

Gratitude Journal, Expressive Writing, and Mindfulness

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Abstract: This study, divided into two sub-studies, was aimed at determining the influence of writing on mindfulness. The first substudy investigated the influence of gratitude journals on mindfulness, while the second substudy sought for the influence of expressive writing on mindfulness. The participants were 72 students (first substudy) and 23 students (second substudy). Both substudies involved students grouped in the experimental group (who received treatment writing) and the control group who did not receive the treatment. The results of statistical tests in the first substudy showed that there was no effect of writing gratitude journal on mindfulness, while the results of statistical tests in the second substudy indicated that the score of the group with expressive writing treatment was higher than that without the treatment. There was no significant influence of gratitude journal on mindfulness. Similarly, expressive writing showed no significant influence on mindfulness. However, there was a moderate effect size in participants who received expressive writing treatment, which needed further study involving larger number of samples. Researchers can also then consider the characteristics of the sample to be studied (not just students) so as to get a broader picture

1 INTRODUCTION

It is known that period of study is a stressful time, where students often face personal, social, academic, economic stress, and so on in various areas of life so that they are prone to stress (Mutalik et al. 2016). Hunt & Eisenberg, (2010) revealed that there is an increase in the number of students at various colleges experiencing mental health problems. This is because students face both academic and non-academic pressures during their college experience—similarly, the students of psychology, who in their daily life can not escape from various kinds of forces. Various studies across the globe have emphasised that students undertaking professional courses, are subjected to higher stress (Waghachavare et al. 2013).

The students of the psychology faculty are classified as psychology scientists who, after their graduation, have a certain authority to provide psychological services that aim to make efforts to prevent, develop, and solve psychological problems (HIMPSI 2010). The students of the faculty of psychology are required to be able to help while providing alternative problem solving for the people

who need their expertise (Fitrianingrum 2009). One of the skills required by psychology students is the ability to manage their own stress first before connecting with the client they are about to face. This is because if the students of the faculty of psychology have not solved their personal problems first, it will be difficult for them to deal with other people's problems.

Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when an individual perceives that the demands exceed the individual's personal abilities (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). When the stress of the individual is experienced, the individual will have the urge to reduce the perceived stress level. Each individual has a different way of reducing the level of stress experienced. Some individuals focus on problem-solving coping to lower stress levels, but some others focus on processing their emotions to reduce the level of stress experienced.

One of the strategies that can be done to process emotions by individuals is by overflowing the emotions they bear through spoken or written words when experiencing high stress. Susilowati & Hasanat (2015) stated that writing emotional experiences can

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reduce negative emotions possessed by individuals. It is also in line with a research conducted by Pennebaker & Chung (2007) that there was a decrease in negative emotions in students who were asked to write down their emotional experiences. Writing this emotional experience is also known as expressive writing. In addition to expressive writing, one way to cope with stress is to create a gratitude journal. Gratitude is defined as a distinctive pleasant feeling—in the form of gratitude, or gratitude—that arises when receiving kindness (kindness, compassion, love), benefits, or altruistic help from others—especially things that are not actually worthy of acceptance, which are things that are not caused by self-effort (Emmons and McCullough 2004). In recent years, research has shown that gratitude is strongly associated with some aspects of well-being and mental health (Watkins, Uher, and Pichinevskiy 2015), and clinical interventions have been developed to improve gratitude as a way to foster positive function, improve well-being, and decrease psychological disorders (Emmons and McCullough 2003).

In addition, some studies have found gratitude practices, such as creating gratitude journals that can improve one's happiness and positive mood. Gratitude journal or counting blessings is an intervention designed to improve gratitude (Emmons and McCullough 2003). This activity involves writing about five things to be grateful for every day or every week. In recent years, many studies have tested the benefits of gratitude in children and adolescents, for example, older teens will be more interested in and satisfied with their school life, more generous and helpful, and more socially integrated. Other studies suggested that gratitude journaling in the classroom changed the mood of the students. It is said that by improving students' subjective well-being, accompanied by an increase in positive emotions, students are expected to feel happier and not feel depressed in their college life (Christanto 2017).

Although many studies stated that gratitude can improve a person's quality of life, it can not always improve life satisfaction because when a person is unaware of an emotional state, then he can show the thought and action of prototypes caused by a particular emotional state (Lambie and Marcel 2002). This is because their awareness of themselves is not fully activated (Bargh and Chartrand 1999). On the contrary, expressive writing gives a person the opportunity to be more 'open' to his emotional state. Bishop et al. (2004) describes mindfulness as a process to bring quality attention at any time at a time

from an experience. There are two components in operational mindfulness, namely (1) maintaining attention to the current experience and (2) being an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance of one's experience. Mindfulness is an approach to raise awareness and respond to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavior. Based on this, mindfulness can bridge relationships related to gratitude and expressive writing, and life satisfaction (Poon, Alvin; Danoff-Burg 2011). However, as far as the researchers know, there has not been much research on these subjects, so the researchers are interested in researching more on gratitude journal, expressive writing, and mindfulness.

2 METHODS (AND MATERIALS)

The research question of this study was whether gratitude journaling and expressive writing influenced mindfulness. The study consisted of 2 substudies using experimental methods. Participants were students, who joined those substudies voluntarily. Participants in this study were students who experienced stresses with moderate or high degrees. The first study, involving 72 students who were grouped into experimental and control groups (38 students per group, using randomization for categorizing to each group). The students in the experimental group were asked to write down the positive things that happened in their life (gratitude journal), namely: 1) what to be grateful for that day, 2) what to expect for the next day, and 3) random questions on positive things in their life (questions varied). Journaling was committed for two weeks, with each week having 3 times of the practice. This refers to a study from (Lyubomirsky & Layous 2013) saying that writing a gratitude journal would be more effectively done once a week than done every day.

The second substudy, involving 23 students who were also grouped into experimental and control groups (with 12 students included into experimental and 11 students included into control group). Students in the experimental group were asked to write emotional experiences for 25-30 minutes a day for 4x. In this writing, students did not need to pay attention to writing structure but were expected to expand and explore their deepest experiences and emotions. The concern of the researchers was the use of words containing negative as well as positive emotional content. In addition, in the first and second study, the participants from both groups (experiments and controls) should fill out a State Mindfulness

Questionnaire (SMS) at the end of the session to find out how their mindfulness condition after getting the treatment (for the experimental group).

SMS is a standard questionnaire compiled by Tanay & Bernstein (2020), consisting of 21 items, with five answer options: not at all, slightly describing, quite describing, illustrating a lot, and strongly describing the participants. This measuring instrument has two factors, namely state mindfulness of mind with Pearson validity value ranging from 0.499-0.815 and state mindfulness of body with Pearson validity value ranging from 0.621-0.839. The reliability obtained with alpha Cronbach is 0.755.

The study results were processed using JASP software (Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program), a free statistical analysis software (open-source) created by the Department of Psychological Methods, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Table 1: Substudy 1. Experimental group.

Gender	Percentage (amount)
Male	10,53% (4)
Female	89,47 (34)

Table 2: Substudy 1. Control group.

Gender	Percentage (amount)
Male	5,89% (2)
Female	94,12% (32)

Based on the description in the table 1 and 2, in the study 1, majority of participants were female (89.4% from the experimental group and 94.12% from the control group).

Table 3: Substudy 2. Experimental group.

Gender	Percentage (amount)
Male	25% (3)
Female	75% (9)

Table 4: Substudy 2. Control group.

Gender	Percentage (amount)
Male	0% (0)
Female	100% (11)

Based on the description in the table 3 and 4, in the substudy 2 majority of participants were female (75% experimental group and 100% control group).

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 5: Substudy 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mindfulness	
	Experimental	Control
Valid	38	34
Mean	67.921	69.294
Std. Deviation	5.697	11.074
Minimum	55.000	49.000
Maximum	80.000	91.000

Table 6: Independent samples T-test.

	T	df	P	Cohen's d
mindfulness	-0.650	48.073	0.519	-0.156

Table 7: Test of normality (Shapiro-Wilk).

		W	P
Mindfulness	Experimental	0.984	0.841
	Control	0.977	0.685

Note. Significant results suggest a deviation from normality.

Table 8: Test of equality of variance (Lavene's).

	F	df	P
Mindfulness	13.838	1	< .001

The tables 7 and 8 show that the research data in study 1 are normal ($p > 0.05$) but not of equal invariance ($p < 0.001$), therefore independent sample t-test (welch's t-test) is used Ahad & Yahaya (2014). As a result, there is no effect of gratitude journaling on mindfulness. This is in line with the mean between experimental groups and controls, which are not significantly different.

Table 9: Substudy 2. Descriptive statistics.

	Mindfulness	
	Experimental	Control
Valid	12	11
Mean	78.167	72.091
Std. Deviation	10.760	5.319
Minimum	56.000	62.000
Maximum	98.000	82.000

Table 10: Independent samples T-test.

	t	Df	p	Cohen's d
Score	1.691	1	0.106	0.706

Table 11: Test of normality (Shapiro-Wilk).

		W	p
Score	Experimental	0.975	0.955
	Control	0.947	0.610

Note. Significant results suggest a deviation from normality.

Table 12: Test of equality of variances (Lavene's).

	F	f	P
Score	2.873	1	0.105

The tables 11 and 12 show that the research data in study 2 are classified as normal ($p > 0.05$) and of equal invariance ($p > 0.05$), therefore an independent sample t-test (student t-test) is used (Ahad and Yahaya 2014). As a result, there is no expressive writing effect on mindfulness. However, the effect size indicates 0.706 (Cohen's d), which falls into the moderate category. This is in line with the mean of a larger experimental group than the control group ($78,167 > 72,091$).

Study 1 did not show the effect of gratitude on mindfulness. Both the experimental and control groups got relatively similar averages. This is in line with the exposure put forward by Lyubomirsky & Layous (2013), which stated that gratitude intervention has an unstable effect. Research Cregg & Cheavens (2021) revealed that even if there is a change in well-being by using gratitude intervention, it is just a placebo effect. Cregg & Cheavens (2021) conducted a meta-analysis and stated that gratitude intervention only has a small effect on symptoms of depression and anxiety. Gratitude is associated with positively interpreting several stimuli and life events, which is contrary to selective attention aimed negatively at the self, the world, and the future, which is a character of depression and anxiety. Although the researchers did not conduct research related to depression and anxiety, the results of some of the above researchers need to be a record of the effectiveness of gratitude journal.

Study 2 found almost the same result, stating that expressive writing had no effect on mindfulness. Nonetheless, it was interesting that the average mindfulness of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group and the effect size test (Cohen's d) stated that there were moderate effects. Ericson (2015) stated that interventions that can be administered over the internet at this low cost show that it can prevent and reduce physical and emotional symptoms. Expressive writing may provide benefits if participants experience a lower negative affectivity after making their writing. This is in line with several

studies which stated that expressive writing can improve the people's well being (Merz, Fox, and Malcarne 2014).

Mindfulness accepts thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise from consciousness in the present without giving judgment (Neff and Dahm 2015). In other words, according to the researchers, mindfulness encourages a person to accept reality for what it is, both negative and positive. This is in line with expressive writing, where participants are asked to write down what they feel, which is not always a form of negative emotion. Thus, expressive writing encourages participants to see reality as it is, and by releasing those emotions, participants avoid rumination and increased mindfulness. Rumination is defined as focusing attention on a negative emotional state, such as intrusive thinking of distressing events, looking for the meaning of negative things, and thinking about how to change the negative. Mindfulness can 'solve' that thought, which emphasizes the awareness of the present moment (Deyo et al. 2009).

According to this finding, there is a difference in focus between expressive writing and gratitude journal, that has an impact on the difference in the results between substudy 1 and substudy 2. When expressive writing emphasizes the disclosure of what is felt, both negative and positive, gratitude journal emphasizes more on the disclosure of positive affect (grateful). This may make the negative affect that participants actually feel unexpressed, which ultimately is not resolved. In this case, the participants did not 'learn' how to receive this negative affect. This is in line with Pennebaker & Chung (2007), who stated that expressive writing is thought to be helpful to express suppressed thoughts, emotions and give an opportunity for exposure to unpleasant emotions. The process of expressive writing also involves labeling emotions related to an unpleasant event which allows one to assign the event meaning and accommodate it into one's existing cognitive scheme, and thus let go of unresolved negative emotions. This is different from gratitude journal which is focusing on positive aspects of lives rather than allowing to be overwhelmed by negative events. This makes the mindfulness of the participants not improve. Nonetheless, this argument still needs further study. The expressive writing participants in this study are still very limited, so it needs further study on how it effects on larger samples.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Writing in journals has no impact on increasing mindfulness. However, there was a moderate effect size in participants who received expressive writing treatment, which needed further study involving larger samples. Future studies can also consider the characteristics of the sample to be studied (not just students) so as to get a broader picture.

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