its underlying psychological mechanisms, as well as guide its development and implementation in school settings.

This literature review therefore assesses the qualitative evidence on the psychological processes underlying school-based expressive writing interventions with adolescents, in relation to: 1) the subjective experience of adolescents receiving the expressive writing intervention; 2) the content of their texts written during the expressive writing activity; and 3) the observations of expressive writing interventions.

1. Method

1.1. Selection of studies

Qualitative or mixed-method studies that focused on analyzing school-based expressive writing interventions used as a psychological therapeutic tool (as proposed by Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) were included in this review. The population of interest included adolescents from 10 to 18 years old. Articles searched included peer-review published papers or PhD dissertations. Studies were excluded if they did not correspond to the above-mentioned criteria; were not primary studies; only involved oral emotional disclosure (without writing); or pertained to college students, adults or a mix of adolescent and adult populations (Fig. 1). In addition, articles that did not explicitly specify the procedural information about the writing activities (information needed to confirm the intervention as an expressive writing activity) were not retained. Studies were not limited by year of publication or country of origin. However, publication languages were limited to English, French and Italian.

1.2. Search strategy

Four methods were used to identify eligible studies: 1) a keyword search in ERIC Ebsco, PsycINFO, and Scopus databases was conducted in July and August 2016 and updated in June 2017; 2) the reference sections of each included study, meta-analysis and review papers were manually searched; 3) a forward citation search was carried out using Google Scholar; and 4) expert-researchers in the field of expressive writing were consulted to ensure no article was missed using the above-mentioned methods.

1.3. Data extraction, synthesis and analysis

A thematic synthesis of qualitative research consisted of identifying, appraising and summarizing the qualitative evidence of eligible studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Firstly, studies were examined for all pertinent information; relevant text units were coded; and themes were extracted. Secondly, themes were classified and synthesized into matrixes according to the following domains: 1) qualitative data-collection methods (e.g., interviews and open-ended questionnaires vs. documentary sources (e.g., students' scripts) vs. observation of expressive writing interventions vs. any other type of method (Green & Thorogood, 2014)); 2) data analysis methods used by study authors; 3) qualitative findings reported in the studies (including relevant verbatim); 4) authors' interpretation of the psychological processes underlying expressive writing (when applicable). Thirdly, extracted themes were verified with the primary data, thus insuring the accuracy of review findings. Finally, data was further analyzed to infer additional psychological processes, when applicable.

2. Results

2.1. Search results

Only six of the 510 identified studies met the inclusion criteria of this review (Fivush et al., 2007; Horn, Pössel, & Hautzinger,

¹ For a thorough presentation of the hypothesized psychological processes underlying expressive writing, such as the *cognitive-processing*, *emotion-regulation*, *exposure/habituation*, and *disinhibition* theories, see Frattaroli, 2006, and Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016.

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