Does therapeutic writing help people with long-term conditions? Systematic review, realist synthesis, and economic modelling

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CITATION
PLANNED RESEARCH

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Abstract
This article, which was first published in the Lapidus Journal, introduces a research project commissioned by the National Institute for Health Research. Two approaches will be used: (i) a systematic review focusing mainly on outcomes and quantitative data, and (ii) a realist review which will enable evaluation of the contexts where therapeutic writing is more likely to be beneficial and the mechanisms that might be operating. The team will also evaluate whether therapeutic writing would be good value for money if implemented more widely in the NHS.

Keywords
evidence synthesis; systematic review; therapeutic writing; long-term conditions; economic modelling; realist review

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) is a main funding body for medical research in the UK. They have recently commissioned a major piece of research on the evaluation of therapeutic writing in people with long-term physical or mental health conditions. This is an 18-month project which started at the beginning of 2013 and the team conducting the project are listed towards the end of this article. There are a number of reasons why this project may have been initiated recently, but one is possibly the large amount of research...
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that has been carried out on an intervention known as ‘emotional disclosure’ or ‘expressive writing’, where participants are invited to write for a short amount of time, such as 60 mins in total, about their illness, other things that are troubling them, or traumatic events in their past lives. Studies known as ‘randomised controlled trials’ have been undertaken comparing expressive writing to writing about everyday topics, or where people have not been asked to write at all. Participants are then followed up for three months or more and both groups evaluated for a variety of health-related outcomes, so a comparison can be made in order to estimate the effectiveness of the writing on health.

Some of the results have suggested that this structured intervention may help participants cope better with illness and maintain better overall health, but other studies have not had such optimistic results. Whilst the benefits of expressive writing in some conditions appear to be well established (albeit relatively modest in magnitude), there are several things we don’t yet know about this intervention. There are also many other forms of therapeutic writing that are being used in a variety of health settings such as psychiatric wards and outpatient clinics. Many of these have not been subject to evaluation through a randomised controlled trial but nevertheless may well be beneficial for patients. The questions we are addressing are as follows:

1. What different kinds of intervention might be offered under the umbrella term ‘therapeutic writing’, and (overall) how effective is each of these in different conditions?
2. In what conditions, and what subgroups of patients, is each type of therapeutic writing most effective; and conversely, are there situations, settings, or patient groups (for which this intervention is likely to be) less helpful or even harmful?
3. What are the mechanism(s) by which therapeutic writing achieves benefit to patients, and what aspects of context, setting, or patient characteristics might make these mechanisms more or less effective?
4. In situations where therapeutic writing is effective, what does it cost and is it good value for money?

In order to answer these questions, we will search widely in the published and unpublished literature for studies on therapeutic writing. To give an overall unbiased summary of the health effects of therapeutic writing, we are using two different approaches: (i) a systematic review where all relevant evidence of therapeutic writing – compared to no writing or standard writing in people with long-term conditions – is collated and summarised, and which focuses mainly on outcomes and quantitative data; and (ii) a realist review which will enable us to evaluate the contexts where therapeutic writing is more likely to be beneficial and the mechanisms that might be operating. These will then be combined to provide a meaningful description of the literature. We will also be evaluating whether therapeutic writing would be good value for money if implemented more widely in the NHS.

Since this is secondary research, where no new studies are undertaken but existing research evaluated, there are no direct ethical issues related to the execution of this project. However, we believe that consumers with chronic conditions have the right to evidence-based information about the effectiveness of any treatments that might be recommended to help them manage their condition. The majority of research has been published in the mainstream medical literature and we will be able to find these articles relatively easily. However, there may well be other comparative studies that have not been published, maybe because they were performed as part of a master’s degree dissertation or as an audit of service delivery. We would be very keen to hear from anyone who has a comparative study of any type of therapeutic writing in any group of people with any long-term or chronic conditions, who would be willing to share their results with us.

Our team is well placed to carry out the research because we have expertise and multi-professional connections in all relevant clinical areas regarding the treatment of chronic conditions. We possess a track record of successfully delivering systematic reviews on a variety of subjects and other work for the NIHR-HTA (Health Technology Assessment) Programme on time and within budget. Special expertise is required to carry out realist reviews and health economic assessments. Our group has published numerous systematic reviews, realist reviews, and health economic assessments and produced educational publications in this highly specialised area. We also have three therapeutic writing experts who are already using some writing techniques with people with long-term conditions. The team are as follows:

- Professor Stephanie Taylor, Professor of Public Health and Primary Care, expert in chronic medical conditions
- Professor Trisha Greenhalgh,
Professor of Primary Health Care, expert in realist synthesis;
• Dr Catherine Meads, Reader in Health Technology Assessment, expert in systematic reviewing and links with economic evaluation;
• Dr Joanne Lord, Reader in Health Economics, expert in economic evaluation;
• Dr Geoff Wong, Senior Lecturer in Primary Health Care, expert in realist synthesis;
• Dr Liz Steed, Lecturer in Health Psychology, expert in the psychology of health;
• Dr Liam Bourke, Lecturer in Public Health Research, expert in clinical trial evaluation and statistics;
• Olga Perez-Nyssen, research fellow, expert in systematic review and realist review;
• Carol Ross, Lead Writing Practitioner, experienced therapeutic writing practitioner;
• Sheila Hayman, author and award-winning television director, expert in therapeutic writing;
• Victoria Field, author and Certified Poetry Therapist, experienced therapeutic writing practitioner.

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The results of the project will be published in a monograph that will be freely available in the NIHR Journals Library, which can be found on the following website: http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/. This project is funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment (NIHR HTA) Programme (project number 11/70/01) and will be published in full in Health Technology Assessment. The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the HTA programme, NIHR, NHS, or the Department of Health.

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