

# Positive expressive writing interventions, subjective health and wellbeing: A systematic review

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## Background



Positive expressive writing (PEW) is a technique that involves reflecting upon and writing descriptively about positive topics and associated emotions



Research shows that these techniques can lead to benefits in various aspects of physical and psychological wellbeing<sup>1-2</sup>



PEW has been increasingly researched over the past two decades due to its potential to serve as a low-intensity psychological self-help intervention

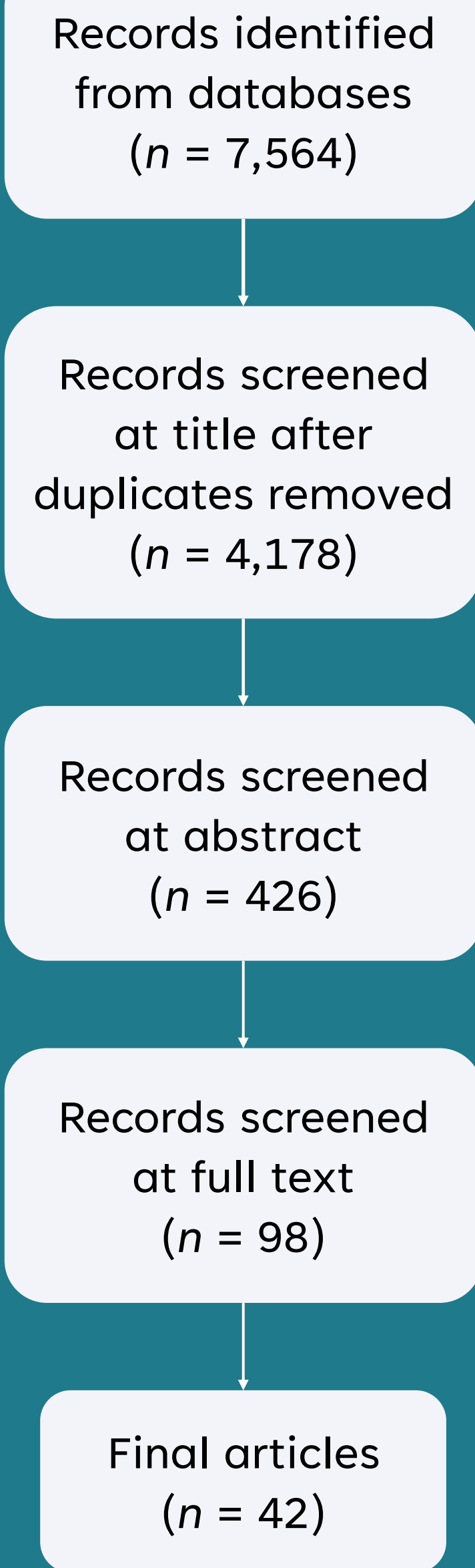


Studies are heterogeneous in their methodologies (e.g., number, duration and spacing of writing sessions, controls, follow-ups) and health outcomes targeted and/or affected

**RQ: What are the optimal conditions under which PEW benefits subjective physical and psychological wellbeing in non-clinical populations?**

- Which techniques work best?
- Who do these interventions work for?
- Which health outcomes are most reliably affected?

## Methodology



- **Protocol:** Followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines<sup>3</sup>
- **Search strategy:** 4 databases including Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and ProQuest (APA PsychArticles) identifying peer-reviewed articles published up to February 2022
- **Screening:** 3 stages (title, abstract, and full text) with two independent reviewers (LH and MS)
- **Eligibility criteria (PICOS):** Non-clinical population(18+ yrs), PEW intervention, control comparison group, subjective health and wellbeing outcomes, experimental design
- **Data extraction:** Excel
- **Quality assessment:** National Institutes of Health Quality Assessment of Controlled Intervention Studies

## Results

42 studies • 6 PEW techniques

- Best Possible Self (BPS)<sup>4-18</sup>
- Positive experiences<sup>19-32</sup>
- Gratitude letter<sup>33-37</sup>
- Benefit finding<sup>38-42</sup>
- Satisfaction processes<sup>43</sup>
- Resource diary<sup>44</sup>

**Most consistent benefits:**

- ✓ Gratitude letter and BPS
- ✓ Positive wellbeing outcomes (e.g., optimism, life satisfaction)
- ✓ Moderated by wellbeing, emotional and social factors

**Less consistent effects:**

- All other techniques
- Negative health symptoms (e.g., anxiety, stress depression) and physical health

More effective techniques or more effective methods?

Potentially due to...

- Shorter follow-ups
- Use of positive wellbeing outcomes
- No treatment controls



**Quality assessment**  
Poor (n = 26)  
Fair (n = 16)

- X Lack of intention-to-treat analyses
- X Lack of rigorous reporting

## Open Research

Preregistration

Transparency

Open access

Reproducibility

## Conclusions

**Which techniques work best?**

- Potentially gratitude letter and BPS
- Uncertainty based on various methods employed and health outcomes assessed

**Who do these interventions work for?**

- Evidence for effectiveness in non-clinical populations

**Which health outcomes are most reliably affected?**

- Positive wellbeing outcomes
- Outcomes assessed within a 1-month follow-up period

**Future recommendations**

- Assess both positive and negative health outcomes
- Ensure consistencies with methodologies (e.g., number, duration and spacing of writing sessions, follow-ups)
- Assess individual differences as potential moderators
- Follow reporting guidelines (i.e., CONSORT<sup>45-46</sup>) and include all randomised participants in final analyses (i.e., intention-to-treat)



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