

Bonfante 1

Kyara Bonfante

Prof. Stack

ENC 1102

Literature Review

19 July 2026

How Collaborative Writing Can Improve Mental Health

Mental health has been an issue for around one billion people in society. These issues have caused pain and suffering to many, and there aren't enough treatments that don't involve medications as the centerpiece. But what if there was a way to improve the symptoms of mental illness by writing? What if medication could become a secondary treatment or even obsolete entirely? That itself is wishful thinking, however writing having a positive impact on people's mental health is not. There is now scientific evidence that has proven this theory. Writing has been confirmed to help those affected by mental illness. If someone is struggling with this, they'd probably wonder: What can I do to help myself? I know I've asked that question a few hundred times. I've only had opportunities to try medication because the effects that writing has on mental health aren't often discussed. The research that has been conducted and the information that has been gathered can help give people new opportunities to improve their mental health.

Each experiment has focused on determining writings' effectiveness on mental health symptoms. The information that is gathered below will not only have cited sources and explanations of their findings, but it will also be broken down and put into words that are much simpler to understand.

Bonfante 2

Review of Literature

Writing does help improve symptoms of mental illness.

Research on writings' effects on mental health has been happening for decades. According to a more recent study done in 2020, they were able to determine that collaborative songwriting improved the symptoms of veterans who suffer with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. By meeting with professional songwriters who were "...trained specifically for co-writing original material with the veteran population." (Hirschberg) they were able to write a song about the emotions they experienced because of their trauma. The researchers specifically hoped "... to examine the feasibility and acceptability of a collaborative songwriting intervention (CSI) while exploring its potential effectiveness in improving physical and mental health outcomes for veterans with PTSD." (Hirschberg) At the end of this intervention the majority of the veterans (95%) said they would recommend this treatment. In another article that was written in 2020 was researching something similar. These researchers were hoping to find out if creative writing being led by authors would help with mental illness. They quoted four of the participants in this intervention and all four had positive things to say about it. One of which, Anne said, "It was a relief to let go of the pressure to perform that has been a burden all my life." (Bundesen, Anne). By following a specific course structure "...with different progressive phases consisting of a start, a middle and an end." (Bundesen) it allowed the participants to learn to vocalize and understand their emotions. In 2007, another experiment was conducted with creative writing. This one was to see if they could help children face their fears by writing strategies they could use to overcome challenges. During this treatment, a teacher named Mrs. Green discovered that due to fear, the child Molly would always flee when confronted with a "...threatening situation..." (Pehrsson).

By doing the collaborative writing with the teacher Molly was eventually able to help her overcome her fears and come out of her shell. The teacher reported a 92% attention for Molly after the intervention. Each of these experiments showed a collaborative writing form that improved the mental health of the participants involved.

Writing Doesn't Need to be Collaborative to Improve Mental Health

The question being researched is how collaborative writings affects mental health. However, during the time it took to do this research it was discovered that the collaborative portion that was researched isn't necessary at all to make improvements. In a 3+ year experiment done to show the benefits of writing, "Nearly all participants identified the importance of writing in perspective taking, personal growth and self-awareness." (Lynn Haertl & Maiers Ero-Phillips). While this was a three-part experiment, the article being used was the third and final stage. One participant mentioned that writing and having a structured routine was "...healing..." (Lynn Haertl & Maiers Ero-Phillips, Participant). In an experiment conducted to improve the mental health of doctors, they tested whether structured writing would improve symptoms of mental illness. Using 100 doctors as participants, they structured each day with two to three spots for writing. They used the Doctoral Psychological Health Scale to measure psychological well-being, the Scale of Positive and Negative Emotion for emotional well-being, and the Sense of Scientific Community Scale for social well-being. All of which came back with consistent positive results, "...post-test, scores for EG participants are lower for psychological distress and higher for psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing."

(Vincent). In another experiment, they were hoping to find out if collaborative writing or non-collaborative writing had more of an effect on mental health, specifically using poetry. They made four groups two with collaboration and two without and studied if either of them had a better effect on soothing symptoms. While there were slightly higher rankings in the experimental group (7.38) in comparison to the (6.18) ranking in the control group they determined, "... that there was no significant difference between the pretests of the control (6.18) and experimental groups (7.38) at the .05 level and they were deemed equivalent." (Golden). This specific experiment is what helped determine that the collaboration involved other studies wasn't the main reason for improvement, but it was writing itself.

Discovering if medications will always be needed

Medications are a fail-safe when it comes to mental health. You mix them around with psychiatrist approval to find your right mixture and dosage, and you find yourself feeling better in no time. But not everyone wants to rely on medication. It is clear from this research that writing alone can help improve the symptoms that people experience while suffering with a mental illness. However, none of these articles specified if the participants were also taking medication. If you search whether medications can be removed from treatment plans in exchange for writing, it will say writing is a supportive tool, but you cannot stop medication without a medical provider's guidance. But what doesn't show is if medication was never a factor, could you replace medication with writing. By gathering willing volunteers who are struggling with mental health and have

yet to take any prescribed medication, it can be determined if writing can improve the symptoms they are experiencing.

Works Cited

Hirschberg, R., Sylvia, L. G., Wright, E. C., Gupta, C. T., McCarthy, M. D., Harward, L. K., Goetter, E. M., Boland, H., Tanev, K., & Spencer, T. J. (2020). Collaborative Songwriting Intervention for Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* (New York, N.Y.), 26(3), 198–203.

<https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2019.0368>

Pehrsson, D.-E. (2007). Co-story-ing: Collaborative Story Writing with Children Who Fear. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2(1), 85–91.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J456v02n01_08

Bundesen, B., Aymo-Boot, M., Djørup, A., Fritzsche, L., Gejl, T., Levin, K., ...

Rosenbaum, B. (2020). REWRITALIZE: Participatory creative writing groups led by authors in collaboration with mental health care professionals for people experiencing severe mental illness. *Nordic Journal of Arts, Culture and Health*, 2(2), 140–147.

<https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2535-7913-2020-02-05>

Lynn Haertl & Maiers Ero-Phillips, Kristine & Adrienne. “The Healing Properties of Writing for Persons with Mental Health Conditions: Arts & Health: Vol 11 , No 1 - Get Access.” *The Healing Properties of Writing for Persons with Mental Health Conditions*, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17533015.2017.1413400. Accessed 13 July 2026

Golden, K.M. The Use of Collaborative Writing to Enhance Cohesion in Poetry Therapy Groups. *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 13, 125–138 (2000).

<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021473712505>

Vincent, Cynthia, Émilie Tremblay-Wragg, and Isabelle Plante. 2023. "Effects of a Participation in a Structured Writing Retreat on Doctoral Mental Health: An Experimental and Comprehensive Study" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 20: 6953. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20206953>

Reflection

While writing this literature review, the biggest challenge I faced was reading over each article to find evidence I can use to describe what their findings were. Another challenge I faced was mental. I could not stay focused, so it took me longer than expected to finish. My favorite part of this assignment was the self-review. It allowed me to check each thing I did and confirm that I did the assignment properly. My least favorite part was reading each article. I don't enjoy reading, so that was just something I just did not like to do. The most significant takeaway was that mental health isn't simple, but improvements can be made by something as simple as writing.