

## A literature review: Does expressive writing effective to reduce stress?

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### Abstract

The study used a literature review method to describe the findings of articles related to the practice of expressive writing in reducing stress. The data was obtained from 30 selected studies consisting of 13 national journals and 17 international articles. The data collection technique was a documentation study in which the data was analyzed by using content analysis. The results of the study were: (1) expressive writing could reduce the stress of a wide range of ages from children to adults, and was able to help problems from various types of stress disorders; (2) expressive writing could be flexibly applied with a various number of sessions and different durations according to the counselee's need; (3) expressive writing effectively reduced and overcome stress in general, academic stress, depression problems combined, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, stress during the pandemic, and stress on children with HIV/AIDS. The study results recommended that school counselors could utilize expressive writing to reduce the negative impacts of stress by creatively modifying the relevant intervention based on the findings. Further research is expected to explore and expand the study through literature studies from another perspective such as focusing on research methods with various variables, subjects, objects, and locations.

**Keywords:** *expressive writing, stress, school counselor, counseling.*



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### Introduction

Stress is a phenomenon that becomes an attribute of modern human life. This is because stress has become an unavoidable part of human life, whether at school, work, or family, anywhere (Kupriyanov & Zhdanov, 2014). Stress has harmful effects on an individual's physical

and mental health. Lin and Huang explain that high levels of stress can harm individuals who experience them (Lin & Huang, 2014).

Director of Prevention and Control of Mental Health and Drug Problems, Munthe explained that mental health problems in Indonesia are closely related to the problem of the high prevalence of people with mental disorders (Widyawati, 2021). Currently, Indonesia has a prevalence of people with mental disorders of around 1 in 5 of the population, meaning that around 20% of the population in Indonesia has potential mental problems. He revealed that this figure is very high because 20% of the 250 million people have great potential to experience mental health problems.

Based on the results of the welfare score survey in 2021, in general, the stress level of Indonesians is currently lower than the countries surveyed, such as Singapore. However, Indonesia still shows an increase in stress from 73 percent in early 2020 to 75 percent in 2021 according to the Marketing Director and Cigna Indonesia Strategic Cooperation, Nasution, in his writing in *Jawa Pos* on Wednesday, 6 October 2021 (A. Lubis, 2020).

A study involving 5,000 adults in 13 markets in Asia between August and September (2020) stated that compared to other Asian countries, respondents in Indonesia recorded experiencing the most stress due to Covid-19. This was most likely due to the high rate of transmission per day and the death rate in Indonesia (A. Lubis, 2020).

Some of the data above show that stress is a frightening specter for Indonesian people. Stress is a desired state that is not in accordance with biological, psychological, or social systems (Sarafino, 1994). Stress is a misalignment of surrounding demands with one's performance. Stress is a person's reaction to a situation or event that threatens or interferes with one's coping abilities (coping) and causes stress (stressors) (Santrock, 2012). Girdano classifies stressors into five aspects, namely (1) bioecological stress, (2) psychosocial stress, (3) job stress, (4) self-concept, and (5) personality characteristics (Girdano, 2005).

Brantley explains that stress can be triggered by life incidents and simple events experienced in an individual's daily life (Danastri & Desiningrum, 2016). Kupriyanov and Zhdanov explain that stress is part of the attributes of modern life that are difficult to avoid (Kupriyanov & Zhdanov, 2014). At a certain threshold, stress can benefit oneself to remain active and careful, however, stress with very severe and long-term levels that exceed coping capacity can cause mental stress. Prolonged stress can affect physical health. Stress also has emotional, cognitive, physiological, and behavioral effects. Emotional effects include anxiety, depression, physical, and mental stress (Asnita et al., 2015). Stress experienced by individuals can trigger psychosomatic (Pennebaker, 2016).

Several studies have shown that students in Indonesia have recently been experiencing high levels of stress. The implementation of a virtual study-at-home policy has an impact on the emergence of anxiety and feelings of pressure in a number of students. A study by Catherine proves that many school assignments given by teachers cause stress for students when learning online (Chaterine, 2020). Supporting this phenomenon, research by Raharjo and Sari shows facts that students were not only burdened with many assignments but the assignments given by the teacher were felt to be burdensome because the processing time was very short (Raharjo & Sari, 2020). Therefore, students became confused in finishing their school assignments. The research results of Livana, et al., reinforce the reality that learning assignments are a major factor causing stress for students in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic (Livana et al., 2020).

Lubis's study showed that the average student experienced stress in the moderate category (H. Lubis et al., 2021). Putri et al., who also conducted similar research showed high academic stress was inversely related to seeking academic assistance (Putri et al., 2018). Qonitatin et al's research included loan results that there were 40.3% of students with mild stress, 6.5% moderate stress, 88% severe stress, while the rest (48.4%) did not experience stress (Qonitatin et al., 2011).

Pennebaker stated that keeping secrets (problems) was physical work (Pennebaker, 2018). Over time, holding onto problems serves as a trigger for stress buildup in the body, increasing

the likelihood of illness and other stress-related physical and mental problems. The harder the individual has to try to hide thoughts or feelings, the greater the stress on the body.

When an individual writes or expresses their feelings about an event expressively, they will feel the emotion that emerged at that time. However, their perception of the event and mind will begin to focus on forming a new perception. Expressive writing describes life experiences in the past, present, or future imagined by the author (Aldrich, 2010). Expressive writing has several uses, including externalizing problems that support counselees to be able to express their emotions appropriately, separating self-problems, minimizing negative effects due to experiencing problems, forming mindsets, and optimizing self-quality.

In education, writing is used as a tool in the educational process (Pennebaker, 2018). Students are actively encouraged to write or talk about facts and theories. Writing becomes a driving force in learning and creativity, clears the mind, solves experiences that hinder important tasks, helps in acquiring and remembering new information, encourages problem solving. Some research shows expressive writing can reduce depression, anxiety, and stress (Danarti et al., 2018).

Based on the explanation, it can be concluded that stress can be overcome by using expressive writing. However, the review literature on this topic is still limited. This becomes one of the backgrounds of the research. In addition, research on expressive writing in reducing stress was still being carried out in a fairly limited number. In the study, expressive writing is defined as a form of creative counseling by means of writing techniques of disturbing experiences and events. It is intended as a way of telling the problems, feelings, and moods of individuals in the form of expressive writing that allows them to release hidden emotions within themselves (Pennebaker, 2018).

Several studies explain that stress is an indicator that shows an individual's inability to face threats physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Appropriate handling or methods for reducing stress, for example expressive writing, are needed. An in-depth review of the literature related to the application of expressive writing in reducing stress in accordance with various studies is expected to provide reinforcement of the usefulness of the technique. Literature review is not only meant to read through literature, but is more towards an in-depth and critical evaluation of previous research on a topic. Researchers need to read previous studies. The readings are then reviewed, providing a critical look at past studies. This activity is to find out how existing research contributes to science later. Through this, researchers are able to find out how research is useful by identifying various findings on expressive writing that have not been uncovered related to the stressful conditions being studied. Literature review includes systematic explanations of literary studies and the results of previous studies which aim to present the state of the art in the scientific field in relation to the studies carried out (Indra & Cahyaningrum, 2019).

Literature review research on the application of expressive writing in reducing stress was carried out with the aim of finding, studying, and analyzing literature related to the application of expressive writing. The scope of the review in the study included goals, procedures for the successful application of expressive writing in reducing stress. The results of the study are expected to make a positive contribution to the scientific insights of guidance and counseling, and to be used as a reference by future researchers.

## **Method**

The study used a literature review by collecting, reading, and recording library data and processing research materials (Zed, 2014). According to Nazir, a literature study is a data collection technique that involves reviewing books, literature, notes, and reports related to the theme of the problem (Nazir, 2014). Literature reviews were carried out with the intention of finding relationships between problems, research, and theory. Research is supported by existing theory, evidence (research results), conclusions, and suggestions, to create a concept regarding

the application of expressive writing to reduce stress. The study analyzed literature from journals, thesis, and books that accomplished the criteria. The criteria in the study were 1) studying expressive writing and reducing stress; 2) publication from 2010-2022.

According to Kuhlthau, the procedures in the study included (Kuhlthau, 2002):

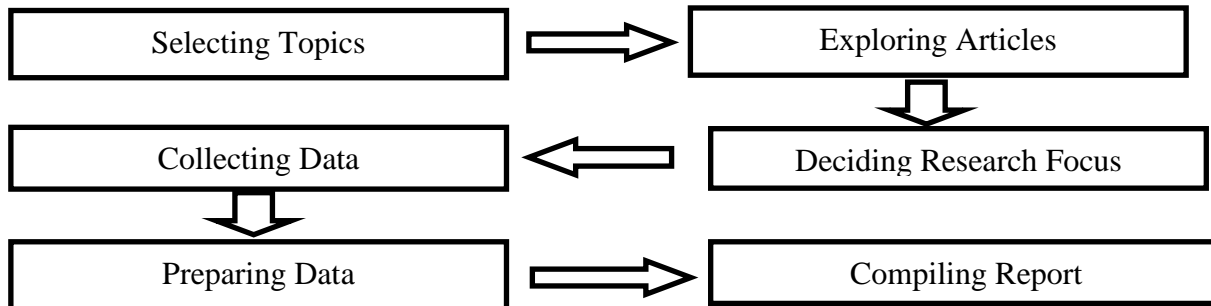


Figure 1. Research Procedure

The data source in the study was a secondary source obtained by researchers through journal studies. The following are 30 journals used as research references:

Table 1. List of Articles

	Author and Year	Journal	Title
1	(Budury & Khamida, 2020)	Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development	Playing "Walk and Stop" and Expressive Writing to Reduce Children's Stress During the Covid Pandemic 19
2	(Muhtadini, 2018)	Undergraduate (S1) thesis, University of Muhammadiyah Malang	Expressive Writing untuk Menurunkan Stres Akademik pada Siswa Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) Full Day School
3	(Triyani et al., 2020)	Supplement: International Nursing Conference	Pengaruh Expressive writing Therapy terhadap Stres Anak dengan HIV/AIDS
4	(Apriliana, 2020)	Motivasi	Pengaruh Expressive writing Terhadap Tingkat Stres pada Siswa SMP Nuri Samarinda
5	(Danarti et al., 2018)	Jurnal Ilmu Keperawatan Jiwa	Pengaruh Expressive Writing Therapy Terhadap Penurunan Depresi, Cemas, dan Stres Pada Remaja
6	(Hapsari, 2012)	Thesis Universitas Gadjah Mada	Pengaruh Program Expressive writing Terhadap Simtom-Simtom Gangguan Stres Pasca Trauma Pada Perempuan Korban Kekerasan Domestik
7	(Ainiyu et al., 2020)	Humanitas	Pengaruh <i>Expressive writing</i> dalam Menurunkan Stres pada Wanita Penderita Penyakit Lupus
8	(Rahmawati, 2014)	Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi Terapan	<i>Expressive writing</i> Sebagai Strategi Mereduksi Stres Untuk Anak-Anak Korban Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga
9	(Maharani et al., 2017)	Jurnal Psikologi Indonesia	<i>Expressive writing Therapy</i> dalam Menurunkan Tingkat Stres pada Remaja Dengan Albino Ditinjau dari Tipe

	Author and Year	Journal	Title
			Kepribadian Introvert dan Ekstrovert
10	(Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022)	Jurnal Basicedu	Pengaruh Expressive Writing terhadap Penurunan Stres Akademik Mahasiswa
11	(Panggabean et al., 2020)	Molucca Medica	Penerapan Expressive Writing Therapy dalam Pemulihan Post Traumatic Stress Disorder pada Perempuan Korban Kekerasan Masa Pacaran
12	(Anggraini et al., 2019)	Jurnal Pendidikan	Keefektifan Teknik Expressive Writting Untuk Mereduksi Stres dan Emosi Negatif Siswa
13	Saputri (2020)	Journal of Client Centered Nursing Care	Pengaruh Terapi Menulis Ekspresif terhadap Penurunan Stres pada Remaja
14	(Rossi et al., 2020)	Frontiers in Psychology	Effectiveness of Expressive Writing in The Reduction of Psychological Distress During The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Randomized Controlled Trial
15	(Ruark, 2021)	The Journal of Middle-Level Education in Texas	Expressive Writing as an Intervention for Math Anxiety in Middle School Students
16	(Hines, 2011)	Counseling & Human Service Theses and Education	The Effects of Expressive Writing on Anxiety, Mathematics Anxiety, Stress, Cognitive Processes and Psychological Processes on The Virginia Standards of Learning (Sol) on A Sample of Urban High School Students Failing Mathematics
17	(Gallagher et al., 2018)	Journal of Clinical Psychological	The unexpected impact of expressive writing on posttraumatic stress and growth in Chinese American breast cancer survivor
18	(Argudo, 2021)	Teachers' Professional Development	Expressive writing to relieve academic stress at university level.
19	(Chu et al., 2020)	Quality of Life Research	Expressive writing intervention for posttraumatic stree disorder among Chinese American breast cancer survivor: the moderating role of social constraints
20	(Jannah et al., 2019)	International Journal of Scientific & technology Research	Managing Cognitive Anxiety Through Expressive writing In Student-Athletes
21	(Paquin et al., 2022)	Psylogical Medicine	Unexpected effects of expressive writing on post-disaster distres in Hurricane Harvey Study: a randomized controlled trial in perinatal women
22	(Atarezaei & Gorji, 2020)	Shenakht Journal of Psychology and Psychiatry	Effect of expressive writing Pattern on the decreasing of rumination, depression and stress in divorced women
23	(Mukhlis et al., 2020)	Annals of Tropical Medicine and Public Health	The effect of expressive writing technique to stres level decrease of new student at Al-Falah Putri Islamic Boarding School, Margodadi, Tanggamus
24	(Rani & Princely, 2016)	ICCR-JNR	A True Experimental Study to Assess the Effectiveness of Expressive Writing on the Level of Stress among Adolescent Students

	Author and Year	Journal	Title
25	(Wright, 2019)	Psychreg Journal of Psychology	Effects of expressive writing on posttraumatic stress symptoms and other traumas: Case study of male clients in therapy settings
26	(Mirmolaei et al., 2020)	Journal of Client-Centered Nursing Care	The Effect of Narrative Writing on Depression, Anxiety, and Stress of Pregnant Women
27	(Welch et al., 2020)	Proceedings of the 1st Workshop Covid 19	Expressive Interviewing: A Conversational System for Coping with COVID-19
28	(Chishima et al., 2021)	Applied Psychology Health and Well-Being	Temporal distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic: Letter writing with future self can mitigate negative affect
29	(Mikocka-Walus et al., 2020)	Journal of Psychosomatic Research	Expressive writing to combat distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in people with inflammatory bowel disease (WriteForIBD): A trial protocol
30	(Qian et al., 2020)	Psychiatry Research	Effects of expressive writing intervention for women's PTSD, depression, anxiety and stress related to pregnancy: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials

The articles analyzed were those published from 2010 to 2022. The data collection were utilized Google Scholar with 3 keywords including stress management, expressive writing techniques, and expressive writing to reduce stress. The search for stress management yielded 8,260 titles but only 3 journals were relevant. The search for expressive writing techniques resulted 900 titles, but only 16 were relevant. The search for expressive writing to reduce stress yielded 86 titles but only 6 titles were relevant. The title relevance criteria was based on an exploration of the literature which included goals, procedures, and the successful application of expressive writing in reducing stress. After obtaining relevant data according to the relevance criteria, the researchers took 30 journals to be used as data sources. These journals were 13 national journals and 17 international journals, specifically using expressive writing to reduce stress.

The data analysis technique used was the analysis of the contents of the articles which showed the findings of the research. Mirzaqon and Purwoko suggested that the data analysis technique in literature review research focused on analyzing the content (Mirzaqon. T & Purwoko, 2017). Fraenkel and Wallen stated that content analysis pivoted on the content and characteristics of internal resources. Textbooks, essays, newspapers, novels, magazine articles can be the focus for analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). This is to determine the existence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, letters, or sentences in relevant texts, books, essays. Content analysis is intended to reach valid conclusions and can be reviewed in context. This analysis proceeds through the process of selecting, comparing, identifying, and sorting different meanings until it finds relevant data. Confirmation between the literature and expert comments serve to maintain the accuracy of the evaluation process, avoiding and reducing falsity or erroneous data.

The study used the data analysis model of Miles and Huberman (Sugiyono, 2018). There are 2 types, namely analysis when collecting data which is carried out side by side according to the research flow and analysis after the data is collected by knowing the relationship between them. The procedure was carried out by: (1) data reduction, (2) displaying data, (3) drawing conclusions, (4) data validation which includes trust, researcher credibility, transferability of research results, research dependence on data, certainty lies in testing the validity of theoretical or applied findings.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Some of the data analyzed in the article was related to goals and scope, procedures, and the success of applying expressive writing in reducing stress. The following research results had been analyzed:

### **1. Goals and scope**

The goals and scope of the application of expressive writing in reducing stress explain the number of participants, age, gender, origin, and scope of the problem. The number of respondents or subjects in each study varied from 2 to 1090 people. In general, the participants in the reviewed studies ranged in age from 6 to 45 years. This showed that expressive writing could be used in a wide age range. Mostly used for high school and college aged children where cognitively they were already able to compose writing well. Viewed from gender, expressive writing was used for both men and women, although it was not studied more deeply which group this technique is more effective for. While the backgrounds of the subjects in the research studied showed that their backgrounds vary from students, nurses, social workers, psychologists and other professions. In fact, there were studies that examined special populations such as albinos, people with traumatic experiences, and people who had long-term illness or Covid-19. Judging from the country of origin, this study found studies from Indonesia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore.

### **2. Procedure**

The literature reviewed showed the various procedures followed in each study when applying expressive writing. One of the procedures carried out was by filling out a questionnaire at the assessment stage using the perceived stress scale before giving treatment. The intervention provided by the expert was carried out in four general stages, namely: recognition/initial writing, examination writing/exercise, juxtaposition/feedback, and application to the self. Other model interventions were carried out by utilizing the expressive writing therapy module and workbook sheets. Studies that used an experimental approach usually divided the group into a control group and a treatment group. While other designs use pre-test and post-test models. The data analysis conducted was very dependent on the design of the research carried out and, in the study, varies greatly from quantitative and qualitative data. One result that showed a visible change was by giving expressive writing treatment in the form of asking participants to carry out activities to write down experiences or events that are upsetting and stressful. They were then expressively instructed to write continuously for 15 minutes a day for 4 days straight. They received specific instructions on what topics to write about. This process stimulated individual awareness of the problem or emotional dynamics which would then help them to better understand themselves and make plans for change.

### **3. Effectiveness**

Literature review showed that writing expressive sentences could help relieve stress and improve one's concentration and reflexes. Expressive writing was also found to reduce students' academic stress. Several studies had found that there was an effect of expressive writing therapy on children's stress. Furthermore, another interesting finding was that there was a significant difference in the level of academic load felt by junior high school students who wrote expressively and those who wrote non-expressively. Expressive writing therapy could be used to reduce depression, anxiety and stress in adolescents in the process of social rehabilitation. This was because expressive writing could provide relief although it could not reduce the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The shortcoming found in expressive writing was that the counselee must not only be prepared to deal with these emotions, but the therapist must also be able to recognize and properly handle situations where feelings could become overwhelming for the counselee. In a group setting, the overwhelming feeling of expressive writing could affect others in a group that needs to be anticipated.

Based on the research conducted, it creates various data that needs to be discussed further. Explanation of the objectives and scope shows that expressive writing can reduce stress for children, youth, adults, and the elderly, male and female, with an age range of 6 to 45 years with the number of participants ranging from 2-1090 people. While the scope of expressive writing in reducing stress is in the form of stress in children, academic stress, stress due to the impact of Covid-19 stress on anxiety, specific phobias, post-traumatic stress in women victims of domestic violence, lupus, domestic violence and during dating, post-traumatic stress disorder, albino, stress on overseas students, stress on pregnant women, stress on post-traumatic and other traumas. Therefore, expressive writing can be applied with targets at all ages from children to the elderly, and is able to cover the scope of problems from various types of stress.

Expressive writing therapy can be used by all age groups, from children, adolescents to adults. According to White and Murray, writing therapy can be used individually or in groups (White & Murray, 2002). The benefits of using this method are: 1) it makes it easier for people to express their emotions more carefully. 2) people can solve problems from within. 3) people can overcome the negative symptoms of anxiety problems (dizziness, stomach ache, etc.), 4) strengthen self-development.

The procedure for applying expressive writing was found to have no definite procedure, during the intervention both groups and individuals as the procedure had been modified in such a way as needed. According to Wright in (Susilowati & Hasanat, 2011) expressive writing is a writing activity that reflects the client's reflection and expression, either on his own initiative or on the advice of a therapist or researcher. Some researchers use expressive writing as a research intervention method. For example, Von Kleine and Adriel explored expressive writing, the results of which are described within the framework of a model based on cognitive and social psychology theory. Expressive writing reduces thoughts about stressful experiences and frees up sources of information in working memory. Pennebaker found that there is much benefit in writing about highly emotional subjects for 15–20 minutes, regardless of grammar or words (Pennebaker, 1997). This method then is called expressive writing. Paez found that exposure to or exposure to stressful traumatic events manifested in expressive writing procedures resulted in higher levels of physical well-being (eg, fewer visits to medical facilities) (Qonitatin et al., 2011).

The common procedure of expressive writing is conducted about 15 minutes a day, 3 days a week on a deep writing topic. There are some explanations and conclusions about how expressive writing affects physical and psychological conditions, emotional expression, habits that stimulate emotions, language and emotions, the use of emotional sentences in sentences, story construction, cognitive word analysis and writing as a means to change perspectives (Welch et al., 2020).

Various stress problems experienced by individuals has a positive impact. The application of expressive writing is effectively able and successful to overcome various types of stress. Another factor that influences the results is personality type. How to deal with a problem is different for everyone. This is related to the personality type of the participants who take part in the research treatment. According to Eysenck's opinion (Rahmandani et al., 2018), everyone is unique and different depending on their personality.

Pennebaker found that expressive writing was more effective when given to participants with introverted personalities (Pennebaker, 2018). In introverted individuals, when dealing with something, the influential factors are subjective factors that come from their own inner world. When an introverted individual cannot make peace with themselves, it will cause stress, because the conflicts they experienced are not channeled properly. When developmental tasks are not fulfilled, it will certainly be a pressure or a source of stress for them. Maybe their stress will not be seen in subjects with extroverted personality types, but that does not mean they do not feel the stress. Those with introverted personality types tend to try to hold it in themselves and within themselves. Through expressive writing activities, it is even easier for subjects with introverted personality types to express their emotions. Because in the context of writing, individuals are not required to disclose to others. When the subject writes expressively, it is as if this only transfers their thoughts and feelings into a



written narrative. Therefore, expressive writing can be effectively given to subjects with introverted personality types.

Expressive writing for people who feel lonely, alienated and dare to express their thoughts and feelings without considering the judgments of others would be useful. In the finding, expressive writing found to be reassured for women with unstable extroverted personality, although it cannot reduce symptoms of increased stress. Expressive writing therapy is a technique of writing down disturbing experiences. This simple activity can help improve your physical and mental health over time. This therapy is a writing technique that helps escape from emotional confusion in life (Danarti et al., 2018). It reduces stress with written disclosure by inhibiting emotional release dan by helping to organize traumatic memories of oneself, others. It shows that we can bring about more adaptable and integrated schemes that lead the world (Rahmawati, 2014).

The writing process allows them to learn to adjust their emotions in a positive way. Therefore, writing helps the subject adjust their traumatic memory and lead to a more adaptive and integrated self-scheme with other people and the environment (Rahmawati, 2014). According to Bolton, writing explores and expresses thoughts, emotions and spirituality, communicating with oneself and developing thoughts and awareness of events to be its own strengths (Bolton, 2011). Rahmawati's research also showed that stress levels changed before and after treatment in the form of expressive sentences (Rahmawati, 2014). Expressive writing therapy can be used to treat emotional problems. This has been shown to reduce stress levels among the respondents in this study.

## Conclusion

Based on the research that has been done, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) the process of extracting information related to the literature on the application of expressive writing in reducing stress by finding, collecting, studying, and analyzing; (2) the target scope of the application of expressive writing is that expressive writing can reduce various types of stress disorders in children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly who are male and female with an age range of 6 to 45 years and with the number of participants ranging from 2-1090 subjects; (3) the procedure for applying expressive writing in reducing stress is carried out with a certain stage, number of sessions, and duration according to research needs. In carrying out interventions both in groups and individually without using special procedures, the procedures have been modified in such a way as needed; (4) expressive writing is effectively capable and successful in overcoming various types of stress.

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