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Effect of combined deep-breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy on anxiety among students

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Abstract

Background: Anxiety is an emotional condition resulting from anticipation of an unclear threat, which can affect the learning process and adolescent development if not properly managed. Deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy are complementary therapies that can help reduce stress responses and assist individuals in managing emotions and thoughts related to anxiety.

Purpose: To find out the effect of the combination of deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy on anxiety in students.

Method: This research design uses a quasi-experimental approach with a one-group pre-test and post-test design. The research sample was taken using a nonprobability sampling technique, namely accidental sampling, with a total of 20 respondents. The research instrument used a questionnaire on the level of adolescent anxiety, which had been adapted and modified by Ways Alqorny in 2023.

Results: Based on the results of the Paired T Test on the samples, a $p = 0.001$ was obtained, which is less than the significance value ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Conclusion: The results of this study indicate that there is an effect of the combination of deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy on reducing anxiety in students.

Keywords: Adolescents; Anxiety; Deep Breathing Relaxation; Expressive Writing Therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is defined as an emotional condition and the individual's subjective experience toward objects that are unclear and specific due to the anticipation of danger, which allows the individual to take actions to face threats, characterized by feeling confused, worried about the consequences of the conditions faced, difficulty concentrating, appearing restless, appearing tense, and having difficulty sleeping (PPNI 2016). Adolescents are defined as individuals in the age group of 10-19 years; this phase is a phase in which the transition from childhood to adulthood occurs and involves physical, sexual, psychological, and social developmental changes, all occurring simultaneously. This phase is also the right and important time for character formation, physical, emotional, and social changes, including exposure to

poverty, abuse, or violence, which can make adolescents vulnerable to mental health problems (Witri, Ningrum, Ayubbana, Inayati, & Dharma, 2022).

Globally, one in seven adolescents aged 10-19 years experiences mental disorders, accounting for 15% of the global disease burden in this age group. It is estimated that 4.1% of adolescents aged 10-14 years and 5.3% of adolescents aged 15-19 years experience anxiety disorders (Wijayanti, Sarwili, & Rukiah, 2025). In Indonesia itself, the number of individuals experiencing emotional mental disorders based on the basic health research in 2018 recorded that the prevalence of emotional mental disorders was 9.8%, with a total of 19 million people aged 15 years and older (Riskseddas, 2018). The most recent prevalence released by the Indonesian Health Survey

(IHS) in 2023 shows a significant increase, with the percentage of emotional mental disorders among the population aged ≥ 15 years reaching 10.2%. Banten Province ranks third in Indonesia for emotional mental disorder rates, with a percentage of 2.7% (Katuuk, Wahyuni, & Buhang, 2024). The Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS, 2022) reported that 15.5 million adolescents, or about 34.9%, experience mental health disorders, with anxiety being the most common problem, accounting for 26.7% of 1,514 adolescents aged 10-17 years in Indonesia. Female adolescents have a higher percentage at 28.2% compared to male adolescents at 25.4% (Kemimaro, Neor, Nursyam, & Agusthia, 2026).

Anxiety in adolescents is caused by age factors. At this stage, adolescents face unexpected situations as well as unconscious desires and threats that can cause anxiety. In addition, anxiety in adolescents is often caused by the inability to complete developmental tasks, painful past experiences, loss events, physical forms or conditions, family conflicts, and fears or failures. For high school students, anxiety often arises from various demands and new experiences accompanied by intimidation, such as school exams, graduation, college entrance selection, as well as expectations to determine the future. Pressure from parents, teachers, and the surrounding environment, combined with concerns about failure and peer judgment, further increases the feelings of fear and restlessness experienced; this situation can have a negative impact if left unchecked (Lathifunnisa, 2024).

Anxiety in adolescents can cause various negative impacts if not managed properly. Individuals experiencing anxiety generally show symptoms such as feelings of panic, somatic discomfort such as chest tightness or stomach disturbances as well as a decline in cognitive function (Syafi'i & Naqiyah, 2024). These cognitive disturbances include the ability to process information, maintain concentration, and short- and medium-term memory function. This condition can lead to a decrease in adolescents' activeness in the learning process, hinder concentration, and ultimately impact the decline of academic achievement. If anxiety is not well managed, it can disrupt the overall learning process and hinder the development of adolescent potential (Putri, Daulay, & Marlindawani, 2025). In addition,

improper handling of anxiety disorders carries the risk of causing more serious complications, such as depression, substance abuse, and even suicidal behavior (Maimanah, 2025). Therefore, appropriate handling through nursing interventions is required, with non-pharmacological approaches that have been proven effective in reducing anxiety, such as deep breathing relaxation therapy and expressive writing therapy (Rosmiati, 2021).

The Application of Deep Breathing Relaxation Therapy as Anxiety Management in Adolescents. Based on the results of community service carried out at Muhammadiyah 2 Bobotsari High School, it can be concluded that training in deep breathing relaxation techniques using lecture and direct demonstration methods has proven effective and successfully increased knowledge and reduced student anxiety (Lathifunnisa, 2024). The results of the first community service session showed that respondents aged 17 had a high percentage, with the majority having adequate knowledge levels and varying levels of anxiety. The second session showed a significant increase in knowledge and a decrease in anxiety after the training was conducted. In addition, there is a research result titled Expressive Writing as an Emotional Regulation Strategy to Reduce Future Anxiety in Adolescents (Kemimaro et al., 2026).

RESEARCH METHOD

A quasi-experimental approach with a one group pre-test and post-test design. The determination of the sample size in this study refers to Roscoe's Theory, which states that for experimental research with strict control, a sample size of 10 to 20 people is considered adequate and representative. The sampling was carried out using the accidental sampling technique. Inclusion criteria include respondents who are willing to become research subjects, respondents who have mild to moderate anxiety levels according to the adolescent anxiety instrument from Qorny al Ways, and respondents who are in grade XI. The research was conducted at Senior High School 14 Tangerang City. This research was carried out from April 14 to April 17, 2026. The data instrument in this study used a teen anxiety level questionnaire that had been adapted and modified by Ways Alqorny in 2023. Data processing was carried out using the SPSS version 27 statistical software application. Univariate analysis was used to obtain a

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description of the frequency distribution of each research variable. Bivariate analysis was used to test the hypothesis between two variables (independent

and dependent). Bivariate analysis can be carried out using the Paired Samples T Test.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Distribution of Respondent (N= 20)

Variable	Results
Age (Mean$\pm$SD)(Range)(Year)	(16.5 $\pm$ 0.8)(15–18)
Gender (n/%)	
Male	5/25.0
Female	15/75.0
Anxiety Level (Pretest) (n/%)	
Mild	17/85.0
Moderate	3/15.0
Anxiety Level (Posttest) (n/%)	
Mild	9/45.0
Moderate	11/55.0

Based on Table 1, the respondents had a mean age of 16.5 $\pm$ 0.8 years, with an age range of 15–18 years. The majority of respondents were female (15; 75.0%), while 5 respondents (25.0%) were male. Before the intervention (pretest), most respondents experienced mild anxiety (17; 85.0%), whereas 3 respondents (15.0%) experienced moderate anxiety. After the intervention (posttest), 9 respondents (45.0%) remained in the mild anxiety category, while 11 respondents (55.0%) were classified as having moderate anxiety.

Table 2. Average Anxiety Levels Before and After Intervention

Variable	Mean	SD	Min-Max
Pre-Test	20.90	5.270	14-34
Post-Test	13.55	4.322	6-22

The table above shows that the average anxiety level before being given deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy was 20.90 with a standard deviation of 5.270, with the lowest anxiety level before the intervention being 14 and the highest value being 34. Then, the average value after the intervention was 13.55, with a standard deviation of 4.322, and the anxiety level after the intervention had a minimum value of 6 and a maximum anxiety level of 22.

Table 3. Normality Test (N=20)

Variable	Statistik	Sig.
Pre-Test	0.923	0.116
Post-Test	0.961	0.560

The table above shows that from a total of 20 respondent data for the pre-test and post-test, normality tests

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were conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test because the number of respondents was less than 50. From the results of this test, a value > 0.05 was obtained in both the pre-test and post-test data groups, indicating that the data were normally distributed and thus hypothesis testing could be conducted using parametric tests. The value obtained for the pre-test data was 0.116 and for the post-test data was 0.560.

Table 4. Test Paired Sample T-Test

Variable	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Pre-Post Test	7.35000	5.499	6.977	0.001

From the table, the results of the hypothesis test using the Parametric Paired Samples T-Test show that statistically the p-value is < 0.05 , which in this study obtained a value of 0.001. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_a) in this study is accepted. This indicates that there is an effect of deep breathing relaxation collaboration and expressive writing therapy on reducing anxiety levels in students.

DISCUSSION

The research results indicate that the majority of respondents were female, totaling 15 people (75%) out of 20 respondents. This dominance of female respondents is in line with recent research findings showing that anxiety levels in adolescent females tend to be higher compared to males. Recent studies reveal that adolescent females have higher severity of anxiety, primarily influenced by factors such as academic pressure, sleep quality, social relationships, as well as suboptimal social support (Bao & Han, 2025).

From a psychological aspect, women tend to be more emotionally sensitive when facing academic and social pressures. It shows that female students more often use emotion-focused coping strategies, which can increase anxiety levels. In addition, women are more sensitive to academic and social demands, thereby worsening mental conditions. Differences in physiological responses to stress also play a role. Research has found that women have higher activity in brain areas that regulate emotions, such as the cingulate gyrus, making them more vulnerable to stress and anxiety. Higher hormonal responses to stress also strengthen this vulnerability. The interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors causes women to be at higher risk of experiencing anxiety disorders compared to men (Firdausy, Wardani, Larasati, & Pramesona, 2024).

The research results explain that the anxiety level before being given the deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy intervention was mild anxiety in 17 respondents (85%), moderate anxiety in 3 respondents (15%) with a mean of 20.90 and a standard deviation of 5.270, with the lowest anxiety level before the intervention being 14 and the highest value being 34. The anxiety is caused by stress factors due to facing academic and social pressures. The respondents often think about subject exams, family situations, and also friendship problems, which leads to anxiety in themselves. This is reinforced by a theory that states that anxiety is a feeling of fear of something that might happen, resulting from the anticipation of risks, demands, competition, and misfortunes in life, which can affect a person's physical and mental well-being, thereby causing feelings of anxiety (Pastari, Martini, & Endriyani, 2023). The reduction in anxiety levels in respondents occurred due to a combination of deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy, which provided an effect in reducing anxiety. The deep breathing technique works by increasing the sensitivity of baroreceptors and activating the vagus nerve, thereby suppressing sympathetic nervous system activity and cortisol hormone production, while also increasing endorphin hormones that create a feeling of comfort. This helps reduce anxiety both physiologically and emotionally (Sari, Wibowo, & Susanti, 2025). Expressive writing therapy helps refocus attention, stimulates the parasympathetic system, and lowers cortisol levels. This therapy also enhances emotional regulation and serves as a means of catharsis to relieve emotional stress (Lutfi, Sriyani, & Rahmaniati, 2022). These two techniques complement each other, with deep breathing focusing on the physiological aspect and expressive writing therapy on the cognitive-emotional aspect, making

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them together effective in reducing anxiety (Maryany, Lail, & Azzahroh, 2024).

The results of the research conducted by the researcher show that there is a decrease in students' anxiety levels in the pre-test and post-test scores of the deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy collaboration, as indicated by the mean rank results. In the pre-test data, the mean score obtained was 20.90, and in the post-test, the mean score obtained was 13.55. This is also evidenced by a $p = 0.001$ ($\alpha < 0.05$), so it can be concluded that the administration of deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy reduces anxiety levels in students (Mulki, Ta'adi, & Sunarjo, 2021).

Deep breathing relaxation is beneficial for improving alveolar ventilation, maintaining gas exchange, regulating breathing rate and pattern, improving diaphragm function, preventing atelectasis, and reducing anxiety. The relaxation process lengthens muscle fibers, reduces the transmission of neural impulses to the brain, and subsequently decreases brain activity as well as other body systems. A decrease in heart rate and respiratory rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption, along with an increase in alpha brain activity and peripheral skin temperature, are characteristics of the relaxation response, thereby making the body relaxed (Witri et al., 2022).

Expressive writing has a variety of important benefits. This activity helps individuals gain a deeper understanding, both of themselves and others, through self-representation in writing. Additionally, expressive writing can enhance the ability to convey oneself, strengthen self-esteem, and stimulate creativity. Communication and interpersonal skills can also develop through this process. Expressive writing also serves as a medium to channel excessive emotions, thereby reducing inner pressure. Moreover, this activity helps individuals improve their ability to adapt in facing various life challenges. This process also contributes to lowering stress and anxiety levels and creating a sense of relief (Septiani, Afrianti, & Pertiwi, 2025).

Changes in anxiety levels are demonstrated by the anxiety questionnaire scores. The results obtained before the intervention showed that 17 students experienced mild anxiety, and 3 students experienced moderate anxiety. After the intervention, there was a decrease in anxiety among the students, with 9

students in the not anxious category and 11 other students in the mild anxiety category. The decrease in anxiety levels in respondents after being given deep breathing relaxation intervention is reflected in the respondents' statements that they feel more comfortable and relaxed while undergoing therapy. The researchers assume that this technique can help achieve peace of mind and direct thoughts and feelings to become calmer. According to theory, this happens because deep breathing relaxation therapy can reduce tension, allowing individuals to feel more comfortable. In a relaxed state, the production of Corticotropin Releasing Hormone (CRH) plays a role in improving mood, making individuals feel calmer and happier. In addition, the level of Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone (ACTH) also decreases, which ultimately contributes to reducing the stress and anxiety levels experienced by students (Wijayanti et al., 2025).

After being given deep breathing relaxation, the respondents were subsequently given expressive writing therapy. The reduction of anxiety in the respondents was observed during this study, which indicated that the respondents truly released themselves while writing. They wrote for themselves without anyone else seeing and honestly expressed their feelings, so after writing, they felt very satisfied that they were able to channel both mental burdens, negative emotions, and unpleasant events. The researcher assumes that performing expressive writing therapy can reduce anxiety because the writing activity is carried out freely to express feelings and thoughts. This aligns with the theory that by using words, expressive writing gives people the opportunity to convey their emotions emotionally. By expressing emotions better, their relationship with others and themselves will be more stable (Katuuk et al., 2024).

Controlled deep breathing relaxation can enhance vagus nerve stimulation, thereby strengthening parasympathetic nervous system activity and suppressing sympathetic nervous system dominance. The increase in parasympathetic activity provides an inhibitory effect on the limbic system, including the amygdala, thereby reducing amygdala hyperactivity that plays a role in triggering anxiety responses. In addition, this technique also increases the involvement of the medial prefrontal cortex, which functions in emotion regulation and provides top-down control over the amygdala. The decrease in amygdala activity impacts the reduced activation of the

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hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis and lowers the release of stress hormones such as cortisol. As a result, physiological symptoms of anxiety such as palpitations, muscle tension, and feelings of panic can decrease. This mechanism makes deep breathing techniques one of the effective non-pharmacological nursing interventions for controlling anxiety (Maharani & Wandini, 2026). In line with this, expressive writing therapy plays a role in helping individuals restore and focus attention, which then stimulates the parasympathetic system and hypothalamus to lower cortisol levels. This therapy affects cognitive and emotional aspects by enhancing emotion regulation abilities, serving as a cathartic means to channel emotional pressure, and helping individuals gain new psychological energy. Through this process, individuals can direct their attention more adaptively, reduce emotional burden, and increase focus on goals and more adaptive behaviors (Lutfi et al., 2022).

Thus, deep breathing relaxation and expressive writing therapy have a complementary relationship. Deep breathing relaxation plays a role in regulating physiological responses, while expressive writing therapy focuses on processing cognitive and emotional aspects. The combination of both has been proven to provide optimal therapeutic effects in addressing anxiety (Kusumaratna, Said, Rifky, Hasan, & Suci, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study on anxiety levels before the implementation of the Deep Breathing Relaxation and Expressive Writing Therapy Collaboration intervention on students, the lowest score was found in the mild anxiety category with a score of 14 and the highest score in the moderate anxiety category with a score of 34. Anxiety levels after the intervention had the lowest score of 6 in the no anxiety category, and the highest score of 22 in the mild anxiety category. The average anxiety level before and after the intervention was 20.90 with a standard deviation of 5.271 and a min-max value of 14-34. After the intervention, the average was 13.55 with a standard deviation of 4.322 and a min-max value of 6-22. The study results showed the effect of providing a Collaboration of Deep Breathing Relaxation and Expressive Writing Therapy on anxiety in students, proven by a $P = 0.001$, which means $P < 0.05$, indicating there is a difference in

values before and after the intervention.

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