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**

- **Inclusion Criteria**
  - Peer-reviewed studies addressing the impact of a journaling intervention on PTSD, other anxiety disorders, depression or a combination of the aforementioned.
  - Studies with a control arm and intervention arm.
  - Studies with sufficient data for meta-analysis.

- **Exclusion Criteria**
  - Studies without a control arm.
  - Studies without sufficient data for meta-analysis.

- **Results**
  - 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 $I^2$ of 71.2% and the intervention arm having an $I^2$ 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.

- **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”.

- **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).