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A Mixed-Methods Examination of Well-being in a Veterans Writing Workshop

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from military to civilian life can be a daunting challenge for many veterans. Despite the availability of various support programs, 60% of former members of the U.S. armed forces who served after September 11, 2001 "report difficulty adjusting to civilian life" (Bond et al., 2022, p. 283). In a recent national three-year longitudinal study measuring factors of well-being for reintegrating veterans, only 34% were deemed "successful" in their reintegration after the two-and-a-half-year mark (Perkins et al., 2020).

U.S. Military veterans often seek out support from community programming to supplement their transition back into civilian society (Morgan et al., 2020), and those who do seek out supplementary transition assistance from community programs show better well-being outcomes than veterans who do not (Morgan et al., 2020). Recent research has examined *online expressive* writing programs for veterans, showing positive outcomes for hyperarousal in veterans with PTSD (Krupnick et al., 2017). A randomized controlled trial of (n = 1292) veterans found *expressive writing* "reduc[ed] PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration problems, and physical complaints, and more effective than no writing in improving social support" (Sayer et al., 2015, p. 387).

This study builds on prior research to investigate the potential of an ***in-person experiential writing workshop*** **as a novel approach to support veteran well-being,** addressing a critical gap in research.

STUDY PURPOSE & AIMS

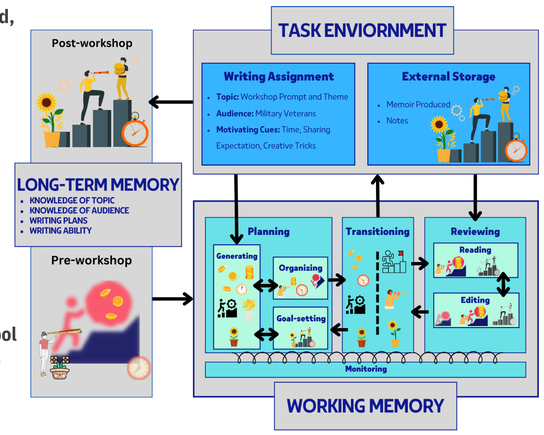
The purpose of this research is to better understand if and how an in-person experiential writing program for military veterans supports or constrains well-being. This study aims to examine subjective, hedonic well-being outcomes associated with life satisfaction over the course of an 8-week community veteran writing program where, in a group setting, participants compose and share experiential narratives of military from curated prompts.

- **Aim 1:** To identify *if* and *how* participation in an experiential writing program for U.S. military veterans supports or constrains satisfaction with life.
  - **Analysis:** Two-way Repeated Measures ANOVA & Thematic Analysis
- **Aim 2:** To track and compare trajectories of change over time in satisfaction with life for participants of an experiential veteran writing program.
  - **Analysis:** Independent Growth Modeling

THEORETICAL & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Flower & Hayes (1981) Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) is the primary theoretical framework grounding this study (see Fig. 1). This framework presents writing as not simply archival, descriptive, or "as a series of decisions and choices," but as a generative action and skill requiring both cognitive and meta-cognitive processes (p. 365). By prompting writing within an experiential genre like memoir, writers are given an opportunity to plan, set goals, generate ideas, and translate their own significant memories into writing.

Figure 1: CPTW in the Experiential Writing Workshop



- Participants must **read, re-read, and edit their memory** in real time.
- With new information being added through dialogue and prompts in the task environment, **novel ways of organizing and perceiving memories** becomes available.
- This theoretical grounding reinforces the idea that the process of writing can be **a generative and therapeutic tool with the potential to reshape, reframe, and *rewrite* past traumas.**

This study is also conceptually grounded in Diener et al.'s (1999) subjective well-being theory (SWBT), which presents subjective well-being is a multifaceted construct that encompasses how individuals evaluate their lives through an assessment of happiness and satisfaction.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

Participants

There were an initial n=41 applicants for the study. Applicants were recruited at local events, through veteran-oriented email lists, and through a flyer campaign on local college campuses, libraries, and writing spaces. After screening, n=19 were invited to sign consent documents. After the initial meetings, n=16 military veterans agreed to be in the study. Due to attrition, n=13 participants finished the workshop and were included in analysis (see Fig. 2).

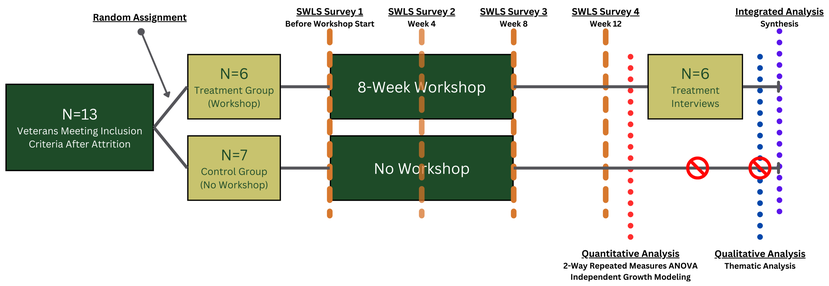
Screening Criteria:

1. Must be a U.S. military veteran
2. Must not have participated in any writing programs three months prior to the start date of the research workshop.
3. Must not participate in any other experiential writing workshops over the course of the twelve-week study.
4. Must be willing and able to attend at least six of the eight scheduled workshops.
5. Must be willing to complete four surveys on Well-being and Life Satisfaction.
6. Must agree to participate in a ~90-minute follow-up interview.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data were collected using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985) and a semi-structured interview protocol which borrows conceptually from both the SWLS and the Well-being Inventory (Vogt et al., 2018). Data were collected from both treatment and control group participants four times over a 12-week period at one month intervals (see Fig. 2). Surveys were taken online on a Google form. Data were analyzed using SPSS & NVivo, and transformed using Tableau. Multiple rounds of qualitative coding were completed and themes were extrapolated from the indictive coding process.

Figure 2: Mixed-Methods Research Design



QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Two-way Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance

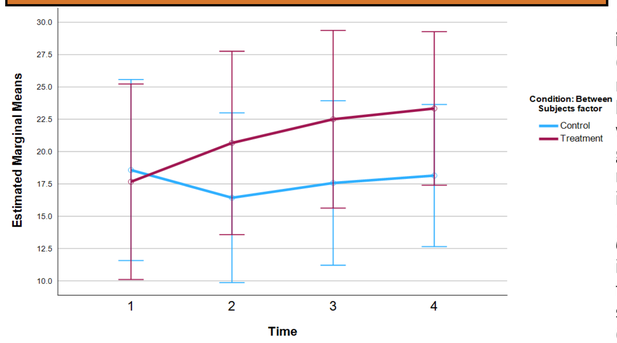
Within-subjects effects, shows a significant result for both the *Time* (F (3) 4.23, p = .012) **and *Time*Condition interaction*** (F(3) = 5.75, p = .003) (see Table 1). This result suggests the workshop had a differential impact on SWLS scores over time.

Table 1: Within-subjects: Two-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects
Measure: Satisfaction With Life Scores

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time	Sphericity Assumed	58.873	3	19.624	4.235	.012	.278
	Greenhouse-Geisser	58.873	2.568	22.928	4.235	.017	.278
	Huynh-Feldt	58.873	3.000	19.624	4.235	.012	.278
Time * Condition	Sphericity Assumed	80.027	3	26.676	5.756	.003	.344
	Greenhouse-Geisser	80.027	2.568	31.166	5.756	.005	.344

Figure 3: Estimates of Group Mean Difference in SWLS Scores



Between-subjects effects show only the *Time*Condition* interaction is significant (F (3,9) = 4.06, p = .044), meaning while we cannot be certain that the variation SWLS score group means over the repeated measurements is varying as a function of *Time* alone, the *Condition*Time* interaction does predict the variation in SWLS scores between groups (see Fig. 3).

Individual Growth Modeling

Estimates of fixed effects show the interaction effect between the Time & Condition variables is significant (p = .022), indicating the **rate of change in SWLS scores vary independently as a function of workshop participation** over time (see Table 3).

Estimates of covariance highlight a large point estimate (69.336) and SE (30.264) indicating significant variability in the initial status of SWLS scores (see Table 4). The residual variance at Level two indicates that there is considerable unexplained variability within individuals. The negative covariance (-5.66) highlights **participants with a higher initial status in SWLS scores tend to have a smaller increase in scores over time** (see Fig. 4).

Table 3: Estimates of Fixed Effects

Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	df	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
Intercept	17.429	3.316	13	5.256	<.001	10.265	24.592
Time	.157	.464	13	.339	.740	-.845	1.160
Condition	-1.179	4.881	13	-.241	.813	-11.723	9.366
Time * Condition	1.776	.683	13	2.601	.022	.301	3.252

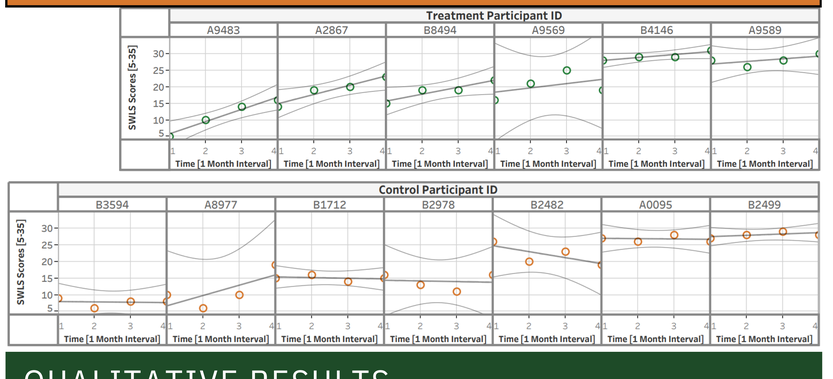
a. Dependent Variable: SWLS Scores

Table 4: Esitmates of Covariance Parameters

Parameter		Estimate	Std. Error
Residual		5.088	1.411
Intercept + Time [subject = Participant ID]	UN (1,1)	69.336	30.264
	UN (2,1)	-5.661	3.821
	UN (2,2)	.489	.655

a. Dependent Variable: SWLS Scores.

Figure 4: Individual Trajectories of Change in SWLS Scores



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Thematic Analysis: Supporting Themes and Evidence

The major theme explored here, *Camaraderie*, has three sub-domains that align with the overarching concept. It helps answer: *How* does the workshop support the subjective well-being of participants?

Camaraderie: Understanding, Comfort, Vulnerability

Veterans in the workshop shared experiences, felt safe, demonstrated vulnerability, and built connections, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding.

- One participant stated about the experience: **"It's the being witnessed without any agenda. No one's trying to fix you. No, these are people who can sympathize and empathize and share."**
- Another participant relayed the shared understanding and comfort in the room, stating **"It's kind of a kinship. You know? It felt like that."** Elaborating on his own vulnerability in such a space, he also shared that when he read his story of experiencing the end of an intimate partner relationship, he didn't realize, **"I wanted to be witnessed being hurting. It was humbling."**

CONCLUSION

Quantitative results indicate that **the workshop had a significant positive effect on participants' subjective well-being,** as measured by the SWLS. Evidence from the ANOVA highlights the workshop had a greater positive impact on SWLS scores for the treatment group compared to the control group, particularly at later time points, indicating **the workshop was a significant factor in the observed increase in well-being.** Additionally, IGM highlights that the workshop was particularly beneficial for individuals with a lower initial status of life satisfaction.
These results are **further supported by the qualitative findings** which highlight the supportive theme of *Camaraderie.* Qualitative findings also show **the workshop can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, increase self-esteem, benefit mental health, and provide a sense of purpose.**

Limitations & Future Research: This study is limited by the small sample size and limited measures of well-being. Additionally, this research does not identify the component (community or writing) that impacts well-being over time. Future studies should include eudemonic measures of well-being and run concurrent workshops to maximize sample size, help with attrition, and to examine group differences in meeting with and without writing to isolate the impact of the writing element of the workshop on well-being.