

The Efficacy of Journaling in the Management of Mental Illness

A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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Rationale

- Journaling is a widely used tool in many forms of non-pharmacological mental health therapy.
- Family physicians are commonly the first line of access for mental health support yet receive minimal formal training on mental health therapy.
- Significant data exists on this modality, but limited efforts to systematically review it in a Canadian context.

Objective

- To perform a meta-analysis assessing the efficacy of journaling as an intervention for improving mental health outcomes.
- To inform primary care clinicians regarding the current state of the literature and strength of recommendations on utilizing journaling as an intervention.

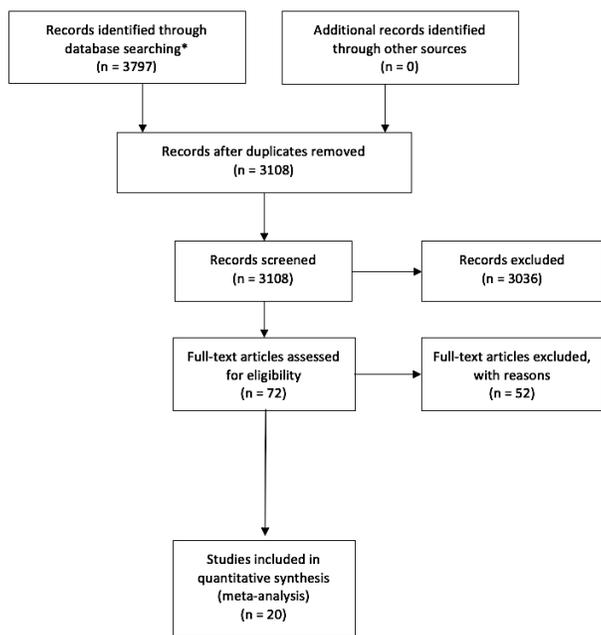
Methods

Identification

Screening

Eligibility

Included

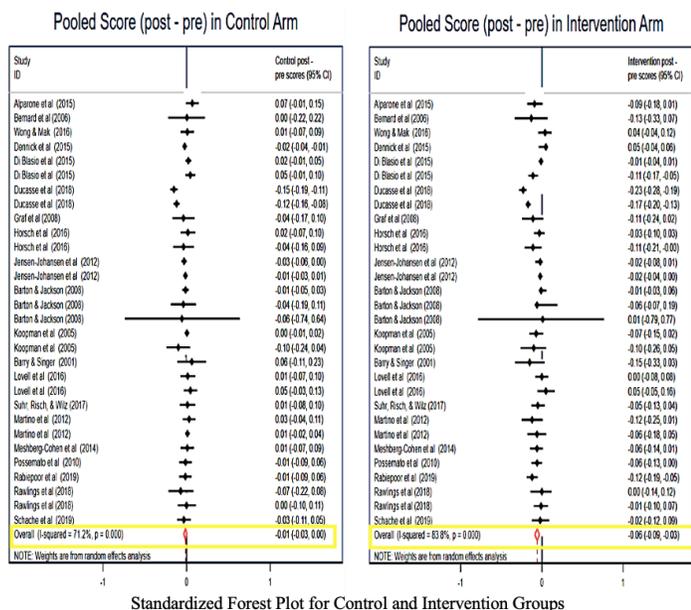
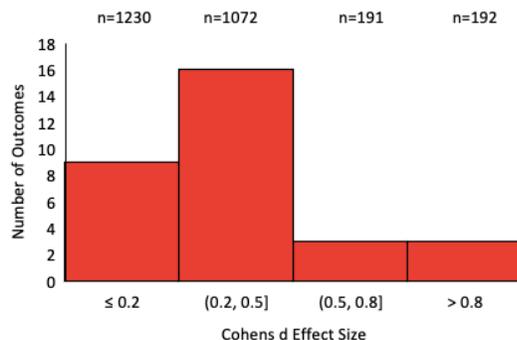


Methods (continued)

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer reviewed	Studies which examined the effect of multiple types of journaling
Randomized control trials	Studies with insufficient or missing data which was required to perform a meta-analysis
Studied the impact of a journaling intervention on mental illness	Studies which examined the effects of a journaling intervention on well-being only

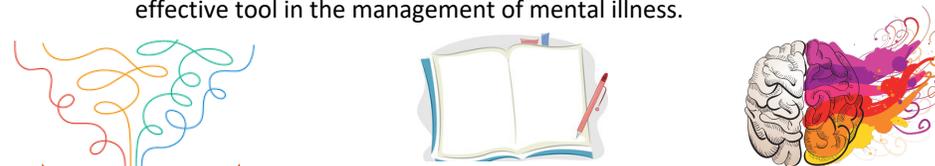
*Search terms: journaling, gratitude, reflective journal, journal writing, reflective practice, expressive writing, written emotional discourse AND depression, depress, self-injurious behaviors', substance-related disorders, addictions, anxiety/anxiety disorders, mental health, stress disorders/post-traumatic, mental disorders, trauma, chronic pain
*Databases used: MEDLINE, EMBASE, Psycinfo

Results



Results (continued)

- 20 peer-reviewed, randomized control trials (31 outcomes) (MEDLINE, EMBASE, PsycInfo) met inclusion criteria.
- Studies addressed the impact of a journaling intervention on PTSD, other anxiety disorders, depression or a combination of the aforementioned.
- Data is highly heterogenous with the control arm having an I² of 71.2% and the intervention arm having an I² of 83.8%. SORT = B-level recommendation.
- Effect size analysis of studies suggest an overall small to moderate benefit.
- There is a significant difference between control (-0.01, CI: {-0.03-0.00}) and intervention arms (-0.06, CI: {-0.09 - -0.03}). This 5% difference between groups indicates that a journaling intervention resulted in a greater reduction in scores on patient health measures when compared to the control arm. It is unlikely this reaches clinical significance. However, it is suggestive that journaling is an effective tool in the management of mental illness.



Limitations

- Heterogeneous and low-quality data (SORT = B-level recommendation)
- Lack of standardized protocols across studies (e.g., all studies implemented variable durations of journaling)

Key Conclusions

- Journaling, is overall an effective tool in the treatment of mental illness
- Journaling as an intervention, is low risk, cost efficient and builds self-efficacy

Future Directions

- Higher quality RCTs needed, particularly with comparison of journaling to medications
- Studies should be conducted in a family physician context with a model similar to "exercise as a prescription"

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