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Effect Of Gratitude Journaling On Depression Patients

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Article Details

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Gratitude Journaling, Depression, symptoms in an individual diagnosed with moderate depression. Depression remains Beck Depression Inventory, Mental Health, a widespread mental health concern, and accessible, low-cost interventions are increasingly necessary. Gratitude journaling has shown potential in previous studies to enhance emotional well-being and reduce symptoms of depression. This research used a single-case ABAB design, with one participant diagnosed with moderate depression based on DSM-V criteria. Data were collected through standardized measures, including the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and Mood & Feelings Questionnaire, over a four-week period. The participant alternated between baseline periods (no journaling) and intervention periods (daily gratitude journaling with prompts). Results indicated a significant reduction in depressive symptoms during the journaling phases, with marked improvements in mood and emotional well-being as reported by the participant. The BDI scores showed a substantial decrease from baseline to post-intervention, supporting the efficacy of gratitude journaling as a therapeutic tool for managing depression. These findings contribute to existing literature on gratitude interventions and their positive impact on mental health, suggesting that gratitude journaling can be a viable supplementary treatment for depression. However, limitations such as the small sample size and short intervention duration must be addressed in future research. Further studies should focus on larger, more diverse samples, and longer intervention periods to strengthen the generalizability of these results. Future research could also explore the long-term effects of gratitude journaling on depression and its potential for integration into clinical practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Depression is a pervasive and debilitating mental health disorder that affects individuals across all age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. It has been recognized by the World Health Organization (2020) as the leading cause of disability worldwide, with more than 264 million individuals suffering from it. Depression significantly impairs functioning in personal, social, and occupational domains. It manifests through persistent sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities, fatigue, and cognitive disturbances. The disorder does not only affect emotional health but also has substantial implications for physical well-being, with many individuals reporting psychosomatic symptoms. Furthermore, the societal costs of depression are enormous, contributing to reduced productivity, increased healthcare expenditures, and economic loss. Despite the magnitude of the problem, stigma and lack of awareness remain significant barriers to seeking and receiving appropriate treatment. Conventional treatment approaches often involve antidepressants and psychotherapy, yet access to these services is not universally available, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Even where treatment is available, it may not meet the needs of all patients due to various constraints. Hence, there is a growing demand for innovative, accessible, and low-cost interventions that can supplement existing therapeutic modalities and provide relief to those affected by this widespread disorder (WHO, 2020).

Pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions are considered the gold standard for treating depression. Antidepressant medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), and psychotherapies, especially Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), have demonstrated efficacy in numerous clinical trials.

Gratitude journaling has emerged as a promising alternative intervention for depression due to its simplicity, affordability, and accessibility. This practice involves individuals writing down things they are grateful for, often focusing on small, everyday aspects of life. Research suggests that expressing gratitude can lead to significant improvements in psychological well-being, including enhanced mood, greater life satisfaction, and reduced negative affectivity (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Unlike traditional therapies, gratitude journaling can be self-administered and does not require professional intervention, making it a viable option for individuals who may face barriers to accessing conventional treatments. Its low cost and ease of implementation further enhance its appeal, especially in low-resource settings. Furthermore, gratitude journaling is associated with positive behavioral changes, such as improved sleep

quality, increased optimism, and reduced stress (Wood et al., 2010). The growing body of evidence supports the idea that regularly engaging in gratitude exercises fosters a shift in focus from negative to positive aspects of life, which may be particularly beneficial for those experiencing depression. As depression is often characterized by negative rumination and a lack of positive self-reflection, practices like gratitude journaling could be a valuable tool in reversing these cognitive patterns (Seligman et al., 2005).

The beneficial effects of gratitude journaling on depression can be understood through various psychological mechanisms. Positive psychology, the theoretical framework underlying gratitude interventions, emphasizes the cultivation of positive emotions to counteract negative emotional states. According to Seligman (1998), fostering positive emotions such as gratitude enhances resilience and happiness, both of which are often compromised in individuals with depression. Gratitude journaling helps individuals reframe their experiences by focusing on positive aspects, thereby counteracting the pervasive negative thoughts typical of depressive episodes. This process aligns with cognitive behavioral principles, where individuals are encouraged to recognize and challenge negative thought patterns. By emphasizing gratitude, individuals may experience a reduction in negative automatic thoughts, which are central to depression (Beck, 1967). Furthermore, gratitude journaling encourages a shift in cognitive focus, from self-criticism and hopelessness to a more balanced and appreciative outlook on life. These cognitive shifts can foster a sense of agency and empowerment, allowing individuals to regain control over their emotional well-being. Thus, gratitude journaling serves as a tool for cognitive restructuring, helping individuals to break free from depressive thought patterns and develop more adaptive emotional responses (Froh et al., 2008).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of gratitude journaling on depressive symptoms in individuals diagnosed with depression?
2. Does practicing gratitude journaling lead to increased feelings of hope and positivity among depression patients?
3. How do the frequency and duration of gratitude journaling influence its effectiveness in reducing depressive symptoms?
4. In what ways does gratitude journaling affect other aspects of psychological well-being, such as stress levels and sleep quality, in individuals with depression?
5. Is there a difference in the outcomes of gratitude journaling based on demographic variables

such as age, gender, or severity of depression?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the effect of gratitude journaling on reducing depressive symptoms in individuals diagnosed with depression.
2. To evaluate the changes in emotional well-being, including hope and positivity, during the gratitude journaling intervention.
3. To assess how the frequency and duration of gratitude journaling influence the reduction of depressive symptoms.
4. To explore whether gratitude journaling improves overall psychological functioning, such as stress levels and sleep quality.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1: Gratitude journaling significantly reduces depressive symptoms in individuals diagnosed with depression.

H2: Participants will report increased levels of hope and positivity after engaging in regular gratitude journaling.

H3: Greater frequency and longer duration of gratitude journaling will be associated with more significant improvements in depressive symptoms.

H4: Gratitude journaling contributes to improved psychological functioning, including reduced stress and better sleep quality.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a single-case ABAB design to examine the effects of gratitude journaling on depressive symptoms. The ABAB design is widely used in behavioral research to evaluate the impact of an intervention by alternating between baseline (A) and intervention (B) phases. This design strengthens internal validity by reintroducing the intervention and observing whether changes in behavior are replicated. In this study, Phase A (Baseline) included no intervention, while Phase B involved a structured gratitude journaling routine. The design allowed for the comparison of depressive symptoms during and after intervention periods to assess the direct impact of journaling.

PARTICIPANTS

This study utilized a single-case approach, involving one participant diagnosed with moderate to severe depression as per DSM-V criteria. The participant was selected based on the ability to

engage in daily journaling and complete standardized assessments. Informed consent was obtained prior to inclusion. Exclusion criteria included the presence of comorbid severe psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, and any current psychotherapeutic or pharmacological treatment that could confound the results.

INSTRUMENTS

Two main instruments were used for data collection: the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ). The BDI (Beck, 1961) is a robust measure of depressive severity across cognitive, emotional, and physical domains. It was administered at four time points: at the start and end of each baseline and intervention phase. The MFQ, developed by Angold and Costello (1987), was adapted for adults and used weekly to assess emotional states and changes in mood, offering qualitative support to the BDI data.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURE

The procedure unfolded over four weeks. In Phase 1 (Baseline A1, Week 1), no intervention was applied, and the participant completed the BDI and MFQ to establish baseline data. In Phase 2 (Intervention B1, Week 2), the participant was introduced to gratitude journaling using prompts such as “What is one positive thing that happened today?” and “Who or what are you most grateful for today?” Journaling was done daily, and depressive symptoms were reassessed at the end of the week using the BDI. Phase 3 (Baseline A2, Week 3) involved discontinuation of journaling, and depression assessments were conducted again to determine the effect of withdrawal. Finally, Phase 4 (Intervention B2, Week 4) reinstated journaling under the same conditions as Phase 2, followed by the final BDI and MFQ assessments. Throughout the study, the participant also wrote affirmations such as “I am worthy of love and happiness” and “I am resilient,” which helped reinforce positive self-beliefs.

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND MEANINGFULNESS OF THE INTERVENTION

Gratitude journaling fostered various positive emotional experiences in the participant. The daily practice encouraged heightened awareness of positive life events, aligning with findings from Emmons & McCullough (2003), who noted that gratitude increases life satisfaction and reduces negative emotions. Although initially challenging due to the depressive state, journaling gradually shifted the participant's emotional tone, enhancing feelings of hope and optimism, consistent with studies by Froh et al. (2008). Furthermore, the journaling process promoted self-compassion and emotional relief. According to Neff (2003), self-compassion is vital in reducing the burden of depressive symptoms. Lastly, journaling contributed to the development of a sense

of purpose and meaningfulness in life, an effect emphasized by Krause (2006). This reflective process helped the participant view life through a more appreciative and hopeful lens.

RESULTS

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANT

Variable	Description
Age	34 years
Gender	Female
Marital Status	Married
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree
Employment Status	Unemployed
Clinical Diagnosis	Moderate to Severe Depression (DSM-5)
History of Psychotherapy	None
Current Medication	None
Journal Writing Experience	None

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participant, which offers context to the study. The participant is a 34-year-old female with a bachelor's degree and is currently unemployed. Diagnosed with moderate to severe depression, the participant has no history of psychotherapy and is not taking any medication. Additionally, the participant had no prior experience with journaling. These demographic details help contextualize the study and demonstrate that the participant is a suitable candidate for the research, especially in terms of not having other confounding mental health conditions or external interventions influencing the outcome of the gratitude journaling intervention.

TABLE 2: BECK DEPRESSION INVENTORY (BDI) SCORES ACROSS PHASES

Phase	BDI Score (Range: 0–63)	Change in Score
Pre-Intervention (Week 1)	40	-
Post-Intervention (Week 2)	30	-10
Re-baseline (Week 3)	38	+8
Post-Intervention (Week 4)	25	-13

Table 2 shows the participant's BDI scores at four key time points throughout the study. The pre-intervention score was 40, indicating moderate to severe depression. After one week of

gratitude journaling (Week 2), there was a significant decrease of 10 points (BDI score of 30). However, following the cessation of journaling in Week 3, the score slightly increased to 38, suggesting a partial return to baseline depressive symptoms. Upon reintroducing gratitude journaling in Week 4, the participant's depressive symptoms decreased further, reaching a final score of 25, indicating an improvement in their mood and reduced depressive symptoms. The overall trend suggests that gratitude journaling had a positive effect on alleviating depressive symptoms.

TABLE 3: MOOD & FEELINGS QUESTIONNAIRE (MFQ) SCORES ACROSS PHASES

Phase	Positive Mood Score	Negative Mood Score	Total Mood Score
Pre-Intervention (Week 1)	15	30	45
Post-Intervention (Week 2)	30	15	45
Re-baseline (Week 3)	18	28	46
Post-Intervention (Week 4)	35	10	45

The MFQ scores in table 3 illustrate fluctuations in the participant's emotional well-being. During the baseline phase (Week 1), the participant reported a significant dominance of negative mood (score of 30), with a comparatively lower positive mood score (15). After one week of gratitude journaling (Week 2), there was a marked improvement in positive mood (score of 30), with a corresponding decrease in negative mood (score of 15). The participant's mood reverted to a more negative state in Week 3, as indicated by the slight increase in negative mood score (28). However, following the second week of journaling (Week 4), the positive mood score increased significantly (35), while the negative mood score decreased to 10. These changes suggest that gratitude journaling contributed to a shift in the participant's emotional state, enhancing their positive mood and reducing negative mood.

TABLE 4: PARTICIPANT'S SELF-REPORTED EXPERIENCE WITH GRATITUDE JOURNALING (QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK)

Category	Description
Initial Experience	Felt difficult to find positive things initially.
Emotional Response	Felt lighter and more hopeful as journaling continued.
Challenges	Initially struggled with consistency.

Category	Description
Overall Effectiveness	Reported improvement in mood, felt more grateful and hopeful.

The participant's qualitative feedback in table 4 provides insight into their personal experience with gratitude journaling. Initially, the participant found it challenging to focus on positive experiences due to the depressive symptoms. However, as the intervention continued, there was a noticeable shift toward a more hopeful outlook. The participant also reported difficulties in maintaining a consistent journaling routine early on, but once they adjusted to the process, they found it to be an effective tool for mood improvement. Overall, the participant felt more grateful and hopeful after completing the journaling intervention, reinforcing the quantitative findings that gratitude journaling had a positive impact on their depressive symptoms.

TABLE 5: CHANGES IN DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND MOOD SCORES ACROSS STUDY PHASES

Time Point	BDI Score	Positive Mood Score	Negative Mood Score	Mood Total
Pre-Intervention (Week 1)	40	15	30	45
Post-Intervention (Week 2)	30	30	15	45
Re-baseline (Week 3)	38	18	28	46
Post-Intervention (Week 4)	25	35	10	45

Table 5 illustrates the participant's changes in both depressive symptoms (measured by the Beck Depression Inventory, BDI) and mood (measured by Positive and Negative Mood Scores) throughout the study. At the baseline (Week 1), the participant's depressive symptoms were relatively high (BDI = 40), with a predominant negative mood (Negative Mood Score = 30). Following the first week of gratitude journaling (Week 2), the participant's BDI score decreased by 10 points (BDI = 30), and there was a significant increase in positive mood (Positive Mood Score = 30), with a corresponding decrease in negative mood (Negative Mood Score = 15). However, when the journaling intervention was paused during Week 3, there was a slight rebound in depressive symptoms (BDI = 38) and a small increase in negative mood (Negative Mood Score = 28). After reintroducing the journaling intervention in Week 4, the participant's depressive symptoms decreased further (BDI = 25), while positive mood increased significantly (Positive Mood Score = 35) and negative mood decreased (Negative Mood Score = 10). This

suggests that the gratitude journaling intervention had a positive impact on both depressive symptoms and mood, with the effects being more pronounced during the periods of active journaling.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of gratitude journaling on depressive symptoms in an individual diagnosed with depression. The results show a significant reduction in depressive symptoms, as indicated by a decrease in the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) scores, as well as an improvement in mood, particularly during the periods when the gratitude journaling intervention was active. These findings suggest that gratitude journaling can be a valuable complementary intervention for individuals struggling with depression, providing a cost-effective and easily accessible method to help reduce the severity of depressive symptoms. In terms of the comparison with previous research, the results of this study align with prior studies that have shown a positive relationship between gratitude interventions and reduced depressive symptoms. For example, Emmons and McCullough (2003) demonstrated that regular gratitude practice could significantly improve emotional well-being and reduce negative affect. Similarly, Froh et al. (2008) found that gratitude interventions led to increased positive emotions and decreased feelings of sadness, which was consistent with the emotional shifts observed in the current study. This supports the hypothesis that gratitude journaling can foster positive affect and mitigate depressive symptoms in individuals with moderate depression.

The implications of the findings are significant for clinical practice. Given the increasing prevalence of depression globally and the limitations of traditional treatments, interventions such as gratitude journaling provide an alternative or complementary approach to enhancing mental health. The findings suggest that even short-term, low-cost interventions can have a meaningful impact on depressive symptoms. Clinicians might consider incorporating gratitude journaling into treatment plans for patients dealing with depression, especially those who may not have access to more intensive therapeutic options. Moreover, the improved mood and emotional well-being observed in participants could have broader implications for improving overall quality of life, making this practice a simple yet effective tool for mental health maintenance.

However, several limitations of the study should be noted. First, the study used a single-case ABAB design with only one participant, which limits the generalizability of the results. Larger sample sizes and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are necessary to determine whether the findings can be replicated across a wider population. Additionally, the study relied on self-

reported measures such as the BDI and mood tracking, which could be subject to bias. Future studies could benefit from incorporating objective measures of depression and mood, such as biological markers or clinician-administered assessments, to strengthen the validity of the findings. Another limitation is the short duration of the intervention. While the study observed positive outcomes over a four-week period, it is unclear whether the effects of gratitude journaling would persist beyond this timeframe. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of gratitude journaling on depression and whether it can serve as a sustainable intervention for chronic conditions. Moreover, variations in how participants engage with the journaling practice, such as the frequency or depth of reflection, could also influence the effectiveness of the intervention, which was not fully explored in this study.

The practical implications of the findings are substantial for both individuals and mental health professionals. Gratitude journaling can be easily incorporated into daily routines and does not require specialized training or expensive resources. This makes it an attractive option for individuals who may not have access to formal therapy or those seeking supplementary techniques to enhance their mental health. Additionally, the positive effects of gratitude journaling on mood and depressive symptoms suggest that individuals might experience immediate relief, which could help reduce the severity of their symptoms in the short term.

Finally, recommendations for future research include expanding the sample size and examining potential moderators of the gratitude journaling intervention's effectiveness, such as individual differences in baseline depressive symptoms, personality traits, or cognitive styles. Additionally, future studies could compare the effectiveness of gratitude journaling with other established interventions for depression, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), to further assess its efficacy in managing depressive symptoms. The inclusion of a control group could also help to establish a clearer cause-and-effect relationship between the journaling intervention and the

CONCLUSION

This study explored the effects of gratitude journaling on depressive symptoms in an individual diagnosed with moderate depression. The results indicated a significant reduction in depressive symptoms, as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), during the journaling intervention phases, suggesting that gratitude journaling can have a positive impact on mental health. Additionally, improvements in mood and emotional well-being were observed, further supporting the potential benefits of gratitude journaling as a mental health intervention.

Gratitude journaling has emerged as a promising low-cost, easily accessible tool that can be integrated into daily routines to help alleviate depressive symptoms. The findings of this study are consistent with prior research, which has demonstrated that gratitude interventions can foster positive emotions, increase life satisfaction, and reduce depressive symptoms. Given the increasing prevalence of depression and the limitations of traditional treatment options, gratitude journaling offers an effective complementary intervention for individuals seeking ways to manage their mental health.

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