

Emotional expression and psychological symptoms: A comparison of writing and drawing

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Abstract

The psychological effects of writing versus drawing about a stressful experience were compared. Participants were randomly assigned either into a control group ($n = 34$), a journaling group ($n = 29$), or a drawing group ($n = 29$). A measure of psychological symptoms was completed before and after two 15-min sessions. The results indicated that participants in the journaling group had a significantly greater decrease in their psychological symptoms than those in the drawing group or the control group. Journaling was also found to have a more positive effect for participants who initially had higher levels of psychological distress.

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Historically, the expression of emotion has been an important area of focus within the fields of psychology and psychotherapy (e.g., Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). In recent years, attention has been given to the role of emotional disclosure outside of the interpersonal context of therapy. Much of this work has been based on the use of prescriptive and creative tasks that elicit emotional content, such as journaling about a stressful or traumatic experience (Pennebaker & Beal, 1986). The benefit of such activity is now well documented for both psychological and physical health (Esterling, L'Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999; Francis & Pennebaker, 1992; Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaer, 1988; Symth, 1998). Journaling has been found to be

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beneficial both as an adjunct to psychotherapy (Esterling et al., 1999) and as an independent intervention (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999). These results have been shown to be relatively robust across the number and length of writing sessions used (Smyth, 1998) and across individual differences on personality traits (Horneffer & Jamison, *in press*; Pennebaker, 1999; cf., Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Margulies, & Schneiderman, 1994). In sum, the therapeutic value of emotional expression through journaling appears to be viable for a range of settings and populations.

As writing has grown in popularity, so too has the use of drawing as a therapeutic tool within the contexts of individual psychotherapy (e.g., Theorell et al., 1998) and group therapy (Parr, Haberstroh, & Kotter, 2000). Less research exists regarding the effectiveness of art therapy interventions compared to journaling; however, a recent review of 17 studies provides some promising results for the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing psychological symptoms (Reynolds, Nabors, & Quinlan, 2000). Although drawing is a commonly used method within art therapy, its use as an independent intervention to elicit emotional expression has received little empirical investigation. It seems possible, however, that drawing might offer an alternative or complementary creative arts approach to Pennebaker's use of journaling as a means of processing stressful experiences. This possibility was explored in a study by Pizarro (2004), which compared journaling and drawing of stressful experiences on two occasions. The author found that participants in the writing condition, but not the art therapy condition, showed a decrease in social dysfunction, but not in other health indices. The small sample size (15 per group) limits the interpretability of these findings. However, the study does highlight the value of examining various factors that might influence the effectiveness of drawing interventions (e.g., number and length of sessions, content of instructions, type and range of art media included).

There exist several incentives for comparing the efficacy of writing and drawing as prescribed tasks. First, it is not uncommon for journaling and artwork to be used together as an expressive arts component in group therapy (e.g., Sweig, 2000). The ease with which these forms of expression can be used together, or be offered as independent options, raises the question of their relative effectiveness as a means of emotional disclosure. There appear to be benefits and limitations associated with each modality. Journaling has the advantage of being a familiar and comfortable activity for many people, given the common use of writing in day-to-day life. However, for some people, the use of words may be a greater obstacle than catalyst for accessing feelings. This has been found to be the case for people with deficits in emotional awareness and understanding (a condition termed alexithymia). Lumley, Tojek, and Macklem's (2002) overview of several studies in this area suggests that alexithymia interferes with the benefits of emotional expression through journaling (e.g., Lumley, Naoum, & Kelley, 2001), although some contradictory findings exist (Paez, Velasco, & Gonzalez, 1999). In comparison, art therapy and drawing have been found to be useful tasks for individuals with alexithymia (Heiman, Strnad, Weiland, & Wise, 1994; Hornyack & Baker, 1989).

There are theoretical reasons for predicting both writing and drawing to be effective vehicles of expression. For both modalities, the process of creating, as opposed to the created product, is viewed as being of key therapeutic value. This perspective represents a recent trend in the field of art therapy, in which attention is given to "doing the art, in and of itself" (Kaplan, 1998) as opposed to interpretations of completed works of art (McNiff,

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