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An Investigation of the Efficacy of Online Expressive Writing for Trauma-Related Psychological Distress in Hispanic Individuals

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This study compared the efficacy of 2 online expressive writing protocols for a traumatic/stressful life event in a Hispanic student sample. Participants who had reported a traumatic event were randomly assigned to either the emotion-focused group or the fact-focused group. The emotion-focused group focused their written accounts on emotions and feelings as well as facts about a stressful/traumatic experience, whereas the fact-focused group focused on facts of a stressful/traumatic event. Both groups completed 3 online writing sessions scheduled for 3 consecutive days, a 1-week online follow-up assessment, and a 5-week online follow-up assessment. Both groups statistically significantly reduced trauma symptoms over time with the emotion-focused group demonstrating statistically significantly greater trauma symptom reductions than the fact-focused group at the 5-week follow-up assessment.

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SINCE THE FIRST EMPIRICAL STUDY of expressive writing targeting stressful experiences in students (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), a great deal of research indicates the potential benefits of expressive writing. Ample evidence supports the notion that expressive writing promotes physical well-being, as evidenced by fewer doctor visits, lower cortisol levels, and fewer physical symptoms (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan, Marx, & Epstein, 2005). Evidence also supports the value of expressive writing for reducing psychological symptoms, including traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Guastella & Dadds, 2008; Hemenover, 2003; Kenardy & Piercy, 2006; Pennebaker & Beall; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan, Marx, Epstein, & Lexington, 2007), while a few studies reported no effects (Brown & Heimberg, 2001; Sloan, Marx, & Greenberg, 2011).

In the typical expressive writing paradigm individuals write about a stressful experience and their emotional reactions to the event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan et al., 2011; Sloan et al., 2007). Variations involve

writing about the same or different traumatic/stressful life event multiple times over several consecutive days (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall; Sloan & Marx) to focusing on the same traumatic experience in all writing assignments (e.g., Guastella & Dadds, 2008; Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan et al., 2007). Overall, a meta-analytic study (Frattaroli, 2006) reported a small but positive average effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.15$) for expressive writing instructions compared to a control condition (e.g., writing about neutral daily experiences, wait-list control).

Potential therapeutic mechanisms for trauma-related distress are based on emotional processing theory (Foa & Kozak, 1986). According to this theory, traumatized individuals have developed a fear network with pathological information and emotional responses to stimuli associated with a traumatic event. Activation of the fear network facilitates reconstruction of the network and allows the victim to replace pathological information with accurate information. Subsequent decreases in emotional arousal in response to trauma-related stimuli, habituation, indicates modifications in the pathological fear network. It has been hypothesized that writing about a stressful life event activates this network and leads to habituation and symptom reduction. Recent studies report evidence for this model. For example, increases in physiological or self-reported emotional arousal from pre- to post-writing (e.g., Sloan et al., 2007; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2005) and habituation across writing sessions (e.g., Sloan et al., 2007; Sloan et al., 2005) have been found. Consistent with emotional processing theory, emotional reactions to the content of writing tasks was associated with improved physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Sloan et al., 2007; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2005).

The above studies suggest the importance of experiencing emotions during writing to promote therapeutic outcomes. Unknown is whether writing about emotions facilitates such processes. As noted above, typical instructions require individuals to write about facts and emotional components of a stressful/traumatic experience. This approach is then compared to a control group writing about a neutral event. Unclear is whether the combination of emotional and factual components has incremental effects over the fact-focused approach alone. This comparison has been examined in a limited number of studies (Brown & Heimberg, 2001; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), with no differences reported between the two types of instructions. Additional tests of specific types of writing are required to bring clarity to this research literature.

Another unknown is whether the expressive writing paradigm is applicable to individuals with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Most prior investigations have been conducted in predominantly European American samples with small proportions of other ethnic groups (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan et al., 2007) and among Western Europeans (e.g., Guastella & Dadds, 2008; Kenardy & Piercy, 2006). Few studies have been performed among individuals with non-Western cultural backgrounds such as Asian American students (Lu & Stanton, 2010) and Hispanic American students (Lee & Cohn, 2010). Thus, there is remarkably little known about the effects of expressive writing and its therapeutic mechanisms in cultural groups such as Hispanic Americans.

According to Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analytic study of expressive writing, Hispanic individuals represent only 5% of participants, although the percentage of Hispanic Americans has increased by 43% within the last decade and now accounts for 16% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This gap is particularly important in light of evidence suggesting that Hispanics may develop more severe trauma-related symptoms than non-Hispanic individuals (Pole, Gone, & Kulkarni, 2008). Specifically, higher prevalence rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and more severe levels of trauma symptoms are reported in Hispanic individuals (e.g., Marshall, Schell, & Miles, 2009; Pole et al., 2008; Pole, Best, Metzler, & Marmar, 2005). An improved understanding of the effectiveness of the writing paradigm for traumatic/stressful experiences in Hispanic American samples is necessary.

Research indicates that Hispanic individuals differ in emotional response and expression from other cultural groups and that, for Hispanics, expressing emotions may be a culturally shaped coping strategy. Soto, Levenson, and Ebling (2005) reported that when compared to Chinese Americans, Hispanic Americans experienced larger responses to startle stimuli. Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, and Villegas (2009) found that emotion-focused coping was most significantly associated with psychological well-being in Latino males, suggesting the importance of expressing emotions related to stressors. The use of venting emotions as coping has also been reported in a Mexican American high school sample (Vaughn & Roesch, 2003) and Hispanic women with breast cancer (Culver, Arena, Antoni, & Carver, 2002). These tendencies in Hispanics might interact with instructional differences in expressive writing. Specifically, Hispanics might respond to fact-focused instructions with less therapeutic benefit than other cultural subgroups because of their documented preference for expressing emotion.

Several recent expressive writing studies utilized the Internet (Possemato, Ouimette, & Geller, 2010;

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