

7-31-2021

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Ryan Francis O. Cayubit

*Department of Psychology, College of Science, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1015 Philippines;*  
*Research Center for Social Sciences and Education, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1015 Philippines,*  
rocayubit@ust.edu.ph

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### Recommended Citation

Cayubit, R. F. (2021). Effect of Expressive Writing on the Subjective Well-Being of University Students. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, 25(1), 71-79. <https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1130520>

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# Effect of Expressive Writing on the Subjective Well-Being of University Students

Pengaruh Penulisan Ekspresif pada Kesejahteraan Subjektif Mahasiswa

Ryan Francis O. Cayubit

Department of Psychology, College of Science, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1015 Philippines  
Research Center for Social Sciences and Education, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1015 Philippines

## ABSTRACT

The main intent of this research is to test the effectiveness of expressive writing in processing and dealing with inhibited emotions of university students. The use of expressive writing targets the subjective well-being of the subjects, specifically their happiness and life satisfaction. Employing a between-subjects design, a thorough and rigorous psychological experiment was performed on 23 student volunteers where expressive writing was designated as the independent variable and happiness and life satisfaction as dependent variables respectively. Results of the non-parametric analysis showed that after the experimentation, both the happiness and life satisfaction of the subjects improved. Theoretical implications of the study are discussed in this paper.

## ABSTRAK

Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengukur tingkat efektifitas dan menulis secara ekspresif dalam hal memproses dan menghubungkan dengan ungkapan emosi yang dipendam di antara mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi. Kegunaan dari menulis secara ekspresif memiliki tujuan yang mengarah pada kesejahteraan diri secara khusus tentang kebahagiaan dan kepuasan hidup mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan *between subject design* yakni sebuah proses psikologis yang ketat dan menyeluruh yang dilakukan pada 23 mahasiswa yang secara sukarela mengambil bagian dari penelitian ini. Menulis ekspresif dalam penelitian ini merupakan variabel bebas sementara kebahagiaan dan kepuasan hidup adalah variabel terikat. Hasil dari penelitian yang dianalisis dengan menggunakan non-parametric menunjukkan bahwa tingkat kebahagiaan dan kepuasan hidup menunjukkan adanya peningkatan. Implikasi secara teori dari penelitian ini akan dibahas secara luas dalam tulisan ini

## Original Article

\*Correspondence Author:  
Ryan Francis O. Cayubit  
E-mail: rocayubit@ust.edu.ph

Received: 04 March 2020  
Revised: 04 April 2020  
Accepted: 13 May 2020

**Keyword:** expressive writing, well-being, life satisfaction, happiness

**Cite this article:** Cayubit, R. F. O. (2021). Effect of expressive writing on the subjective well-being of university students. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, 25(1), 71-79. <https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1130520>

## 1. Introduction

During their stay in school, university students deal with changes in their physical, social, cultural and learning environments. They are expected to adapt to these changes and at the same time deal with the demands of earning a degree. Although some students may adapt to these changes and demands well, others may negatively appraise these changes and experience increased stress (Kaya et al., 2015; Ng, Diener et al., 2009) which can impact their happiness and life satisfaction. Happiness and life satisfaction are known facets of subjective well-being (SWB) and for some time now, this has been the focal point of many psychological researches. Its popularity and sudden emergence as a psychological construct is seen as a move by experts and researchers alike to counter the overwhelming focus and emphasis

of research in psychology on the negative states of man (Diener et al., 1999).

SWB deals with man's positive states and how these states have affected the way they think and live their lives. The nature of SWB can be deduced into three distinct aspects, first; it is subjective as it is based on one's perception, second; it focuses on positive measures or states and last, it is an overall assessment of all aspects of a person's life (Diener, 1984). Looking at its etiology, SWB appears to stem from feelings of mastery experienced by individuals as a result of their perception that they are making progress towards the goals that they have set. It also appears from their temperament during the times when they engaged in interesting, pleasurable activities and positive social relationships (Diener et al., 1998). Just like many psychological constructs, SWB appears to be

multidimensional and is believed to be made up of pleasant and unpleasant affect, life satisfaction and domain satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999).

Happiness, a sub-division of the pleasant affect component of SWB, is an interesting construct in positive psychology because it is a domain that is traditionally philosophical and theological in nature but has been greatly influenced by the views and methods of psychology over the years (Biswas-Diener et al., 2004). Research on this construct deals with its nature, effects and implications with the hopes of coming up with ways on how to either attain or enhance it. Indicators of happiness include feelings of joy, satisfaction, cheerfulness, gladness and gratitude. Since it is perceived as important, many studies have been conducted which shows that happy individuals are successful across different areas of their lives including marriage, friendship, income, work performance and health (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Among students, evidence exists that happiness is positively linked to academic performance (Sahi, 2018; Seligman et al., 2009) and self-confidence (Cheng & Fumham, 2002). Past studies also shows that happiness is related to having positive relationships and experiences (Camfield et al., 2009; Lu, 1999; Peterson, 2006); friendships (Demir et al., 2012); capitalization (Demir et al., 2013; Gable & Reis, 2010); gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kausar, 2018; Watkins et al., 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Toepfer et al., 2012; Toepfer & Walker, 2009); autonomy and attribution style (O'Donnell et al., 2013) and emotional intelligence (Mukherjee, 2018). Finally, it has been found that happy people tend to be more sociable, optimistic, energetic, original and altruistic (Norish & Vella-Brodrick, 2008).

Life satisfaction on the other hand is the cognitive aspect of subjective well-being that involves the judgmental process a person engages in to overall assess one's life based on a chosen criteria (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). The judgment is brought about by a comparison between one's current state with what is perceived as something acceptable or a known standard. The comparison is done to evaluate one's life satisfaction and is not externally imposed. It centers on the person's own judgment and not upon some criterion set by others (Diener, 1984). As a result of the comparison, individuals become highly satisfied if they find out that the difference between their current life state and the standard is low. On the other hand, dissatisfaction occurs if the difference is high. Through the years, life satisfaction has been associated with a range of outcomes that are both positive and negative. Studies show that among college students, life satisfaction is strongly related to grade scores and academic efficiency (Lodi et al., 2017); attitude towards money (Barand & Imanian, 2017); resilience (Rathore,

2017); regulation and use of emotions (Chen et al., 2018); self-esteem (Cha, 2003; Patel et al., 2018); optimism (Cha, 2003); trait emotional intelligence (Liu et al., 2013; Wong & Kong, 2014); positive perception of daily events (McCullough et al., 2000) and coping resources (Gnilka et al., 2015). Result also shows that it is negatively related to perceived stress (Alleyne et al., 2010; Gnilka et al., 2015; Kaya et al., 2015; Puri et al., 2016); anxiety (Paschali & Tsitsas, 2010); and worry (Paolini et al., 2006). Considering these empirical evidence, studying life satisfaction is an advantage not only because of its documented effects but also because it possesses a unique importance in understanding a number of mental health concerns of individuals (Kaya et al., 2015) including university students.

Given the importance and range of benefits of both happiness and life satisfaction, individuals often seek psychotherapy as a means to increase or improve them (Johnson, 1991; Mallum, 1983; Paolini et al., 2006) but this may not be readily accessible to many college students because of the lack of financial resources. The use of expressive writing could address this issue as it is seen as one of the most cost-effective ways to handle personal issues and concerns (Wong & Mak, 2016). This is evident in the reported overall effect size of .47 when expressive writing was used to improve the health, psychological well-being and general functioning of individuals (Smyth, 1998). Expressive writing has become popular because it provides individuals a safe context to deal with their feelings and emotions (Frattaroli, 2006; Greenberg & Lepore, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2002) and through expressive writing, SWB is enhanced because it provides opportunities for self-disclosure (Ko & Kuo, 2009) as individuals narrate their feelings and emotions through writing. Aside from an improved SWB, expressive writing is also associated with improved emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy (Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2011); emotional regulation (Suhr et al., 2017; Wing et al., 2006); adjustment and social engagement (Kim, 2008); life satisfaction, mental and physical health (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006); meaning making through self-distancing (Park et al., 2016); psychological well-being (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009); retirement well-being (Round & Burke, 2018) and improved GPA, working memory and better college adjustment (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009). Other benefits include reduced depressive symptoms (Suhr et al., 2017); posttraumatic symptoms (Lange-Nielsen et al., 2012) and psychological distress (Wong & Rochlen, 2009). Given these benefits, using expressive writing as a cost-effective way to promote, develop or enhance happiness and life satisfaction among university students may prove to be beneficial not only for students but for educational institutions as well. With the abundance of literature and empirical evidence on its therapeutic potential, one cannot help but wonder what is in writing that makes it effective. I

believe that writing provides a non-threatening avenue or opportunity for self-disclosure, self-expression, and self-exploration and because of its non-threatening aspect; individuals tend to open more and engage themselves with their real feelings and thoughts translating into a wide range of benefits.

In the literature, three prominent models exist that explain why expressive writing is effective. The first model is based on the theory that emotional inhibition is effortful and is a stressor that negatively affects physical health functioning and through expressive writing, individuals are able to release those emotions resulting in the reduction of stress which in turn positively affects physical health (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Pennebaker, 1990; Sloan & Marx, 2004). This first model puts emphasis on the ability of expressive writing to facilitate the release and freeing of inhibited emotion resulting in positive effects on individuals. The second model takes its root from cognitive psychology. This cognitive adaptation model proposes that adaptation takes place as a result of man's innate need to bridge the gap between one's core assumptions and the events that violate these assumptions and that this process aids in the coping of man with the negative and traumatic events being experienced (Sloan & Marx, 2004). There are times however those traumatic and negative experiences will be stored in a non-verbal fashion that prevents it from being processed. As such, expressive writing becomes a tool to transform these nonverbal memories into a linguistic format that can be processed and dealt with (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). The above process aids in the reorganization of core schemas leading to diminished stress and improved health (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009). Finally, an outgrowth of learning theories, the third model focuses on emotional processing and emotional exposure through expressive writing. In addition to the above, empirical evidence also suggests that writing about present and future experiences would also be beneficial (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009).

Concerning the present work, the first model (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Pennebaker, 1990; Sloan & Marx, 2004) was used as the basis in hypothesizing how expressive writing was used to help improve the happiness and life satisfaction of university students. I believe that negative events, stressors and other challenges encountered by university students when unsuccessfully handled may result in pent-up and inhibited emotions leading to feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Through the use of EW, these pent-up and inhibited emotions are released and stress is reduced significantly because EW provides a structured but non-threatening avenue for self-disclosure, self-expression, and self-exploration.

## 2. Methods

### Participants

Sixty participants were recruited from the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines via opportunity sampling (only those willing to participate in the experiment were selected). Data from 40 subjects were excluded: 10 were not able to attend all the sessions of the experiment for various reasons, 12 did not report for the posttest, 8 dropped out after the experiment had started and 7 dropped out after the administration of the pretest. As a result, only the data of 23 subjects (6 males and 17 females; mean age = 19.15; SD = 0.67) were retained and analyzed. Of the 23 subjects, 11 were part of the expressive writing group (2 males and 9 females; mean age = 19.00; SD = 0.63) and 12 subjects were of the control group (4 males and 8 females; mean age = 19.33; SD = 0.71).

### Design

This study employed the between-subjects design to test whether expressive writing technique would be a cost-effective way to enhance the subjective well-being of university students (Kontowitz et al., 2009; Myers & Hansen, 2012). The independent variable was the expressive writing technique while the dependent variable was subjective well-being, specifically happiness and life satisfaction.

### Measures

**Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ).** It is a 29-item scale designed to measure a person's subjective well-being (Hills & Argyle, 2002; Kashdan, 2003). The OHQ is considered to be the improved version of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle et al., 1989) and is answerable using a 6-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The scale is reliable based on the following evidences: Cronbach's Alpha = 0.78 and test retest correlation coefficients of 0.84 and 0.87 (Hadinezhad & Zaree, 2009). Content validity was also established based on the evaluation of experts (Hadinezhad & Zaree, 2009) and its unidimensional construct to measure happiness was established via sequential orthogonal factor analysis (Hills & Argyle, 2002). In the present study, Cronbach's Alpha was 0.593 (Pretest) and 0.714 (Posttest).

**Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).** It is a 5-item scale designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction that is answerable using a 7-point scale that ranges from 7 = strong agree to 1 = strongly disagree (Diener et al., 1985). In terms of its psychometric properties, the SWLS is reliable and stable (0.54 for 4 years) and its validity was established via convergent and divergent analysis (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In the present study, Cronbach's Alpha was 0.748 (Pretest) and 0.856 (Posttest).

## Procedures

**Recruitment and assignment of subjects.** After securing all permissions needed, a call for research subjects was released and those who signified their intention to participate were scheduled for pretesting. Following the standard procedure for scale administration, the pretests for OHQ and SWLS were conducted based on the pre-set schedule. After the administration and scoring of the scales, subjects were randomly assigned to the expressive writing condition and the control condition.

**Development of expressive writing intervention.** I developed the expressive writing intervention based on empirical evidences cited by literature on the effectiveness of expressive writing as a self-help intervention that allows individuals a safe way to recognize, understand, validate and accept their feelings and emotions (Frattaroli, 2006; Greenberg & Lepore, 2004; Lepore, Greenberg et al., 2002). It was composed of 6 sessions that focused on the general concerns, family, friends, school work, teachers and views of the future of college students. Each session followed the experiential learning cycle that begins with rapport building, discussion of learning objectives, orientation, instructions, experiencing, data gathering, synthesis and integration (Ortigas, 1999). Before using it, the expressive writing intervention was reviewed and validated by 3 psychologists.

**Expressive writing group.** Subjects followed the same writing instruction each session. They were asked to write about their general concerns, family, friends, school work, teachers and views of their future guided by predetermined probing questions. During each session, subjects were encouraged to self-disclose and self-explore through writing. Each session lasted for an hour and subjects were allowed to bring their diary home giving them more opportunity to express their feelings and sentiments on their own time. The interval between each session is 1 week.

**Control group.** I met the control group twice for the pretest and posttest administration. Throughout the whole study, the control group did not receive any form of treatment or intervention that resembles expressive writing.

**Data Analysis.** Data gathered were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, specifically non-parametric considering the small number of subjects. The Mann Whitney U test was used for the between-groups analysis and the Wilcoxon Sign Rank T Test for the within groups analysis.

## 3. Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Though it is customary not to report the mean and standard deviations for non-parametric results, I still opted to do so as it will present a clearer picture of the happiness and life satisfaction of the subjects before and after the experiment. Based on the results, a considerable increase in the mean scores of the happiness and life satisfaction of the subjects were observed after engaging in expressive writing. However, the result of the control group was unexpected because a minimal change was also observed in their happiness despite the absence of expressive writing. Finally, a drop in their life satisfaction mean scores of the control group was also observed.

### Between-groups analysis

Subjects were grouped based on whether they participated in the expressive writing intervention or not. Their data for both the pretest and posttest of happiness and life satisfaction was compared. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that before the start of the experiment, the happiness level of the expressive writing group ( $Mdn = 105$ ) and the control group ( $Mdn = 111$ ) are the same,  $U = 36$ ,  $p = 0.64$ ,  $r = 0.39$ . Similar result was obtained when the pretest of the life satisfaction of the expressive writing group ( $Mdn = 21$ ) and the control group ( $Mdn = 25.5$ ) was compared,  $U = 48$ ,  $p = 0.266$ ,  $r = 0.23$ . Both results indicate that in terms of happiness and life satisfaction both groups are comparable. However, after the experiment the happiness of the expressive writing group ( $Mdn = 111$ ) and the control group ( $Mdn = 116$ ) remained the same,  $U = 54$ ,  $p = 0.459$ ,  $r = 0.15$ . Similarly, Mann-Whitney also indicated that after the experiment, the life satisfaction of both groups are the same,  $U = 39$ ,  $p = 0.096$ ,  $r = 0.34$  (expressive writing group  $Mdn = 25$ ; control group  $Mdn = 21$ ).

**Table 1. Happiness and life satisfaction of the subjects before and after the experiment**

|                   | Expressive writing condition |                           | Control group            |                           |
|-------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
|                   | Pretest<br><i>M (SD)</i>     | Posttest<br><i>M (SD)</i> | Pretest<br><i>M (SD)</i> | Posttest<br><i>M (SD)</i> |
| Happiness         | 105.45 (8.20)                | 110.91 (8.03)             | 113.58 (9.76)            | 114.83 (11.61)            |
| Life satisfaction | 20.27 (5.78)                 | 24.91 (5.41)              | 23.00 (6.20)             | 20.33 (6.39)              |



### Within-group analysis

Two separate within-group analyses were performed, one for the expressive writing group and the other for the control group. For the expressive writing group, the Wilcoxon Signed-ranks test indicated that a significant difference exists in the happiness level of the subjects before ( $Mdn = 105$ ) and after ( $Mdn = 111$ ) the use of expressive writing,  $Z = -2.274$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = 0.68$ . A significant difference in their life satisfaction was also observed for the same group,  $Z = -2.814$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = 0.85$  (pretest  $Mdn = 21$ ; posttest  $Mdn = 25$ ). For the control group, a significant decrease in their life satisfaction was observed before ( $Mdn = 25.5$ ) and after ( $Mdn = 21$ ) the experiment,  $Z = -2.246$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = 0.65$ . Finally, based also on the Wilcoxon Signed-ranks test, no significant difference was observed in the pretest ( $Mdn = 111$ ) and posttest ( $Mdn = 116$ ) happiness scores of the control group,  $Z = -0.786$ ,  $p = 0.432$ ,  $r = 0.22$ .

## 4. Discussion

The present study dealt with testing the effectiveness of expressive writing in enhancing the subjective well-being (SWB) of university students with specific focus on their happiness and life satisfaction as facets of their SWB. Present results are not only insightful but intriguing as well. It is insightful because this research was able to demonstrate that expressive writing can be an effective cost-efficient tool to help enhance happiness and life satisfaction. It is also intriguing because after the experiment, the happiness and life satisfaction of both groups remained the same despite the absence of expressive writing in the control group. This was something unexpected considering the procedures that were put in place to ensure control during the experimentation. This however does not negate the power and ability of expressive writing to create change in the happiness and life satisfaction levels.

The rigor in the conduct of a psychological experimental research was observed at all times and following the standard practice, the first hypothesis that was tested found no significant difference in the happiness and life satisfaction of the expressive writing group (experimental group) and the control group respectively. This effectively established the baseline required for experimentation which also means that the two groups of university students were comparable before the start of the experiment. Happiness as a construct has been studied extensively and is considered important among individuals, including university students. This is because of its positive link to many desirable outcomes and behaviors as documented in the literature. As such, individuals who are happy are expected to exhibit more positive and desirable traits and behaviors as opposed to those who are unhappy. In

this research, empirical data showed that happiness of university students significantly improved after engaging in expressive writing. This adds credence to the effectiveness claim of expressive writing as an intervention tool to process and handle personal issues and concerns (Wong & Mak, 2016). University students, just like regular individuals, are prone to stressors and challenges present in their environment as they attempt to balance the demands of their academic and personal lives. When these demands and challenges prove too much and they are no longer able to cope, stress level increases and inhibited emotions are experienced. This affects several aspects of their lives including their happiness. Such a scenario prompts university students to seek professional help or engage in self-help techniques in order to cope. Regardless of the manner of help sought, expressive writing can be part of the process since it is considered as an effective tool to deal with pent-up and inhibited emotions because it provides a non-threatening avenue for self-disclosure, expression, and exploration to deal with their negative experiences, feelings, and inhibited emotions. The processing and dealing of these experiences, feelings and emotions result in a more relaxed and happy university student. There is theoretical support for this process; based on the expressive writing model tied to emotional inhibition, the release of inhibited emotions and processing of negative experiences through expressive writing results in the reduction of stress among individuals leading to positive outcomes (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Pennebaker, 1990; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Imagine a university student feeling helpless and scared and unable to speak up while being unceremoniously scolded and reprimanded by a professor. The negative experience may result in feelings of shame, anger and hostility towards the professor and increased frustration because of the inability to act on his pent-up feelings and emotions since it is considered inappropriate to lash out at his professor. The student may turn to expressive writing to express his true emotions and feelings but narrating the things that he wishes he could have said to his professor. Through the process, he was given the opportunity to express how he feels and deal with what happened. The result of which is a more relaxed, calmed and happy student.

I believe the same process applies for life satisfaction. Based on the hypothesis testing performed, a significant improvement was recorded in the life satisfaction of university students after the experiment. This means that their overall assessment of their lives has greatly improved after engaging in expressive writing. This can again be attributed to the non-threatening nature and approach of expressive writing to self-disclosure, exploration and expression. Through expressive writing, university students are able to express and evaluate themselves without the fear of being judged

and rejected by others, the result of which is a more honest evaluation of their lives and situations, improved life satisfaction and a more sound SWB. Similar to happiness, life satisfaction is also crucial not only because of its ability to predict positive outcomes, as provided by literature, but also because of the role it plays in understanding a number of mental health concerns of individuals, including university students (Kaya et al., 2015).

As previously mentioned, the present research also produced unexpected results. Following the basics of experimentation, the posttest results of the experimental and control group should be significantly different after the experimentation where the experimental group is expected to exhibit the desirable characteristics of the dependent variable when compared with the control group. This is based on the logic that it is the experimental group that received the treatment thus it is expected that they will be “better” than the control group. However, this was not the case for the present study because the hypothesis testing performed indicates that the happiness and life satisfaction levels of the two groups remained the same after the experiment. This unconventional result however does not necessarily mean that expressive writing is not an effective tool rather it points out that aside from expressive writing, there are many other ways to improve the happiness and life satisfaction of individuals.

## 5. Conclusion

Just like ordinary individuals, university students are also prone to stress, distress, anxiety and many other negative states brought about by a combination of personal and environmental factors that affect their subjective well-being, specifically their happiness and life satisfaction. This study aimed to test whether expressive writing can be used as a cost-effective way to help enhance both their happiness and life satisfaction and based on the data analysis that was performed, it can be concluded that expressive writing was indeed useful. However despite its results, the present study is not without limitations. First, considering its chosen methodology (experimentation) and the number of subjects that were left (due to mortality), generalizability of results remains a challenge. Second, looking at the result of the between-group analysis of the posttests of the two groups of subjects, a more rigorous control procedure during the experimentation appears to be warranted. Finally, the present study did not attempt to conduct an extended posttest which could have provided more insights into the lasting effect of expressive writing. Future studies may consider addressing these limitations in similar works. Nonetheless, the power and ability of narration through expressive writing to deal with pent-up feelings and

inhibited emotions cannot be denied and educational institutions through its counselors, psychologists and other mental health professionals may opt to consider its use in handling appropriate student cases.

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