

Does therapeutic writing help people with long-term conditions? Systematic review, realist synthesis and economic considerations

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Long-term health conditions (chronic illness) can reduce the quality of people's daily lives and can be costly to the health service. It has been suggested that when patients write about their experiences, this can have positive effects on patients' lives and the health service. We refer to this type of writing as writing therapy. The aim of this study was to see if people with long-term health conditions benefit from writing therapy.

We undertook a thorough search for scientific studies that tested writing therapy in people diagnosed with any long-term condition (LTC). We looked at whether or not writing therapy helped the individuals in the study, if the study was conducted properly, how the writing therapy might produce benefits and if it could lower health service costs.

We found that most of the available evidence looked at writing done by individuals on their own and focused on writing about distressing events. Overall, there was very little evidence that this type of writing therapy had benefits for people with LTCs. A few studies looked at another type of writing therapy, which was done mainly in groups, was led by a leader and which we called facilitated writing. People with LTCs appeared to get some benefits from this type of writing, but much more research needs to be done to see how useful it is. Overall, studies were unclear on how writing therapy might work to produce health benefits or if it reduced health-care spending.

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