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Expressive writing therapy for academic stress among twelfth-grade students

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Abstract

Background: Grade XII students are in the transitional phase of late adolescence, making them vulnerable to severe psychosocial pressure. A dense curriculum, final exam preparation, and intense competition for university entrance selection trigger academic stress. Expressive Writing Therapy (EWT) is an effective independent complementary nursing intervention for managing emotional pressure, utilizing expressive writing to release mental burdens and facilitate cognitive restructuring.

Purpose: To identify the effect of expressive writing therapy on reducing academic stress levels in grade XII students.

Method: A quantitative research method with a quasi-experimental approach using a one-group pretest-posttest design. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 36 Grade XII students. The research instrument was an adapted version of the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) questionnaire. Bivariate data analysis was performed using the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test.

Results: Statistical analysis showed that the mean academic stress score before the intervention (pre-test) was 53.83, which significantly decreased to 35.56 after the intervention (post-test), yielding a $p < 0.001$

Conclusion: There is a meaningful and significant effect of Expressive Writing Therapy on reducing academic stress levels among Grade XII students.

Keywords: Academic Stress; Expressive Writing Therapy; Late Adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

Late adolescence (aged 17–21 years) is a crucial developmental transition characterized by the stabilization of cognitive functions and the formation of a mature self-identity (Hakim & Rajan, 2025). During school years, Grade XII students face intense psychosocial pressures and academic curriculum demands, such as mastering subject materials, final graduation exams, and anxiety regarding public university (PTN) entrance selection (Afifa, 2020). These burdens can serve as potent stressors that trigger academic stress if students lack adaptive coping strategies. Globally, data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2024 indicated high levels of anxiety among school children, with 66% of students reporting stress due to the fear of receiving poor

grades. Nationally, the 2022 Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) reported that 1 in 3 Indonesian adolescents experienced mental health issues within the past 12 months. Furthermore, according to the 2023 Indonesian Health Survey (IHS) by the Ministry of Health (Kusumaratna, Said, Rifky, Hasan, & Suci, 2025). Banten Province ranked third highest nationally for the prevalence of psychological stress (1.7%), with the incidence of stress among school-aged children in Banten reaching 13.96%. A preliminary study conducted at Senior High School 19 Tangerang in January 2026 confirmed this phenomenon; all interviewed students complained about heavy workloads and difficulty concentrating,

displaying stress level scores ranging from moderate to high (5 to 8 out of 10) (Cignetti & Piacentini, 2024).

Academic stress experienced by Grade XII students must not be overlooked, as it carries systemic adverse effects. Internal consequences include sleep disturbances (insomnia), decreased academic focus, loss of motivation, academic procrastination, and an increased risk of developing clinical depression or chronic anxiety (Fadhilah & Boediman, 2025). To minimize these impacts, psychiatric nursing care requires a psychological modality therapy that is independent, applicable, and efficient. Expressive Writing Therapy (EWT), pioneered by James Pennebaker, represents a highly suitable intervention option (Dewi, Agindaris, Susanto, & Wardani, 2025). Through EWT, students are guided to express all their thoughts, anxieties, and deepest feelings regarding academic pressure into free-form writing without worrying about grammar or spelling rules (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

Psychologically, expressive writing therapy operates through two main pathways: (1) emotional catharsis (ventilation), which helps reduce psychological inhibition and calms autonomic nervous system activity; and (2) cognitive organization (sense-making), which helps the brain process unstructured stressors or traumatic experiences within the prefrontal cortex. Resolving emotions through writing stimulates a reduction in cortisol (the stress hormone) levels in the body. The positive effects of expressive writing on reducing anxiety responses and stress in adolescents (Wekoadi, Ridwan, & Sugiarto, 2018; Maulida & Fitriyani, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative method with a quasi-experimental approach and a one-group pretest-posttest design. The sample consisted of 36 Grade XII students selected using a non-probability, purposive sampling method. A questionnaire sheet was employed as the data collection instrument. The inclusion criteria were active Grade XII students identified with moderate academic stress (based on initial screening results), who voluntarily participated as respondents, were cooperative, and were proficient in reading and writing. The research was conducted at Senior High School 19 Tangerang, Banten Province. The study was carried out sequentially from February 23 to February 26, 2026. To measure academic stress levels, the study adopted the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA). This instrument consists of 16 items measuring 5 major dimensions of academic stress using a 5-point Likert scale, which has been verified for construct validity (factor loading > 0.5) and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.81) based on previous adaptations.

The Expressive Writing Therapy (EWT) intervention was applied directly by the researcher according to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for 4 consecutive days, with each session lasting 15–20 minutes. The therapeutic stages included the Recognition phase (identifying emotions), Examination phase (writing detailed stressors), Juxtaposition phase (reflecting on cognitive reframing), and Application to the self phase (formulating coping strategies). Univariate analysis was performed to determine the frequency distribution of respondent characteristics and research variables. Bivariate analysis to evaluate the pre- and post-intervention effects was performed using the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, as the data were not normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk $p < 0.05$). This study strictly adhered to health research ethics principles throughout.

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RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Univariate Analysis (N= 36)

Variable	Results
Age (n/%) (Mean±SD) (Range) (Year)	(17.4±0.6) (17-19)
17	23/63.9
18	11/30.6
19	2/5.5
Gender (n/%)	
Male	13/36.1
Female	23/63.9
Academic Stress (Pre-test) (n/%)	
Mild	0/0.0
Moderate	36/100.0
Severe	0/0.0
Academic Stress (Post-test) (n/%)	
Mild	25/69.4
Moderate	11/30.6
Severe	0/0.0

Table 1 shows that the respondents were aged between 17 and 19 years, with a mean age of 17.4 ± 0.6 years. Most respondents were 17 years old (63.9%), followed by 18 years old (30.6%) and 19 years old (5.5%). Based on gender, the majority of respondents were female (63.9%), while males accounted for 36.1%. Prior to the intervention, all respondents (100.0%) experienced a moderate level of academic stress, with no respondents categorized as having mild or severe stress. After the intervention, the level of academic stress decreased, as most respondents were categorized as having mild academic stress (69.4%), while 30.6% remained in the moderate category, and no respondents experienced severe academic stress. These findings indicate an improvement in academic stress levels following the intervention.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

Category	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z-score	p-value (Sig.)
Post-Test – Pre-Test				
Negative Ranks	18.50	666.00		
Positive Ranks	0.00	0.00	-5.241	0.00
Ties				

Table 2 highlights that out of 36 respondents, all 36 students experienced a decrease in their academic stress scores (Negative Ranks) after the expressive writing intervention. No student showed an increase in scores (Positive Ranks = 0) or unchanged scores (Ties = 0). The statistical analysis yielded a P value = 0.00. Because the P value ($0.00 < 0.05$), H_0 is

rejected and H_a is accepted, concluding that Expressive Writing Therapy significantly reduces academic stress among Grade XII students.

DISCUSSION

Descriptive findings showed that all Grade XII students (100%) initially suffered from moderate

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academic stress, with a mean score of 53.83. The accumulation of final-year school demands positions students under constant emotional tension (Nuraeni, Hasan, & Satrio, 2023). This moderate stress condition represents students reaching the threshold of their cognitive load capacity (Geist, 2021). The subject demographics were dominated by female adolescents (63.9%). The researchers argue that female adolescents are psychologically more vulnerable to academic stress due to their tendency to employ emotion-focused coping mechanisms (such as rumination) and their higher sensitivity to social expectations and fear of academic failure compared to male peers (Ruark, 2019).

Post-intervention measurements revealed a stark decrease in academic stress levels; the majority of students (69.4%) transitioned into the mild stress category, lowering the total mean score to 35.56. This cognitive shift and emotional decompression occurred because translating problems into a written medium serves as a catharsis that releases internal psychological barriers (Ilaloo, Ahmadi, Zahrakar, & Cicognani, 2022). Through structured reflective writing over 4 days, negative emotional outbursts were converted into more orderly, new cognitive schemas. Reduced scores reflect the subjects' success in rebalancing school environmental demands with their mental capacity through written therapy (Rahmawati, 2024).

Bivariate analysis confirmed a direct, significant effect between the administration of Expressive Writing Therapy and the reduction of academic stress. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test yielded a P value = 0.00 at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, meaning that H_a is fully supported (Sefton, 2024). The statistics show that 100% of the sample (36 students) experienced a positive reduction in stress vulnerability scores (Negative Ranks). These results demonstrate that the therapeutic practice of expressive writing effectively regulates emotional tension. Guided by four structured SOP steps (recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to the self), students were prompted to acknowledge their anxiety, unburden their thoughts onto paper, reconstruct negative biases into positive reframing, and establish future adaptive steps (Lewis, 2023). Consistent expressive writing breaks the cycle of recurrent negative thoughts (ruminating thoughts) by externalizing them onto paper, thereby reducing the

workload of the brain's working memory (Dalauleng, Widyastuti, & Ridfah, 2024).

This success was heavily influenced by the students' commitment and compliance during the 4 consecutive days of therapy (Sun, Dunne, Hou, & Xu, 2021). Additionally, the reduction in stress was supported by internal factors, such as the emotional openness of the subjects while writing without cognitive censorship or distortion (Zhang, Deng, Zhang, Zhou, Gao, Di, & Zhao, 2025). Although 11 respondents (30.6%) remained in the moderate stress category post-therapy, the researchers assume this was caused by intense, static external stressors, as well as variations in individual psychological resilience. Overall, this study reinforces psychiatric nursing evidence that EWT is highly applicable for reducing psychological stress among school-aged adolescents (Wantini, Suyatno, & Dinni, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The effect of Expressive Writing Therapy on academic stress reduction among Grade XII students, the baseline data indicate that the majority of respondents were female (63.9%) and predominantly 17 years old (63.9%). The baseline academic stress distribution prior to the intervention (pre-test) showed that 100% of respondents experienced moderate stress with a mean score of 53.83. Following the Expressive Writing Therapy intervention (post-test), academic stress levels dropped significantly, with 69.4% of respondents moving to the mild stress category, and the final mean score dropped to 35.56. Bivariate analysis using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test yielded a significance value of P value = 0.00. Because the P value < 0.05, it is concluded that Expressive Writing Therapy exerts a significant effect on reducing academic stress levels in Grade XII students.

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