LEARNING IN CLINICAL CASES

Journaling therapy for patients with social isolation

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Abstract
Social isolation led to multiple chronic conditions, including heart, lung, cardiovascular, hypertension, atherosclerosis, and other clinical conditions. When left untreated, social isolation causes depression, psychological stress, and anxiety. However, the use of journal therapy is scarce in the literature. Therefore, the study evaluated the benefits of journaling therapy in patients with social isolation. The finding showed that this therapy decreases the willingness to social isolation in the community setting. It is hoped that journaling therapy can be used for patients with psychological problems.

Keywords: Social isolation; nursing care; community nursing; journaling therapy; mental health issue

Introduction

Social isolation profoundly impacts mental health, often exacerbating existing conditions and contributing to the development of new psychological issues (Taylor, Cudjoe, Bu, & Lim, 2023). Human beings are inherently social creatures, and the absence of regular interaction can lead to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Shankar, 2023). Studies have shown that prolonged social isolation can result in cognitive decline, increased stress levels, and a higher risk of psychiatric disorders (Donovan & Blazer, 2020; Newman-Norlund et al., 2022). The lack of social engagement deprives individuals of essential support networks, making it more challenging to cope with life's stresses and maintain mental well-being **(Figure 1)**. The relationship between social isolation and mental health is particularly evident among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, individuals with chronic illnesses, and those with preexisting mental health conditions (Mann et al., 2022). For these groups, social isolation can intensify feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, leading to a decline in both psychological and physical health (Yanguas, Pinazo-Henandis, & Tarazona-Santabalbina, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its necessary lockdowns and social distancing measures, has amplified these issues, highlighting the critical need for mental health support during periods of isolation (Keller, Derksen, Kötting, Dahmen, & Lippke, 2023). Innovative solutions, such as virtual therapy and online support groups, have emerged to help mitigate the adverse effects of social isolation, but the challenge remains significant.

Addressing social isolation requires a multifaceted approach that includes community engagement, mental health services, and policy interventions. Communities can play a vital role by fostering inclusive environments that encourage social interaction and support (Glover, Todd, & Moyer, 2022). Mental health services must be accessible and equipped to address the unique challenges posed by social isolation, offering both preventive and therapeutic interventions. Policymakers can contribute by creating and supporting programs that reduce barriers to social participation, such as transportation services for the elderly and initiatives that promote digital literacy. By prioritizing the reduction of social isolation, we can enhance mental health outcomes and improve overall quality of life for affected individuals. Social isolation is a state of change experienced by patients with schizophrenia (Hämmig, 2019). A lonely experience of someone and feelings of resentment towards others as something negative (Donovan & Blazer, 2020). The condition of a person's social isolation is the patient's inability to express the patient's feelings that can cause the patient to express his feelings with violence. Patients with social isolation cannot socialize, have difficulty expressing desires, and communicating appropriately, so patients cannot express anger well (Sukaesti, 2019). Feeling worthless makes it harder for patients to develop relationships with others. As a

result, the patient becomes regressive or retrograde, experiences a decrease in activity and a lack of attention to appearance and self-hygiene (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Patients are increasingly immersed in past travel and behaviour and primitive behaviours, including autistic speech and unrealistic behaviour, resulting in further hallucinations (Sukutiro, 2020). The effects of social isolation include sensory disorders of perception: hallucinations, the risk of violent behaviour (on oneself, others, the environment and verbal), and self-care deficits (Mohammadi et al., 2017). Journaling therapy could be a promising intervention to deal with this social isolation health concern.

Figure 1. Illustration of social isolation (*Courtesy of unsplash.com*)

Interventions to combat social isolation are crucial for promoting mental health and overall well-being. One effective approach is the implementation of community-based programs designed to foster social connections and engagement (Kannan & Veazie, 2022). These programs can include social clubs, group activities, and volunteer opportunities that encourage individuals to interact and form meaningful relationships. For the elderly, initiatives such as senior centers, intergenerational activities, and community transport services can significantly reduce feelings of isolation (Dehi Aroogh & Mohammadi Shahboulaghi, 2020). Additionally, technology can play a vital role; virtual social platforms, online support groups, and telehealth services can help maintain connections and provide access to mental health support, particularly for those unable to participate in face-to-face interactions. Another essential intervention is the integration of social support within healthcare services (Zanjari, Momtaz, Kamal, Basakha, & Ahmadi, 2022). Healthcare providers can screen for social isolation during routine check-ups and refer patients to appropriate community resources or mental health professionals. Training healthcare workers to recognize and address the signs of social isolation can enhance early intervention efforts. Moreover, creating partnerships between healthcare systems and community organizations can ensure a comprehensive support network (Alderwick, Hutchings, Briggs, & Mays, 2021). Policies that promote affordable and accessible mental health care, as well as initiatives that support family caregivers, can also mitigate the impact of social isolation. By adopting a holistic approach that combines community engagement, healthcare integration, and supportive policies, we can effectively address social isolation and improve mental health outcomes.

Journaling is a well-established non-pharmacological tool in the management of mental illness **(Figure 2)**. However, there is a lack of clear evidence-based guidelines to inform primary care providers about its use (Sohal, Singh, Dhillon & Gill, 2022). Positive affect journaling (PAJ), an emotion-focused self-regulation practice, has been linked to favorable outcomes across various medical groups. It is possible to modify PAJ for delivery via the internet, meeting the demand for scalable, evidence-based psychosocial therapies among patients experiencing emotional distress due to medical illnesses (Smyth et al., 2018). Writing therapy, also known as "expressive (emotional) disclosure," "expressive writing," or "written disclosure therapy," has the potential to heal both the mind and the body. In the earliest studies, participants were asked to write for up to twenty minutes over three or four writing sessions about the thoughts and feelings associated with a stressful incident that they found to be the most painful (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012; Colori, 2018). Writing therapy is an inexpensive, easily accessible, and adaptable form of therapy. While having a mental health expert guide the process is possible, it can also be practiced independently with just a person and a pen (Ruini & Mortara, 2022). Writing therapy can also be conducted in a group setting, with the focus of the group discussions being on the writing. It can be used as a complementary treatment to another therapy. Regardless of the format, writing therapy can be beneficial for individuals, helping them accelerate personal growth, engage in creative expression, and develop a sense of agency and mastery over their own lives (Algristian, 2019).

Figure 2. Illustration of writing therapy (*Courtesy of unsplash.com*)

The studies mentioned suggest that journaling therapy may help alleviate some of the symptoms of depression, making it a practical therapeutic intervention for clients undergoing psychotherapy. As with anxiety, such interventions were more helpful when they lasted more than thirty days. However, the use of journaling therapy in patients with social isolation is limited in the literature. Nursing measures, such as building relationships of mutual trust, helping patients identify the causes of social isolation, understanding the benefits and disadvantages of being out of contact with others, and teaching patients to gradually become acquainted, are needed. Journaling is

also a way for individuals to express themselves without the fear of judgment from others. Therefore, this study aims to understand the impact of journaling therapy on social isolation, with the goal of helping mental health nurses better support patients experiencing social isolation in hospital or community settings.

Method

In this study, researchers used descriptive research using a case studies design. The case study is a widely used research and clinical approach that involves an in-depth examination of a single individual or a small group of individuals. The primary purpose of a case study is to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon, such as a mental health condition, a specific therapeutic intervention, or a unique life experience (Paparini et al., 2020). In a clinical setting, case studies are often used to explore and describe complex or rare clinical presentations, evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, develop and refine clinical hypotheses and theories, and illustrate the application of clinical knowledge. The case study approach often involves the collection and analysis of various data sources, such as clinical observations, interview transcripts, psychological assessments, and relevant medical or historical records (Budgell, 2008). By synthesizing this multifaceted information, clinicians can gain a deeper understanding of the individual's experiences, the factors contributing to their condition, and the most effective ways to provide support and intervention. The in-depth, qualitative nature of case studies allows for a nuanced and contextual exploration of clinical phenomena, complementing the broader insights gained from larger-scale quantitative studies.

This case study investigates the use of psychiatric nursing interventions, including journaling therapy, in treating patients with mental disorders and social isolation issues. The study was conducted at Prof. Dr. Soeroyo Hospital in Magelang, Indonesia, with data collection taking place in March 2023. The researchers engaged the patients' families in the treatment optimization process. Data collection instruments included questionnaires, observation sheets, and writing tools. For the journaling therapy, the researchers utilized patient activity records, schedules, and observation sheets to evaluate the impact of the intervention. The researchers employed direct observation of the patients to gather data and gain insights into their behavior and condition. The observation period spanned two weeks, with a frequency of six meetings. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang. The case study's focus on the integration of standard nursing interventions and innovative journaling therapy in the management of mental disorders and social isolation among patients provides a valuable contribution to the field of psychiatric nursing. The comprehensive data collection methods and ethical considerations demonstrate the researchers' commitment to conducting a rigorous and well-designed study. The findings from this case study have the potential to inform clinical practice and guide future research in the effective treatment of mental health issues..

Results

Prior to the implementation of the journaling therapy, the researchers conducted a comprehensive assessment of the patients' clinical status. Several key observations were documented: The patients reported feelings of loneliness, a tendency to stay at home, and a lack of involvement in social activities. They expressed feelings of shame due to their unmarried status and difficulties in initiating conversations with others. Additionally, the patients appeared disconnected, with comatose expressions, slow and unclear speech, low eye contact, easily distracted focus, preference for solitude, passive demeanor, restlessness during social interactions, and an indifferent attitude towards their environment. After the six-session journaling therapy intervention, the researchers observed significant improvements in the patients' clinical status. The patients reported feeling relieved and stated that they had incorporated the scheduled activities into their routine, successfully completing the treatment program with cooperation and engagement. The patients no longer felt lonely, and their eye contact and interaction skills had improved. They demonstrated increased motivation, better comprehension, and reduced anxiety when engaging with others. The enhanced clinical presentation was evident in the patients' overall appearance and behavior. The comprehensive assessment of the patients' baseline condition and the observed positive changes following the journaling therapy intervention provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of this therapeutic approach in addressing mental health challenges and social isolation. The detailed documentation of the patients' experiences and the observed outcomes underscores the importance of a holistic, patient-centered approach to mental health care.

Discussion

Implementation of nursing care focusing on expected outcomes improve the patient's health status (Potter & Perry, 2010). The selection of nursing interventions to accomplish results for which the nurse is accountable is based on a nursing diagnosis, which gives the rationale for making those selections. Nursing diagnoses are generated based on data obtained during the nursing assessment, enabling the nurse to develop a care plan for the patient (Müller-Staub, Lavin, Needham & van Achterberg, 2006). The principle of implementing nursing performed with priority action teaches the application of journaling therapy. The implementation of journaling techniques can begin with the client writing one or two paragraphs at the beginning of the session. This paragraph will reflect how the client feels or what happens in his life and will determine the direction of the session (Tas'adi & Dewi, 2018). Journaling techniques guide the client through different writing exercises, and then they can discuss the information revealed in the journal with the client. Furthermore, writing techniques can range from non-directive, flow-free writing tasks to structured worksheets. Still, a critical element in all journalizing practices is adapting its methodology to the client's needs (Erford et al., 2015).

Writing or journaling therapy can be used to express feelings and thoughts; if both things are overwhelmed, both things lead to a negative impact on the body. Our study found a decrease in the characteristics of signs and symptoms of social isolation in our patients. However, mental health nurses should work in tandem with patients' family and their environment to achieve the best outcomes. Families helped residents rehabilitate by showing them affection and a sense of belonging, providing both emotional and technical support, and maintaining an active involvement in the residents' lives. Regarding encouraging independent living, social workers can access a valuable resource vastly underutilized named families (Piat, Sabetti, Fleury, Boyer & Lesage, 2011). Even though families are now expected to be accountable for the treatment of a patient with mental illness, it has been found that mental health disorders are related to a variety of dysfunctional social and psychological processes that occur within one's family of origin (Ong, Fernandez & Lim, 2021). Therefore, primary care practitioners might involve the family in various activities, ranging from fundamental functions like psychoeducation and meeting the family's needs to more specialized therapies like family assessment and family therapy. These activities could be performed in various settings, including at home (Norton & Cuskelly, 2021).

Our study documented that the patient can now interact with the surrounding environment, involved in the activities in the background; he can interact and dare to try to establish social relationships. The objective data is that the patient appears to communicate with other friends, the patient's voice is heard slowly, the patient's eye contact is improved, the patient can perform activities in his environment, and the patient is seen to care about the environment. This finding is supported by evidence that journal therapy is a valuable tool for self-discovery and healing (Rowe, 2012). Although self-expressive writing has positive health effects, little is known about the psychological mechanisms underlying these effects. Consistently proven self-affirmation is essential in stress control, which can be used as a viable mechanism for the underlying health benefits of expressive writing (Albalooshi, Moeini-Jazani, Fennis & Warlop, 2020). The study also explains that writing about significant life events and traumatic experiences can significantly benefit mental and physical health. Journaling can be used for self-discovery, growth and self-actualization by channelling feelings and emotions through creative expression and writing processes (Erford et al., 2015). The instructions are like the instructions used, i.e. the time given to write varies from 10 to 30 minutes each session. After writing, the client can also be allowed to re-read and improve his writing. The number of meetings ranges from 3-5 sessions in a row or once a week. In addition, writing therapy can be done both individually and in groups. It produces various results, including decreased bodily pain, improved memory and supports positive growth, reduced traumatic symptoms, improved emotional mood, changed beliefs or thoughts, and so on.

Journaling can offer a multitude of potential benefits for mental health management. The process of expressing thoughts and feelings through writing can help individuals better understand and regulate their emotions, leading to improved emotional awareness and coping strategies **(Figure 3)**. Journaling provides a constructive outlet for processing and releasing pent-up emotions, which can help alleviate stress and anxiety (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012). Regular journaling can also foster self-reflection, allowing individuals to gain deeper insights into their thoughts, behaviors, and patterns, leading to increased self-awareness. Studies have shown that journaling can help reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by providing a means of processing and making sense of difficult experiences (van Emmerik, Reijntjes, & Kamphuis, 2013; Sloan, Sawyer, Lowmaster, Wernick, & Marx, 2015). The act of writing can facilitate the organization of thoughts and the

exploration of potential solutions to problems, fostering a sense of control and empowerment. Journaling can also help individuals challenge and reframe negative thought patterns, promoting more balanced and adaptive thinking. Furthermore, the process of reflecting on and documenting personal growth and coping strategies can enhance an individual's resilience and ability to navigate future challenges. Additionally, journaling can serve as a valuable record of an individual's progress, which can be shared with mental health professionals to inform and enhance the therapeutic process. By incorporating journaling into a comprehensive mental health management plan, individuals can harness its therapeutic benefits and work towards improved emotional well-being and overall mental health.

Figure 3. Illustration of tool for journaling therapy.

Journaling can be enhanced through the use of various effective techniques and prompts to support mental health. One such approach is gratitude journaling, where individuals are prompted to list 3-5 things they are grateful for each day and reflect on why. This practice can help shift the focus to positive aspects of life and cultivate a sense of appreciation (Fekete & Deichert, 2022). Another technique is emotion exploration, where individuals are encouraged to describe their current feelings using a wide range of emotion words. This allows for deeper exploration and expression of emotional experiences (Zhao, Fu, Lian, Ye, & Huang, 2021). Problem-solving journaling can also be beneficial, where individuals are prompted to identify a current challenge or problem and brainstorm possible solutions and action steps. This can help develop problem-solving skills and a sense of agency. Narrative journaling, where individuals write about significant life events and reflect on their impact, can facilitate the processing and integration of past experiences (Heywood, Conti, & Hay, 2022). Mindfulness journaling, which involves describing one's current surroundings and sensations using all five senses, can enhance present-moment awareness and reduce rumination. Positive affirmations, where individuals write down 3-5 positive statements about themselves, can help challenge negative self-talk and promote self-compassion (Cascio et al., 2016). Letter writing, where individuals express their thoughts and feelings to a loved one, can be a cathartic way to process interpersonal dynamics and communicate effectively. Finally, future-oriented journaling, where individuals imagine and describe their ideal future life, can foster a sense of hope and motivation for personal growth. Incorporating a

variety of these techniques and prompts can help individuals tailor their journaling practice to their specific mental health needs and goals, enhancing the therapeutic benefits of this practice.

Journaling can be a powerful tool for setting and tracking personal goals related to mental health improvement. To effectively use journaling for this purpose, one can start by reflecting on their current mental health status and identifying areas they would like to improve, such as reducing anxiety, increasing self-esteem, or improving sleep quality (Sohal, Singh, Dhillon, & Gill, 2022). Using the journal, individuals can then write down specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals related to these areas. For example, "I will practice mindfulness meditation for 10 minutes per day, 5 days a week, to reduce my anxiety levels by the end of the month." In the journal, individuals can also outline the concrete steps they will take to achieve their mental health goals, such as scheduling appointments with a therapist, incorporating new coping strategies, or making lifestyle changes (Smyth et al., 2018). Breaking down larger goals into smaller, manageable action steps can increase the likelihood of success. Regularly reflecting on and documenting progress towards mental health goals in the journal is crucial. This can include tracking changes in symptoms, noting successes or challenges, and reflecting on the effectiveness of the strategies employed. Using visual aids, such as graphs or charts, can help monitor progress over time. Periodically reviewing journal entries can also help identify patterns, successes, and areas that may need adjustment, allowing individuals to revise their goals or modify their action plan as needed (Faccio, Turco, & Ludici, 2019). Importantly, individuals should recognize and celebrate their achievements, no matter how small, in their journal, as this can help reinforce positive behaviors and maintain motivation. By incorporating these journaling techniques, individuals can create a personalized, dynamic, and effective system for setting, tracking, and achieving their mental health goals, with the act of writing and reflecting providing valuable insights and support for their overall well-being.

Conclusion

Writing therapy has the potential to be an inexpensive and straightforward intervention that requires minimal involvement from medical professionals. However, the systematic variation in the results can be influenced by several factors, such as the specific writing instructions, the study design, the nature of the trauma or disease, and whether it is still present. Despite these potential variations, there is sufficient evidence to warrant comprehensive trials of writing therapy in primary care settings, both for disorders with a significant psychological component and for psychological issues themselves. Within the next decade, this may emerge as a potentially valuable new intervention for several conditions that are often challenging to manage in general practice. The simplicity and accessibility of writing therapy make it an appealing option, as it can be implemented with minimal resources and expert involvement. This could make it a viable and cost-effective approach to addressing a range of mental health and psychological concerns in primary care settings. While the specific results may vary depending on the context and implementation, the existing evidence suggests that writing therapy deserves further exploration and rigorous evaluation. If proven effective, this intervention could provide a much-needed addition to the arsenal of tools available to healthcare providers for addressing the multifaceted needs of their patients. Overall, the promise of writing therapy as a straightforward and potentially impactful intervention warrants a closer examination and a concerted effort to conduct comprehensive trials and establish its efficacy across different populations and clinical settings.

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Author's perspective

Key points
- Evidence that writing therapy works is mixed, but it's promising way to use in general practice
- Writing appears to be a relatively safe intervention for patients with social isolation.
- It is necessary to consider the most effective conditions for delivering written material.

Potential areas of interest
- How can the family be involved in journal therapy?
- What supportive factors lead to successful journal therapy?
- When must healthcare technology be evaluated for system optimization?