

The Effects of Expressive Writing Interventions for Patients With Cancer: A Meta-Analysis

Pok-Ja Oh, RN, PhD, and Soo Hyun Kim, RN, PhD, OCN®

Oh is a professor in the Department of Nursing at Sahmyook University in Seoul, South Korea, and Kim is an associate professor in the Department of Nursing at Inha University in Incheon, South Korea.

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Oh contributed to the conceptualization and design and analysis. Kim provided the statistical support. Both authors completed the data collection and contributed to the manuscript preparation.

Kim can be reached at soohyun@inha.ac.kr, with copy to editor at ONFEditor@ons.org.

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Purpose/Objectives: To evaluate the effects of expressive writing (EW) interventions in patients with cancer.

Data Sources: Electronic databases searched included both international and Korean databases through January 2015.

Data Synthesis: Of the 20 trials that met the eligibility criteria of this review, a meta-analysis was conducted of 14 articles involving 13 randomized and 1 nonrandomized trials with 1,718 patients with cancer. EW interventions were compared with a neutral writing intervention or usual care (no writing). A significant small effect was noted on relieving cancer symptoms; however, the effects on psychological and cognitive outcomes were not significant. When subgroup analysis by control condition was performed, a significant effect on health-related quality of life was found between the EW intervention group and the usual care group.

Conclusions: EW had significant small effects only on cancer symptoms. The findings suggest that the traditional EW intervention protocol may need to be intensified to confirm its effect on patients with cancer.

Implications for Nursing: Current evidence for EW as a nursing intervention for improving physical, psychological, and cognitive outcomes among patients with cancer is promising, but not conclusive.

Although cancer survival has improved with advancements in early diagnosis and treatment, cancer can be an overwhelming and traumatic event that may profoundly affect multiple aspects of an individual's life (Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004; Merz, Fox, & Malcarne, 2014). About 30% of patients with cancer have been diagnosed with at least one psychiatric disorder, such as adjustment disorder or major depression (Mehnert et al., 2014). Potential risk factors for poor adjustment in patients with cancer include intrusive thoughts (unwanted and recurrent thoughts about a stressful experience) and avoidance behaviors (consciously recognized avoidance of certain thoughts and feelings) (Dupont, Bower, Stanton, & Ganz, 2014; Milbury et al., 2014). These are considered an adaptive part of processing trauma; however, they can cause negative effects or somatic symptoms (e.g., depression, fatigue, sleep disturbance), leading to poor adjustment (Devine, Parker, Fouladi, & Cohen, 2003; Dupont et al., 2014; Golden-Kreutz & Andersen, 2004; Johnson Vickberg et al., 2001).

Expressive writing (EW) is a psychosocial intervention for reducing psychological morbidity that was developed by Pennebaker and Beall (1986). The expression of emotions by writing about one's deepest thoughts and feelings, particularly regarding stressful or traumatic experiences, has long been a