



Evaluating Expressive Writing

Preliminary Findings

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**Thank you for placing me on this course.
It's been so helpful for my writing and mental health.**

| Executive Summary

This pilot project was a collaboration between Verbal and the Royal Literary Fund. It involved running a series of facilitated expressive writing workshops for older adults with the aim of reducing loneliness, improving self-expression, and improving mental wellbeing.

Expressive writing is a form of therapeutic writing that helps someone to express their thoughts and feelings. Facilitated writing can take several forms such as taking place in a group or being guided by a facilitator.

A review published by the National Health Service (2016) identified a lack of research exploring the facilitated expressive writing model, leaving practitioners unsure as to which components of the model are most influential to wellbeing. This pilot aimed to contribute to existing research on the topic and provide the foundation for further research.

This programme involved four online sessions. We used end-of-programme feedback questions to explore which aspects of the facilitated expressive writing model were most influential to wellbeing, such as feeling supported by the facilitator and feeling close to the group.

While the programme began with 15 participants, three completed all paperwork necessary for data analysis. Our preliminary findings showed that mental wellbeing and feelings of loneliness significantly improved for all participants with completed paperwork.

Feedback from the programme was very positive, with participants noting the support provided by the facilitators and sharing the benefits the programme had on their mental health. When evaluating the facilitated expressive writing model, we found that feeling supported by facilitators had the strongest relationship with wellbeing and loneliness, but that each component of the model also had a relationship with at least one aspect of wellbeing or loneliness.

While more research is needed, these early findings support the positive impact of a facilitator for expressive writing and demonstrate the range of mental health benefits that the facilitated expressive writing model can have. There is significant scope for further research including investigating the mode of delivery (such as face-to-face sessions) and further exploring the co-facilitation model and the influence of a facilitator with lived experience of the subject material.

| Introduction

Expressive writing is a form of therapeutic writing that helps a person to express their thoughts and feelings. Expressive writing acts as a journey of self-exploration and self-expression, allowing someone to explore and process their emotions while gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and their life experiences.

While the format of expressive writing can vary in multiple ways (such as alone or in a group), a key way in which it can differ involves the use of a facilitator. Facilitated expressive writing uses an additional person, known as a facilitator, to provide additional support and guidance to the person or group.

In 2016, the National Health Service (NHS) published a review of various types of expressive writing models with the aim of evaluating their effectiveness. This review identified a clear lack of research on facilitated expressive writing, with research instead preferring to use unfacilitated expressive writing models. In lieu of evidence, the authors expressed their frustration at a lack of research evaluating the additional complexities of the expressive writing model. To directly quote the authors:

“

Which has a bigger influence on outcomes in facilitated writing, the group, the facilitator or the writing technique? How and why?

Nyssen et al., 2016

To aid researchers' desires to understand more about the facilitated expressive writing model, we conducted a four-week pilot study of a facilitated expressive writing programme delivered online to older adults.

| Methods

Four sessions of a facilitated expressive writing workshop were delivered via Zoom between February-March 2023 with the aim of reducing loneliness, improving wellbeing and promoting self-expression in older adults. Author Bernie McGill was the primary facilitator of each session, while Audrey Slater co-facilitated sessions to offer additional support and insight. A co-facilitator with lived experience of loneliness was included due to the programme involving older adults with experiences of spousal loss and isolation. A representative from Verbal's Literature Team was also present during session delivery.

The sessions provided participants with an opportunity to reflect and write in a safe, friendly and confidential atmosphere which fostered personal awareness and wellbeing. The programme was open to writers of all experience levels as they would be guided by a combination of literature, writing prompts and conversations with others.

At each session, the facilitator/s read aloud a short piece of published writing (poetry or prose) and invited participants to talk about how the words impacted them. These published works were selected by Verbal's Literature Team, and the discussion breaks and their questions were developed by Verbal's Psychology Team to encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. Short writing prompts and exercises were then offered to help them write about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Participants were invited to share their writing with the group if they felt comfortable doing so.

Questionnaires were emailed to participants before and after taking part in the workshop, with reminder emails being sent to those who did not provide a response. Both the before and after questionnaires contained the same questions on mental health, self-expression and loneliness to gauge the programme's impact on wellbeing. The questionnaire emailed to participants after taking part contained additional questions designed to evaluate the facilitated expressive writing model. Descriptions of all questions asked in the questionnaires are available below:



WHO-5 Well-Being Index

This is a five-item measure designed to assess psychological wellbeing and quality of life (Bech, 2004). High scores are indicative of positive wellbeing and a high quality of life. The WHO-5 has been used in a range of studies worldwide and is a useful measure for recognising symptoms of depression in older people (Topp, Østergaard, Søndergaard, & Bech, 2015).



Self-Expression

Two questions on self-expression were suggested, implemented and used by the Royal Literary Fund. These questions were: I can use words to express what I think; I can use words to express how I feel.



De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale

This scale is designed to measure two separate components of loneliness: emotional isolation and social isolation (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2010). The scale was deliberately chosen for these subscales as while feelings of social isolation can change from the group aspect of the programme, emotional isolation could theoretically change through self-exploration and self-expression alongside others.



Project Evaluation

Feedback questions were developed to assess components of the facilitated expressive writing model that the NHS review wished for further insight on. These questions asked participants: how inspired they were by writing prompts; how inspired they were by literature; whether they enjoyed group discussions; whether they felt supported by facilitators; whether they felt connected to other group members; and whether they enjoyed being able to express their feelings during discussions and share their writing with others.

Wellbeing, self-expression, and loneliness data were analysed via t-tests to identify differences in scores before and after taking part in the workshop. Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were used to explore the facilitated expressive writing model, particularly which components of the model were most impactful to mental wellbeing.

Statistical significance was explored when analysing data. Statistical significance refers to the probability that a finding happened due to a specific cause, most likely the result of the programme. In alignment with established guidelines, results were considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$. This means that we can be at least 95% sure that a finding was not due to chance or coincidence.

Results: Wellbeing

Fifteen participants signed up to take part in the expressive writing programme. As session delivery took place online, a group of five participants who had difficulties using technology initially took part together in the same room. Unfortunately, this group did not return after the first week due to logistical difficulties.

Eight participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire. Despite the use of email reminders, post-programme questionnaires were completed by only three participants. The findings for these participants can be viewed below.



Mental Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing **significantly improved in all participants** who completed both questionnaires ($t=5.50$, $p=.016$). Wellbeing scores were on average **25% higher** after taking part in the workshops.



Self-Expression

After taking part in facilitated expressive writing, **33% of participants felt more confident expressing themselves**. The questions on self-expression proposed by the Royal Literary Fund demonstrated **excellent reliability** in the current study ($\alpha=0.91$), supporting their use in future iterations of the study.



Loneliness

Feelings of emotional loneliness **significantly reduced in all participants** who completed both questionnaires ($t=3.50$, $p=.036$); these feelings **decreased by 21%** after taking part. However, no changes were identified for feelings of social isolation.



Project Evaluation

All participants felt inspired by writing prompts, felt inspired by literature, felt supported by the facilitators, felt connected to other group members, and enjoyed being able to share their own writing.

67% of participants enjoyed being able to discuss things with others and enjoyed being able to share their thoughts and feelings.

When asked what their **favourite aspect of the programme** was, participants responded:

“

I felt all the facilitators did a great job of creating a safe space where we could play with words and discuss private thoughts. I thought all the participants were very inspiring and also generous with their comments about other people's work. Bernie is fabulous - so calming and so insightful and encouraging. More please!

“

I thought Bernie was so patient and accepting of our work. I felt confident about sharing it. I would just like to say that I enjoyed it and would love to repeat the experience.”

“

I enjoyed the use of poetry in particular and the original ways in which it was used to encourage writing.

When participants were asked if there was anything that they would **change about the programme**, we received the following responses:

“

No. They were excellent. Thank you for placing me on this course. It's been so helpful for my writing and mental health, touching base with such a creative and supportive group.

“

It would be nice to do face to face workshops, but the fact that it was on Zoom allowed people from all areas to take part. Made it more interesting.

“

Have more!

Results: Model Evaluation

End-of-programme feedback was compared with wellbeing and loneliness scores to understand which aspects of the model were most influential to wellbeing. Our findings can be viewed below:

Most Influential for Mental Wellbeing

Feeling supported by facilitators

Inspired by writing prompts

Inspired by literature

Sharing their writing

Most Influential for Emotional Loneliness

Inspired by literature

Sharing their writing

Most Influential for Social Isolation

Feeling supported by facilitators

Inspired by writing prompts

Enjoying group discussion

Bonding with group members

Expressing their feelings

| Discussion

This four-week programme aimed to use facilitated expressive writing as a way to improve wellbeing and reduce loneliness in a cohort of older adults.

We achieved our aim in significantly improving mental wellbeing and reducing feelings of emotional loneliness in all participants who completed both sets of psychological evaluations. These findings support the power of facilitated expressive writing in improving wellbeing and helping others not only feel more connected to others, but to help participants understand more about themselves and be able to express themselves.

We also used a combination of wellbeing scores and feedback questions to assess which components of the facilitated expressive writing model were most influential to wellbeing and loneliness. Our findings were surprising as every aspect of the model related to at least one component of mental wellbeing and loneliness. However, the strong relationships between facilitator support and both mental wellbeing and social isolation reinforce the additional benefits that a facilitator can bring to expressive writing. While more data are needed for further analyses, our initial findings suggest that the range of ways facilitated expressive writing can help a person (inspiring them, supporting them, introducing them to others etc.) can indeed provide a varied range of mental health benefits.

We found fewer improvements in social isolation than in emotional loneliness. This finding may be due to the programme taking place online, potentially providing fewer opportunities for discussion and conversation amongst group members. The online aspect was commented on by one participant who felt that it would be “nice” for the programme to be conducted in a face-to-face setting. Future facilitated expressive writing groups could benefit from a face-to-face programme as our previous research shows that groups who meet for Verbal’s programmes commonly stay in touch and attend activities together afterwards (Verbal, 2022).

A limitation of our preliminary findings is the low number of participants who completed both pre- and post-programme questionnaires. This limitation could be improved with offline programme delivery as data collection can be incorporated into the sessions themselves rather than asking people to volunteer their time afterwards. This could be beneficial in gaining more data to increase our statistical power and to allow for more complex statistical analyses such as Regression analyses to evaluate the model. The opportunity to gather more data also introduces the opportunity to evaluate further components of the model, such as the value of adding a co-facilitator with lived experience of the subject material.

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