

Expressive writing as a preventive measure for work stress: A randomized controlled trial

Kimberly Meyer^{a, b}, Sandra Sülzenbrück^a and Christine Sutter^b

^aFOM University of Applied Sciences, Germany

^bGerman Police University, Germany

Work stress puts a strain on both the individual and the organization. Individuals can suffer from adverse health effects (e.g., depression, psychosomatic symptoms) and organizations are impaired in productivity (lower performance, engagement etc.). Organizations should therefore develop both a self-interest and an ethical responsibility to implement stress-reducing measures. Meta-analytic results show moderate to large effects of stress management interventions. However, it is currently unclear whether these effects relate only to acute stress levels or whether they also reduce long-term strain. Therefore, one issue for research on work stress is to identify interventions that prevent long-term strain. Such an intervention could be expressive writing. Expressive writing is a writing technique in which participants spend 15 to 20 minutes in three to four consecutive sessions writing about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a stressful event. The intervention was developed in the 1980s and showed positive effects, especially for posttraumatic stress. Since then, however, research on expressive writing has been extended to other applicational fields, including the professional contexts. Expressive writing was shown to be beneficial in dealing with workplace injustice, during times of high work intensity, as well as in moments of work life adjustment (e.g., an unintentional local transfer). A positive influence of expressive writing on psychopathological symptoms (e.g., depression), personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, clout) and organizational variables (e.g., continuance commitment) was also shown. The aim of the study was to apply expressive writing to the specific use case of work stress and to examine its effectiveness. For this purpose, a 3 x 3 mixed factorial experimental design was used (Fig. 1). The measurement focused on a comprehensive operationalization of work stress through variables such as burnout, psychosomatic symptoms, negative affectivity and irritation, on accounting for long-term effects through a follow-up and particular focus on organizational outcomes. The data evaluation is currently not yet completed. By the time of the conference, however, first results will be presented.



Figure 1. Presentation of the experimental design of the study

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3. Lanaj, K., Foulk, T. A., & Erez, A. (2019). Energizing leaders via self-reflection: A within-person field experiment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 104(1), 1.
4. Procaccia, R., Segre, G., Tamanza, G., & Manzoni, G. M. (2021). Benefits of expressive writing on healthcare workers' psychological adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 624176.
5. Saldanha, M. F., & Barclay, L. J. (2021). Finding meaning in unfair experiences: Using expressive writing to foster resilience and positive outcomes. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 13(4), 887-905.

Biography

Kimberly Meyer currently works as a junior research and lecturer at the German Police University, where she is also working on her doctorate. Her focus is on prevention measures for the negative consequences of occupational stress. This is a collaborative project between the Institute for Traffic and Engineering Psychology at the German Police University in Münster and the Institute for Business Psychology at FOM University in Dortmund. She completed her master's degree in business psychology and consulting in 2021 with a master's thesis in which she developed a scale to measure internal resignation.

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