Vol. 4, Issue 11 November 2026 ISSN: 2584-0142



Impact of Expressive Writing on the Affect of University Students in Guwahati

[1]**Shabnam Jannat**, *B.A, The Assam Royal Global University*
shabnamjannat710@gmail.com
[2]**Jwmwishree Boro**, *Ph.D, The Assam Royal Global University*
jsrboro@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aimed to assess the impact of expressive writing on the affect of university students in Guwahati. The study employed eight university students as participants, who were randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. The control group was tasked with writing on neutral topics, while the experimental group engaged in expressive writing about traumatic experiences. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was administered before and after a series of five writing sessions, conducted over five consecutive days for fifteen minutes each day, to assess changes in both positive and negative affect among the participants. The results indicated that the control group experienced minimal changes in affect, with no significant shifts in either positive or negative emotions. The experimental group, on the other hand, showed a significant reduction in negative affect and a trend towards increased positive affect. This suggests that expressive writing about traumatic experiences can effectively alleviate negative emotions and potentially enhance positive ones. These findings highlight the potential of expressive writing about traumatic experiences as a valuable intervention for improving emotional well-being among university students. Further research with larger sample sizes is recommended to validate these results and explore additional benefits of expressive writing.

Keywords: *Expressive Writing, Emotional Well-Being, University Students, PANAS, Positive Affect, Negative Affect, Guwahati.*

Vol. 4, Issue 11 November 2026 ISSN: 2584-0142

a. Introduction

Expressive writing can be understood as a form of writing therapy that requires reflecting on one's challenging experiences through written expression in order to alleviate the associated trauma. It involves the process of writing about one's deepest thoughts and feelings related to traumatic or emotional experiences. It serves as a means of self-expression and emotional exploration (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). It is a therapeutic technique that allows individuals to gain insight, process their experiences, and promote emotional healing. (Smyth, 1998) It involves the deliberate and structured expression of one's past or present emotional experiences without inhibition or censorship. It encourages individuals to explore and make sense of their emotions and can lead to psychological, cognitive, and physiological benefits. (Frattaroli, 2006) Originating from the seminal work of Pennebaker and Beall (1986), the expressive writing paradigm has been explored in various contexts to understand its impact on mental health, well-being, and cognitive functioning.

Expanding upon the foundational research by Pennebaker and Beall (1986), recent studies highlight expressive writing's ability to significantly enhance subjective well-being by processing and dealing with inhibited emotions of university students (Cayubit, 2021). This intervention has been demonstrated to aid in emotion regulation, as indicated by psychophysiological measures such as electrodermal activity (EDA) and electrocardiogram (ECG) readings (Jacques et al., 2020). Combining expressive writing with positive rumination training has also been found to improve psychological adjustment and working memory in maladaptive ruminators (Yang & Li, 2020).

The benefits of expressive writing extend beyond emotional well-being to include performance outcomes in specific populations. For instance, a brief expressive writing intervention was found to have significantly reduced music performance anxiety among college-level piano students, leading to improved performance quality (Tang & Ryan, 2020). Similarly, online expressive writing interventions have demonstrated potential in mitigating symptoms of post - traumatic stress disorder among Hispanic students who have experienced traumatic events. This underscores the cultural sensitivity and flexibility of this methodology (Hirai et al., 2020).

Expressive writing has also been linked to cognitive and neural changes. Writing about past failures has been associated with altered neural processing in the mid-cingulate cortex, suggesting that expressive writing may influence cognitive performance and resilience

(DiMenichi et al., 2019). The practice also appears to enhance emotional intelligence over time, providing a valuable tool for college students to manage stress and improve academic achievement (Walker, 2019).

The impact of expressive writing on specific health outcomes has also been explored. For example, writing about intensely positive experiences was found to reduce eating pathology in female students during exam periods (Kupeli et al., 2018). Moreover, expressive writing has been shown to alleviate public speaking anxiety, enhancing performance and emotional management in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Tresnawati & Musthafa, 2016).

The potential for expressive writing to prevent depressive symptoms in vulnerable populations has been supported by evidence indicating that it can lower rumination and depressive symptoms over time (Gortner et al., 2006). Expressive writing about relationships has been linked to improved relationship quality and overall subjective well-being (Eells, 2006). Even among high-risk populations, such as drug-dependent patients, expressive writing has shown acceptability and potential benefits for psychological health (Baikie et al., 2006).

Writing about life goals, as a variation of the expressive writing paradigm, has also been found to enhance well-being and reduce illness, further demonstrating the versatility and effectiveness of expressive writing interventions (King, 2001). It also helps individuals to explore their inner psychological resources, such as imagination and creativity to facilitate the integration of both the emotional and cognitive components of life experiences (A. Lange, 1996). Addressing the emotional impact of job loss through expressive writing has been shown to facilitate reemployment by helping individuals process negative emotions and adopt a more positive outlook (Spera et al., 1994). It has also been proven effective in educational settings. Many believe that it is through writing, particularly through expressive, reflexive, or personal writing, that students begin to hear their inner voices, discover and develop their own writing voices, evolve their personal prose styles, give order, sense, and meaning to their lives, and learn (Emig 1977; Hawkes 1967; Macrorie 1970).

In a broad sense, the process of expressive writing is reminiscent of the cathartic method developed by Freud and Breuer (1895/1966) as it allows internal dialogue with oneself and provides opportunity for introspection and catharsis without fear of evaluation and judgment of others (G. Bolton, S. Howlett, C. Lago, and J. K. Wright, 2004). According to Freud and Breuer, if an experience is particularly disturbing, the memory or ideation may be suppressed, whereas the emotion or affect associated with the event continues to exist in consciousness in the form of anxiety. They, however, noted that hysterical symptoms were most likely to disappear after the patient had described the event in fine detail. Thus, catharsis, which emphasizes the fundamental connections between cognition and affect in relation to

significant or threatening experiences, underscores how expressing and confronting suppressed emotions can lead to psychological relief and reduced anxiety, thereby alleviating negative emotional and affective states.

Affect, encompassing the range of emotions and feelings individuals experience, plays a crucial role in overall psychological functioning. Research has demonstrated that expressive writing can profoundly influence affect by helping individuals process and release negative emotions associated with stressful or traumatic experiences (Pennebaker et al, 1988; Páez et al, 1999; Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005). This therapeutic approach is, therefore, effective in enhancing positive affect and reducing negative affect, contributing to greater happiness and life satisfaction. Among university students, who often face unique academic and social pressures, the impact of expressive writing on affect is particularly pertinent. Understanding how this method can enhance their emotional well-being is essential for developing effective mental health interventions within this demographic. Thus, the continued exploration of this method holds potential for furthering our understanding of its impact on affect and developing effective mental health strategies for diverse populations.

b. Significance

In the present day and age, mental health issues are surging exponentially worldwide, including in Guwahati, a city located in the Northeastern state of Assam in India. This necessitates the development of creative and affordable intervention strategies to address this growing epidemic. However, very few empirical studies have attempted to assess the implications of various intervention techniques within this city. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of one such therapeutic intervention, expressive writing, on the affect of university students in Guwahati. The significance of this study lies in its potential to yield valuable information about the efficacy of expressive writing as a therapeutic intervention for enhancing the affective states and consequently, the psychological well-being of university students. It seeks to present expressive writing as a creative and viable method for improving emotional health of students in higher studies in Guwahati. Given the limited research on expressive writing in this context, this study substantially contributes to the growing body of literature on therapeutic interventions across varied populations. This study, thus, significantly elicits the importance of drawing attention to innovative as well as cost-effective approaches to mental health care, promoting expressive writing as a feasible and accessible strategy to support psychological well-being in academic settings.

Vol. 4, Issue 11 November 2026 ISSN: 2584-0142

c. Methodology

3.1 *Objective of the study*

To assess the impact of expressive writing on the positive and negative affect of participants.

3.2 *Hypothesis*

Null Hypothesis (H_o): There is no significant difference in PANAS scores of the participants engaging in expressive writing before and after the expressive writing sessions over the course of 5 days.

3.3 *Sample and sampling technique*

The sampling size of the study was 8 students of The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati between the ages 18-20. The gender distribution comprised 2 males and 6 females. Convenience Sampling Technique was used for the selection of the sample.

3.4 *Tools for data collection*

Socio-demographic data sheet: A socio-demographic data sheet is a questionnaire used to collect demographic information about participants. Details such as age, gender, educational background, and other relevant characteristics necessary for profiling a sample are typically included in it.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; David Watson, Lee Anna Clark, Auke Tellegen): The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA), representing an individual's experience of positive and negative emotions. It was developed by David Watson, Lee Anna Clark, and Auke Tellegen in the year 1988. The PANAS is intended to assess an individual's general emotional experience by capturing the presence and intensity of positive and negative emotions. Participants rate the intensity of various emotions they have felt over a specific time frame on a Likert scale. The common scale ranges from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). PA includes positive feelings of interest, excitement and enthusiasm while NA includes negative feelings such as fear, guilt and hostility.

3.5 *Procedure for data collection*

Informed consent was obtained from each participant, prior to participation. All writing sessions were conducted in a controlled setting within the university premises. A rapport-building phase preceded data collection wherein assurance of the utmost privacy regarding responses was communicated. After this, the participants completed a socio-demographic data sheet. They were provided with 2-3 pieces of paper as per their requirement to complete the writing exercises. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was administered to measure participants' positive and negative affect scores both before and after the expressive

writing sessions spanning five consecutive days. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. Both groups had an equal size of four participants each.

3.6 *Experimental Group Instructions*

Participants in the experimental group were asked to engage in expressive writing about their most traumatic experiences. They received the following instructions:

"For the next 5 days, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I would like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives; to your past, your present, or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up. Try to be as honest with your writing as possible. Do not share your topics with the rest of the participants in the study."

Participants could choose from the following suggested prompts:

- **a.** Write about a past traumatic experience and how it has affected you.
- **b.** Describe a difficult relationship in your life and how it has impacted you.
- **c.** Reflect on a time when you felt alone and what made that time traumatic.
- **d.** Write about a fear or phobia you have and explore its origins.
- **e.** Reflect on your biggest failures and how they impacted you.

3.7 *Control Group Instructions*

Participants in the control group were asked to write about trivial, non-emotional topics. They received the following instructions:

"For the next 5 days, I would like you to write your thoughts about the following topics. Feel free to describe your activities, interests, or experiences in a detailed manner, focusing on factual details rather than emotions. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up. Try to be as honest with your writing as possible. Do not share your topics with the rest of the participants in the study."

Prompts for the control group were as follows:

- **a.** Day 1: Write about your daily routine and how you typically spend your day.
- **b.** Day 2: Write about an artist/craftsman whose work you enjoy and why.
- **c.** Day 3: Describe your favourite place to unwind or relax.

d. Day 4: Write about a recent book, movie, or TV show you enjoyed.

e. Day 5: Reflect on a hobby or interest you have and why you enjoy it.

Participants in both groups participated in the designated writing sessions according to their assigned topics for 15 minutes each day. Clear and comprehensive instructions were provided to all participants. They were encouraged to complete the questionnaire and data sheet honestly, in order to maintain the integrity of the research.

3.8 *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Inclusion criteria for the current study are mentioned below:

- Students of the age range 18-20 years were selected for the study.
- As Convenience Sampling technique was applied, students who could read and write English properly were selected for the study.
- Only students of The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati were selected for the study.

Exclusion criteria for the current study are mentioned below:

- Students below the age of 18 and above the age of 20 years were not selected for the study.
- Students with severe physical or psychological issues were not selected for the study.

3.9 *Research design*

Pretest-posttest type of experimental research design is employed for this particular study.

3.10 *Statistical method of data analysis*

The data analysis was conducted by calculating the descriptive statistics and a paired samples t-test using the software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 29.0.2.0 (20).

4. Results

Table 1. *Control Group*

Affect type	N	PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS				PAIRED SAMPLES TEST					
		Mean Pre-test	Mean Post-test	Standard Deviation Pre Test	Standard Deviation Post Test	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	Degree of Freedom	t-value	significance
Positive affect score pre and post test	4	36.50	38.75	3.69	6.18	-2.25	2.75	1.37	3	-1.634	0.20
Negative affect score pre and post test	4	27.75	20.75	11.08	6.75	7.00	11.51	5.75	3	1.215	0.31

As shown in Table 1, the control group, which engaged in neutral writing, showed a mean positive affect score of 36.50 (SD = 3.69) in the pre-test and 38.75 (SD = 6.18) in the post-test. The mean difference of -2.25 was not statistically significant, $t(3) = -1.634$, $p = 0.20$. For negative affect, the control group had a mean score of 27.75 (SD = 11.08) in the pre-test and 20.75 (SD = 6.75) in the post-test. The mean difference of 7.00 was also not statistically significant, $t(3) = 1.215$, $p = 0.31$. This suggests that neutral writing did not significantly increase the positive affect nor reduce the negative affect among the participants.

Table 2. *Experimental Group*

Affect type	N	PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS				PAIRED SAMPLES TEST					
		Mean Pre-test	Mean Post-test	Standard Deviation Pre Test	Standard Deviation Post Test	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	Degree of Freedom	t-value	significance
Positive affect score pre and post test	4	32.25	36.75	3.94	1.25	-4.50	3.69	1.84	3	-2.435	0.09
Negative affect score pre and post test	4	26.50	19.75	14.15	11.44	6.75	3.40	1.70	3	3.967	0.02

As shown in Table 2, the experimental group, which engaged in expressive writing about traumatic experiences, had a mean positive affect score of 32.25 (SD = 3.94) in the pre-test and 36.75 (SD = 1.25) in the post-test. The mean difference of -4.50 approached significance, $t(3) = -2.435$, $p = 0.09$. This trend suggests that expressive writing may increase positive affect, though the result is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. For negative affect, the experimental group showed a decrease with a pre-test mean of 26.50 (SD = 14.15) and a post-test mean of 19.75 (SD = 11.44). The mean difference of 6.75 was statistically significant, $t(3) = 3.967$, $p = 0.02$ at the 0.05 level. This indicates that expressive writing significantly reduced negative affect among the participants.

Table 3. *Combined Groups*

Group	N	PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS				PAIRED SAMPLES TEST					
		Mean Pre-test	Mean Post-test	Standard Deviation Pre Test	Standard Deviation Post Test	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	Degree of Freedom	t-value	significance
Total positive affect score pre and post test	8	34.37	37.75	4.20	4.26	-3.37	3.24	1.14	7	-2.938	0.02
Total negative affect score pre and post test	8	27.12	20.25	11.78	8.71	6.87	7.86	2.78	7	2.473	0.04

Vol. 4, Issue 11 November 2026 ISSN: 2584-0142

As shown in Table 3, when combining both groups, the total mean positive affect scores were 34.37 (SD = 4.20) in the pre-test and 37.75 (SD = 4.26) in the post-test, with a mean difference of -3.37, which was statistically significant, $t(7) = -2.938$, $p = 0.02$ at the 0.05 level. For negative affect, the combined groups had a mean score of 27.12 (SD = 11.78) in the pre-test and 20.25 (SD = 8.71) in the post-test. The mean difference of 6.87 was statistically significant, $t(7) = 2.473$, $p = 0.04$ at the 0.05 level. This indicates that the writing intervention significantly increased positive affect and decreased negative affect across both groups.

5. Discussion

The present study explored the impact of expressive writing on the affect of university students in Guwahati. The findings demonstrate nuanced effects of expressive writing on the positive and negative affective states, highlighting both significant changes and trends within the experimental group as well as across the entire sample.

Participants in the control group, who wrote on trivial topics, did not show significant changes in either positive or negative affect. This suggests that neutral writing alone does not substantially influence affective states.

The experimental group, on the other hand, which engaged in expressive writing about traumatic experiences, exhibited more pronounced changes. There was a notable trend towards increased positive affect, although it was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. However, the decrease in negative affect was statistically significant, suggesting that expressive writing effectively reduced negative emotions.

Comparing the data of the control and experimental groups reveals that the latter exhibited more substantial improvements in affective states. While the control group showed minimal and non-significant changes, the experimental group had undergone significant reduction in negative affect and manifested an upward trajectory towards heightened positive affect.

When combining data from both groups, the overall analysis showed significant increase in positive affect and decrease in negative affect. This implies that writing interventions, regardless of the content, can positively impact affective states. However, the more substantial effects observed in the experimental group underscore the specific benefits of expressive writing about traumatic experiences.

The findings support the rejection of the null hypothesis (Ho), which stated that there would be no significant difference in PANAS scores before and after the expressive writing sessions. The observed significant changes in affect, particularly in the experimental group, provide evidence that expressive writing can be an effective intervention for improving

emotional well-being.

The significant reduction in negative affect in the experimental group is in line with the broader literature on the therapeutic nature of expressive writing (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). It can, therefore, be inferred that the act of writing about traumatic experiences likely fosters emotional processing, allowing individuals to structure and organize their experiences which helps in reducing the intensity of negative emotions.

The trend towards increase in positive affect in the experimental group, indicates that expressive writing may also enhance positive emotions. This could be due to the reflective nature of writing, which encourages individuals to find meaning and personal growth in their experiences, which may contribute to an improved sense of well-being (King, 2001).

The findings support the utility of expressive writing as a cost-effective, easily accessible intervention to improve mental well-being among university students. Therefore, it can be highly beneficial if incorporated into student support services and mental health programmes. It is particularly relevant in an academic setting, such as that of a university, where students often face various stressors and emotional challenges.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

Although the study provides evidence in support of the positive impact of expressive writing on the affect of university students, it has certain limitations. The first being the small sample size, which limits generalizability and reduces statistical power. The homogeneity of the sample also poses as a drawback for the study as it restricts applicability to other broader and diverse demographics. The reliance on self-reported measure of affect may be subject to the bias of social desirability while the short-term duration of the study hinders a thorough assessment of the effects of expressive writing. These limitations call for longitudinal studies to gauge the efficacy and sustainability of this writing intervention. Future research should address these limitations by using larger, more diverse samples, incorporating objective measures of affect, and conducting extended follow-up assessments. In conclusion, despite its limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature supporting the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing for emotional well-being.

References

Baikie, K. A., Wilhelm, K., Johnson, B., Boskovic, M., Wedgwood, L., Finch, A., & Huon, G. (2006). Expressive writing for high-risk drug dependent patients in a primary care clinic: A pilot study. *Harm reduction journal*, *3*, 1-8.

Cayubit, R. F. O. (2021). Effect of expressive writing on the subjective well-being of university

students. Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia, 25 (1), 71–79.

DiMenichi, B. C., Ceceli, A. O., Bhanji, J. P., & Tricomi, E. (2019). Effects of expressive writing on neural processing during learning. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *13*, 389.

Eells, J. E. (2006). *Expressive writing, relationships, and health* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri--Columbia).

Gortner, E. M., Rude, S. S., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006). Benefits of expressive writing in lowering rumination and depressive symptoms. *Behavior therapy*, *37*(3), 292-303.

Hirai, M., Dolma, S., Vernon, L. L., & Clum, G. A. (2020). A longitudinal investigation of the efficacy of online expressive writing interventions for Hispanic students exposed to traumatic events: competing theories of action. *Psychology & Health*, *35*(12), 1459-1476.

Jacques, T., Alves, R. A., Fadaei, S., & Barbosa, F. (2020). Real-time psychophysiological and writing correlates of expressive writing. *Experimental Psychology*.

King, L. A. (2001). The health benefits of writing about life goals. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, *27*(7), 798-807.

Kupeli, N., Schmidt, U. H., Campbell, I. C., Chilcot, J., Roberts, C. J., & Troop, N. A. (2018). The impact of an emotionally expressive writing intervention on eating pathology in female students. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, *6*(1), 162-179.

NAPT. (1928). *History of NAPT*. Retrieved from National Association for Poetry Therapy.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Beall, S. K. (1986). Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 95*(3), 274–281.

Spera, S. P., Buhrfeind, E. D., & Pennebaker, J. W. (1994). Expressive writing and coping with job loss. *Academy of management journal*, *37*(3), 722-733.

Tang, Y., & Ryan, L. (2020). Music performance anxiety: can expressive writing intervention help?. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 539112.

Tresnawati, F., & Musthafa, B. (2016, April). Expressive writing in minimizing students' public speaking anxiety. In *1st UPI International Conference on Sociology Education* (pp. 393-399). Atlantis Press.

Walker, E. H. (2019). *The Effects of Expressive Writing on Emotional Intelligence in College Undergraduates* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).

Yang, H., & Li, H. (2020). Training positive rumination in expressive writing to enhance psychological adjustment and working memory updating for maladaptive ruminators. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 471633.