



## **Reflective Transcendental Approach Through Expressive Writing To Manage Emotional Dysfunction Emotions In Graduate Students**

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### **Abstract**

Graduate students often face academic pressures that can potentially trigger emotional dysregulation, such as anxiety, pent-up emotions, and ongoing psychological tension. This condition requires a counseling approach that not only focuses on psychological aspects but also pays attention to reflective and transcendental dimensions. This study aims to examine the application of a reflective-transcendental approach through expressive writing in managing emotional dysregulation in graduate students of Islamic Guidance and Counseling. The research used a qualitative method with an individual counseling case study design on a graduate student of Islamic Guidance and Counseling class 3A at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, observation of the counseling process, the client's reflective journal, and session documentation. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis to identify changes in the client's emotional regulation patterns. The results showed that the application of expressive writing combined with transcendental reflection helped the counselee recognize and express emotions more adaptively, reduce academic anxiety, and increase self-awareness and life meaning orientation. This approach not only served as a medium for emotional catharsis but also as a means of making sense of experiences that contributed to emotional stability. This study concludes that the reflective-transcendental approach through expressive writing is relevant and applicable as an alternative intervention in individual counseling to manage emotional dysregulation among graduate students at Islamic universities.

**Keywords:** Expressive Writing; Emotional Regulation; Reflective-Transcendental; Individual Counseling; Graduate Students.

### **Abstrak**

Mahasiswa pascasarjana kerap menghadapi tekanan akademik yang berpotensi memicu disregulasi emosi, seperti kecemasan, emosi terpendam, dan ketegangan psikologis yang berkelanjutan. Kondisi ini membutuhkan pendekatan konseling yang tidak hanya berfokus pada aspek psikologis, tetapi juga memperhatikan dimensi reflektif dan transendental. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penerapan pendekatan reflektif-transendental melalui writing ekspresif dalam mengelola disregulasi emosi pada mahasiswa pascasarjana Bimbingan dan Konseling Islam.

Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus konseling individual terhadap seorang mahasiswa pascasarjana BKI kelas 3A UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi proses konseling, jurnal reflektif konseli, dan dokumentasi sesi. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi perubahan pola regulasi emosi konseli. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan writing ekspresif yang dipadukan dengan refleksi transendental mampu membantu konseli mengenali dan mengekspresikan emosi secara lebih adaptif, menurunkan kecemasan akademik, serta meningkatkan kesadaran diri dan orientasi makna hidup. Pendekatan ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media katarsis emosi, tetapi juga sebagai sarana pemaknaan pengalaman yang berkontribusi pada stabilitas emosional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan reflektif-transendental melalui writing ekspresif relevan dan aplikatif sebagai alternatif intervensi dalam konseling individual untuk mengelola disregulasi emosi mahasiswa pascasarjana di perguruan tinggi Islam.

**Kata Kunci:** Writing Ekspresif; Regulasi Emosi; Reflektif-Transendental; Konseling Individual; Mahasiswa Pascasarjana.

## INTRODUCTION

Academic development at the graduate level is often accompanied by intellectual demands, intellectual demands, perceptions of academic success, and high social responsibility pressures. These pressures can trigger an inability to manage emotions, which by some researchers as emotional dysregulation, a condition in which individuals have difficulty recognizing, understanding, and regulating their reactions to complex emotional experiences complex emotional experiences. This condition not only hinders psychological well-being but also impacts the learning process, interpersonal relationships, and the continuity of academic studies (Sakinah et al., 2025).

Previous studies have examined the role of expressive writing techniques in helping individuals manage and rationalize their emotional experiences. Expressive writing is a psychological intervention in which individuals freely write down their deepest experiences and feelings to understand their meaning and emotional impact. In the context of students, the

effectiveness of expressive writing has been shown to significantly reduce academic stress in student subjects, as a form of emotion regulation that is useful for improving mental well-being (Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022).

Furthermore, recent quantitative research also reports that expressive writing techniques can improve students' emotional regulation abilities in a two-group pre-test–post-test design, showing that individuals directed to expressive writing techniques exhibit positive changes in emotional management skills compared to the control group (Qolbi et al., 2025).

However, recent empirical evidence shows variations in the results of expressive writing, depending on the context, intensity of emotional experience, and instructions given during the writing practice. Some studies, for example, note the need for additional instructions to increase writer engagement in order to optimize the effects of emotional regulation. Studies comparing variations in expressive writing instructions show that approaches incorporating elements of emotional experience acceptance result in higher engagement patterns and stronger regulatory effects than traditional standard instructions (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012).

Although research on expressive writing has developed in general psychology, the category of application that combines spiritual and reflective dimensions as mechanisms for emotional change in the context of individual counseling for graduate students, especially Islamic Guidance and Counseling (BKI) graduate students, is still very limited. This is particularly evident in the literature that places spiritual experiences as part of the writing process without integrating them as a deep reflective-transcendental approach to emotional regulation. Most studies still focus on general contexts, such as adolescents or students in general, without considering religious or spiritual contextual factors that can be sources of meaning and internal reinforcement that are actually relevant to graduate students at Islamic universities (Nurani & Putri, 2025).

Research in religious education settings, such as expressive writing training for students at Islamic institutions, shows positive results in terms of psychological well-being and learning motivation, but lacks a focus on measurable and in-depth emotional regulation (Rohim et al., 2023).

Thus, there is a research gap between the degree of empirical evidence available, which is mainly general psychological in nature, and the need for contextually relevant spiritual emotional regulation intervention applications for BKI graduate students that are not yet integrated in a reflective-transcendental manner. This gap underlies the need for more contextual and in-depth research through individual counseling case studies that explore the use of expressive writing as a reflective-transcendental medium for managing emotional dysregulation.

Therefore, this article aims to descriptively examine the application of a reflective-transcendental approach through expressive writing in fostering emotional regulation among graduate students in Islamic Guidance and Counseling class 3A at UIN Sunan Gunung

Djati Bandung through individual counseling case studies, while bridging the research gap between general psychotherapy practices and reflective values rooted in internal spiritual experiences.

## **METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative case study method to describe in depth the counseling process experience and changes in emotional regulation among graduate students in Islamic Guidance and Counseling class 3A at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. The case study approach was chosen because this method allows researchers to explore the context of the phenomenon holistically and gain rich insights into the internal experiences of the counselee in the real context of individual counseling. Case studies have been widely used in counseling studies to explain the process of psychological services and

consultation outcomes in detail through narrative data and reflection, including observation, interviews, and field documentation. Case studies are also a key strategy in counseling practice research to understand personal behavioral changes in a unique therapeutic context (Kaluzeviciute, 2021).

In counseling, the case study method plays an important role in exploring how certain intervention practices, in this case reflective-transcendental expressive writing, affect the client's ability to manage emotional dysregulation individually, in line with literature that utilizes a similar approach in psychotherapy and counseling case studies (Kaluzeviciute, 2021).

### **Subject and Setting**

The research subject was a graduate student in BKI class 3A at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, who was selected purposively (based on criteria of emotional dysregulation and willingness to participate in counseling). The research was conducted in the context of face-to-face individual counseling at the campus Psychology Service Unit (ULP), equipped with reflective writing tools (journal writing) and written recording facilities.

### **Research Instruments**

Data was obtained through several instruments:

1. Semi structured interviews with counselors to obtain in depth information regarding emotional experiences and the expressive writing process.
2. Direct observation of expressive writing sessions, noting reactions, emotional narratives, and reflective content produced by the counselee in each session.
3. Daily journals kept by the counselee throughout the counseling process, focusing on emotional insights, reflections on experiences, and emerging spiritual experiences.

4. Documentation of the session process (counselor's notes), which includes session summaries, evaluations emotional changes, and responses to the reflective-transcendental approach.

This instrumentation is similar to the methods used in expressive writing case studies in educational and counseling settings, where interviews, observations, and documentation are used as sources of triangulation data to ensure the validity of case phenomenon interpretations (Afrizal, 2015).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The research procedure included the following stages:

1. Identification of initial problems: Counselees were asked to complete a basic inventory related to emotional regulation (e.g., subjective anxiety scores and initial reflections based on self-assessment).
2. Initial counseling session: An initial interview is conducted to explore the client's life story, emotional experiences, and readiness to participate in the expressive writing process.
3. Implementation of reflective-transcendental expressive writing: Over three to five sessions, the client is guided to write about emotional experiences that cause dysregulation, then guided through reflective questions that connect personal experiences with spiritual meaning and life meaning orientation (reflective-transcendental values) in their journal.
4. Counselor observation and notes: Each session is complemented by observation of the and notes on shifts in internal dynamics during the writing process.
5. Follow up interview: After the writing session, a follow-up interview is conducted to evaluate the impact of writing on the client's ability to recognize and manage emotions.

6. Data triangulation: Data is collected from various sources (interviews, observations, journals documentation) to strengthen the validity of the findings through triangulation of data collection techniques (Sugiyono, 2016).

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach that focused on identifying narrative patterns, emotional themes, and meaning-making that emerged from the clients' writing and interviews. Qualitative thematic analysis follows these operational steps: (1) familiarization with the data by rereading interview transcripts and journals, (2) initial coding to find the main themes related to emotional experiences and transcendental reflections, (3) grouping of major themes related to the dynamics of emotion regulation, and (4) interpretation of data to formulate representative case counseling narratives.

This analytical approach is widely used in educational counseling and expressive writing therapy case studies because it captures the complexity of subjective experiences and internal changes that are not easily measured quantitatively (Afrizal, 2015).

### **Data Validity**

To enhance the validity of the data and findings of this case study, the researcher applied several trustworthiness techniques, including:

1. Source triangulation: Data was obtained from interviews, observations, and the counselee's journal.
2. Member checking: Several interpretations of the analysis results were reconfirmed with the counselee to ensure an accurate representation of their experience.
3. Audit trail: All session documentation, observation notes, and interview transcripts were recorded for internal auditing of the timeline and consistency of interpretations.

4. Researcher reflection: The researcher made reflective notes about the data collection and analysis process to minimize subjective bias (Afrizal, 2015).
5. This type of validation approach is consistent with best practices in case studies in guidance and counseling research to ensure the integrity of the results even though they are qualitative and focus on a specific case.

## **RESULTS**

This study aims to describe the application of the reflective-transcendental approach through expressive writing in managing emotional dysregulation in graduate students of Islamic Guidance and Counseling class 3A at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung through individual counseling case studies. The research results are presented based on observation data, interviews, reflective journals of the counselee, and counselor notes during the counseling process.

### **Initial Condition of the Counselor**

At the initial assessment stage, the counselee showed indications of emotional dysregulation characterized by difficulty expressing feelings, a tendency to suppress negative emotions, academic anxiety, and feelings of pressure related to the demands of completing their studies. The counselee also expressed difficulty reflecting on the personal and spiritual meaning of their academic experiences, resulting in frequent negative emotions without adaptive management.

The initial interview results showed that the counselee rarely expressed feelings openly and preferred to divert attention rather than consciously process emotions. This condition is in line with research findings stating that graduate students are prone to emotional pressure due to high academic burdens and a lack of space for self-reflection (Nursolehah & Rahmiati, 2022).



## Changes in Emotional Regulation During the Counseling Process

After several sessions of individual counseling based on reflective-transcendental expressive writing, the counselee showed significant changes in their emotional regulation abilities. These changes were evident in the counselee's increased ability to recognize emotions, name feelings more specifically, and associate emotional experiences with personal and spiritual meanings.

A summary of the changes in the client's emotional regulation can be seen in Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Changes in the Client's Emotional Regulation Before and After Intervention**

Regulation Emotion	Initial Condition	Condition After Intervention
Emotional Awareness	Difficulty recognizing Mixed Emotions	Able to recognize and name specifically
Emotional Expression	Emotions are Expressed	Emotions expressed through reflective writing
Management anxiety	Excessive anxiety related to studies	Anxiety is more controlled and rational
Self-reflection	Minimal personal reflection	Emergence of deep reflection
Meaning	Loss of academic	Emergence of meaning and
Calmness emotional	Easily depressed	More calm and emotionally stable

The data in Table 1 shows that there were positive changes in all aspects of the counselee's emotional regulation after participating in the counseling process. *Expressive writing* helped the counselee channel previously suppressed emotions, while the reflective-transcendental approach strengthened the process of meaning-making and self-acceptance.

## Dynamics of the Reflective-Transcendental *Expressive Writing* Process

During the *expressive writing* session, the counselee was directed to write down the most disturbing emotional experiences related to their studies

and personal life. In the initial sessions, the counselee's writing tended to be descriptive and focused on complaints. However, in subsequent sessions, the writing began to show a shift towards deeper reflection, such as the emergence of awareness of self-limitations, acceptance of the process of life, and an orientation towards spiritual values and meaning.

The integration of transcendental elements is evident when the counselee begins to associate emotional experiences with an awareness of God's will, self-reflection (*muhasabah*), and a broader orientation towards life goals. This helps the counselee shift their perception from merely an academic burden to a meaningful learning process.

The results of this study indicate that the application of *expressive writing* with a reflective-transcendental approach contributes positively to improving emotional regulation in graduate students. These findings reinforce previous research findings that expressive writing is effective in reducing stress and helping individuals manage negative emotions through a process of self-reflection (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012).

In particular, the results of this case study show that *expressive writing* not only functions as a medium for emotional catharsis, but also as a means of meaning-making. When the writing process is combined with transcendental reflection, the counselee not only expresses emotions, but also builds a broader understanding of their life experiences. This finding is in line with the research by Salma Qolbi et al. (2025), which shows that the effectiveness of *expressive writing* increases when individuals are directed to reflect deeply on their emotional experiences (Qolbi et al., 2025).

The reflective-transcendental approach in this study also shows advantages over the conventional *expressive writing* approach. The elements of value reflection and spiritual awareness help counselees develop attitudes of acceptance, calmness, and a more stable orientation toward meaning. This

supports the view that the spiritual dimension acts as an internal resource in managing emotions and psychological well-being, especially in individuals in the context of religious value-based education (Rohim et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the results of this study reinforce the finding that individual counseling with a reflective approach allows counselors to understand the emotional dynamics of clients in a more in-depth and contextual manner. Case studies allow for detailed exploration of the change process, providing a realistic picture of how counseling interventions work in actual situations (Latifatul Jamaliyah et al., 2024)

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the individual counseling case study, it can be concluded that the application of the reflective-transcendental approach through expressive writing contributes positively to managing emotional dysregulation in graduate students of Islamic Guidance and Counseling. This approach helps clients recognize, express, and manage emotions more adaptively through a structured and meaningful process of self-reflection.

Expressive writing serves as the main medium for channeling previously suppressed emotions, while the reflective-transcendental dimension strengthens the process of making sense of emotional experiences by linking them to values, life goals, and deeper self-awareness. The integration of these two aspects allows counselees not only to experience emotional release but also to build a new understanding of the academic situations they face, resulting in emotional calm and a more positive orientation toward meaning.

The findings of this study confirm that the reflective-transcendental approach can be a strategic alternative in individual counseling services in Islamic higher education settings, especially for graduate students facing academic and emotional pressures. Although this study is limited to one case study, the results provide an empirical picture of the potential for integrating

expressive writing and transcendental reflection in mental counseling practice. Therefore, further research is recommended to involve a broader subject population and utilize diverse research designs to strengthen the generalization of findings and enrich the development of a reflective-transcendental counseling model in the higher education context.

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