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Journaling and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): A Review of Their Combined Potential for Managing Stress in Young Adults

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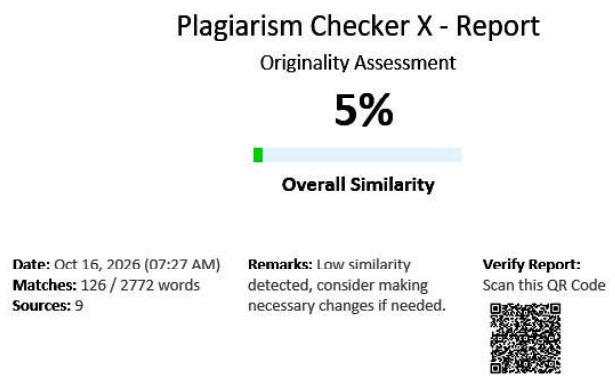
ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant rise in the global prevalence of mental health challenges among college students and young adults. Currently, stress simultaneously impacts their academic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and lifestyle-related dimensions. Although both 'Expressive Journaling' and 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy' (CBT) have been independently validated as effective mental health interventions, empirical research examining their combined therapeutic potential within a unified framework remains extremely limited.This literature review synthesizes findings from more than 15 studies conducted between 1992 and 2023. It critically analyzes journaling as a therapeutic tool, the clinical efficacy of CBT, and documented experiences of stress among young adults. The review reveals that while journaling yields measurable physiological and psychological benefits, maximizing its therapeutic potential requires a clear cognitive structure. CBT provides precisely this necessary structure through its evidence-based 'cognitive restructuring techniques.' Notably, no existing study has explicitly tested the combined application of these two approaches for young adults experiencing stress.The available evidence collectively indicates that 'Structured Reflective Journaling' incorporating CBT principles represents an underexplored yet potentially excellent intervention. This approach simultaneously addresses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of stress within a format characterized by low cost, high accessibility, and extensive scalability. Empirical testing of this integrated approach should be accorded top priority in future research.

KEY WORDS

Mental Health; Stress Management; Young Adults; Expressive Journaling; Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

INTRODUCTION

The global prevalence of mental health challenges among college students has escalated significantly in recent years, driven by evolving academics demands, technological pressure and environmental transitions. SE Ross. Identified that university experience psychological distress across five primary dimensions; academic pressure, intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal difficulties, environmental adjustments and lifestyle disruptions, underscoring an urgent need for scalable, accessible and clinically validated mental health interventions.

Among non-pharmacological approaches, expressive journaling has emerged as a significant therapeutic tool for emotional self-regulation and psychological wellbeing. defined as the structured expression of thoughts, emotions and personal experiences, journaling enables individuals to organise and process their internal psychological states. Pennebaker (1997) established that writing about traumatic and emotionally significant experiences yields measurable improvements in both psychological and physiological health outcomes, positioning journaling as an accessible and low-cost intervention for diverse population.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, pioneered by Aaron Beck (1960), represents the gold standard of contemporary psychotherapeutic practice. Grounded in the principle that maladaptive thought patterns directly influence emotional states and behaviour responses, CBT employs structured cognitive restructuring to facilitate meaningful and lasting psychological improvement across both psychiatric and non-psychiatric conditions.

Despite the established independent efficacy of both expressive journalling and CBT, limited empirical research has examined their integrated application as a unified therapeutic framework. Ullrich and Lutgendorf demonstrated that journaling incorporating cognitive processing alongside emotional expression produces significantly greater therapeutic outcomes, suggesting that CBT principles serve as a natural structural complement to journaling practice. This review therefore examines the combined potential of structured reflective journaling integrated with CBT principles as an accessible interventions for stressed young adults.

Literature Review

Journaling as Therapeutic Tool

Pennebaker (1997) established a scientific basis for journaling as a therapeutic intervention, demonstrating that writing about emotional and stressful experiences can improve psychological and physical health. He emphasized that its benefits arise not merely from emotional expression but also from the cognitive and linguistic processing through which individuals organize and make sense of their experiences. This process can support emotional understanding, self-reflection, and stress management, particularly among stressed young adults.

Pennebaker (1992) further demonstrated the health benefits of expressive writing in a controlled study involving 41 university employees. Participants who wrote about traumatic experiences for 20 minutes weekly over four weeks showed reductions in liver enzyme levels (SGOT and SGPT) and approximately 28.6% lower workplace absenteeism, whereas absenteeism increased by 48.5% among those writing about neutral topics. The benefits were greater among individuals less inclined to suppress emotions, suggesting that journaling can influence biological and behavioural outcomes alongside psychological well-being.

In academic settings, **Friston (2008)** examined journaling and self-efficacy among 41 undergraduate psychology students, comparing reflective writing with and without cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) instructions. Both groups demonstrated significant improvements in self-efficacy by midterm, with no significant differences between them. These findings suggest that regular reflective writing may strengthen students' confidence in their abilities and perceived personal control, supporting their capacity to cope with academic and personal challenges.

Sohal (2022) provided broader evidence through a systematic review and meta-analysis of 20 randomized controlled trials examining journaling interventions for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Journaling was associated with an approximately 5% greater reduction in mental health symptom scores than control conditions, with stronger effects reported for anxiety (9%) and PTSD (6%). However,

substantial heterogeneity and methodological limitations restricted definitive conclusions. The absence of structured preparatory guidance across the included studies also highlighted a potential research gap concerning the integration of evidence-based frameworks, such as CBT, to enhance journaling outcomes. Collectively, these findings support further investigation into structured journaling as an accessible stress-management intervention for young adults.

Extending this research, **MacIsaac; et. al. (2023)** investigated positively focused journaling through a 28-day smartphone-based study involving 152 undergraduate students. Their findings indicated improvements in psychological well-being among participants with average or higher baseline self-reflection. Although rumination predicted initial engagement with journaling, structured prompts offered opportunities to redirect reflection positively. However, low journal uptake highlighted challenges in sustained participation and the importance of designing interventions suited to individual differences.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) originated in the 1960s through the clinical observations of Aaron Beck, who identified recurring patterns of distorted and self-defeating thinking among patients with depression. Beck conceptualized these cognitive distortions, including catastrophizing and overgeneralization, as identifiable and modifiable patterns contributing to psychological distress. His seminal work, Cognitive Therapy of Depression (Beck et al., 1979), established a structured therapeutic approach based on the interrelationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. By identifying and restructuring dysfunctional thoughts and underlying beliefs, CBT aims to promote lasting psychological improvement. Karunarathna (2024) described CBT as a structured, collaborative, goal-oriented, and adaptable intervention effective across various psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use disorders, as well as conditions such as chronic pain and insomnia.

Hofmann and Smits (2008) examined the efficacy of CBT for adult anxiety disorders through a meta-analysis of randomized placebo-controlled trials. Their findings demonstrated that CBT was significantly more effective than placebo conditions, supporting the importance of specific therapeutic mechanisms, including cognitive restructuring and behavioural exposure. However, treatment effectiveness varied across anxiety disorders, indicating that outcomes depend partly on the nature of the underlying cognitive and behavioural patterns. The findings also suggested potential benefits for associated depressive symptoms, reinforcing CBT's value as an evidence-based approach to managing psychological distress.

CBT has gained recognition as a leading evidence-based psychotherapeutic approach because of its extensive empirical evaluation, structured theoretical framework, and continuing refinement through clinical research. Its effectiveness has been assessed against various control conditions, including placebo interventions and treatment-as-usual. Its emphasis on cognitive processes and observable behavioural change provides a systematic framework for understanding therapeutic outcomes. Consequently, CBT serves as an important reference point in psychotherapy research and offers a foundation for developing integrated interventions that combine established psychological techniques with complementary approaches.

An important extension of CBT is Cognitive Behavioural Writing Therapy (CBWT), examined by Van der Oord et al. (2009) among 23 children aged 8–18 years who had experienced traumatic events. The intervention integrated exposure, cognitive restructuring, and social sharing through therapist-assisted writing sessions in which participants developed detailed narratives of their traumatic experiences. Results indicated reductions in post-traumatic stress symptoms, depressive symptoms, trauma-related cognitions, and behavioural problems, with improvements maintained at six-month follow-up. The intervention required an average of 5.5 sessions, and 75% of participants reported feeling much better after treatment. Although further randomized controlled trials were recommended, the findings suggest that combining structured writing with CBT techniques may provide a promising approach to addressing trauma-related distress. This evidence provides a conceptual foundation for investigating CBT-informed journaling as a structured stress-management intervention for young adults.

Stress Among Young Adults

Stress is a common challenge in college life, arising from academic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental factors. Bulo and Sanchez (2014), using the Student-Life Stress Inventory among 150 college students, reported moderate overall stress levels, with interpersonal stressors ranking highest and environmental stressors lowest.

The transition to higher education exposes students to increased academic expectations, changing social relationships, financial pressures, and new responsibilities. When inadequately managed, these stressors may contribute to loneliness, excessive worry, and difficulties regulating emotions.

Bulo and Sanchez (2014) further identified academic workload, lower-than-expected grades, parental conflicts, and interpersonal relationships as significant sources of student stress. Financial difficulties emerged as particularly stressful, highlighting the interconnected nature of economic, academic, and personal pressures among college students. These findings underscore the need for accessible stress-management strategies that help young adults understand their experiences and develop effective coping mechanisms.

Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002) investigated the role of writing approaches in psychological adjustment by randomly assigning 122 undergraduate students to three conditions: emotional expression, combined cognitive processing and emotional expression, and factual writing about media events. Students who combined emotional expression with cognitive processing demonstrated greater positive growth than those in the other groups, with mean growth scores increasing from 70.68 to 75.95. Conversely, emotional-expression-only writing was associated with increased physical illness symptoms. These findings suggest that journaling may be more beneficial when it incorporates cognitive reflection and meaning-making rather than focusing exclusively on emotional release. Accordingly, structured, cognitively oriented journaling may offer a promising approach to helping college students process stressful experiences and strengthen their coping abilities.

Discussions

The reviewed literature suggests that journaling and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are complementary interventions that may provide a more comprehensive approach to stress management when integrated. Both focus on examining, understanding, and reframing thoughts and emotions that contribute to psychological distress. While CBT uses structured techniques to identify cognitive distortions and develop balanced thinking, journaling facilitates written self-reflection and emotional processing. Their integration allows individuals to extend CBT principles beyond therapeutic sessions into everyday life, making reflective practice an accessible and low-cost strategy for stressed young adults.

Empirical support for this integration is provided by Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002), who found that undergraduate students combining emotional expression with cognitive processing in their writing experienced greater positive growth than those focusing solely on emotional expression. Emotion-focused writing was also associated with increased physical illness symptoms. These findings suggest that emotional expression alone may be insufficient and that cognitive processing and meaning-making are important for beneficial outcomes. CBT techniques can provide the necessary structure for journaling by helping individuals identify unhelpful thoughts, challenge negative interpretations, and develop more balanced perspectives.

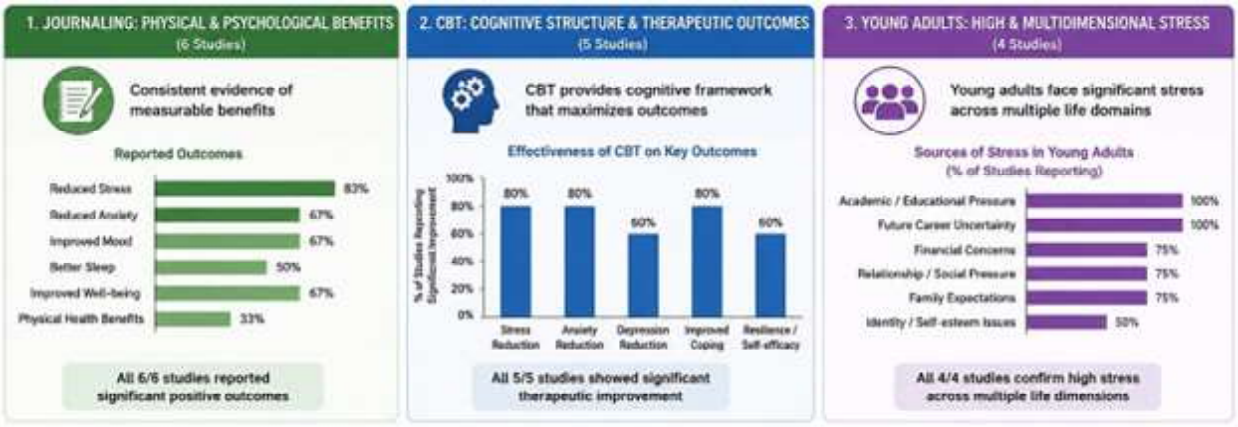
Further evidence comes from Sohal et al. (2022), whose systematic review and meta-analysis of 20 randomized controlled trials found that journaling produced an approximately 5% greater reduction in mental health symptoms than control conditions. However, the small-to-moderate effects and substantial heterogeneity across studies (($I^2 = 83.8\%$)) indicated limitations in the consistency of the evidence. The absence of preparatory training or structured guidance in the included studies also highlights the potential importance of providing appropriate direction. These findings support investigating whether integrating CBT principles can enhance journaling's effectiveness in managing stress and emotional difficulties.

The complementary value of these interventions is further supported by Van der Oord et al. (2009), who found that Cognitive Behavioural Writing Therapy, incorporating cognitive restructuring and exposure within structured writing, reduced post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms among traumatized children, with improvements maintained at six-month follow-up. Together with the findings of Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002) and Sohal et al. (2022), this research provides a rationale for combining structured writing with CBT techniques rather than relying on journaling as an isolated intervention.

This integrated approach has particular relevance for college students and young adults, who experience multiple stressors, including academic demands, financial difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, and family pressures (Bulo & Sanchez, 2014). Although professional CBT can be effective, access may be constrained by cost, waiting periods, and stigma surrounding mental health support. Journaling offers a private, affordable, and flexible means

of applying CBT-based strategies in daily life. By learning to recognize unhelpful thinking patterns, reframe negative interpretations, and reflect constructively on stressful experiences, young adults may strengthen their coping skills and emotional understanding. Therefore, CBT-informed journaling represents a promising complementary stress-management approach that may extend the practical application of evidence-based psychological techniques without replacing professional mental health care when needed.

Results



The review of studies across three thematic areas reveals a consistent and converging pattern. Journaling produces measurable physical and psychological benefits, CBT provides the cognitive structure that maximizes therapeutic outcomes, and young adults represent a population facing significant and documented stress across multiple life dimensions. Critically, while both interventions demonstrate independent efficacy, no existing study has explicitly examined their combined application for stressed young adults. The evidence collectively suggests that structured reflective journaling incorporating CBT principles represents an underexplored yet potentially superior intervention, one that addresses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of stress simultaneously, in a low cost and accessible format.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how journaling supports Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) outcomes among stressed young adults. The evidence suggests that journaling complements CBT by extending cognitive and emotional processing beyond therapy sessions. While CBT provides a structured framework for identifying and restructuring dysfunctional thoughts, journaling encourages consistent practice and integrates these techniques into daily life. Their combination is particularly relevant for young adults facing academic, interpersonal, financial, and personal pressures.

The reviewed literature highlights three key findings. First, journaling offers mental health benefits, particularly when cognitive processing and emotional expression are combined within structured frameworks. Second, CBT is an evidence-based intervention for stress and anxiety, and writing-based adaptations can effectively reduce symptoms. Third, young adult stress is multidimensional and can negatively affect psychological wellbeing and self-efficacy. Brief, structured journaling interventions may promote self-efficacy and personal growth, indicating the importance of appropriate guidance and intervention design.

Despite these promising findings, further research is needed. Future studies should incorporate preparatory sessions, compare integrated journaling-CBT interventions with conventional CBT and control conditions, and use longer follow-up periods to assess sustained benefits. Outcome measures should also include psychological wellbeing, self-efficacy, interpersonal functioning, and academic performance.

In conclusion, integrating journaling with CBT offers an accessible and practical approach to supporting young adults' mental health. By translating therapeutic principles into daily practice, this combination has the potential to improve coping skills and psychological wellbeing, although further empirical research is required to establish its long-term effectiveness.

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