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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING IN REDUCING ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITAS FORT DE KOCK

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing academic stress among first-year students of the Physiotherapy Study Program at Fort De Kock University. The study employed a quantitative approach using an experimental study design with a posttest-only control group design. A total of 20 students participated in the study and were divided into two groups, consisting of 10 students in the experimental group and 10 students in the control group. The experimental group received an expressive writing intervention conducted over four consecutive days, while the control group did not receive any intervention. Academic stress was measured using the Indonesian version of the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA). Data were analyzed using an independent sample t-test with the assistance of Jamovi software. The results showed a statistically significant difference in academic stress levels between the experimental and control groups after the intervention, with a significance value of $p = 0.040$ ($p < 0.05$). The experimental group demonstrated lower academic stress scores compared to the control group. In addition, the effect size analysis showed a Cohen's d value of 0.990, indicating a large effect. These findings suggest that expressive writing is effective in reducing academic stress among first-year university students. Therefore, expressive writing can be considered a practical, low-cost, and accessible psychological intervention to support students in managing academic stress during the transition to higher education.

Keywords: *Expressive Writing;, Academic Stress; University Students*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has undergone considerable change in recent decades, marked by increasingly independent and technology-based learning systems and rising expectations for students' adaptability and psychological readiness (Wilks, 2008). Within this environment, students' mental health has become an essential factor for academic success, as students with better psychological well-being tend to manage academic pressure more effectively and

demonstrate stronger academic performance and adaptability than those experiencing prolonged psychological distress (Wilks, 2008).

One form of psychological pressure commonly experienced by university students in higher education is academic stress. Academic stress arises when students perceive academic demands as exceeding their ability to cope with them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This condition may be influenced by various factors, including academic workload, pressure to achieve high academic performance, time management difficulties, academic competition, and the need to adapt to new learning systems (Govaerts & Grégoire, 2004; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Academic stress remains a substantial concern among university students, particularly within health-related study programs where workload and clinical-skill demands are high (Djoar & Anggarani, 2024; Nappoe & Triwahyuni, 2025). This pattern is consistent with global trends, as a recent systematic review of the biological and educational literature reported an academic stress prevalence of 51.1% among university students, with workload, time constraints, and academic difficulties identified as the main stressors ((Brata et al., 2025).

First-year students are considered one of the groups most vulnerable to academic stress due to the transition from secondary education to higher education, which requires significant academic and social adjustment (Misra & Castillo, 2004). During this transition period, students are required to adapt to new learning systems, increased academic demands, broader social environments, and greater personal responsibility in managing academic activities. Failure to adapt effectively to these changes may increase students' susceptibility to academic stress.

Several studies in Indonesia have also highlighted the high prevalence of academic stress among first-year students. Nappoe & Triwahyuni (2025) found that first-year nursing students experienced high levels of academic stress, with 60% classified in the severe-to-very-severe category, largely marked by physiological symptoms such as fatigue and excessive sweating. Similarly, reported that first-year nursing students at Universitas Andalas experienced considerable academic stress linked to their self-efficacy. Dewi et al. (2024) reported that the majority of first-year students experienced moderate to high levels of academic stress, while Nafi & Febrina (2025) found that first-year students demonstrated significantly higher levels of academic stress compared to senior students. These national findings are also consistent with international evidence: first year health sciences students in Chile (Granada-Granada et al., 2025) and first-year students in Canada (Nordstokke & Hindes, 2025) have all shown similar vulnerability to academic stress during the early stages of higher education.

High levels of academic stress are influenced by various factors, including adjustment difficulties, academic workload, achievement pressure, and environmental and demographic factors (Govaerts & Grégoire, 2004). This condition represents a significant challenge in efforts to improve the quality of human resources, considering that university students are expected to become individuals who are capable of facing global changes and future workforce competition. Moreover, academic stress has been associated with decreased concentration, reduced academic motivation, emotional disturbances, and an increased risk of burnout among university students (Credé & Niehorster, 2012)

Academic stress-related problems were also identified among students at Fort De Kock University, Bukittinggi. Based on preliminary observations conducted among university students, several first-year

students reported difficulties in adapting to academic demands in higher education. Students described experiencing excessive academic assignments, intensive lecture schedules, difficulties in understanding course materials, and pressure to achieve satisfactory academic performance. These findings indicate the presence of academic stress, which, if not properly managed, may negatively affect students' academic performance and psychological well-being.

Academic stress experienced by university students, if not properly managed, may negatively affect both mental health and academic performance. Therefore, effective psychological interventions are needed to help students cope with the academic pressures they experience. One intervention that can be applied is expressive writing. *Pennebaker & Beall (1986)* described expressive writing as a reflective writing activity in which individuals express their deepest emotions, thoughts, and personal experiences. This technique allows individuals to disclose emotions that have been suppressed, thereby facilitating emotional regulation and reducing psychological distress. Pennebaker (1997) further explained that expressive writing helps individuals process emotional experiences more adaptively, which may contribute to improved psychological well-being.

Expressive writing is considered a simple, flexible, and easily implemented intervention within higher education settings. This technique can be conducted independently without requiring specialized facilities, making it a potentially effective psychological intervention for helping students manage academic stress. In addition, *expressive writing* is particularly relevant for first-year students who are undergoing academic and social adjustment during the transition to university life.

Several previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing academic stress among students. Nursolehah & Rahmiati (2022) ound a significant effect of expressive writing on reducing academic stress among university students. Similiarly, Maulida & Fitriyani (2023) reported significant differences in academic stress levels between students who received the expressive writing intervention and those in the control group. Furthermore, Safithry & Dewi (2020) reported a reduction in academic stress scores following the implementation of expressive writing therapy, while Yuhenita & Kurniati (2022) also found that expressive writing reduced students' academic stress levels. These findings indicate that *expressive writing* has considerable potential as a psychological intervention to help individuals manage academic pressure.

Despite these findings, studies examining the effectiveness of expressive writing among first-year university students remain limited. Most previous studies on expressive writing and academic stress were conducted among secondary-school students (Safithry & Dewi, 2020; Yuhenita & Kurniati, 2022) or final-year/senior university students (Maulida & Fitriyani, 2023; Ramadhani, 2025), rather than first-year students facing the specific stressors of academic transition. Another limitation, several of these studies used single-group pretest posttest designs without a comparison group (Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022; Safithry & Dewi, 2020; Yuhenita & Kurniati, 2022), which limits the ability to distinguish intervention effects from the effects of time or repeated measurement. Within Indonesia, academic stress has been documented among students in health-professional programs including physiotherapy(Djoar & Anggarani, 2024), yet no controlled study appears to have evaluated expressive writing as an intervention within this population. This

combination of gaps (a controlled, randomized design; a first-year student population; and a health-professional (Physiotherapy) education setting in Indonesia) has not been widely examined in the expressive writing literature. The present study addresses this gap by using stratified random allocation based on pretest stress levels to form the experimental and control groups, thereby strengthening the assumption of baseline comparability between groups.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing academic stress among first-year students at Fort De Kock University. This study is expected to contribute to the development of effective psychological interventions that support students' mental health and improve the quality of human resources in the era of global change.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach using an experimental study design with a posttest-only control group design. This design was used to determine the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing academic stress by comparing academic stress scores between the experimental group and the control group after the intervention was administered. The study was conducted in January 2026 at Universitas Fort De Kock, Bukittinggi. The population of this study consisted of students at Fort De Kock University.

The sample included 20 first-year students from the Physiotherapy Study Program at Universitas Fort De Kock. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria consisting of active first-semester students, willingness to participate in the study, and experiencing academic pressure during the learning process.

All 20 participants completed a pretest using the academic stress scale. Based on their pretest scores, participants were stratified into three stress-level categories (low, moderate, and high). Within each stratum, participants were then randomly allocated in equal proportion to the experimental group (n = 10) and the control group (n = 10). This stratified random allocation procedure was used to strengthen the comparability of academic stress levels between the two groups prior to the intervention.

The research instrument used was the Indonesian version of the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), measuring academic stress based on five aspects: pressure from study, workload, worry about grades, self-expectation, and despondency, using a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The experimental group received the expressive writing intervention for four consecutive days. During each session, participants were instructed to write freely and reflectively about their deepest thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the academic pressures they faced, for approximately 15–20 minutes. The control group did not receive the expressive writing intervention during the study period.

After the intervention was completed, both groups were given a posttest using the academic stress scale. Data were analyzed using Jamovi software. A normality test was first conducted to determine the distribution of the data; if normally distributed, the independent-samples t-test was used, and the Mann-Whitney test otherwise. In addition to significance values, mean differences, 95% confidence intervals, and effect sizes (Cohen's d, with 95% confidence intervals) were calculated to allow a more complete and cautious interpretation of the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of expressive writing in

reducing academic stress among first-year students of the Physiotherapy Study Program at Fort De Kock University. The study involved 20 participants who were divided into two groups, consisting of 10 students in the experimental group and 10 students in the control group.

Before hypothesis testing was conducted, assumption tests including normality and homogeneity tests were performed. The results of the Shapiro–Wilk normality test showed a significance value of 0.194 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the data were normally distributed. Furthermore, the Levene's Test for homogeneity revealed a significance value of 0.800 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the variance between groups was homogeneous.

Table 1. Results of Normality and Homogeneity Tests

Assumption Test	Sig. Value	Description
Shapiro–Wilk	0.194	Normally distributed data
Levene's Test	0.800	Homogeneous variance

After fulfilling the assumption tests, data analysis was continued using an independent sample t-test, with 95% confidence interval, and the effect size (Cohen's d) with its own 95% confidence interval, to determine differences in academic stress levels between the experimental and control groups

Table 2. Results of Independent Sample t-test

					95% Confidence Interval				95% Confidence Interval	
Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE	Lower	Upper		Effect Size	Lower	Upper
2.21	18	0.04	7.8	3.52	0.4	15.2	Cohen's d	0.99	0.04	1.91

Note. H_a $\mu_{2\,KK} \neq \mu_{1\,KE}$

The results of the independent sample t-test showed a significance value of 0.040 ($p < 0.05$), with mean difference 7.80, indicating a significant difference in academic stress levels between the experimental and control groups after the expressive writing intervention was administered.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Posttest Scores

Group	N	Mean	SD
Control	10	55.8	7.22
Experimental	10	48.0	8.49

Based on the descriptive analysis, the mean academic stress score in the control group was 55.8, while the experimental group had a lower mean score of 48.0. These findings indicate that students in the experimental group experienced lower levels of academic stress compared to those in the control group after receiving the expressive writing intervention. In addition, The effect size analysis showed Cohen's d = 0.99, 95%

CI [0.04, 1.91], classified as a large effect by conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988). However, the wide confidence interval, ranging from near-negligible to nearly 2.0, reflects considerable uncertainty due to the small sample, so the point estimate should be read as an indication of a plausible range rather than a precise value.

Because participants were stratified by pretest stress level prior to random allocation, the two groups can reasonably be assumed to have had comparable baseline academic stress levels. Nonetheless, as only posttest scores were formally analyzed, the results reported here reflect a statistically significant between-group difference in stress levels following the intervention, rather than a directly measured within-person reduction in stress from a known baseline.

DISCUSSION

This study found a statistically significant difference in posttest academic stress scores between first-year Physiotherapy students who received the expressive writing intervention and those in the control group, with the experimental group reporting lower scores (M = 48.0, SD = 8.49) than the control group (M = 55.8, SD = 7.22); mean difference = 7.80, 95% CI [0.4, 15.2], d = 0.99, 95% CI [0.04, 1.91]. Because participants were stratified by pretest stress level before being randomly allocated to groups, the two groups can reasonably be assumed to have been comparable in academic stress at baseline. Even so, as only posttest scores were formally analyzed, this finding is best interpreted as evidence of a between-group difference following the intervention that is consistent with an effect of expressive writing, rather than a directly documented within-person reduction in stress.

The findings of this study support the theory proposed by Pennebaker and Beall (1986), which states that *expressive writing* actively suppressing thoughts and feelings about a stressful experience requires sustained cognitive and physiological effort, and that this inhibition itself functions as a chronic, low-grade stressor. Expressive writing is theorized to interrupt this process by providing a structured opportunity for emotional disclosure, thereby reducing the ongoing effort associated with inhibition (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012). Beyond disinhibition, subsequent theoretical development has emphasized cognitive processing as a complementary mechanism: repeatedly writing about a stressor prompts individuals to organize fragmented thoughts and emotions into a coherent narrative, which facilitates meaning-making and a more adaptive appraisal of the stressor (Pennebaker, 1997). From an emotion-regulation perspective, this process of narrative construction can be understood as a form of cognitive reappraisal, rather than avoiding or suppressing academic-stress-related emotions, students who engage in expressive writing are prompted to label, examine, and reinterpret these emotions, a strategy generally associated with lower subjective and physiological distress than avoidance-based regulation. These mechanisms suggest a plausible four-step pathway through which expressive writing may have contributed to lower academic stress scores in the experimental group: (1) disclosure of previously suppressed academic-stress-related emotions, (2) engagement in emotion regulation through cognitive reappraisal rather than avoidance, (3) organization of stressful academic experiences into a more coherent narrative, and (4), as a downstream consequence, reduced psychological distress. It should be emphasized that the present study did not directly measure these underlying processes, so this explanation should be regarded as a plausible theoretical account consistent with

the observed group difference, rather than a mechanism verified within this study.

It is also worth situating the size of the observed effect within the broader expressive-writing literature. It is also worth situating the size of the observed effect within the broader expressive-writing literature.

Frattaroli (2006) meta-analysis of 146 randomized controlled trials found an average effect of experimental disclosure on psychological and physical health outcomes equivalent to approximately d = 0.15, considerably smaller than the d = 0.99 point estimate obtained here. This discrepancy, together with the small sample size and wide confidence interval reported above, suggests that the true effect of expressive writing on academic stress in this population most likely lies somewhere between the modest effects typically reported in broader meta-analytic syntheses and the large point estimate observed in this study.Frattaroli (2006) also found that expressive-writing effects tended to be stronger when writing sessions exceeded 15 minutes and when participants were instructed to disclose both facts and emotions, which may partly explain why a comparatively large effect emerged despite the small sample.

This findings are broadly consistent with previous studies reporting reductions in academic stress following expressive writing among Indonesian student samples (Maulida & Fitriyani, 2023; Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022; Safithry & Dewi, 2020; Yuhenita & Kurniati, 2022) and with a study among final-year students that found reduced stress after several expressive-writing sessions (Ramadhani, 2025). However, not all studies report consistent effects: a study among students of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of North Sumatra found no significant effect of expressive writing on academic stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such inconsistencies may reflect differences in participants' baseline psychological state, environmental context (for example, pandemic-related stressors), adherence to the writing protocol, and, as discussed above, the imprecision associated with small samples, which can produce effect-size estimates that vary considerably from study to study even when the underlying intervention is genuinely effective.

The comparatively large effect observed in this study may also be partly explained by characteristics specific to the study population. First-year Physiotherapy students in Indonesia face a distinctive combination of stressors: alongside the general adjustment demands of first-year university life, they must also begin acquiring early clinical and practical skills, which has been associated with elevated academic stress in Indonesian physiotherapy students more broadly (Djoar & Anggarani, 2024). If baseline stress in this population is unusually high and driven substantially by suppressed or unprocessed emotional reactions to this compounded workload, there may be relatively more "room" for a brief disclosure-based intervention to produce a detectable difference compared with more heterogeneous or lower-stress student populations studied elsewhere. This remains a post-hoc interpretation, however, and would need to be tested directly, for example by examining whether the intervention effect varies according to participants' pretest stress stratum.

Through the writing process, students are able to release negative emotions, reduce psychological pressure, and improve self-reflection regarding the problems they face. Practically, the low cost, simplicity, and independence of expressive writing make it an attractive candidate for supporting first-year students' mental health, particularly in resource-limited higher-education settings. However, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged when considering

its practical implications. The sample size was small (n = 20), which limits statistical power and the precision of the effect-size estimate, as reflected in the wide confidence intervals reported above. Although stratified random allocation strengthens the assumption of baseline equivalence, the analysis was restricted to posttest scores, so within-person change and the durability of the effect beyond the immediate post-intervention period could not be assessed. The study was also conducted at a single institution among students from one study program, which may limit generalizability to other institutions or disciplines. Finally, academic stress was assessed using a self-report measure, which may be subject to social desirability or recall bias. Future research should employ larger samples, analyze pretest scores directly to model within-person change, include follow-up measurements to assess durability of effect, and, where possible, incorporate direct measures of the proposed mechanisms (for example, linguistic analysis of writing content or validated emotion-regulation measures) to more rigorously test the mechanisms proposed above.

CONCLUSION

This study found a statistically significant difference in posttest academic stress scores between first-year Physiotherapy students at Universitas Fort De Kock who received an expressive writing intervention and those who did not; mean difference = 7.80, 95% CI [0.4, 15.2], df(18) = 2.21, p = 0.04, Cohen's d = 0.99, 95% CI [0.06, 1.91]. Students in the experimental group reported lower academic stress scores than those in the control group following the intervention. Because participants were stratified by pretest stress level before random allocation, the two groups can reasonably be assumed to have been comparable at baseline. Nonetheless, as only posttest scores were formally analyzed and the confidence intervals for both the mean difference and the effect size were relatively wide, these findings should be interpreted as evidence of a between-group difference consistent with an effect of expressive writing, rather than definitive proof that the intervention directly reduced individual students' stress levels.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that *expressive writing* was effective in reducing academic stress among first-year students of the Physiotherapy Study Program at Fort De Kock University. The results of the *independent sample t-test* analysis demonstrated a significant difference in academic stress levels between the experimental group and the control group, with a significance value of 0.040 ($p < 0.05$). Students who received the *expressive writing* intervention showed lower levels of academic stress compared to those in the control group.

Theoretically, this difference is consistent with the proposition that expressive writing facilitates emotional disclosure, supports emotion regulation through cognitive reappraisal, and enables more coherent processing of stressful academic experiences, which may in turn contribute to lower psychological distress; however, this study did not directly test these mechanisms, and they should be regarded as a plausible explanation rather than a confirmed pathway. The magnitude of the observed effect was also considerably larger than the average effect reported in broader expressive-writing meta-analyses, suggesting that the true effect in this specific population is best treated as uncertain pending replication with a larger sample.

Given its simplicity, low cost, and independence from specialized facilities, expressive writing represents a promising strategy that educational institutions may consider as part of psychological support programs for first-year students in health-

professional education, such as Physiotherapy. However, given the small sample size, the posttest-only analysis, and the single-institution setting, this conclusion should be treated as preliminary. Confirmation through larger, multi-site, pretest-posttest randomized controlled trials, and ideally with follow-up measurement to assess the durability of the effect, is needed before firm conclusions about the causal effectiveness of expressive writing for academic stress in this population can be drawn.

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