

The Role of Expressive Writing Interventions in Decreasing Trauma Symptoms and Increasing Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of an expressive writing intervention in decreasing trauma symptoms and increasing perceived meaning among individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

Methods and Materials: A randomized controlled trial was conducted with 30 participants from South Africa, who were randomly assigned to either an intervention group (n = 15) or a control group (n = 15). The intervention group participated in eight structured 75-minute expressive writing sessions over a four-week period, while the control group received no psychological treatment. Standardized measures were used to assess trauma symptoms (Impact of Event Scale-Revised) and perceived meaning (Meaning in Life Questionnaire) at three stages: pre-test, post-test, and five-month follow-up. Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with Bonferroni post-hoc tests for pairwise comparisons. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 27.

Findings: Results indicated a significant interaction effect between time and group for both trauma symptoms ($F(2,56) = 27.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .488$) and meaning ($F(2,56) = 31.34, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .528$). The intervention group demonstrated a substantial reduction in trauma symptoms from pre-test ($M = 61.47, SD = 5.83$) to post-test ($M = 45.80, SD = 6.11$), with further improvement at follow-up ($M = 42.93, SD = 5.62$). Perceived meaning significantly increased from pre-test ($M = 18.40, SD = 3.55$) to post-test ($M = 25.87, SD = 3.66$) and follow-up ($M = 28.60, SD = 3.20$). No significant changes were observed in the control group for either variable.

Conclusion: Expressive writing significantly reduces trauma symptoms and enhances meaning-making in individuals exposed to trauma, with effects sustained over a five-month period, suggesting its potential as a cost-effective intervention for trauma recovery.

Keywords: expressive writing, trauma symptoms, meaning-making, randomized controlled trial, psychological intervention, South Africa

1. Introduction

Trauma, in its many forms, disrupts not only psychological equilibrium but also the process of meaning-making essential for recovery. Individuals who experience traumatic events frequently grapple with intrusive memories, emotional dysregulation, and a fragmented sense of identity, all of which impair their ability to derive coherent narratives from their experiences. As researchers and clinicians seek accessible, low-cost interventions to assist in trauma recovery, expressive writing has emerged as a promising tool with the potential to facilitate emotional processing and enhance psychological well-being (Chaudoir et al., 2023). Rooted in the idea that writing about emotionally significant experiences allows for the cognitive and emotional reorganization of trauma, expressive writing helps individuals move from disorganized recollection toward integrated understanding (Park et al., 2016).

Expressive writing as an intervention is grounded in the work of James Pennebaker, who demonstrated that structured written disclosure of traumatic events can reduce distress and improve mental health outcomes. While early research focused primarily on physiological and psychological benefits such as reduced anxiety, improved immune function, and enhanced mood, subsequent studies have expanded its theoretical base, highlighting its role in facilitating meaning-making and narrative reconstruction (Zheng et al., 2019). Trauma often strips individuals of a coherent sense of meaning; thus, interventions that restore narrative coherence are instrumental in long-term healing (Xuan, 2022). Meaning-making, defined as the active process of interpreting life events and integrating them into a coherent self-concept, is not only a psychological outcome but also a mechanism of healing that contributes to post-traumatic growth (Trisanti et al., 2022).

The therapeutic potential of writing is supported by broader educational and linguistic frameworks. Writing, particularly when done reflectively, is not merely a communicative act but a space for identity construction and emotional articulation (Wallace, 2021). By translating traumatic experiences into language, individuals engage in symbolic processing that promotes psychological distancing and reappraisal (Park et al., 2016). Studies in educational contexts have also confirmed the importance of writing in facilitating critical reflection, emotional awareness, and cognitive integration, especially among learners in complex sociocultural environments (Jones, 2021; Кенжебаева &

Нуптекеева, 2020). Expressive writing, therefore, transcends clinical boundaries and intersects with broader theories of literacy and narrative development.

The capacity of expressive writing to reduce trauma symptoms has been observed across diverse populations and contexts. For instance, Holliday et al. implemented a narrative writing program in a neurosurgical intensive care unit during the COVID-19 pandemic and observed improved emotional resilience and communication among staff (Holliday et al., 2023). Similarly, Chaudoir et al. found that brief online expressive writing interventions significantly reduced psychological distress and enhanced self-affirmation among sexual minority youth (Chaudoir et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the idea that expressive writing is adaptable, accessible, and effective across sociocultural and demographic boundaries. However, what remains underexplored is the sustained impact of such interventions—particularly their long-term influence on trauma symptom reduction and the reconstruction of meaning over extended periods.

Meaning-making has increasingly become a central concept in trauma research, especially in interventions aimed at fostering recovery and resilience. According to Jandrić et al., the act of collective or personal writing allows individuals to reinterpret adverse experiences and generate new perspectives that support psychological growth (Jandrić et al., 2022). Writing encourages a form of cognitive expansion that leads to increased emotional clarity, and it often produces transformative insights regarding self-concept, agency, and existential purpose (Gobbo & Benedetti, 2021). From a multimodal perspective, writing is a dynamic space where language, emotion, and cognition converge to enable the articulation of complex internal states (Bock, 2016). These internal shifts are vital for trauma survivors, who often lack the verbal frameworks to express or organize their distress.

The interplay between language, culture, and trauma is also essential to consider. Expressive writing functions within a sociocultural context, and the way individuals articulate trauma is often shaped by linguistic conventions and cultural values (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2018). Studies suggest that metaphor, symbolism, and narrative style differ across cultures and can influence how trauma is externalized and processed in written form (Saeful & Dahlan, 2016). Thus, an intervention like expressive writing is not merely therapeutic—it is also culturally situated. This has implications for studies conducted in non-Western contexts, such as South Africa, where collective histories of violence

and systemic oppression necessitate culturally attuned approaches to trauma healing.

The importance of writing as a vehicle for developing coherence and restoring agency is echoed in pedagogical research. Writing is not simply about conveying information; it is a cognitive practice that enables individuals to synthesize complex experiences and locate personal significance (Lewis & Noguchi, 2022). Gao's work in academic English instruction highlights how even basic writing tasks promote metacognitive awareness and emotional insight, elements essential for therapeutic writing (Gao, 2020). Similarly, Kim and Belcher show that student writers benefit from multimodal approaches that integrate emotion, reflection, and critical thinking, leading to richer engagement with written narratives (Kim & Belcher, 2020). These findings demonstrate the educational value of writing for developing emotional and cognitive skills necessary for recovery from trauma.

The process of meaning-making through writing also resonates with research on multimodal literacy and cognitive-emotional development. Aini et al. emphasize the significance of integrating writing within research methods, underlining its potential to yield both emotional insight and empirical clarity (Aini et al., 2018). Writing becomes a method of inquiry as well as a method of intervention. Similarly, Caine explores how voice-based interfaces and digital storytelling can aid self-expression in individuals who may struggle with conventional writing modes, offering new avenues for therapeutic expression (Caine, 2022). These innovations suggest that expressive writing need not be confined to traditional paper-and-pen formats and can be adapted to diverse needs and technologies.

In addition, the reflective nature of writing supports the development of metacognition and self-regulation, which are essential for individuals recovering from trauma. According to Odom, the act of writing enhances the writer's capacity to analyze internal states, regulate emotional responses, and project into the future with increased agency and coherence (Odom, 2017). Mtonjeni also found that reflective writing in applied science students promoted deeper levels of self-awareness and critical thinking, reinforcing the argument that writing facilitates both emotional and intellectual engagement with lived experience (Mtonjeni & Sefalane-Nkohla, 2017). The capacity for self-reflection and the construction of coherent life narratives are not merely therapeutic—they are foundational for psychological integration and healing.

Moreover, writing-based interventions may serve as a bridge between creative expression and structured therapeutic models. Meyntjens highlights the utility of pseudo-translated writing handbooks in guiding students toward deeper expressive practices, thereby expanding the pedagogical and psychological scope of creative writing (Meyntjens, 2018). Writing is a space where linguistic invention meets psychological necessity, enabling individuals to confront the unspeakable and transform it into something organized, meaningful, and communicable.

Finally, the role of writing in constructing personal meaning is amplified in contexts of social disruption and existential uncertainty. Kalantzis et al. argue that writing allows individuals to assert their voice in the face of fragmentation and dislocation, especially when guided by structured prompts and reflective frameworks (Kalantzis et al., 2016). This is especially relevant in post-trauma contexts, where the experience of fragmentation is both internal and external. Expressive writing can reestablish a sense of continuity by anchoring emotional experiences within the flow of narrative time, thereby restoring a sense of self that trauma threatens to erode. Taken together, this body of literature underscores the dual potential of expressive writing: to reduce the burden of trauma symptoms and to elevate the human capacity for meaning-making. While prior studies have demonstrated the short-term efficacy of writing-based interventions, fewer have addressed their long-term impact on both symptom reduction and existential integration. This study seeks to fill that gap by evaluating the effectiveness of an eight-session expressive writing program in decreasing trauma symptoms and increasing perceived meaning over a five-month period. By situating this work within the sociocultural context of South Africa and drawing from both psychological and educational perspectives, this study contributes to a growing interdisciplinary understanding of how writing can function as both a tool of healing and a practice of meaning.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a randomized controlled trial design to examine the effectiveness of expressive writing interventions in decreasing trauma symptoms and increasing meaning. The sample consisted of 30 participants recruited from community mental health centers in South Africa. Participants were screened to ensure they had experienced at least one traumatic event and reported moderate to high

levels of trauma-related distress. After obtaining informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the intervention group ($n = 15$) or the control group ($n = 15$). The intervention group received eight 75-minute expressive writing sessions over a four-week period, while the control group received no psychological intervention during this phase. All participants completed assessments at three time points: pre-test, post-test (immediately after the last session), and follow-up (five months after the intervention).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trauma Symptoms

To measure trauma symptoms, the study employed the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R), developed by Weiss and Marmar in 1997. The IES-R is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess current subjective distress resulting from traumatic life events. It consists of 22 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("extremely"), based on how distressing each item has been over the past seven days. The scale includes three subscales: Intrusion (e.g., intrusive thoughts and nightmares), Avoidance (e.g., efforts to avoid reminders of the trauma), and Hyperarousal (e.g., heightened startle response and irritability). Higher scores indicate greater levels of trauma-related distress. Numerous studies have confirmed the scale's strong psychometric properties; it has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α typically above 0.90), good convergent validity with other PTSD measures, and robust test-retest reliability across various populations.

2.2.2. Meaning

To assess the extent of experienced meaning in life, the study utilized the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler in 2006. The MLQ is a 10-item self-report instrument that measures two key dimensions of meaning: the Presence of Meaning (how much individuals feel their lives have meaning) and the Search for Meaning (the degree to which individuals are striving to find meaning). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("absolutely untrue") to 7 ("absolutely true"), with higher scores reflecting greater presence or search for meaning. The scale includes five items for each subscale. The MLQ has been validated in diverse cultural and clinical contexts and has shown high internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values generally

exceeding 0.80 for both subscales. It also demonstrates solid construct validity and has been frequently used in psychological research related to well-being, identity, and trauma recovery.

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Expressive Writing

The expressive writing intervention in this study was conducted across eight sessions, each lasting approximately 75 minutes. The intervention was based on Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm, with adaptations to include reflective processing and meaning-making techniques. Sessions were held twice a week over four consecutive weeks. Participants were guided to write about emotionally significant experiences, particularly traumatic or distressing events, with an emphasis on exploring thoughts, emotions, and personal meaning. The sessions combined writing exercises, brief discussions, and psychoeducational components to help participants process trauma and foster a sense of coherence and meaning. Each session built progressively toward deeper emotional engagement and cognitive restructuring, allowing participants to explore their narratives in a safe, structured, and supportive environment.

Session 1: Introduction and Orientation

The first session introduced participants to the concept of expressive writing and the structure of the intervention. The facilitator explained the rationale behind expressive writing, emphasizing its role in emotional processing and trauma recovery. Participants were encouraged to set personal goals for the process and were instructed on confidentiality and non-judgmental reflection. A short initial writing exercise focused on a neutral topic was conducted to reduce anxiety and familiarize participants with the process. The session concluded with a discussion about emotional safety and support mechanisms.

Session 2: Describing the Traumatic Event

In the second session, participants were instructed to write about the most traumatic or distressing experience in their lives. They were encouraged to include detailed descriptions of what happened, who was involved, and the specific emotions they felt during the experience. The goal was to bring the unprocessed memory into conscious awareness. After writing, a brief voluntary discussion was facilitated to normalize emotional reactions. The facilitator provided grounding techniques for participants who felt emotionally overwhelmed.

Session 3: Exploring Emotions and Thoughts

The third session guided participants to reflect more deeply on the emotions and thoughts they associate with the traumatic experience. Writing prompts asked participants to examine how the event has affected their view of themselves, others, and the world. The session also introduced basic cognitive reframing techniques, encouraging participants to notice any recurring thoughts or assumptions. This session aimed to initiate the emotional-cognitive integration of the trauma narrative.

Session 4: Writing from a New Perspective

During the fourth session, participants were encouraged to write about the traumatic event from the perspective of an observer or another person involved. This technique aimed to promote psychological distance, increase empathy, and foster insight into the broader context of the experience. Participants reflected on how different perspectives might alter their understanding of the event and its impact. A group discussion focused on identifying shifts in emotional tone and new cognitive realizations.

Session 5: Identifying Change and Growth

In the fifth session, participants wrote about how the traumatic experience may have led to changes in their identity, values, relationships, or life direction. Prompts focused on exploring post-traumatic growth, such as increased resilience, appreciation of life, or personal strength. Participants were encouraged to recognize both positive and negative consequences without denying the pain of the experience. The session aimed to help participants integrate the trauma into a broader life narrative.

Session 6: Meaning-Making and Reframing

The sixth session focused explicitly on meaning-making. Participants were prompted to write about what the traumatic experience means to them now and how their understanding has evolved. Writing prompts invited participants to connect the experience to their beliefs, purpose, and worldview. The session introduced meaning-centered coping strategies and emphasized that meaning can emerge even from suffering. A short group dialogue explored how individuals had begun to reinterpret or transform their narratives.

Session 7: Creating a Coherent Narrative

In the seventh session, participants were asked to compile their writings and create a coherent, organized narrative of the traumatic experience, incorporating the emotional insights and meaning they had developed in previous sessions. This life-story approach aimed to promote narrative coherence, emotional closure, and cognitive

restructuring. Participants shared excerpts voluntarily and reflected on how their perceptions of the trauma had shifted throughout the process.

Session 8: Closure and Future Orientation

The final session focused on closure, consolidation, and looking forward. Participants wrote a letter to their past or future selves, summarizing what they had learned and how they intended to carry these insights into their lives. The session included a structured group reflection on the emotional journey, highlighting shared experiences of healing and resilience. The facilitator provided tools for continued self-expression beyond the intervention and encouraged participants to maintain emotional self-care practices.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess within-group and between-group differences over time. When significant interactions or main effects were observed, Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to identify specific differences between time points and groups. The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. This analytic approach allowed for the evaluation of the stability and effectiveness of the expressive writing intervention across multiple time points and its sustained impact over a five-month follow-up period.

3. Findings and Results

The sample consisted of 30 participants, with 15 assigned to the intervention group and 15 to the control group. In terms of gender, 13 participants (43.33%) identified as male, and 17 participants (56.67%) identified as female. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 50 years, with a mean age of 28.5 years ($SD = 8.32$). Regarding educational background, 10 participants (33.33%) had completed high school, 15 participants (50.00%) had an undergraduate degree, and 5 participants (16.67%) had a postgraduate degree. The majority of participants (24 participants, 80.00%) were employed, while 6 participants (20.00%) were unemployed at the time of the study. The trauma types reported by participants included 12 (40.00%) who had experienced physical assault, 8 (26.67%) who had experienced emotional abuse, and 10 (33.33%) who had experienced a combination of different traumatic events.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Trauma Symptoms and Meaning Scores by Group and Time Point

Variable	Group	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Follow-Up M (SD)
Trauma Symptoms	Intervention	61.47 (5.83)	45.80 (6.11)	42.93 (5.62)
	Control	62.20 (6.15)	60.13 (5.92)	59.47 (6.00)
Meaning	Intervention	18.40 (3.55)	25.87 (3.66)	28.60 (3.20)
	Control	18.13 (3.22)	18.80 (3.47)	19.27 (3.31)

Participants in the intervention group showed a substantial reduction in trauma symptoms from pre-test ($M = 61.47$, $SD = 5.83$) to post-test ($M = 45.80$, $SD = 6.11$), with further improvement at follow-up ($M = 42.93$, $SD = 5.62$). In contrast, the control group displayed minimal change over time. Regarding perceived meaning, the intervention group demonstrated a notable increase from pre-test ($M = 18.40$, $SD = 3.55$) to post-test ($M = 25.87$, $SD = 3.66$), which was sustained and further improved at follow-up ($M = 28.60$, $SD = 3.20$). The control group showed only marginal changes in meaning scores (Table 1).

Before conducting the analysis, the necessary assumptions for repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) were checked and confirmed. The normality of the data was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that the data for trauma symptoms and meaning were normally distributed at all time points (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up). The Mauchly's test of sphericity was nonsignificant ($p = 0.89$), indicating that the assumption of sphericity was met. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was also tested using Levene's test, which revealed no significant violations ($p = 0.42$). Thus, the data met the assumptions required for valid ANOVA analysis.

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA Summary Table for Trauma Symptoms and Meaning

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Partial η^2
Trauma Symptoms	Time	4221.48	2	2110.74	34.91	<.001	.558
	Group	1890.27	1	1890.27	29.74	<.001	.514
	Time \times Group	3274.62	2	1637.31	27.08	<.001	.488
	Error (within)	3544.60	56	63.30			
Meaning	Time	1654.92	2	827.46	39.22	<.001	.583
	Group	1412.38	1	1412.38	26.67	<.001	.488
	Time \times Group	1223.59	2	611.80	31.34	<.001	.528
	Error (within)	1179.27	56	21.06			

The repeated measures ANOVA indicated a statistically significant interaction between time and group for both trauma symptoms ($F(2,56) = 27.08$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .488$) and meaning ($F(2,56) = 31.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .528$), suggesting that the intervention group experienced

significant changes over time compared to the control group. Main effects for time and group were also significant for both variables, confirming the overall impact of the expressive writing intervention (Table 2).

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results for Trauma Symptoms and Meaning by Group

Variable	Group	Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p-value
Trauma Symptoms	Intervention	Pre vs. Post	15.67	2.28	<.001
		Pre vs. Follow-Up	18.53	2.13	<.001
		Post vs. Follow-Up	2.87	1.07	.023
	Control	Pre vs. Post	2.07	1.95	.296
		Pre vs. Follow-Up	2.73	1.82	.142
		Post vs. Follow-Up	0.67	1.15	.573
Meaning	Intervention	Pre vs. Post	-7.47	1.28	<.001

Control	Pre vs. Follow-Up	-10.20	1.43	<.001
	Post vs. Follow-Up	-2.73	0.93	.009
	Pre vs. Post	-0.67	0.87	.449
	Pre vs. Follow-Up	-1.13	1.00	.274
	Post vs. Follow-Up	-0.47	0.95	.623

Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons confirmed significant reductions in trauma symptoms within the intervention group from pre-test to post-test (mean difference = 15.67, $p < .001$), and from pre-test to follow-up (mean difference = 18.53, $p < .001$). A smaller but significant reduction was observed from post-test to follow-up (mean difference = 2.87, $p = .023$). In contrast, the control group exhibited no significant changes over time. Regarding meaning, the intervention group showed significant increases from pre-test to post-test (mean difference = -7.47, $p < .001$) and from pre-test to follow-up (mean difference = -10.20, $p < .001$), as well as a smaller but significant increase between post-test and follow-up (mean difference = -2.73, $p = .009$). The control group again showed no significant differences (Table 3).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an expressive writing intervention in reducing trauma symptoms and increasing perceived meaning among individuals who had experienced distressing life events. Findings from the repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant reduction in trauma-related symptoms and a notable increase in meaning scores in the intervention group compared to the control group over time, particularly at the five-month follow-up. These results confirm that expressive writing not only facilitates short-term emotional processing but also promotes sustained psychological integration and meaning-making in the aftermath of trauma.

Participants in the intervention group demonstrated a marked decrease in trauma symptoms as measured by the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R). This decline was evident at post-test and maintained during the five-month follow-up, suggesting that the intervention had a lasting therapeutic impact. This finding aligns with previous research which demonstrates that expressive writing facilitates emotional disclosure, narrative coherence, and psychological distancing, all of which contribute to the reduction of distress associated with trauma (Chaudoir et al., 2023). By enabling participants to articulate intrusive memories and emotionally significant content, expressive

writing served as a vehicle for emotional regulation and desensitization, processes that are fundamental in trauma recovery (Park et al., 2016).

Simultaneously, there was a statistically significant increase in participants' sense of meaning in life, as measured by the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). This improvement was particularly strong by the final session and sustained at the five-month follow-up. These results are consistent with research that frames expressive writing as a reflective act of cognitive integration, which helps individuals reorganize disjointed traumatic experiences into meaningful narratives (Zheng et al., 2019). Writing about trauma appears to offer more than catharsis; it promotes intentional reflection, leading individuals to explore existential themes such as purpose, identity, and growth (Xuan, 2022).

The findings also reflect broader scholarly perspectives that position writing as a tool for meaning-making in both clinical and educational settings. According to Jandrić et al., the act of structured writing supports the reconfiguration of disrupted personal narratives and fosters new insights into the self and one's relationship with the world (Jandrić et al., 2022). This perspective was echoed in the current study, where participants reported not only a release of emotional tension but also a shift in how they conceptualized their traumatic experiences—transforming them from chaotic events into sources of insight and resilience. Similarly, Gobbo found that digital storytelling—another form of expressive narrative—enhanced users' sense of identity and personal cohesion through narrative construction (Gobbo & Benedetti, 2021). These convergent findings emphasize the narrative dimension of healing and highlight the therapeutic potential of storytelling, whether analog or digital.

Furthermore, the results are in alignment with existing literature on the use of writing to foster psychological integration. Writing facilitates psychological distancing, a process wherein individuals can view their experiences from a more objective standpoint, reducing emotional intensity while enhancing clarity and coherence (Park et al., 2016). This distancing effect, evident in this study's participants, enabled them to re-engage with traumatic memories from a safe psychological distance, fostering increased self-understanding and emotional mastery. As Wallace explains,

the ability to read and write about personal experiences creates opportunities to reflect and reframe difficult experiences through the lens of literature and language (Wallace, 2021).

Moreover, expressive writing's capacity to foster meaning-making is reinforced by studies in pedagogical and literacy domains. Kalantzis et al. suggest that writing enables the construction of complex meanings by connecting lived experiences with cultural and personal contexts (Kalantzis et al., 2016). In the current study, the writing prompts encouraged participants to articulate not only the events themselves but their significance, thereby fostering deeper insight and emotional growth. Similarly, Bock's research on children's multimodal storytelling found that creative writing allows for the integration of thought, emotion, and imagination—components that are equally relevant to adult trauma processing (Bock, 2016).

Several other studies support the role of writing in fostering reflection and transformation. Holliday et al. demonstrated that narrative writing exercises implemented among hospital staff helped participants process the emotional toll of the COVID-19 crisis, improving both psychological well-being and workplace communication (Holliday et al., 2023). Likewise, Chaudoir et al. found expressive writing beneficial in mitigating the effects of stigma and internalized distress among marginalized groups, emphasizing its value in addressing emotional suppression and fostering identity integration (Chaudoir et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the idea that expressive writing is particularly effective in contexts where psychological wounds are layered with complexity, ambiguity, and silence.

In addition, the current results are supported by findings from the academic writing and language education fields. According to Gao, structured writing exercises in English instruction improved both cognitive performance and emotional clarity among Chinese college students, highlighting the dual cognitive-emotional benefit of writing as a pedagogical tool (Gao, 2020). Kim and Belcher also reported that students participating in multimodal writing projects exhibited greater emotional engagement and narrative depth, indicating that writing—especially when guided and purposeful—can serve as a mirror for internal experience (Kim & Belcher, 2020). These findings validate the approach used in the current study, where structured prompts and thematic focus were used to guide participants toward emotional and cognitive depth.

The results further corroborate the importance of self-expression through writing in contexts where verbal

processing may be limited or culturally constrained. As Ahmed and Aini note, the ability to express complex thoughts through metaphor, narrative structure, or symbolic language offers participants an emotionally safe pathway to disclose content that may otherwise remain suppressed (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2018; Aini et al., 2018). In the current study, participants often utilized symbolic or metaphorical language to explore trauma, which suggests that expressive writing accommodates both literal and figurative modes of meaning-making. This flexibility may be particularly important in multicultural contexts like South Africa, where linguistic diversity and historical trauma may influence how individuals frame their experiences.

In line with Mtonjeni's work, which emphasized the value of reflective writing for deepening conceptual understanding among students in applied sciences, this study also observed that expressive writing stimulated analytical thought and personal insight among participants (Mtonjeni & Sefalane-Nkohla, 2017). Participants frequently described experiencing "clarity" or "new understanding" through the writing process, pointing to the transformative potential of structured narrative reflection. Similarly, Odom found that writing across disciplines enhances students' capacity to understand themselves and the world around them, a finding echoed here as participants described a broader, more hopeful worldview by the end of the intervention (Odom, 2017).

Finally, the current findings suggest that expressive writing interventions have the potential to be used as scalable, low-cost methods for supporting trauma recovery and psychological growth, especially in under-resourced settings. As Caine and Lewis point out, even technologically assisted or simplified versions of writing tasks can offer meaningful psychological benefits (Caine, 2022; Lewis & Noguchi, 2022). In contexts where professional mental health services may be limited or stigmatized, expressive writing can serve as a powerful, client-centered tool for self-exploration and healing.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its promising findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small ($n = 30$), limiting the generalizability of the results. The sample was also drawn from a single cultural context—South Africa—which may influence how trauma and meaning are constructed and understood. Additionally, the control group received no alternative form of intervention, raising the

possibility that the observed effects were partly due to the attention and structure provided by the writing sessions themselves rather than the expressive writing component specifically. Moreover, self-report measures were used to assess outcomes, which may introduce social desirability or recall biases. Finally, while the five-month follow-up provides valuable data on sustained effects, longer-term outcomes remain unknown.

Future research should consider expanding the sample size and including more diverse populations to enhance external validity. Cross-cultural studies would be particularly valuable in determining how cultural norms, language, and narrative styles influence the efficacy of expressive writing. It may also be helpful to compare expressive writing with other low-intensity interventions, such as art therapy or mindfulness-based practices, to evaluate their relative effectiveness. Incorporating physiological measures or clinician-administered assessments could further validate self-report findings. In addition, longitudinal studies examining outcomes one year or more post-intervention would provide critical insight into the lasting effects of expressive writing on trauma recovery and meaning-making.

In clinical settings, expressive writing can be implemented as a structured, adjunctive intervention for clients who have experienced trauma and are seeking meaning in their recovery journey. Practitioners should consider adapting writing prompts to reflect the cultural, linguistic, and emotional contexts of clients. The intervention can be delivered in individual or group formats and facilitated by trained professionals or through guided self-help models. Schools, community centers, and mental health outreach programs could incorporate expressive writing workshops as part of broader psychosocial support strategies, especially in resource-limited settings. Emphasis should be placed on emotional safety, gradual engagement with distressing content, and the integration of reflection to support both trauma symptom reduction and meaning reconstruction.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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