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The Effectiveness of Expressive Writing on Psychological Well-Being in Islamic Boarding School Students (Santri)

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Abstract

Introduction

Psychological well-being represents an essential dimension of human quality of life, encompassing autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Ryff, 2013). Globally, disparities in well-being remain substantial. According to the *World Happiness Report 2024*, Finland ranked highest with a score of 7.741, while Afghanistan was lowest with 1.721 (Helliwell et al., 2024). Concurrently, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reported that one in eight individuals suffers from a mental disorder. In Indonesia, the *Indonesian National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS, 2022)* revealed that one in three adolescents (34.9%), equivalent to approximately 15.5 million youths, experienced a mental health disorder within the past year (Center for Reproductive Health, University of Queensland, & Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2022).

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity-seeking, emotional fluctuation, and heightened vulnerability to stress (Erikson in Danyalin & Tantiani, 2022; Leuwol, Jamin, & Ayu, 2023). Effective psychosocial support during this phase is essential, particularly in institutional settings such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), which play a major role in shaping adolescent identity in Indonesia. Pesantren emphasize moral and religious development, yet their structured environments often present unique challenges. Studies have shown that santri (students) struggle with stressors including heavy academic and religious demands, social adaptation, and cultural differences (Nabilah, Arifin, & Tarsono, 2022; Misbahudin & Munawaroh, 2024; Alfarisi, Mulyanto, & Waspodo, 2022). For example, Ayu, Sundari, and Rahmawati (2024) found that 83.4% of pesantren students reported mild-to-moderate stress, significantly associated with adaptability issues.

To address these challenges, expressive writing has emerged as a promising psychological intervention. Originally developed by Pennebaker, expressive writing enables individuals to articulate their deepest emotions and thoughts, promoting both emotional catharsis and cognitive restructuring (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Empirical evidence supports its benefits, including improved emotional regulation, reduced stress, enhanced resilience, and better physical health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2011; Travagin, Margola, & Revenson, 2015). Structured in four stages—recognition, examination, reflection, and application—expressive writing facilitates meaning-making and self-clarity (Oentarto, 2021).

This study investigates the effectiveness of expressive writing in enhancing psychological well-being among students in an Islamic boarding school. The research tested two hypotheses: (1) there would be a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores in the experimental group, and (2) there would be a significant difference in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups.

Method

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design using a pretest-posttest control group approach.

Participants. Thirty 11th-grade students (aged 15–20) from Al-Muayyad Islamic Boarding School in Surakarta participated, divided into 15 for the experimental group and 15 for the control group. Eligibility criteria included: (1) enrollment in grade 11, (2) residence in the pesantren during the study, (3) moderate to below-average psychological well-being scores, and (4) no concurrent psychological interventions.

Procedures. Data collection was conducted in four stages: (1) preparation, including literature review, module development, and informed consent; (2) screening and pretest; (3) intervention delivery; and (4) posttest. The expressive writing intervention was administered over seven consecutive days, guided by the *Ruang Rasa* booklet. Activities included:

- **Day 1 (Stage I – Recognition):** free writing based on prompts.
- **Days 2–5 (Stage II – Examination):** guided writing on personal growth, relationships, and environment.
- **Day 6 (Stage III – Reflection):** synthesis of previous writings.
- **Day 7 (Stage IV – Application):** writing about goals and self-motivation, followed by posttest administration.

Instruments. Psychological well-being was measured using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, adapted by Laila (2019). The instrument covers six dimensions—autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance—with a reliability coefficient of 0.857.

Analysis. Data were processed using IBM SPSS 26. Normality was assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests, and homogeneity through Levene's test. Paired-sample t-tests were employed to examine intra-group changes, while independent-sample t-tests compared posttest scores between groups.

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Results

Preliminary Tests. Normality and homogeneity assumptions were satisfied, with significance values above 0.05, confirming data suitability for parametric testing.

Intra-Group Comparisons. The experimental group demonstrated significant improvements between pre-test and post-test scores ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$). The mean score increased from 124.3 to 129, indicating a meaningful enhancement in psychological well-being. In contrast, the control group's improvement from 124.3 to 127.5 was not statistically significant ($p = 0.092 > 0.05$).

Inter-Group Comparisons. The independent-sample t-test revealed no significant differences in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups ($p = 0.660 > 0.05$). Thus, while Hypothesis 1 was supported, Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Qualitative Observations. During the intervention, participants disclosed stressors related to academic demands (especially Quran memorization), homesickness, and social conflicts. The writing process fostered emotional release, self-reflection, and motivation for self-improvement. Several participants expressed a desire to continue writing independently, highlighting its perceived long-term benefits.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that expressive writing positively influenced psychological well-being within the experimental group, aligning with previous studies (Mardiatusaleha, Herlida, & Novita, 2023; Lam, 2024). However, the absence of significant differences between groups underscores certain methodological and contextual constraints.

First, the homogeneity of the sample may have reduced variability, masking group-level differences (Ziegler & Fiedler, 2024). Both groups shared similar environments, routines, and stressors, potentially minimizing contrasts. Second, the intervention's short duration—limited to one week—may have been insufficient to yield robust intergroup effects. Xu et al. (2019) noted that short-term interventions often produce delayed but significant improvements observable only through follow-up assessments. Third, inconsistencies in implementation, particularly reliance on unsupervised writing tasks, may have compromised fidelity. Inadequate supervision and potential misunderstanding of instructions in the *Ruang Rasa* booklet could have diluted outcomes (Amos, Moase, & Sladeczek, 2025).

Despite these limitations, expressive writing facilitated emotional catharsis and cognitive processing among participants. Themes of homesickness, self-doubt, and social tension were gradually reframed into gratitude, acceptance, and personal aspirations. This transition mirrors findings by Beseghi (2021) and Tang et al. (2023), who emphasized expressive writing's capacity to clarify values, reduce distress, and encourage future-oriented thinking. The observed willingness of participants to continue writing further underscores its acceptability and sustainability as a psychosocial tool.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that expressive writing enhances psychological well-being among pesantren students at the individual level, supporting Hypothesis 1. However, no significant group-level differences were detected, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 2. These findings suggest that expressive writing offers therapeutic value by fostering emotional expression, self-awareness, and goal-setting, though extended interventions and more heterogeneous samples are necessary to fully validate its group-level effectiveness. From a practical standpoint, expressive writing represents a cost-effective, flexible, and culturally adaptable intervention for adolescent mental health in pesantren. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, include follow-up assessments, and strengthen implementation fidelity to maximize outcomes. For educators and counselors, integrating expressive writing into routine student support programs may contribute to healthier adaptation, resilience, and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Expressive Writing; Psychological Well-Being; Santri.

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