



Raising Awareness of Expressive Writing as a Method for Alleviating the Trauma of Hurricane Dorian in The Bahamas

Saskia M. Fürst  [0000-0002-8085-959X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8085-959X)
[Dustin C. Hellberg](mailto:dustin.hellberg@univ.bahamas.edu.bs)  [0000-0003-2117-2787](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2117-2787)
University of The Bahamas

Abstract

To date, there has been no published research on the use of expressive writing therapy in The Bahamas. However, studies within the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatric medicine have explored both the emotional and physical benefits of expressive writing therapy in dealing with various types of trauma. In the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian, expressive writing workshops were conducted at the University of The Bahamas in an ad hoc manner to potentially assist in reducing the trauma experienced by students. This paper will explore the potential for future, long-term studies to raise awareness and appreciation for this method of reducing the negative mental and physical health impacts of traumatic natural disasters on the emotional well-being of Bahamians and residents. Results could also potentially be applicable to other Small Island Developing States.

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Introduction

Hurricane Dorian, “the most powerful storm to hit the Bahamas since records began” (“Hurricane Dorian,” 2019, para. 1) not only devastated the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama, but it also economically, physically, and emotionally traumatized the entire population of The Bahamas. A Category 5 hurricane, Hurricane Dorian destroyed houses, roads, electricity, and communication lines in the Abaco Islands as it passed over the islands on September 1, 2019. It moved on to Grand Bahama, practically stalling in its path for over a day and wreaking similar havoc to High Rock, Grand Bahama, before slowly moving on to the Carolinas in the United States on

September 3, 2019. With over 70 people officially reported dead, more than 200 people still reported missing, and an estimated 600 undocumented residents who may have drowned and been swept out into the ocean, the Hurricane left an indelible impression on the psyche of the Bahamian people (Rolle, 2019; Sanders & Silva, 2019).

While the capital of The Bahamas, Nassau (New Providence) is the most populous island, Grand Bahama and the Abaco Islands are the second and third most inhabited islands, respectively. The death and destruction that resulted there was not only endemic to those islands but had seismic effects across the

country. Many Nassauvians had relatives and friends living on these islands. With the massive destruction left behind Hurricane Dorian's passing, numerous people from Grand Bahama and the Abaco Islands relocated to New Providence, sometimes to their immediate families or the homes of more distant family and friends, in the weeks following the hurricane. This placed a strain on the economic resources and psychological well-being of those in Nassau. The need for immediate physical and psychological aid could not be more pressing and more evident in The Bahamas. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), The Bahamas faces increasing challenges due to climate change with limited land-based resources to prevent and recover and the emotional toll such challenges pose from the resultant devastating natural disasters like hurricanes on its various community members (Kelman & West, 2009). In the long term, residents of The Bahamas (as well as other SIDS) will need continued assistance dealing with this trauma, especially as psychological trauma may take years to manifest. Meyers (2019) noted there was a surge in depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in many Bahamians following Hurricane Dorian. However, mitigating mental damage in The Bahamas has been met with several challenges which include a lack of free and/or inexpensive mental health facilities; limited services and counsellors offering individual and/or group sessions on the scale needed post-Hurricane Dorian; and the socio-cultural norms that stigmatize individuals who seek psychiatric and psychological counselling. For those persons not familiar or comfortable seeking professional counselling, expressive writing therapy offers an alternative. This article contends that expressive writing therapy may be able to facilitate emotional healing and physical well-being after a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Dorian, in a society where free resources are limited and there is a general

stigma toward seeking psychological assistance for emotional trauma. The conclusions and areas for future research identified in this small study for The Bahamas could also be applied to other SIDS and provide these countries with inexpensive resources to assist their community members in dealing with similar traumas due to the rise of natural disasters caused by the changing climate.

Literature Review

In the wake of a natural disaster, populations undergo extreme forms of stress as they cope with the aftermath. In the post-Hurricane Dorian environment, Bahamians have been faced not only with the physical and financial costs of rebuilding but also the emotional ones. As noted by Smyth et al. (2002), the traumatic effects of a natural disaster, both short and long-term, can be mitigated through writing about the experiences in a process known as expressive writing (pp. 2-3). Persons who undergo such traumatic experiences as a Category 5 hurricane may have limited options and/or desire to seek professional counselling as part of their emotional recovery process. However, as Pennebaker (2018) notes, "concealing or holding back powerful emotions, thoughts, and behaviors ... [is] itself stressful" (p. 226). Indeed, several studies have suggested that expressive writing can be an effective tool to improve an individual's health and wellbeing in the aftermath of traumatic events (see Smyth et al., 2002; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pizarro, 2004). Although there is still some debate between the clinical and scientific camps as to why expressive writing is effective in helping people overcome traumatic events, the efficacy of this method of therapy has been established and documented.

There are, however, limitations to what expressive writing can accomplish. As Pizarro (2004) makes clear, the method of the treatment itself can be a source of trauma in the

short term. She says:

One drawback to these writing strategies is that many participants report higher levels of anxiety and negative mood directly after writing. This negative effect lasted, in some cases, for up to 3 months after the study was completed ... the amount of negative emotions experienced during treatment may discourage individuals from continuing with their treatment. This unintended side effect of writing therapy may, in the end, defeat the potential benefits of the treatment. (Pizzaro, 2004, p. 6)

Despite this, the majority of the literature suggests a more positive outcome from expressive writing therapies compared to control groups. In case-specific longitudinal studies, expressive writing has been shown to reduce low-trait anxiety and fatigue in people with lupus and rheumatoid arthritis (Danoff-Burg et al., 2006); reduce depressive symptoms in college students over a six-month study (Gortner et al., 2006); and reduce difficulty sleeping, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders in college women over an eight week period (Arigo & Smyth, 2012). Another study looked into expressive writing therapy for people with cancer and cancer survivors. The group found no significant statistical difference in psychological or physiological outcomes. Still, they recommend these therapies, nonetheless, saying, “given the practical and inexpensive intervention, it is possible that even small effects in subgroups of patients could be clinically relevant” (Zachariae & O’Toole, 2015, p. 1349). Expressive writing clearly has a positive and potentially lasting effect over a broad range of afflictions, even if these effects are harder to quantify in certain groups. That it is inexpensive to implement and maintain at the individual and group levels makes it an attractive possible therapy for Bahamian citizens in need of mental health assistance.

The Workshops: Context and Methods

In approaching a way to help the Bahamian community, post-Hurricane, we were faced with several distinct challenges that shaped the design of expressive writing workshops. While there is a psychiatric clinic in Nassau at the government-run Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre and several private psychiatric medical practices, the health insurance provided by the government only covers mental health screenings, not treatment. The Bahamian National Health Insurance scheme is in its early stages of coverage and offers only primary health care to legal residents in The Bahamas who have a valid National Insurance Board Smart Card (“Understanding NHI Bahamas,” 2020). With economic resources already strained by host families in Nassau and those displaced by Hurricane Dorian struggling to gain financial stability in their new home of New Providence or rebuild on their respective islands, psychological assistance for the many people affected emotionally by Hurricane Dorian was not always available.

Additionally, there is still a cultural disinclination to seek help for psychiatric issues in The Bahamas. According to an opinion piece by Dehavilland Moss in *The Tribune* in 2012, “in the Bahamas, any person who goes to the doctor for a talk with a psychiatrist is looked upon as someone who is ‘crazy’.” He further notes, “it is still taboo for us [Bahamians] to seek out help because we [they] would be looked upon as someone who is weak” (Moss, 2012). In relation to mental health and suicide, the then Minister of Health, Dr. Duane Sands, noted that there is a “challenge with mental illness and we [Bahamians] tend to dismiss it,” (Brown, 2019) resulting in mental health issues being trivialized in The Bahamas. As such, many Bahamians and residents of The Bahamas may shy away from seeking counselling at Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre and/or

through other private, and often expensive, practitioners. Otherwise, there is no comprehensive, government-sponsored community mental health-focused program that is inexpensive or free and easily accessible, on the capital or any other island of The Bahamas (McKenzie, 2020, p. 5).

Given these limitations, we adopted an approach that would be mobile, inexpensive, could have (relatively) broad appeal despite stigmas surrounding mental health, and would have lasting effects on participants. Expressive writing therapy seemed the best choice as workshops could be held without high costs. Furthermore, the workshops could be offered at various locations and adapted for different ages and literacy abilities, as needed. With this in mind, we set about designing material for a workshop and seeking partners for collaboration to reach a broad audience. Financial support would be needed to acquire the workshop materials and for publicity.

The goal of the workshops was to facilitate individual healthcare initiatives, foster social support networks, and promote national awareness. The workshops would be aimed at guiding individuals through writing exercises and relaxation strategies to open up spaces for dialogue and sharing. As such, the workshops would introduce participants to general writing strategies, relaxation and meditation techniques, and the reasons why expressive writing therapy has both short and long-term physical and mental health benefits. During the workshops, the participants were informed that their writing would not be shared or read aloud. The notebooks and pens provided were for their personal use and would remain in their possession after the workshop. The purpose for this was to ensure a safe environment for participants and to allow vulnerable emotions to emerge through writing without any pressure to openly discuss them among other workshop participants or the hosts. The notebook and workshop booklet would also

serve as a reminder for the participants to continue their writing exercises regularly following the workshop. Part of the rationale was to reinforce that expressive writing therapy as an on-going self-help process and that the participants needed to actively work/write, for themselves, to secure lasting benefits. Since the participants were only able to attend one workshop, instead of the originally intended two-part workshop series, it was important that the participants understood this component of expressive writing therapy.

In October and November, 2019, two workshops were conducted on using expressive writing to mitigate emotional trauma at the University of The Bahamas (UB) and at the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas in Nassau. The workshops were designed to be longitudinal, with participants returning after one month for a second session and to reflect upon their emotional and physical well-being over this time period. However, owing to budget constraints on the part of the organizers and scheduling issues on the part of the participants, this initial approach was revised. Nonetheless, for specific data on the short and long-term mental and physical health benefits, a more comprehensive workshop series would need to be conducted to determine effectiveness of expressive writing to ease emotional trauma in The Bahamas.

Observations

In general, there was a lower turn out of participants than expected due to difficulties publicizing the workshops in a timely manner through both UB and National Art Gallery public relations channels. Another reason could be the general disinterest in writing displayed by Bahamians and by UB students, in particular (see Bethel, 2003, p. 79). We have noted that UB students seem unenthusiastic about taking the mandatory composition and rhetoric courses offered by UB and have had

numerous students in these classes state that they don't like reading and/or writing. While creative writing seems to be an area considered more favourably by the UB student population, it is possible that the UB student body was not aware of the possibility of creative expression in expressive writing. Thus we can extrapolate that similar feelings toward writing, in general, exist in the Bahamian population and may have also impacted turn-out at the writing workshops. Regardless, though the participation numbers were low, many of those who attended the workshops indicated they would be interested in attending future workshops and in continuing with expressive writing as a way to mitigate anxiety and/or stress. That no such programs exist in The Bahamas presently demonstrates both a need and a niche for future programs to develop that can disseminate these techniques more broadly.

We also expect that women may be more willing to engage in expressive writing workshops than men. Bethel contends that Bahamian constructions of masculinity and femininity emerge from gendered norms whereby men must be self-reliant and masculine while women should remain pacifists and more stereotypically feminine (2003, pp. 77-79). In a Bahamian social context, "hard" masculinity is expressed through national cultural activities like the Junkanoo festival while "soft" femininity is expressed through writing. Indeed, Bethel notes that "Bahamian 'masculine' arts were all oral...and these were the media in which power resided. Women wrote, and thought about writing...because in the Bahamas, writing was a medium for the weak and the powerless" (2003, p. 80). Thus, Bahamian women and female residents in The Bahamas may be more willing to engage in expressive writing techniques than Bahamian men and male residents, as reflected in the higher number of female participants at the workshops who were willingly to engage in

using expressive writing to alleviate stress in their lives. Future workshops and advertising strategies could try to make expressive writing more attractive to male participants, perhaps by adding an oral component, for a more gender equal interest in this method.

Other drawbacks to prepare for are the time constraints of potential participants, who in the aftermath of a traumatic event might be otherwise occupied with looking for accommodation, employment, schools, and so forth, hence lack time to focus on their mental health needs. As well, low interest in writing, in general, in The Bahamas may also result in little interest in the general, older population in New Providence. Additionally, older Bahamians and residents of the Bahamas, male and female, may be less likely or unwilling to seek out psychiatric help due to the general stigma surrounding mental health in The Bahamas.

Conclusion

With the financial assistance of UB's Research Grant scheme, we hope to hold a series of expressive writing workshops. By conducting a longer-term study compatible with research already conducted in the field, we hope to demonstrate the efficacy of conducting expressive writing programs and workshops on a regular basis as a method for assisting Bahamians and residents of the Bahamas in dealing with emotional trauma. As McKenzie (2020) notes:

According to recommendations put forth by WHO, governments should step back from large mental institutions and instead, move towards a community health approach, whereby mental health is integrated into primary healthcare, as well as the general public healthcare system (WHO, 2001). To corroborate, researchers found that psychological treatments administered by community health workers in primary-care

settings were more beneficial in reducing the burden of mood disorders in developing countries. (p. 5)

Moving forward out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we acknowledge that expressive writing could be an important tool in dealing with the emotional strain and trauma of physical distancing, unemployment, and the loss of loved ones. Future workshops may indeed be adjusted to address the needs arising from this current pandemic for a Bahamian context. As Kelman and West note, SIDS have advantages such as “creativity for sustainable livelihoods” and “tight kinship networks” (2009, p. 2). Bahamians and residents in The Bahamas have been resourceful in adapting to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and, as indicated earlier, have opened their

homes to assist in the relocation of family members and friends post-Hurricane Dorian. However, this comes at an emotional cost that has yet to be fully determined as the effects of PTSD are long-term. Implementing national and local workshops to utilize expressive writing as a psychological treatment in The Bahamas (and other SIDS) could improve the mental and thus physical health of its populace and reduce excessive government spending on healthcare for its populace. The potential for an inexpensive, community-level program to serve as a method for reducing emotional trauma and stigmas around seeking assistance with mental health is clear and should be further explored in The Bahamas and other SIDS.

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