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Writing and Well-Being: Positive Expressive Writing as a Strategy for Managing Anxiety in College Students

Escritura y bienestar: La escritura expresiva positiva como estrategia para el manejo de la ansiedad en estudiantes universitarios.

Escrita e bem-estar: a escrita expressiva positiva como estratégia para a gestão da ansiedade em estudantes universitários.

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ABSTRACT

The college population faces academic and personal demands that generate stress, anxiety, and emotional distress, with high prevalence rates in Mexico. This essay aims to argue for the relevance of positive expressive writing (PEW) as a preventive strategy for emotional distress among college students. To this end, it reviews its historical foundations, its main techniques, and the available empirical evidence in college and clinical populations. It also discusses its limitations and the factors that moderate its effectiveness. The evidence indicates that PEW produces consistent effects on subjective well-being and positive affect, although its results on clinical variables such as anxiety are less uniform. It is concluded that PEW represents a viable complement within a continuum of university mental health services, useful for promoting well-being and socio-emotional development, if it is not presented as a substitute for specialized psychological care.

Key Words: *Expressive writing, Stress, Psychological well-being, College students, Anxiety*

RESUMEN

La población universitaria enfrenta demandas académicas y personales que generan estrés, ansiedad y malestar emocional, con cifras de prevalencia elevadas en México. El presente ensayo tiene como objetivo argumentar la pertinencia de la escritura expresiva positiva (PEW, por sus siglas en inglés) como estrategia preventiva del malestar emocional en estudiantes universitarios. Para ello, se revisan sus fundamentos históricos, sus principales técnicas y la evidencia empírica disponible en poblaciones universitarias y clínicas. Se discuten, asimismo, sus limitaciones y los factores que moderan su eficacia. La evidencia indica que la PEW produce efectos consistentes sobre el bienestar subjetivo y el afecto positivo, aunque sus resultados sobre variables clínicas como la ansiedad son menos uniformes. Se concluye que la PEW representa un complemento viable dentro de un continuum de servicios de salud mental universitaria, útil para la promoción del bienestar y el desarrollo socioemocional, siempre que no se presente como sustituto de la atención psicológica especializada.

Palabras Clave: *Escritura expresiva, Estrés, Bienestar psicológico, Estudiantes universitarios, Ansiedad.*

RESUMO

A população universitária enfrenta exigências acadêmicas e pessoais que geram stress, ansiedade e mal-estar emocional, com taxas de prevalência elevadas no México. O presente ensaio tem como

objetivo defender a pertinência da escrita expressiva positiva (PEW, na sigla em inglês) como estratégia preventiva do mal-estar emocional em estudantes universitários. Para tal, são analisados os seus fundamentos históricos, as suas principais técnicas e a evidência empírica disponível em populações universitárias e clínicas. São igualmente discutidas as suas limitações e os fatores que moderam a sua eficácia. A evidência indica que a PEW produz efeitos consistentes sobre o bem-estar subjetivo e o afeto positivo, embora os seus resultados em variáveis clínicas, como a ansiedade, sejam menos uniformes. Conclui-se que a PEW representa um complemento viável dentro de um continuum de serviços de saúde mental universitária, útil para a promoção do bem-estar e do desenvolvimento socioemocional, desde que não se apresente como substituto da atenção psicológica especializada.

Palavras-chave: *Escritura expressiva, Stress, Bem-estar psicológico, Estudantes universitários, Ansiedade.*

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the constant demands of daily and academic life, the college population encounters numerous situations that could lead to emotional imbalance, primarily stress, anxiety, and other discomforts that, if not properly addressed, can extend to different areas, affecting both functioning and quality of life. In light of this reality, expressive writing is presented as a versatile, low-intensity, cost-effective, and easy-to-implement psychological tool (Wang et al., 2022), which can be used in various contexts—clinical or otherwise—such as positive expressive writing, which is particularly effective for fostering personal growth, encouraging reflection, self-awareness, and psychological well-being—all beneficial for those who have a sheet of paper and a pencil.

In Mexico, the percentage of students suffering from stress ranges from 38% to 48.23% (Zapata-Ramírez et al., 2025; Zapata-López et al., 2024), a situation similar to that of anxiety, which is present in 58% of the university population (Zapata-Ramírez et al., 2025), so it is essential to avoid normalizing this problem; these figures reflect a situation that goes beyond academic pressure and becomes a silent mental health crisis that institutions should take seriously. The problem is not that students are under stress, but that this feeling is constant and arises during a period that is crucial for the modern individual.

Robertson et al. (2020) note that entering college coincides with emerging adulthood, which Kohútová and Kohút (2024) define as a stage of identity exploration and profound instability. Compounding this are various stressors such as academic responsibilities, financial pressures, adjusting to a new environment, and difficulty finding reliable and stable support networks. This combination of highly specific, well-defined factors creates a vulnerability that is not comparable to clinical distress, nor to mere “nerves.” Because it is persistent, if an appropriate pathway for regulation and processing is not found, it can lead to consequences such as poor academic performance, which in turn fuels new cycles of anxiety.

The question arises: What tools do students have at their disposal to cope with these pressures? Consequently, it would be necessary to seek out a resource that is applicable, accessible, and effective in these contexts. Positive expressive writing (PEW) emerges as a relevant solution, especially when interventions typically require clinical infrastructure, professionals, and considerable financial resources that are not always available. PEW

(Hoult, 2023) is in itself a low-intensity, cost-effective, and easy-to-implement tool; however, its accessibility should not be mistaken for superficiality. In this regard, systematic reviews such as that by Hoult et al. (2025), which synthesizes 51 studies in non-clinical populations, report consistent effects on variables such as well-being, positive affect, and optimism through specific techniques like “The Best Possible Self” and gratitude letters, showing robust results.

The central idea of this essay is positive expressive writing as a psychological intervention, theoretically grounded and empirically supported for the management of anxiety in college students, provided there is a commitment to developing elements such as resilience, the search for meaning, and self-knowledge, which moderate the problem to be resolved. As well as the preference for positive expressive writing over its traditional paradigm oriented toward emotional trauma writing. To defend this idea, the argument proceeds by reviewing the historical roots of expressive writing, analyzing the techniques that comprise it and its mechanisms, examining evidence across different populations—including university students—and addressing the counterarguments raised by the literature when viewed critically.

ELABORATION

Genealogy of writing and mental health

From a historical perspective, three periods with distinct views on writing and mental health can be identified (Martín, 2024). The first spans from the inception of psychiatry in the 19th century to the early 20th century, during which diagnosis involved reading the patient’s written works —such as letters, diaries, or spontaneous texts—to identify material confirming the mental condition. In this period, writing served as evidence of a pathology; it was not yet a process in its own right.

The second period is associated with the emergence of psychology and psychoanalysis, along with the diversification of their schools or schools of thought. In this context, writing is viewed as an active process for psychological elaboration. Diaries, unsent letters, and biographies are incorporated into clinical practice as tools that facilitate reflection, the reframing of experiences, and even emotional distancing (Martín, 2024).

The third period began in the 1980s and continues to the present day, distinguished from the previous ones by a particular feature: writing has taken on a role in experimental research. This shift was driven by the work of American psychologists Pennebaker and Bell (Pennebaker, 2018), who asked participants to write about traumatic experiences in brief sessions lasting just fifteen minutes. The results revealed significant improvements in those who recounted intense and unpleasant memories compared to those who wrote about everyday topics. In this way, they inaugurated a new tradition that grants writing autonomy from the purely oral therapeutic process and claims objectively measurable effects, including the reduction of pathological symptoms—a line of research continued by the researchers who followed in their footsteps (Martín, 2024).

From emotional writing to optimism

The distinction between the classical writing model (written emotional disclosure, WED) and positive expressive writing (PEW) has theoretical and ethical implications. The former, in Pennebaker's original theory, requires the writer to devote at least three consecutive fifteen-minute sessions to writing down their deepest thoughts and emotions regarding the traumatic experience, mobilizing four mechanisms that explain its benefits (Ayala, 2025):

1. The expression and release of inhibited emotions which, once discharged, clear the ongoing cognitive load they demanded.
2. The narrative organization of events which, by being expressed in explicit language, gains the coherence and structure needed for assimilation.
3. Reflection and reframing, which transform the passive experience into an active one.
4. The activation of adaptive emotional processing, allowing emotions to be integrated rather than avoided.

However, the WED has a significant limitation in the university setting. Recalling and writing about a traumatic event without professional supervision (which was present in Pennebaker's experimental studies) can trigger intense negative emotions or, in some cases, a crisis. If students engage in these types of activities without adequate support, the tool ceases to be self-administered and low-intensity. Even in group workshops, there are

university settings that lack trained staff to manage an acute, collective emotional response. Its use therefore entails a risk that is difficult to justify ethically.

PEW resolves this problem by shifting the original paradigm. Instead of directing the writer toward the core of the trauma, it guides them toward the expression of positive feelings and thoughts related to their life, future, and identity (Hoult, 2023). This difference is not only technical but also epistemological: WED is based on the idea that processing distress is a necessary condition for well-being and that improvement occurs because it organizes, releases, and articulates what was causing suffering; PEW, in contrast, starts from a complementary premise: actively cultivating positive emotions and thoughts is in itself a psychological resource that modifies the subject's relationship with their own experiences (Ruini & Mortara, 2022), not because it eliminates external sources of distress, but because it functionally expands the repertoire of available responses.

This distinction refers to the debate between Pennebaker's inhibition theory and Frederickson's Broaden-and-Build theory (Hoult et al., 2025); however, resolving this debate is not the purpose of this essay. What is relevant is to recognize the applications and justifications of each model, even though their applicability in clinical contexts is not entirely clear.

Positive expressive writing techniques

A distinctive feature of PEW is its modular nature, as it is not a rigid protocol but rather a set of techniques that share a positive approach yet operate through distinct mechanisms. Hoult et al. (2025) identify seven main techniques:

1. Best Possible Self (BPS)
2. Gratitude letter
3. Intense Positive Experiences (IPE)
4. Benefit Search
5. Satisfaction processes
6. Three Good Things
7. Resource Journal

This taxonomy helps us understand that each technique operates differently and produces specific effects beyond its intended goal.

The “Best Possible Self” technique has the strongest empirical support in Hoult’s review. It involves imagining and writing about a hypothetical future scenario in which all academic, professional, or personal goals have been achieved in the best possible way. Its central mechanism is the clarification of one’s own values and a disposition toward optimism: by constructing this scenario, the writer is prompted to explore their own definition of well-being, their priorities, and the person they wish to become. For young adults, writing about this version of themselves can transform uncertainty into a reflective exercise and help chart a path toward setting goals to achieve it.

The gratitude letter, for its part, directs attention toward the positive aspects of experiences, expressing appreciation for a person, a situation, or one’s own strength and counteracting the cognitive system’s tendency to process and retain negative information. In college students, this intervention significantly increases positive affect, life satisfaction, and a sense of social connection while reducing feelings of loneliness (Hoult et al., 2025)

Intense positive experiences involve writing about satisfying and meaningful memories; however, the results are mixed. Hoult et al. (2025) found mixed results, although in specific contexts such as stressful situations involving exams, presentations, and interviews, writing about positive experiences reduced anxiety and promoted optimism.

Benefit finding has a place in this taxonomy because it serves as a bridge between WED and PEW. It involves reflecting on and writing about the skills, strengths, and lessons learned as a result of a difficult experience, focusing on opportunities for growth rather than on the narrative of suffering. Two very important components can be distinguished within it (Saldanha & Barclay, 2021): “Sensemaking,” that is, understanding what happened and its causes; and “Benefit Finding,” understood as recognizing what was gained as a result. Both processes go hand in hand and go beyond simply asking the student to find something positive about the pressure they are experiencing; it is an exercise that allows them to understand what this experience reveals about their values, their limits, and their ability to cope with adverse situations.

Finally, the evidence regarding “Satisfaction Processes” (writing about aspects of life that generate well-being), “Three Good Things” (recording three positive aspects of daily life each day), and “Resource Journal” (writing about personal and social resources available to cope with daily life) is limited compared to the previous techniques. Hoult et al. (2025) note that the three techniques were evaluated in a single study within their review, so it is not possible to draw reliable conclusions about their effectiveness. This does not negate their potential value, but it does necessitate prioritizing interventions with stronger empirical support in practice.

Stress and the university as a specific context

Of the 51 studies analyzed by Hoult et al. (2025), 28 were conducted with a university population, which is a considerable number. This prevalence could be explained by students’ familiarity with daily pressures, writing, and the availability of group spaces.

Roberston et al. (2026) conducted one of the most rigorous and robust studies by designing a randomized clinical trial with first-year college students, with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of an expressive writing intervention in reducing anxiety. The results showed significant reductions in anxiety over time, with those in the expressive writing group experiencing the greatest decreases. Additionally, an analysis of the language used revealed that the greater the use of first-person personal pronouns (I) and the fewer affective words used, the greater these benefits were. This finding suggests that the distancing of the narrating self from the feeling self may constitute an important mechanism of action.

Similarly, a study by the same author conducted in 2021—during the pandemic, a period when students’ stress and anxiety levels were considerably high—replicated these results in a virtual setting. This is significant not only because of the results but also because of the conditions under which such interventions can be carried out—that is, as a brief, remote intervention without in-person therapeutic supervision—even when a major stressor such as COVID-19 is present (Robertson et al., 2021).

Studies in other populations

For those who might question the robustness of these findings by arguing that their effects do not extend beyond the academic setting. It should be noted that oncology represents one of the fields where expressive writing has shown positive effects; the literature published between 2015 and 2025 on the subject was analyzed by Watson et al. (2025), analyzing 28 studies with a total of 3,527 cancer patients. In these studies, 21 of the 24 quantitative studies reported favorable associations between expressive writing interventions and variables such as quality of life, well-being, sleep, reduced fatigue, and increased perceived self-efficacy.

In this regard, Wang et al. (2022) conducted a randomized clinical trial with breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, documenting that expressive writing produced significant improvements in quality of life and self-efficacy. These findings suggest that writing provides psychological resources to individuals, even when they are going through a difficult time; therefore, a comparison with the university population—who, while facing real problems, do not face a direct threat to their lives—is at least plausible.

These studies are complemented by other studies with favorable results, such as that by Romm et al. (2023), who worked with young people diagnosed with early-onset psychosis, or that by Maroney (2020) with adolescents and children who have experienced traumatic or highly stressful situations.

Limitations of PEW

However, as this is an academic debate, the counterarguments and limitations of the topic must be considered. It should be noted, as a starting point, that the reviewed and cited literature does not come from researchers outside (and, of course, critical of) the tradition of expressive writing, but rather from the very sources that have contributed to its systematic establishment.

The study by Hoult et al. (2025), which has already been cited on several occasions, states in its conclusion that the effects of expressive writing are ambiguous. The effects on health variables such as anxiety, stress, and depression are significantly less consistent compared to variables related to subjective well-being and positive affect. Myers et al. (2021) found in their study with college students that expressive writing did not significantly reduce

anxiety; meanwhile, Forster and Kuhbänder (2022) found that the reduction in negative affect was attributable more to the passage of time than to the intervention itself, casting doubt on the effectiveness of expressive writing.

Based on these findings—both favorable and contradictory—it can be stated that PEW is not a tool that guarantees a reduction in anxiety, nor does it have the same effects on all participants. It is equally necessary to remember that it does not replace psychotherapeutic treatment or other more specialized practices for addressing psychological distress; to claim that writing can replace them or achieve the same results is simply inaccurate, and could be harmful if, in the university context, one seeks a solution interchangeable with specialized psychological care when, due to its results and its very nature, it is a complement.

This counterargument does not invalidate the usefulness of PEW, but rather clarifies it and makes it honest; inconsistency in the variables related to student well-being does not imply an absence of a general effect; on the contrary, it indicates that such an effect depends on conditions that the literature has not yet begun to clarify systematically. Among the elements that moderate the effects are the following (Hoult et al., 2025):

- Prior well-being, or the level at which the study/intervention begins.
- Emotional regulation capacity.
- Sociocultural factors
- The PEW technique employed.

In addition to these factors, Saldanha and Barclay (2021) suggest that the outcome is influenced by the orientation of the writing (meaning-centered or emotion-centered), while Robertson et al. (2020) add the participant's linguistic characteristics as a relevant variable.

In this context, it can be promoted as a tool for self-care and social-emotional learning (García-Ayala, 2025) for both students and teachers, even leading to the creation of an institutional culture of care and expression that extends beyond the individual. Expressive writing yields better results when it is combined with support from a teacher, counselor, nurse, or psychologist, while the individual practices it independently (Maroney, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The presentation of PEW in this essay is brief but precise, as it is not a newly discovered tool, but one that has been implemented in various contexts, countries, and eras with over a century of documented clinical history (Pérez-Martín, 2024) and four decades of experimental research (García-Ayala, 2025); it is not a fad, but a well-established resource that adapts to the demands and paradigms of the present.

In the educational context, where the risk of triggering a crisis makes its use unfeasible, PEW offers a good alternative to WED for addressing the problems affecting students (stress, anxiety, and reduced quality of life), provided that, from a critical perspective, its limitations and the mixed results of some research are taken into account. Its most relevant use is as a preventive strategy that, at the same time, fosters self-exploration and the development of various social-emotional skills.

It is not that PEW is ineffective; rather, it works differently depending on the participant's profile, the conditions, and the objectives set. PEW has the potential to serve as a form of primary prevention and well-being promotion within a continuum of mental health services in university settings; however, it would be unwise to position it at the extreme end as an intervention that directly addresses symptoms without a more targeted assessment. Only under these conditions could it function as a useful tool for human development.

Likewise, the flexibility with which it can be applied is one of its strengths; because it is versatile, it can be implemented both on and off campus. If guided or structured, it can be conducted in person or online, adapting to students' busy schedules. Similarly, when the intervention is private in nature, it does not require public exposure of the participant and can be carried out asynchronously, at each person's own pace, in diverse cultural contexts with relative ease (Watson et al., 2020). Since students are familiar with writing due to their literate environment, they can incorporate writing as part of a valuable self-care routine.

In a university that often reduces its students to their performance on assignments, projects, and exams—which measure, rank, and evaluate them—the introduction of this practice invites them to look inward and express both their concerns and their achievements. More than an intervention, it is an act that acknowledges the subject's own humanity. PEW

does not—nor could it—resolve all the challenges that university life may present; there will be times when these challenges are external to the individual (lack of resources, pandemics, demanding schedules) and a pencil and a sheet of paper are not enough. However, it does open up a space for the student to observe their experiences, to recognize themselves as a subject experiencing distress and capable of reflecting through storytelling, and in that very act, they begin to transform.

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