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# Longitudinal Effects of Meaning-Making Expressive Writing on Mental Health

Chloe Swanson  
*Hope College*

Carmen Casper  
*Hope College*

Isabella Brady  
*Hope College*

Claire Van Duinen  
*Hope College*

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# Longitudinal Effects of Meaning-Making Expressive Writing on Mental Health



Chloe Swanson, Carmen Casper, Isabella Brady, and Claire VanDuinen  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Daryl Van Tongeren

## Introduction

- Expressive writing is beneficial for one's health, helping individuals process emotions (Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009)
  - What are its longitudinal effects?
- Why is searching for meaning necessary?
  - Attributions (explaining *why* things happen)
  - Addressing existential concerns (Koole et al., 2006)

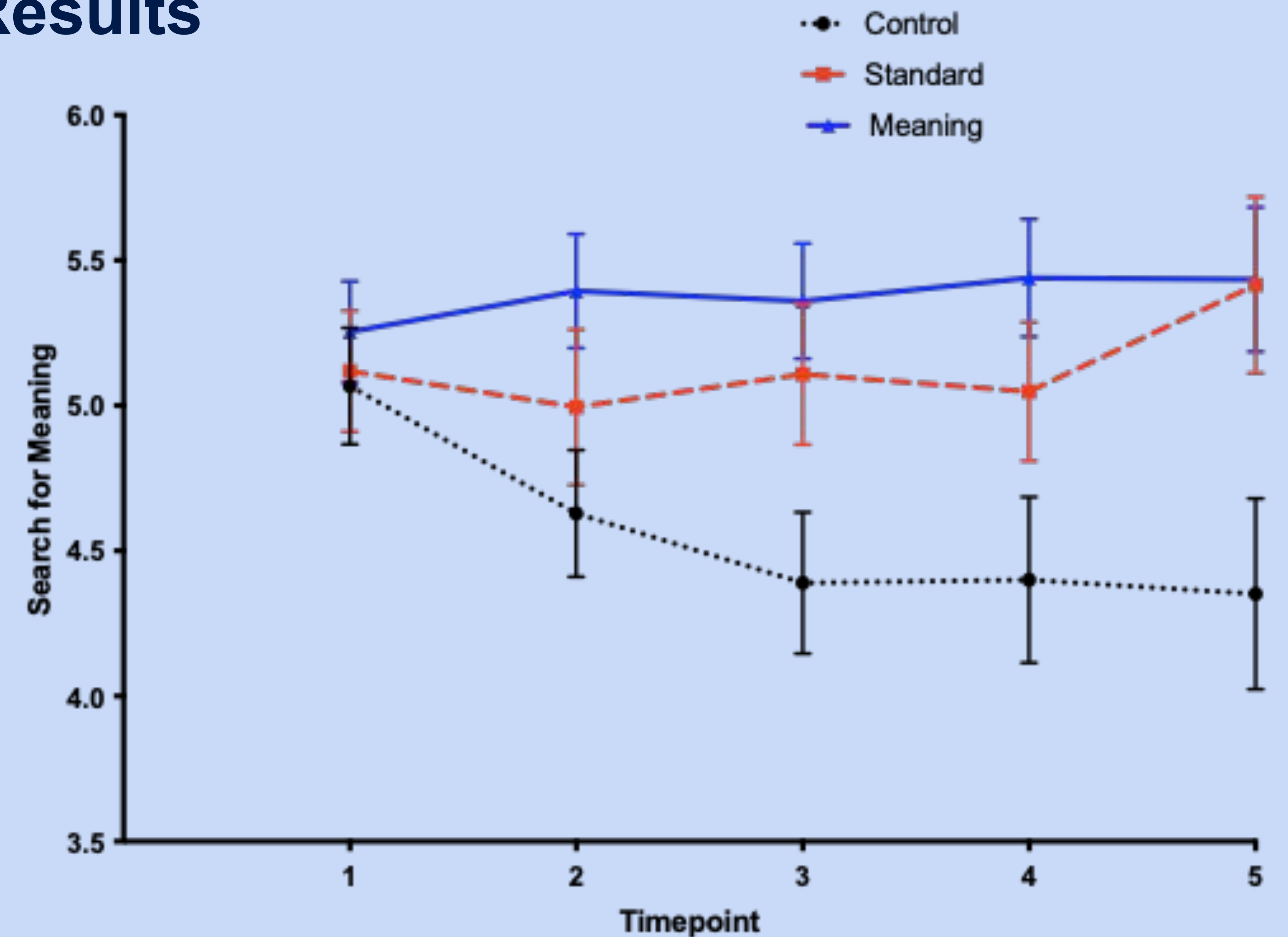
### Research Questions:

1. What is the most effective method of expressive writing for mental health?
2. What are some tangible benefits of expressive writing?

## Methods

- Undergraduate Participants ( $N = 124$ ) from a small liberal arts college
- **Dependent measures:** anxiety (GAD-7), depression (PHQ-8), and meaning in life (MLQ)
  - Standard expressive writing
  - Meaning-focused writing
  - Control condition
- **The intervention:** Randomly assigned to one of three conditions of supervised journaling sessions once a week for 15 minutes
- Dependent measures were assessed again each week, and one-month post intervention

## Results



**Figure 1.** When individuals practiced expressive writing, they had sustained levels of searching for meaning.

### Hypothesis #1:

Overall, participating in expressive writing will have improved mental health over the course of 2 months

### Hypothesis #2:

Participants who make meaning in expressive writing will be even more beneficial than standard expressive writing

### Hypothesis #3:

The longer participants use expressive writing, the more they will search for meaning

## Discussion

- Incorporating meaning into everyday leads to greater levels of searching for meaning (MLQS)
- Facilitating meaning in one's life can improve mental health (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2020) and positively affect one's character (McLean & Pratt, 2006)
- **Future research:** Our team is coding journal entries for *meaning* to understand the difference between standard expressive writing and meaning-focused expressive writing

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