

## **Efficacy Of Expressive Writing Therapy in Reducing Embitterment Among University Students**

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### **Abstract**

*The emotional well-being of university students greatly influences their academic success and overall quality of life. Higher education often exposes students to various stressors that can harm their mental health. This study explores the impact of expressive writing therapy on mitigating embitterment, a detrimental emotional response characterized by feelings of injustice and resentment. Using the Negative Life Events Scale for Students (NLESS; Buri, 2018) and the Embitterment Scale for Students (EMBSS; Javaid & Mahmood, 2023), the study involved 20 participants in a pre-post experimental design. The results of Pearson moment correlation found that negative life events and embitterment has strong positive correlation. Further, paired samples t-test results indicate significant reduction in embitterment scores following expressive writing therapy. This research adds to the growing evidence supporting expressive writing as a valuable tool for improving emotional well-being among university students, with implications for enhancing mental health interventions in educational settings.*

**Keywords:** *Embitterment, Negative Life Events, Experimental Study, Expressive Writing Therapy, University Students.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Emotional well-being holds a pivotal role in a student's academic voyage, profoundly influencing their overall learning journey and scholastic achievements. University students frequently grapple with an array of stressors, including academic pressures, societal expectations, and personal tribulations, all of which can precipitate emotional turmoil. Within this realm, embitterment, a multifaceted emotional state characterized by feelings of injustice and resentment, emerges as a particularly distressing emotion with adverse effects on students' mental health.

To confront this issue, expressive writing therapy has arisen as a structured and empirically-supported intervention, holding promise as a means to alleviate embitterment. This study investigates the efficacy of expressive writing therapy in mitigating embitterment among university students. Through an exploration of the results from a rigorous research endeavor, we

seek to illuminate the potential advantages of this therapeutic approach and its implications for fortifying the emotional well-being of higher education students.

According to Linden (2003), embitterment can be defined as an emotional state encompassing enduring sensations of disillusionment, perceived injustices, and a yearning for retribution, all intertwined with a sense of powerlessness. Such embitterment reactions materialize when individuals perceive that their fundamental values, beliefs, or fundamental perspectives regarding the world or themselves have been challenged by perceived injustices. Embitterment, an emotion universally encountered by individuals in the aftermath of unjust events, comprises an enduring desire to reverse past occurrences. It is accompanied by feelings of anger directed towards those deemed responsible, sorrow over incurred losses, a sense of helplessness, and a feeling of being trapped in a state of emotional stagnation, alongside contemplations of seeking redress

Embitterment represents a unique and intricate emotional state that, in some cases, may evolve into a mental health issue. It can manifest as Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder (PTED), co-occur with other mental health conditions, or even become a part of an individual's personality traits (Linden et al., 2011). Notably, embitterment can manifest not solely as a disorder tied to a single traumatic event but also as comorbid symptoms alongside other mental disorders (Linden & Rotter, 2018). Research has found associations between embitterment and various forms of psychopathology, including neuroticism, interpersonal difficulties, depression, and anxiety (Valdes-Stauber et al., 2015; Kuhn et al, 2018). The effect of embitterment can be measured dimensionally (Linden et al., 2009). High levels of embitterment have been linked to decreased life satisfaction, reduced well-being, and heightened perceived stress (Kuhn et al, 2018).

Expressive therapy is a practice encompassing various creative modalities such as art, music, dance, drama, poetry, play, and sand tray, all integrated into psychotherapy, counseling, rehabilitation, or healthcare settings (Malchiodi, 2005, p2). One notable facet of expressive therapy is that expressive writing is defined as the act of personal and emotional writing, unconstrained by conventional writing rules such as spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Expressive writing shifts the focus from the events or objects of a memory to an exploration of one's emotions (Evans, 2012). In the context of adversity, Marcus (2017) describes it as writing centered on emotional aspects rather than the factual or narrative elements of a traumatic experience. Pennebaker, a prominent researcher in expressive writing, has suggested that this practice can be particularly valuable as individuals seek to comprehend significant life upheavals (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Essentially, expressive writing serves as a therapeutic means of personal disclosure, especially for topics that are challenging to discuss openly. Over the past three decades, there have been numerous suggestions that expressive writing holds therapeutic potential.

The physical implications of expressive writing, as elucidated in Pennebaker's and other researchers' studies, are closely associated with enhancements in both mental and physical well-being (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). This research, along with similar investigations, posits that engaging the mind in recalling traumatic or unsettling experiences and expressing the accompanying emotions can exert a substantial influence on various bodily functions. Scholars contend that an individual's emotional state and their physiological well-being are intricately interconnected, mutually affecting multiple bodily systems and processes. These include digestion, heart rate, skin condition, pain sensitivity, and fatigue—areas that undergo significant alterations during stress responses. Chronic stress results in the frequent release of two key hormones, cortisol

and adrenaline, which can have detrimental effects on physiological functioning (Doyle & Hutton, 2013).

Psychological elements influence the learning capacity of students (Ikramullah et al., 2023). Psychological discursiveness has influence on perception (Ramzan et al., 2023). The provision of social support and successful social adjustment enhances the academic performance of students (Maqbool et al., 2021). Perceived social support plays role in improving quality of life (Adeeb et al., 2017). The mindfulness of teachers is impacted by job-related stress (Javaid et al., 2023). Students typically encounter a moderate degree of satisfaction within their educational settings (Ramzan et al., 2023).

In a study with 42 Japanese undergraduates, positive expressive writing prompts increased willingness to write about stressful experiences. Positive prompts effectively maintained expressive writing and reduced interruptions, showing promise as a stress intervention (Oishi, 2023). In a pioneering study on expressive writing in college students, 255 undergraduates from the University of Mississippi completed an online survey. The study found that expressive writing was associated with lower sadness or depression levels in college adjustment. It also noted more women engaged in expressive writing, with no other significant differences (Wilbanks, 2018).

Another study explored the impact of expressive writing on college students prone to depression, initially exhibiting elevated symptoms but currently experiencing lower levels. Ninety undergraduates were randomly assigned to write about either a superficial topic or their deep emotions for three days. Half of them received a 20-minute "booster session" five weeks later. The results indicated a significant reduction in depression symptoms after six months in the group practicing expressive writing ( $n = 57$ ) compared to the control group ( $n = 40$ ). This was especially notable among students who actively suppressed negative thoughts to prevent depression relapse (Gortner et al., 2006).

Research on expressive writing's broader emotional effects explored its link to well-being, including happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude. In a study examining expressive writing's impact on well-being, participants ( $n = 84$ ) either wrote gratitude letters or were in a non-writing control group for eight weeks. Expressive letter-writers experienced increasing happiness levels, with significant improvement compared to the control group ( $n = 40$ ) from the first to last writing session. This highlights the positive effect of letter writing on college students' well-being, showing consistent benefits after each gratitude letter (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Emotions affects language use (Javaid et al., 2023), this way writing capabilities helps in expression.

A recent study further assessed effectiveness of an expressive writing intervention for working adults experiencing embitterment through a randomized controlled trial. The intervention's impact on reducing work-related rumination, embitterment, and sleep quality was evaluated, with follow-up assessments at interval one month and three months. Results supported showed no significant differences between factual writing and expressive writing groups when controlling for baseline values. However, both groups exhibited reduced affective rumination and embitterment, improved sleep quality and increased detachment during the intervention. These findings suggest that embitterment diminished following the writing exercise, irrespective of emotional disclosure, warranting further research (Michailidis & Cropley, 2019).

This study's rationale is firmly grounded in the recognition of the utmost importance of emotional well-being among university students. The higher education environment often exposes students

to a multitude of stressors and negative life events, which can deeply impact their mental health and overall quality of life. In the face of these challenges, students may undergo a range of complex emotional responses, and one that stands out for its potentially detrimental effects is embitterment. Embitterment is characterized by enduring feelings of injustice and resentment, emotions that can significantly impede academic success and overall happiness.

Given the detrimental influence of embitterment on students' well-being, it becomes imperative to explore effective interventions to address this issue. Expressive writing therapy emerges as a promising approach to mitigate embitterment in university students. This intervention encourages individuals to process and articulate their emotions through writing, offering a structured avenue for confronting and managing negative feelings. Objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of expressive writing therapy in university students with embitterment. To explore this following hypothesis were devised.

*H1: There would be significant relationship between negative life events and embitterment among university students.*

*H2: There would be significant difference between pre and post testing scores on embitterment of university students.*

## 2. METHOD

For this study, a quasi-experimental research design was employed. The study involved a sample of 20 university students, aged 18 years and older, selected from both public and private universities. The sample consisted of both male and female students. Data collection was carried out using a purposive sampling technique. Students with high levels of negative life events and embitterment were included in the study. However, students with high levels of negative life events and embitterment who also had serious medical illnesses, disorders, and/or disabilities were excluded from participation.

### 2.1. Measures

In **Negative Life Events Scale for Students (NLESS)**, a review of ten questionnaires assessing stressful life events was undertaken. During this process, specific criteria were applied to refine the questionnaire: (a) only long-term and unpleasant events were retained, (b) items unsuitable for students were excluded, (c) redundant items were removed, and (d) items measuring the same event were consolidated into one. As a result of this rigorous process, a final pool of 25 negative life events was curated to constitute the NLESS. This instrument provides several measures of negative life event stress, including (a) normative scoring, (b) differentiation between stress from recent and distant events, and (c) the count of experienced stressful life events, both recent and past. Preliminary examinations suggest that the NLESS is a robust measurement tool with the potential for effective predictive use in various research contexts (Buri, 2018).

The **Embitterment Scale for Students (EMBSS)** comprises seventeen items categorized into five factors. Factor one, labeled "Academic and Situational Impact," and factor two, named "Distrustfulness," consist of four items each. The remaining three factors, "Negative Perception," "Professional Jealousy," and "Bittered Reaction," include three items each. The scale demonstrates a reliability coefficient of 0.8 (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023).

## 2.2. Procedure

The research began by providing informed consent forms and demographic sheets to the participants. Participants were provided informed consent, with the assurance that they could withdraw at any point without facing penalties. Baseline screening was carried out and individuals exhibiting high levels of negative life events and embitterment underwent experiment. Pre- and post-testing were administered to the selected treatment group. Students were enrolled for this study were called at the Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University Faisalabad for therapy sessions. Negative life events and levels of embitterment were assessed before to the exam. Participants received clear instructions over five daily sessions and developed a connection with therapists to foster a supportive environment. In each session, they wrote for 20 minutes about experiences that made them angry. The therapy promoted processing and emotional expression. Following therapy, participants talked about their experiences and received a debriefing on the goal of the study. They acknowledged amazement at the therapy's success in addressing underlying emotions and offering fresh viewpoints on the past. Students from many areas seemed to benefit from this brief therapy. It proved to help them process unpleasant feelings and enhance their emotional wellbeing. Confidentiality of all information obtained during the experiments was strictly maintained.

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the demographic characteristics of the sample. Pearson moment correlation was employed to explore relationships. Pre- and post-treatment comparisons within the groups were assessed using paired samples t-test statistics. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software.

## 3. RESULTS

In the results section, we provide a concise overview of participant demographics. Then pre and post test results explaining how effective expressive writing therapy is for reducing level of embitterment. Our study featured 20 university students, aged 18 and above, with an equal gender split of 9 males and 11 females. Regarding age distribution, half fell within the 18-23 age range and half above that. Academic programs included half pursuing bachelor's degrees, rest half from masters and doctorate programs with equal ratio. Participants represented diverse fields of study, with 8 from public sector institutions and 12 from private sector institutions. Most of them belonged to middle class. Residence was evenly split between home and hostel. Family systems consisted of 7 in joint families and 13 in nuclear families. The area of living was divided between 11 rural and 9 urban, while participants came from various provinces.

Table 1: Pearson Moment Correlation between Negative Life Events and Embitterment (N = 20, Pre-Test)

	Embitterment	Negative Life Events
Embitterment	-	.874**
Negative Life Events	-	-

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The findings show a high positive connection between embitterment and negative life events. This argues that the frequency or intensity of bad things happening in life grow in direct proportion to levels of embitterment. In other words, those who experienced bad things happening to them in

life are more likely to have higher degrees of embitterment and these two variables seem to be related.

Table 2: Paired Samples t-test

Constructs	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				LL	UL			
EMB_Pre	58.35	2.834	0.634					
Pair				21.106	27.994	14.92	19	0.000
EMB_Post	33.8	6.42	1.436					

Note: EMB = Embitterment, SD = Standard Deviation, SE = Standard Error, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit, df = Degree of freedom

This table presents the descriptive statistics for the paired samples of the Embitterment construct (EMB) before (EMB\_Pre) and after (EMB\_Post) an intervention or treatment. The mean score before the intervention was 58.35 (SD = 2.834), while the mean score after the intervention was 33.8 (SD = 6.42). Standard Error (SE) values were also calculated, with SE for EMB\_Pre at 0.634 and SE for EMB\_Post at 1.436.

The table also outlines the results obtained from a paired samples t-test conducted to assess the impact of an intervention on the Embitterment construct. The analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in means ( $M = 24.55$ ) between the EMB\_Pre and EMB\_Post scores. To further characterize this effect, standard deviation calculations were performed, yielding a value of 7.359, along with the determination of the standard error ( $SE = 1.646$ ). The 95% Confidence Interval (CI) for the mean difference was computed to range from 21.106 to 27.994, highlighting the precision of this effect, as evident from the relatively narrow CI at the 95% confidence level. With 19 degrees of freedom (df), the t-value was 14.92, and the two-tailed p-value was 0.000. The p-value further confirms the statistical significance of the findings.

In summary, the paired samples t-test revealed a substantial and statistically significant reduction in Embitterment scores following the intervention. This suggests that the intervention had a positive effect on reducing embitterment in the participants.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to assess the relationship between negative life events and embitterment and impact of expressive writing therapy reducing embitterment in university students. These two hypotheses were tested and produced positive results. Our study involved 20 university students equally split by gender. Age-wise, half fell within 18-23, while the rest were older. We had an even mix of degree programs of students. Participants hailed from diverse academic fields, with 8 from public and 12 from private institutions.

According to first hypothesis testing, unpleasant life experiences may have a major impact on a person's emotional state, possibly increasing emotions of embitterment. To better understand the nature of this association and to look into potential causal elements, next hypothesis was formulated. Additionally, testing of interventions aimed at lessening the effect of unfavorable life events on people's feelings of embitterment are furthered based on this strong relationship.

The results of hypothesis two provide compelling evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention in achieving this objective. The mean Embitterment scores before the intervention were notably higher than those recorded after the intervention. This substantial reduction in mean scores signifies a positive change in the participants' embitterment levels. The paired samples t-test yielded a highly significant result underscoring the substantial impact of expressive writing therapy.

Beyond statistical significance, it is crucial to assess the clinical significance of the observed reduction in embitterment. The mean difference represents a substantial change, suggesting that expressive writing therapy produced a meaningful decrease in embitterment scores. This is especially relevant in the context of university students who may face various stressors and challenges during their academic journey.

Studies are in line with this research and shed light on how negative life events relates to Embitterment and expressive writing's effects on individuals, especially students, in different contexts. Embitterment, a response to perceived life injustices, can pose functional challenges. A study by Muschalla and von Kenne (2022) explored the role of socioeconomic status, negative life events, and core values in embitterment perception. Surveying individuals, it finds higher embitterment linked to more negative events, lower well-being, and reduced income.

Oishi (2023) examined Japanese undergraduates, investigating the effects of positive expressive writing prompts. The study found that positive prompts effectively increased students' willingness to write about stressful experiences, maintaining expressive writing while reducing interruptions. This suggests positive prompts can serve as a promising stress intervention tool.

Furthermore, Wilbanks (2018) study on university undergraduates, explored expressive writing's impact on adjustment. Expressive writing was associated with lower sadness and depression levels during the college transition, particularly benefiting emotional well-being. Interestingly, more women engaged in expressive writing, but no other significant differences were observed.

In conclusion, studies highlight the potential benefits of expressive writing in managing stress and improving students' emotional well-being. Oishi's work emphasizes the effectiveness of positive prompts, while Wilbanks' study underscores expressive writing's role in smoother university transitions, especially for emotional challenges. In concert, these investigations enrich the expanding realm of research that underscores the efficacy of expressive writing as a valuable resource for fortifying mental well-being and addressing the rigors of university existence. The prospect of additional inquiry in this domain offers potential for refining and broadening the utilization of expressive writing interventions across various educational landscapes.

#### **4.1. Conclusion**

To sum up, this research offers compelling evidence for relationship of negative life events and embitterment further affirming the efficacy of expressive writing therapy in mitigating

embitterment among university students. postexperimental design was employed. The substantial and meaningful reduction in embitterment scores underscores the intervention's capacity to enhance emotional well-being among university students. These results emphasize the relevance of integrating expressive writing therapy into mental health interventions within educational contexts. Future investigations may delve into the enduring advantages and wider-reaching potential of this therapeutic method.

#### 4.2. Implications

The favorable results of this study are consistent with prior research on expressive writing therapy. They underscore the intervention's promise as a valuable resource for tackling emotional turmoil, including embitterment, among university students. Expressive writing offers a structured avenue for individuals to delve into and navigate their emotions, ultimately leading to emotional relief and a reduction in negative emotional states.

#### 4.3. Limitations

Although these findings offer promise, it's crucial to recognize some inherent limitations. The study centered around a particular group (university students), warranting caution when extrapolating the results to different demographics. Furthermore, the research did not delve into the lasting effects of expressive writing therapy beyond the immediate post-intervention evaluation. Subsequent studies could delve into the sustainability of the observed decrease in embitterment over an extended period.

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