

A Suggestion for Incorporating Expressive Writing into Elective Courses in Chinese Universities

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential benefits and considerations of implementing expressive writing as an elective course on the mental health of Chinese university students. This paper reviews existing research on expressive writing interventions, including their effectiveness in alleviating emotional distress and promoting subjective well-being. Moreover, the paper discusses the factors influencing the success of expressive writing, including writing style; personal factors; writing topic; length, interval and frequency of writing. Ultimately, the paper provides a potential proposal to improve college students' mental health and coping skills.

KEYWORDS

Expressive writing; Chinese universities; Mental health

1 Introduction

In China, the mental status of college students is awful. According to the survey report on the Mental health status of Chinese College Students in 2022, 21.48% of college students may be at risk of depression (Fang, Wang and Chen, 2023). On the one hand, Chinese college students lack attention to their own emotions, desires and mental health (An and Zhao, 2022). There is a saying in China, "Heaven will entrust a great responsibility to a good man, he must first strain his mind and bones and starve his body and skin" (Chinese Text Project, 2019). It means that if a person wants to succeed, s/he must suffer both physical and psychological hardships. On the other hand, Chinese college students lack the space to express their feelings and desires. The most of Chinese people were taught to "ignore, deny, or prevent the experience and expression of negative emotion" (Eisenberg, Cumberland and Spinrad, 1998, p.242).

University students are in the period of transition from late adolescence to early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). College students in this period are affected by the uncertainty of life, and the pressure of study, employment, interpersonal and academic, leading to be prone to mental problems (Wu et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important for universities to provide instructional courses and supportive services for students to relieve negative emotions and promote mental health.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest that expressive writing should be included in elective courses in Chinese universities, to provide students with an emotional release and promote mental health support. Expressive writing encourages individuals to write about stressful or traumatic events that they experienced or felt through a way of free and non-restrictive language and writing (Pennebaker, 1989; LaCaille et al., 2013), with the function of regulating emotions (Travagin, Margola and Revenson, 2015).

Overall, the mental health problems of Chinese students are growing quickly based on the grounds of the rigorous examinations, intense competition, and the lack of space for emotional expression. The university as a place where students study and social frequently should take measures to foster their mental health. Therefore, the paper suggests Chinese universities incorporate expressive writing into elective courses.

2 Expressive writing research on the mental state of university students in foreign countries

2.1 Depression

The experimental results of Robertson et al. (2019) showed that expressive writing intervention significantly reduced the depressive scores of college students with different levels of depression during the period of six months. Moreover, the scores of post-interventions are affected by the initial symptom and test time, such as one or six months after invention (Robertson et al., 2019). In addition, what should be noted is that the subjects face many different kinds of material or spiritual problems and challenges. The research of Lee et al. (2016) showed similar findings. Writing online offered a fresh way on the expressive writing process (Lee et al., 2016). On the other hand, the research conducted by Niles et al. (2013) yielded a contrary result, demonstrating no appreciable influence on the development of anxiety, depressive symptoms, or somatic symptoms in healthy persons after expressive writing emerged. However, Niles et al. (2013) discovered that emotional expressiveness played a significant role in reducing anxiety. Students with strong emotional expressiveness showed a decrease in anxiety following the intervention experiment, whereas students with

poor emotional expressiveness showed an increase in anxiety (Niles et al., 2013). Therefore, schools should take the emotional expression of students into account when exerting expressive writing in university courses, and it is vital to understand the status of students who may benefit from expressive writing and who may not be suitable for expressive writing.

2.2 Anxiety

A waitlist control design on expressive writing by Robertson et al. (2022) suggests that expressive writing might be an easy and practical solution for college students to reduce their anxiety. Researchers Robertson et al. (2022) also discovered a significant reduction in the anxiety of students from the first day of the expressive writing intervention to the six-month aftercare. In addition, compared with those with lower initial anxiety levels, a greater decline in anxiety can be seen in participants with higher initial anxiety levels (Robertson et al., 2022). Conversely, the findings of Myers, Davis and Chan (2021) indicate that expressive writing and instructional interventions may not be effective in reducing test anxiety or improving test scores in all college classroom settings. The possible reason may be the long interval between every intervention and the lack of assessment of the initial psychological state.

2.3 Stress

Argudo (2021) conducted a mixed method research on expressive writing with students, consisting of two questionnaires and focus groups. The results showed that expressive writing could effectively relieve the academic pressure of students, and the positive effect of expressive writing increased with the progress of the course. Mohamed et al. (2023) conducted expressive writing intervention training for at least 10 minutes a day for 166 college students for 7 consecutive days, and the results illustrated that this intervention reduced the stress level of moderately stressed college students and improved their happiness. At the same time, the participants in this study were mostly from Asian groups, enriching the ethnic centrality of previous studies.

3 Expressive writing research on the mental state of university students in China

Yu and Zhang (2022) conducted a 10-minute expressive writing intervention on college students with high anxiety about tests in China and found that expressive writing intervention could help students with high test anxiety relieve their level of state anxiety when they face high-stress situations. What makes this study special is that he chose subjects with high test anxiety. Yang et al. (2014) took the expressive writing experiment among Chinese undergraduates once a week for eight weeks. And the subjects underwent scale tests one week before and after the experiment. The result showed that the students expressing more emotions and negative events in writing improved their physical, social and especially mental health. Separately, Wong and Mak (2022) found that the people participating in the expressive writing showed more negative influence in the first three days, but their physical symptoms declined in the follow-up tests in 1 month and 3 months. The difference is that Jiang et al. found that writing positive events could significantly improve the positive and decline the negative emotions of college freshmen, while writing negative events with expression has no such effect. The possible reason might be the authors conducted an immediate test without studying and analysing the long-term benefits of expressive writing. The interventions of expressive writing in China focused on positive expressive writing mainly, which might be different from the definition of expressive writing of Pennebaker (1989). However, there are few empirical studies on expressive writing in China, so the results of these writing studies may also provide us with some reference.

4 A meta-analysis of expressive writing

According to Reinhold, Burkner and Holling (2018), expressive writing in the short term may increase the risk of negative emotions. Therefore, in the practice of expressive writing, attention should be paid to the length of implementation time of this intervention to increase the positive effects of expressive writing on individuals. Baikié and Wilhelm (2018) argue that expressive writing has an increased risk of negative emotions within a short period, while in the long term it contributes to mental health and alleviates pre-test depression, among other functions. In addition, Savera, Purwaningrum and Hidayat (2022) also believe that expressive writing can effectively reduce some psychological problems, such as general stress, academic pressure, and depression. In the operation of expressive writing, they suggest that schools should actively modify the expressive intervention to make it more relevant to the student population. However, early meta-analysis results suggest that expressive writing may have less physical and psychological impact on individuals (Mogk et al., 2006).

Although the research results of expressive writing on mental health are inconsistent, it is very low-cost and time-saving (Baddeley and Pennebaker, 2011). If we pay attention to the selection of the target audience and the strictness of the implementation process when implementing such intervention, it may also become an effective means to promote the mental health of college students.

5 The influencing factors of expressive writing

5.1 Writing style

Expressive writing includes typing, handwriting, and finger writing (Friedman and Silver, 2007). Brewin and Lennard (1999) found that compared with typing, writing with pen and paper may lead to higher exposure to negative emotions and more positive perceptions. However, Lee et al. (2016) found a different result, which was that expressive writing intervention on mental health through typing could also have positive effects. In addition, Friedman and Silver (2007) also found that participants expressed more sensitive emotions through finger writing than handwriting. These findings suggest that different modes of expressive writing may lead to different outcomes in terms of emotional exposure and mental health. This emphasises that careful consideration should be given to the choice of writing medium when designing expressive writing activities.

5.2 Personal factors

Many studies have proved that it is beneficial for students with poor initial psychological status after expressive writing training (Robertson et al. 2019; Robertson et al., 2022; Yu and Zhang, 2022). In contrast, students with a good initial mental state may not be able to write expressively, which may even make them worse off (Travagin, Margola and Revenson, 2015). In addition, Lumley (2004) found that expressive writing training may not be appropriate for patients with migraines and alexithymia. Similarly, Niles et al. (2013) also found that patients with poor emotional expressiveness may not be suitable for expressive writing. Therefore, the basic situation of students should be understood before implementing expressive writing training.

5.3 Writing topic

Topics of expressive writing include writing about the painful things in life, as well as writing about the happy things in life (Tarragona, 2019). Shen et al. required the subjects to write the positive feeling everyday during the thirty days, and the mixed research suggested the expressive writing helped decrease test anxiety of high school students (Shen, et al., 2018). In contrast, Yang et al. found the mental health of university students was improved when university students wrote more traumatic event every week after eight weeks (Yang, et al., 2014). Brewin and Lennard (1999) also found that compared with the neutral writing topic group, the negative group was able to expose more negative events and feelings, which is helpful for emotional therapy. In conclusion, expressive writing on both positive and negative topics showed positive value for mental health.

5.4 Length, interval and frequency of writing

The basic paradigm for expressive writing is 3-5 interventions of 15-20 minutes each (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2018). In a study of writing for less than 10 minutes, the final results for emotion regulation were not significant (Yu and Zhang; By 2022). However, it is worth noting that students may experience more negative emotions and feelings in the month leading up to the expressive writing intervention, and the positive effects of expressive writing begin to play a month later (Reinhold, Burkner and Holling, 2018).

As for the length of each writing session, Guo (2022) suggests 1-3 days as a good writing session. Meanwhile, Kross et al. (2011) found that an interval of more than one day is more effective than continuous writing every day. Pennebaker (2010) suggested 3-4 times for writing frequency instead of excessive training. If you do not see any benefit in expressive writing, you should stop the practice or try something else.

6 A proposal to develop expressive writing in Chinese universities

Based on the review of expressive writing and the current situation in China, I suggest that expressive writing be included in elective courses in Chinese universities. There is a suggested teaching plan, which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Expressive Writing Lesson Plan

Expressive Writing Lesson Plan (Simplified version)	
Introduction (15min)	1. Introduce the concept of expressive writing and the potential benefits to mental health
	2. Discuss the cultural background of emotional expression in Chinese society and the importance of finding healthy and safe methods for expression
Practice on expressive writing (20min)	1. Students write freely
Homework(5min)	2. The teachers should encourage the students to express their feelings deeply
Practice every 3 days	
Total lessons:3-4 times	

7 Conclusion

Through the analysis of the social background in China and realistic background, it is acknowledged that the current Chinese mental health system has some shortcomings. This essay emphasizes the importance of promoting and supporting the mental health of college students. An innovative scheme using expressive writing as an intervention measure is presented. In conclusion, the proposal to include expressive writing courses as elective courses in Chinese universities offers new ideas for addressing the mental health challenges of students.

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