



Integrating cognitive behavioral counseling and expressive writing to improve psychological well-being

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Cognitive behavioral counseling, expressive writing, psychological well-being.	Challenges in college life often cause students to experience pressure that impacts their psychological well-being, particularly among first-year students. The aim of this study is to identify the effect of integrating Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing to improve the psychological well-being of first-year students. The study involved 15 first-year students from the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University, divided into three groups: the integration of Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and Expressive Writing. The research design used was a pre-test post-test comparison group design, and psychological well-being was measured using the Psychological Well-Being Scale-42 Ryff, which was adapted into Indonesian. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test analysis showed no significant difference in the effectiveness of the three experimental interventions. These findings confirm that each intervention, whether integrating Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing, Cognitive Behavior Therapy alone, or Expressive Writing—can effectively improve the psychological well-being of first-year students with similar levels of effectiveness.

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Introduction

Between 2020 and 2021, over 60% of students from 373 universities worldwide reported experiencing at least one mental health issue (Lipson et al., 2022). Research by the American College Health Association revealed that three-quarters of students reported moderate to severe psychological distress. Mental health problems among college students have raised significant concerns, impacting academic success, social interactions, and future opportunities. Emotional pressures faced by students range from mood fluctuations to increasingly common mental health disorders in this group (Argudo, 2021; Osborn et al., 2022). This highlights the need for students to continuously adapt to academic processes and policies as part of their early adulthood developmental tasks. Furthermore, students must endure and excel in their academic journey, requiring quick adaptability and efforts to minimize personal weaknesses to achieve well-being (Attridge et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2021).

Psychological well-being refers to an individual's perception of achieving their best potential as a human being. It serves as a predictor of physical and mental health, enhancing happiness in daily life. Ideally, students should maintain high psychological well-being to cope with pressures, fulfill roles, and responsibilities, especially in the context of university life. Psychological well-being significantly influences students' daily lives, enabling them to cultivate positive emotions, enjoy life satisfaction, and enhance their potential for academic achievement and leadership (Niswah et al., 2022; Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022).

Field studies using psychological well-being instruments among first-year students in the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University revealed low levels of psychological well-being, marked by psychological issues such as negative emotions, with anxiety and stress being most prevalent. These negative emotions arise from increased responsibilities and challenges in preparing for a better future (Triwahyuni & Eko Prasetyo, 2021). Low psychological well-being is linked to declining academic performance, dropouts, poor physical health, emotional disturbances, impaired thinking abilities, and reduced social functioning, particularly during the pressures and transitions of the first year (Asif et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2021; Prasetyo & Triwahyuni, 2022).

Guidance and counseling services in universities support students in developing their potential and addressing challenges during their academic journey (Kamaruzzaman, 2016). These services act as stress relief, aiding students in navigating the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. Counselors assist those in adverse situations by guiding them toward better life decisions (Cronin et al., 2021; Mulawarman et al., 2022).

Previous studies have explored interventions to enhance students' psychological well-being using psychological approaches, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT focuses on cognitive schemas such as automatic thoughts, intermediate beliefs, and core beliefs. Students are taught to develop positive thoughts to counter maladaptive emotions and behaviors. This process includes positive reflection, education, data collection (thoughts, feelings, behaviors), evaluation, modification, and practicing new beneficial thoughts and behaviors to improve psychological well-being (Beck & Beck, 2021; Urfa & Aşçı, 2023).

Expressive writing is another technique to explore clients' thoughts and emotions related to trauma or challenges. When integrated with CBT, expressive writing can serve as homework exercises, such as diary writing, allowing clients to express their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (Zhou et al., 2021). These records facilitate self-reflection for clients and help counselors gather data to identify cognitive and behavioral mechanisms during CBT sessions (Algristian, 2019). Expressive writing has proven effective in improving psychological well-being, as it enhances cognitive function, life satisfaction, and health related to psychological well-being. This state is reflected in individuals' self-acceptance, purpose in life, desire for growth, positive relationships, independence, and resilience in overcoming challenges (Mulawarman et al., 2022, 2023; Rohmah et al., 2024; Triwahyuni & Eko Prasetyo, 2021; Wibowo & Mulawarman, 2022).

These findings highlight the potential of integrating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with expressive writing to enhance students' psychological well-being. Incorporating expressive writing into CBT facilitates thought and emotion exploration through writing and promotes cognitive restructuring via self-awareness. This integration enhances CBT's effectiveness, as the reflective process in expressive writing supports cognitive restructuring. Moreover, this approach benefits individuals who struggle to articulate ideas verbally, enabling them to express thoughts more effectively during counseling sessions, thereby improving counseling outcomes (Rachmadi & Poerwandari, 2020). This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with expressive writing in improving the psychological well-being of first-year students at Mulawarman University.

Method

This study employed a pre-test post-test comparison group design. The participants were first-year students from the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University, recruited using purposive random sampling technique. The inclusion criteria required subjects to be active first-year students, have low scores ($X < 158$) on the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS-42), and agree to participate in individual counseling. Based on these criteria, 15 students were selected and randomly assigned to three groups: five in the Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing group (K1), five in the Cognitive Behavior Therapy group (K2), and five in the Expressive Writing group (K3).

The data collection instrument used in this study was the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS-42), developed by Carol Ryff, to measure psychological well-being across 42 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). After adapting the instrument into Indonesian, it was reviewed by judgment experts to confirm its content validity and cultural equivalence. Construct validity testing using item-total correlation showed coefficients ranging from 0.159 to 0.402, while the instrument's reliability demonstrated an Alpha coefficient of 0.789.

This study employed a pretest-posttest comparison group design. All three groups underwent a pretest using the PWBS-42 before counseling and a posttest after completing counseling, with the same instrument administered. Counseling was conducted in five sessions, once a week (1x50 minutes per session). The procedures for counseling sessions in the Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing group (K1), Cognitive Behavior Therapy group (K2), and Expressive Writing group (K3) are detailed in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

The Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS-42) was administered to 74 first-year students from the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University. Based on the data in Table 2, 15 students were categorized as having high psychological well-being with an

average score of 204, 31 students were in the moderate category with average scores ranging between 158–203, and 28 students were in the low category with average scores below 158.

Table 1. Procedures for the Implementation of Counseling Sessions: Integration of Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Expressive Writing (K₁), Cognitive Behavior Therapy Counseling (K₂), and Expressive Writing Counseling (K₃).

Session	Procedure		
	K ₁	K ₂	K ₃
1	- Establishing collaboration, therapeutic relationships, and stabilization - Exploring issues - Setting counseling goals	- Establishing collaboration dan therapeutic relationships - Developing cognitive concepts and defining counseling goals - Providing homework: emotional and thought logs	- Initial writing - Identifying problems and setting counseling goals
2	- Developing cognitive restructuring of maladaptive thoughts and core beliefs - Providing homework: daily journal and applying the ABC-DE cognitive model	- Identifying maladaptive thoughts - Providing homework: emotional, thought, and behavioral logs	- Writing exercise: Self-assessing, problem-solving, and overcoming barriers - Providing feedback on writing
3	- Developing cognitive restructuring of maladaptive thoughts and core beliefs - Providing homework: daily journal and applying the ABC-DE cognitive model	- Identifying maladaptive thoughts and automatic thoughts - Providing feedback and encouragement - Providing homework: applying for ABC-DE cognitive model	- Writing exercise: reflecting on relationships, experiences, and expectations - Providing feedback on writing
4	- Developing problem-solving skills - Exposure - Providing homework: Daily journaling	- Helping clients identify automatic thoughts and restructure thoughts - Exposure - Providing homework: comparing old vs. new beliefs	- Writing exercise: reflecting on life goals, gratitude, aspirations, and efforts - Providing feedback on writing
5	- Applying to self: expressive writing about gratitude toward self - Integrating, transforming, and concluding counseling	- Evaluating thought changes - Concluding counseling	- Applying to self: expressive writing about gratitude toward self - Concluding counseling

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test results, shown in Table 3, indicate that the integration of Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing (K1) significantly improved psychological well-being ($Z_1 = -2.02$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS-42) Level Categorization

Category	Score	Frequency	Percentage
Low	X < 158	28	38%
Moderate	159-203	31	42%
High	X > 204	15	20%

Table 3. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test and *Uji* Kruskal-Wallis Test Results

Group	Pretest		Posttest		Z ₁
	M	SD	M	SD	
K ₁	156.00	3.64	174.00	15.98	-2.02*
K ₂	149.60	9.01	179.80	6.72	-2.02*
K ₃	156.00	3.46	170.60	6.18	-2.02*
Z ₂	3.31**		3.31**		

Description:

Z₁: Wilcoxon signed rank test score

Z₂: Kruskal-wallis score

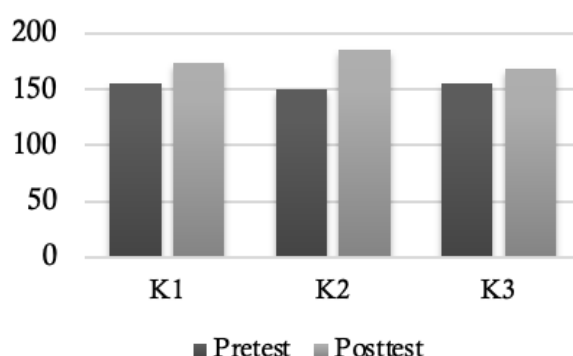
*: <0.05

**>0.05

Similarly, the Cognitive Behavior Therapy (K2) group also showed improvement in psychological well-being ($Z_1 = -2.02$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the Expressive Writing (K3) group exhibited an increase in psychological well-being ($Z_1 = -2.02$, $p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that all three counseling groups effectively enhanced the psychological well-being of first-year students at the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University, as evidenced by the pretest and posttest results displayed in Figure 1.

The Kruskal-Wallis test results, shown in Table 3, reveal no significant difference in the effectiveness of the three counseling groups ($Z_2 = 3.30$, $p > 0.05$) in improving psychological well-being. Therefore, it can be concluded that the three counseling groups—Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing (K1), Cognitive Behavior Therapy (K2), and Expressive Writing (K3)—had comparable effectiveness in enhancing the psychological well-being of first-year students at the Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University.

The experimental group combining Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Expressive Writing (K1) also showed improvement in psychological well-being after completing 5 counseling sessions. Expressive writing, a form of processing individual experiences through writing, combined with Cognitive Behavior Therapy, allows for the exploration of thoughts and emotions from experiences and the restructuring of these thoughts through self-awareness during the expressive writing sessions. This form of expression can help individuals recover from stressful experiences and regulate their emotions more effectively. As a result, participants were able to identify more realistic and positive thoughts, rules, and core beliefs about themselves, leading to an increase in their psychological well-being.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of psychological well-being levels of first-year students

The integration of Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Expressive Writing offers an intervention that can influence an individual's behavior and cognition, particularly in enhancing psychological well-being among first-year students who are vulnerable to emotional and psychological stress. The findings of this study address recommendations from previous research on the application of integrating Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Expressive Writing confirming the effects before and after counseling (Rachmadi & Poerwandari, 2020). The results indicate that this intervention is effective in improving psychological well-being, with most participants showing improvements. Comparing pretest and posttest scores, the integration of Cognitive Behavior Therapy

and Expressive Writing group showed the highest improvement of 44 points and the lowest improvement of 3 points.

The highest score reduction was achieved by participants who demonstrated strong commitment to changing negative thoughts and beliefs about themselves. Counseling was utilized as an opportunity to explore thoughts and feelings, write about experiences, gain self-awareness, share stories, and receive support, all of which facilitated adaptive changes. Participants expressed significant personal experiences that created barriers to their daily behavior, using writing as an outlet to release suppressed emotions. This integration proved beneficial for individuals struggling to articulate their ideas verbally by first recognizing their thoughts and emotions, enabling clearer communication during counseling sessions.

Findings also revealed that using a daily journal served as a coping mechanism during emotional turbulence. The incorporation of expressive writing enhanced the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavior Therapy by supporting cognitive restructuring processes (Algristian, 2019; Rachmadi & Poerwandari, 2020). Additionally, expressive writing served as a bridge toward self-projection, acting as a first step toward self-acceptance (Algristian, 2019). Expressive writing provides a safer space, particularly for individuals who struggle to express emotions in daily life, facilitating catharsis in a secure and private setting. This is especially helpful for addressing trauma or narratives that are difficult to articulate verbally during counseling sessions.

However, this study also identified challenges faced by participants in maintaining a daily journal, with the lowest score reduction potentially stemming from unclear instructions or participants' difficulty in expressing themselves in writing. Some participants struggled to begin writing due to a lack of motivation to complete writing tasks at home. Additionally, not all participants had difficulty verbalizing their ideas, making expressive writing unsuitable for some.

The lowest score reduction might also be attributed to the irregularity of counseling session schedules due to time constraints and conflicting schedules between the researchers and participants. As a result, counseling sessions were conducted less than once a week, adjusted to participants' activity schedules and situational conditions, which were critical to this study. Consequently, participants did not receive entirely uniform treatment.

The Cognitive Behavior Therapy (K2) group also experienced an improvement in psychological well-being after completing five counseling sessions. Each participant has varying capacities to cope with stress. When participants felt unable to manage stress, new dysfunctional behavior patterns emerged, leading to further stress and problems. Consequently, failure to resolve issues resulted in prolonged emotional conflicts, draining energy and reducing motivation in college (Murad, 2021). Such cognitive distortions are exacerbated by low psychological well-being levels among participants.

Participants' self-assessment is rooted in three levels of cognition: automatic thoughts, rules and assumptions, and core beliefs, which are the primary targets of modification in Cognitive Behavior Therapy. This approach assumes that thoughts dictate emotions, and by controlling dysfunctional thoughts and managing behaviors, cognitive distortions can be minimized, enhancing psychological well-being. Cognitive Behavior Therapy helps participants identify distorted thinking patterns in their dysfunctional behaviors and address them through structured discussions and tasks, leading to improved psychological well-being.

Homework assignments were given at the end of each counseling session as an integral component of the Cognitive Behavior Therapy approach. In this study, the homework took the form of worksheets consistent with the activities conducted during counseling sessions. These assignments were designed to motivate participants to complete the tasks and take responsibility for their self-improvement during and after counseling sessions (Beck & Beck, 2021; Şahin & Türk, 2021). Homework also encouraged participants to reflect on the session's content as part of their commitment to achieving desired changes.

The findings align with previous studies, demonstrating that Cognitive Behavior Therapy aids participants in identifying and altering thoughts and feelings that influence behavior, thus enhancing psychological well-being (Attridge et al., 2020; Shahrokhian et al., 2022; Shegarf Nakhaei et al., 2021). Most participants successfully transformed their cognition by reducing negative automatic thoughts, unhelpful rules and assumptions, and negative core beliefs into more productive and positive ones.

The highest reduction in scores was achieved by effectively identifying and adopting more realistic and positive thoughts, rules, and core beliefs about themselves. By assisting participants in recognizing and evaluating these thoughts, they began to think more realistically, resulting in improved emotional states and more functional behaviors (Murad, 2021). As negative self-perceptions shifted to more positive views, participants experienced an increase in psychological well-being.

The lowest score reduction was attributed to participants' inconsistency in completing homework assignments, which is a frequent barrier to success in Cognitive Behavior Therapy. Homework compliance is a critical component of CBT, serving as a structured and therapeutic activity discussed during sessions and

completed between sessions. Homework tasks facilitate behavioral monitoring or the application of new behaviors in therapy (Kazantzis & Miller, 2022; Prasko et al., 2022; Tang & Kreindler, 2017). A lack of commitment to completing homework often leads to forgetting crucial topics, resulting in less optimal and shallow exploration during counseling.

The expressive writing group (K3) also showed improvements in psychological well-being after completing five counseling sessions. Although participants were vulnerable to experiencing negative emotions during the writing process, efforts were made to mitigate this risk by guiding participants to confront rather than avoid these feelings. They were encouraged to articulate and observe their stressors and evaluate the emerging negative emotions. When participants engaged in expressive writing about their feelings regarding an event, they re-experienced the emotions, reassessed the event, and developed new perceptions. This process clarified their thoughts, brought emotional relief, and ultimately enhanced psychological well-being (Azzahra, 2020; Mulawarman et al., 2024; Ruini & Mortara, 2022; Yu & Zhang, 2022a).

Results in the expressive writing group showed the highest score reduction of 20 points and the lowest of 2 points. The greatest improvements were achieved when expressive writing served as a safe space for participants to reflect, explore emotions, and integrate difficult and painful experiences. Although unpleasant situations could arise during the writing process, participants eventually felt more in control, leading to emotional mastery and better psychological adjustment (Fartoukh & Chanquoy, 2020; Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022; Sabo Mordechay et al., 2019; Wahyuningtyas & Setiowati, 2020).

Participants with the lowest score reduction may have struggled to adapt to expressive writing, potentially due to cultural influences and personal preferences favoring verbal expression over written communication. Previous research found that Euro-American participants experienced increased insight and symptom reduction a month after completing four sessions of expressive writing (Wahyuningtyas & Setiowati, 2020). However, no such effects were observed among Asian American participants. This cultural tendency toward verbalization rather than writing could explain the limited effectiveness of expressive writing in some cases. Thus, cultural and habitual factors play a significant role in the success of expressive writing.

The findings in this study demonstrate that all three counseling methods improved psychological well-being. The core premise of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) targets difficult emotions by modifying the thoughts and behaviors that contribute to negative feelings (Ugwuanyi et al., 2020). CBT operates on the assumption that behavior can be regulated by restructuring thoughts, whether consciously or unconsciously. This cognitive restructuring influences emotions and behavior more significantly than the events themselves. Self-awareness—understanding one's characteristics, needs, strengths, weaknesses, desires, fears, feelings, values, and identity—is a crucial aspect of CBT (Şahin & Türk, 2021; Shahrokhian et al., 2022). By managing dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors, CBT reduces stress and enhances psychological well-being. Participants became more capable of adapting to situations that previously triggered negative thoughts, leading to increased motivation and overall improvements in psychological well-being.

Expressive writing is closely related to exposure in Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), but it is simpler, as it involves confronting negative thoughts through writing without directly confronting the traumatic events that caused them. This practice includes addressing internal experiences that lead to cognitive changes in how previously stressful or traumatic events are perceived. The goal is for participants to experience the relief that comes from writing about their thoughts and feelings, especially when it includes a high proportion of emotional and cognitive words (Yu & Zhang, 2022b). Several studies support the idea that expressive writing about emotions and stressful experiences is linked to improved psychological well-being (Cheung et al., 2021; Fartoukh & Chanquoy, 2020; Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022).

Expressive writing helps transform thoughts and emotions by providing a new perspective through reflection. By writing about topics that are difficult to discuss openly, individuals can acknowledge and accept their emotions, giving voice to feelings that were previously blocked and constructing meaningful narratives (Aryani Safithry & Sari Dewi, 2020; Ruini & Mortara, 2022). This process allows individuals to explore their thoughts or feelings by writing about their experiences, leading to self-awareness, reframing, and cognitive restructuring—key components of Cognitive Behavior Therapy—that ultimately enhance psychological well-being. This is consistent with previous research showing that expressive writing can reduce painful experiences through adaptive cognitive restructuring.

Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with Expressive Writing did not yield significantly greater improvements in the psychological well-being of first-year university students than CBT or Expressive Writing alone. The findings indicate that the three interventions showed comparable outcomes, suggesting that integrating both approaches does not necessarily provide additional benefits over

implementing either intervention independently. These results highlight the potential of CBT and Expressive Writing as alternative approaches to supporting students' psychological well-being. Further research with larger sample sizes is recommended to confirm these findings and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of each intervention.

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