THE EFFECT OF WRITTEN SELF-DISCLOSURE ON POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

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Abstract:

In this research, the effect of written self-disclosure's, on the positive and negative emotions of individuals has been investigated. The research was carried out with 8 people (1 woman, 7 men) residing in Giresun (Turkey) who agreed to participate in the research voluntarily. Participants first filled in the personal information forms provided by the researcher (in the researcher's office) and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was used as the pretest. Immediately after these, the participants were left alone for the first written self-disclosure activity. The next 7 written self-disclosure activities were carried out by the researcher via phone calls while the participants were at their homes. After conducting 8 written self-disclosure activities in total, the participants were subjected to the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule once more as the post-test. The same schedule was reapplied as a follow-up test one month after the application was completed and the results were evaluated. The research was conducted in a pretest-posttest semi-experimental pattern (without any control group), and frequency, percentage and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test were used for the analysis of the data. In this research, where the effect of written self-disclosure on the positive and negative emotions of individuals who have personal, emotional or physical problems that they have not been able to talk about with anyone for a long time, has been investigated, three main results have been obtained. The first result is that written self-disclosure has an effect on the negative emotions of individuals and "reduces the negative emotions". In addition, as the second result, it was observed that written self-disclosure has no effect on positive emotions. Lastly, based on the follow-up tests conducted one month after the study was completed, it was seen that the effect of written self-disclosure on negative emotions remained one month later as well, which was the third main conclusion of the research.

Keywords: written self-disclosure, emotions, self-disclosure, positive and negative emotions.

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1. Introduction

One of the important factors of carrying out healthy interpersonal relations is self-disclosure behavior (Cetinkaya, 2019). Self-disclosure behavior, importance of which has gradually increased in recent years, is essential for individuals to establish healthier social relationships, develop their self-efficacy sense and lead a healthier life in terms of psychology (Cetinkaya, 2005). Self-disclosure behavior, which contributes to individuals' recognition and understanding each other in interpersonal relationships as well, is also effective in establishing these relationships more comfortably, developing them more quickly and maintaining them more safely (Cetinkaya, 2014). Jourard (1958), the first person to scientifically study the concept of self-disclosure, states that, individuals will be taking the most effective step in terms of introducing themselves to others by directly communicating their thoughts, emotions and desires. Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information about oneself to another that are kept as secrets from other people (De Vito, 2015; Buhrmester et al., 1988) and the communication of any personal information from person A to person B (Jourard, 1964). Self-disclosure can be defined as a process of communication by which one person shares information about themself such as their good and bad qualities, positive and negative emotions and thoughts, desires and wishes, and their talents and abilities using verbal or non-verbal means to another person they seem fit (Cetinkaya, 2019). Self-disclosure behavior leads to a mutual influence among individuals which forms the reciprocity of self-disclosure. During the process of self-disclosure, the trust of the other person develops, they feel more heart-to-heart and they want to self-disclose as well. In studies supporting the foregoing idea, it is indicated that when individuals self-disclose to someone else, the person on the receiving end is also encouraged in terms of self-disclosure (Harper & Harper, 2006; Bazarova & Choi, 2014). In addition, people who disclose private information about themselves are seen as more sincere and reliable by others they interact with (Bazarova & Choi, 2014).

Unless one discloses their problems, it is not possible to do anything in order to solve such problems (Gultekin, 2001). Therefore, self-disclosure is deemed as an important social need (Ma et al., 2006). Human beings exist with the relationships they establish and they need to share their emotions and thoughts (Cuceloglu, 1994). It is stated that when people share information about themselves with others at an appropriate level, it will have positive effects on their mental health (Farber, 2006). If the level of self-disclosure is too low or too high, the relationships of the respective individual may be adversely affected (Aglamaz, 2006). Therefore, it is very important for individuals to self-disclose at appropriate levels. Likewise, individuals who self-disclose less than they should might feel much more lonely and might experience higher levels of depression (Citil Gurel, 2015; Derin, 2016; Wei et al., 2005; as cited in Uygur, 2018). While people want to communicate their emotions and thoughts to the other person, they also want to understand the emotions and thoughts of the people with whom they establish relationships (Yuksel, 1997). That being said, in order for individuals to understand both their own emotions and thoughts and other's emotions and thoughts as well, they must first have sufficient awareness in terms of emotions and thoughts. In a study they

conducted on this subject (Karabacak & Demir, 2017), it is stated that the only way for individuals to manage and change their emotions is to have conscious awareness of their emotions.

Emotions are regular and short-term responses of an organism directed towards the surrounding events in order to sustain its life, to meet its needs, to achieve its goals and to be in harmony with its environment (Watson & Clark, 1994). Emotions can be defined as reactions to external stimuli (Alakus & Turkoglu, 2019), which have an impact on the individual's decisions and behaviors after their emergence (Koysuren & Deryakulu, 2017). They have an important effect on determining the quality of human life. The positive and negative effects of emotions on the spiritual structure can manifest itself from the communication skills of the individuals who have that emotions on many things that can happen in their daily lives. Emotions can also be reflected through words, gestures and facial expressions as well. While the positive emotions that the individuals reflect to outside affect the perceptions of others about themself positively, the negative emotions of individuals can be seen by others as being mentally not well. Emotions are addressed in two basic dimensions as positive emotions and negative emotions (Watson et al., 1988). In this framework, it is stated that positive emotions help the individual feel good (Crowford & Henry, 2004; Kuyumcu, 2013), that happiness is positively influenced by these emotions (Jourard, 1964; Derlega & Berg, 1987), that they are effective in developing a healthy personality for the individual (Chen & Cheng, 2001). It is also known that if an individual has lots of negative emotions, it causes the individual to feel bad (Crowford & Henry, 2004) and that negative emotions are more effective on psychological health than positive emotions (Dua, 1993). The intensity of these emotions should be taken into account when evaluating positive and negative emotional states (Fisher, 1997). Emotions can be evaluated on a scale, ranked between good to bad (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

People self-disclose in 'writing' as a method as well, just as they self-disclose in verbal and non-verbal ways. As a result of written self-disclosure, people can get a chance to understand their feelings and thoughts much more and why they feel like that and see how much their problems affect them. Therefore, it can be said that the process of written self-disclosure is also the process of the individuals raising their awareness about themself, their experiences, feelings and thoughts. This process can also be considered as a rehabilitation process in a sense. That is because, written self-disclosure includes explaining the feelings and thoughts about life events that upset the individual (Klapow et al., 2001). Pennebaker (1997), who pioneered the studies on the psychological and physical effects that arise through written self-disclosure has created a design that enables researchers to manipulate written and verbal self-disclosure in the laboratory environment (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), and later on he tried to develop it with numerous applications. Although there are a great deal of studies conducted on self-disclosure within the world, there are limited studies on written self-disclosure. Most of the research carried out on written self-disclosure is for investigating the physical properties and health effects of written self-disclosure and in most of these studies, written self-disclosure appears to have positive effects on wellbeing (e.g., Pennebaker &

Beall, 1986; Beckwith et al., 2005; Patterson & Singer, 2007; Kraft et al., 2008; Kellogg et al., 2010; Wallander et al., 2011; Riddle et al., 2016). In the literature review carried out, it is seen that there are a limited number of studies investigating the effect of written self-disclosure on emotions, mental health, etc. and in these studies, it was concluded that written self-disclosure was more effective on negative emotions e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Shee et al., 2004; Gortner et al., 2006; Patterson & Singer, 2007; Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Riddle et al., 2016).

Literature review revealed that there are a lot of research conducted on self-disclosure (e.g., Sari, 2004; Cetinkaya, 2005; Frattaroli, 2006; Moore & Brody, 2009; Cetinkaya, 2011; Uygur, 2018; Acar & Dirik, 2019; Melumad & Meyer, 2020). However, although there are a limited number of studies carried out within the world that examine the effect of written self-disclosure on negative and positive emotions, no experimental study on this subject has been carried out in Turkey. As a result, it is considered that written self-disclosure may have effects on positive and negative emotions, and that it is necessary to determine in what direction and how this potential effect works. This research is considered important in determining the effect of self-disclosure on positive and negative emotions.

2. Method

In this research, which examines the effect of written self-disclosure on positive and negative emotions, single group pretest-posttest semi experimental design with no control group was used.

2.1 Study Group

A large number of announcement tools were used in order to conduct this study (social media, poster announcement, e-mail and interpersonal relations), and thus, volunteers were sought for the research. In the announcements, those who will volunteer for the research were asked to be "people who have physical, emotional etc. problems that has been bothering them for a long time (at least 3 months) about which they haven't/couldn't/didn't want to talk to anyone". It was also mentioned in the announcements that the individuals who will participate in the research will not be asked to share private information about their problems, but that they will be only be asked to write about their problems.

4 out of 12 people who responded to the announcements positively and resided in Giresun (Turkey), left the research stating that they did not want to continue after the first application, 8 of them completed the research and as a result, the research was applied to 8 people in total. Due to such low number of participants, a control group could not be formed in the research. Participants consisted of 7 males and 1 females aged 20-60. The first interviews were carried out with each participant separately, information about the research was given and the requests asked from them were explained to them. It was stated to each participant that the research may have negative and positive results, and no fee or reward will be given to them to participate in this study. After providing

information to the participants, they were asked whether they wanted to volunteer for the research and signed a form stating that they wanted to participate as a volunteer. At first, personal information form were given to the participants of the study and then Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was applied as the pretest. Following these preliminary applications, the participants were asked to carry out the first written self-disclosure procedure. Participants were told that spelling or grammar rules were not important, that the only person who would read what they wrote will be themselves, and that they could use as much paper as they wish, and there were no subject and time restrictions regarding the things they are to write in a single session (minimum 20 minutes). Participants were left alone while they were writing. At the end of the written self-disclosure procedure, they were granted time to read the things they wrote and to think about what they wrote. They were not asked to explain what they wrote and what they thought about afterwards. Thus, the first session was completed. In the next 7 sessions, written self-disclosure processes were initiated by a phone call from the researcher at the times determined together with the participants, when the participants were in their own homes, and it was confirmed with a phone call as well when the processes ended. Written self-disclosure practice was carried out a total of 8 times with an interval of 4 days as from the start. After carrying out the written self-disclosure practice 8 times in total, PANAS was applied to the participants once again as the post test. And then, one month later, the PANAS scale was applied once again as a follow-up test and thus, the process of the research conducted with the participants was completed and statistical studies were started.

2.2 Research Model

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of written self-disclosure on positive and negative emotions. In order to conduct the research, "single group pretest-posttest semi experimental design with no control group" was used. In this model, an independent variable is applied to a randomly selected group (Karasar, 2014) In single group pretest-posttest models, the measurements are applied to the group before (pre-test) and after the experiment (post-test) (Buyukozturk, 2008). Although the absence of a control group is seen as a limitation in pretest posttest single-group semi-experimental designs, it is used in researches when the total number of participants is not enough to form a control group (Knaap & Faan, 2016).

2.3 Data Collection Tools
A. Personal Information Form

Information about the participants' gender, age, marital status, educational status and income status was obtained with the personal information form prepared by the researcher.

B. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, developed by Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988) and adapted to Turkish by Gencoz (2000), consists of two sub-dimensions aimed at

measuring positive and negative emotions. The scale consists of 10 items indicating both positive and negative emotions. The internal consistency coefficient of the positive emotion subscale was 0.83, and the internal consistency coefficient of the negative emotion subscale was 0.86. The scores of the sub-scales range between 10 to 50. High scores obtained from the positive affect subscale indicate high positive emotion level, and high scores obtained from the negative affect subscale indicate high negative emotion level (Gencoz, 2000).

2.4 Analysis of the Data

3 different statistical analyzes (Frequency, Percent, Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test) were applied to analyze the data collected in the research and SPSS for Windows 22.00 statistical software was used for the statistical analysis of the data. In the literature, it is stated that the distribution will not be normal in cases where the number of participants is low and therefore it is recommended to use nonparametric analysis methods. In this study, it was preferred to use nonparametric analysis methods as well since the number of participants required for parametric tests could not be met due to the low number of participants and since the distribution was not normal (Can, 2018). In this framework, non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, which can test the significance of the difference between points in pretest posttest score comparison, was used.

3. Findings

Table 1: Introductory characteristics of the participants included in the research

		n	%
Gender	Female	1	12.5
	Male	7	87.5
Age	20-30 years of age	4	50.0
	31-40 years of age	2	25.0
	41-50 years of age	1	12.5
	51-60 years of age	1	12.5
Marital Status	Married	2	25.0
	Single	4	50.0
	Divorced	2	25.0
Educational Status	High school	4	50.0
	University	4	50.0
Income Status	TRY 1.000-2000	4	50.0
	TRY 3501-5000	3	37.5
	TRY 5001- 7000	1	12.5

Examining the Table 1, it can be seen that, 12.5% of the participants in the study were women, 87.5% of them were men, 50% of them were 20-30 years old, 25% were 31-40 years old, 12.5% were 41-50 years old, 12.5% were 51-60 years old, 25% of the participants were married, 50% of them were single, 25% were divorced, 50% of them were high school graduates, 50% of them were university graduates, income level of the 50% was

between TRY 1.000-2000, income level of 37.5% of them was between TRY 3501-5000 and income level of 12.5% was between TRY 5001- 7000.

Table 2: Arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of
Pretest-Posttest and Follow-up test scores obtained from PANAS scale

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Arithmetic Mean	SD
Positive emotions pretest	8	19	39	30.25	6.23
Negative emotions pretest	8	19	35	26.88	6.22
Positive emotions posttest	8	18	41	28.38	7.52
Negative emotions posttest	8	17	28	22.38	4.10
Positive emotions follow-up test	8	19	41	28.75	6.78
Negative emotions follow-up test	8	15	28	20.38	4.17

When the table is examined, it can be seen that the Positive Emotions pretest mean of the PANAS test of the participants of the study is 30.25±6.23, their Negative Emotions pretest mean is 26.88±6.22, the Positive Emotions posttest mean of the PANAS test is 28.38±7.52, the Negative Emotions posttest mean is 22.38±4.10, the Positive Emotions follow-up test mean of the PANAS test is 28.75±6.78, Negative Emotions post test mean is 20.38±4.17.

Table 3: Comparison of the scores obtained by the participants of the research from
the Positive Emotions and Negative Emotions sub-dimensions of the PANAS Scale
before and after written self-disclosure practice (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test)

Scales and Sub-Dimensions		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test p
PANAS Positive emotions pretest and posttest	Negative Ranks	5a	4.60	23.00	z = 1.527g
	Positive Ranks	2b	2.50	5.00	p=.127
	Ties	1c			
PANAS Negative emotions pretest and posttest	Negative Ranks	7d	5.00	35.00	z = -2.389g
	Positive Ranks	1e	1.00	1.00	p=.017
	Ties	0f			

a. Positive posttest <Positive pre-test b. Positive posttest> Positive pretest c. Positive posttest = Positive pretest d. Negative posttest <Negative pretest e. Negative posttest> Negative pretest f. Negative posttest = Negative pretest g=Based on positive ranks.

It can be seen that the difference between the PANAS test Positive Emotions dimension pretest and posttest mean rank is insignificant at the significance level of p> 0.05 (z = 1.527 p =.127). These findings indicate that there is no difference between the PANAS test Positive Emotions dimension pretest and posttest scores.

It can be seen that the difference between the PANAS test Negative Emotions dimension pretest and posttest mean rank is significant at the significance level of p <0.05 (z = -2,389 p= .017) These findings indicate that there is a difference between the Negative Emotions dimension pretest and posttest scores in PANAS test in favor of the posttest.

All these findings reveal that the practice of written self-disclosure has an effect in decreasing the negative emotions in the Negative Emotions dimension of the PANAS Scale applied before and after the practice, and that it does not have an effect in the positive emotions dimension of the PANAS Scale (Graph 1).

Table 4: Comparison of the scores obtained by the participants of the research from the Positive Emotions and Negative Emotions sub-dimensions of the PANAS Scale after written self-disclosure practice and in the one-monthly follow-up test (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test)

Scales and Sub-Dimensions		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test p
PANAS Positive emotions posttest and follow-up test	Negative Ranks	2a	3.75	7.50	z = -.638c
	Positive Ranks	4b	3.38	13.50	
	Ties	2c			p = 524
PANAS Negative emotions posttest and follow-up test	Negative Ranks	6d	3.50	21.00	z = -2.333b
	Positive Ranks	0e	.00	.00	
	Ties	2f			p =.020

a. Positive follow-up test <Positive posttest b. Positive follow-up test> Positive posttest c. Positive follow-up test = Positive posttest d. Negative posttest <Negative pretest e. Negative follow-up test> Negative posttest f. Negative follow-up test = Negative posttest g = Based on positive ranks. h = Based on negative ranks.

It can be seen that the difference between the PANAS test Positive Emotions dimension posttest and follow-up test mean rank is insignificant at the significance level of p> 0.05 (z =-.638 p =.524). These findings indicate that there is no difference between the PANAS test Positive Emotions dimension posttest and follow-up test scores.

It can be seen that the difference between the PANAS test Negative Emotions dimension posttest and follow-up test mean rank is significant at the significance level of p <0.05 (z = -2.333 p=.020) These findings indicate that there is a difference between the Negative Emotions dimension posttest and follow-up test scores in PANAS test in favor of the posttest.

Graph 1: Arithmetic mean of PANAS
Scale Positive Emotions pretest, posttest and follow-up test scores
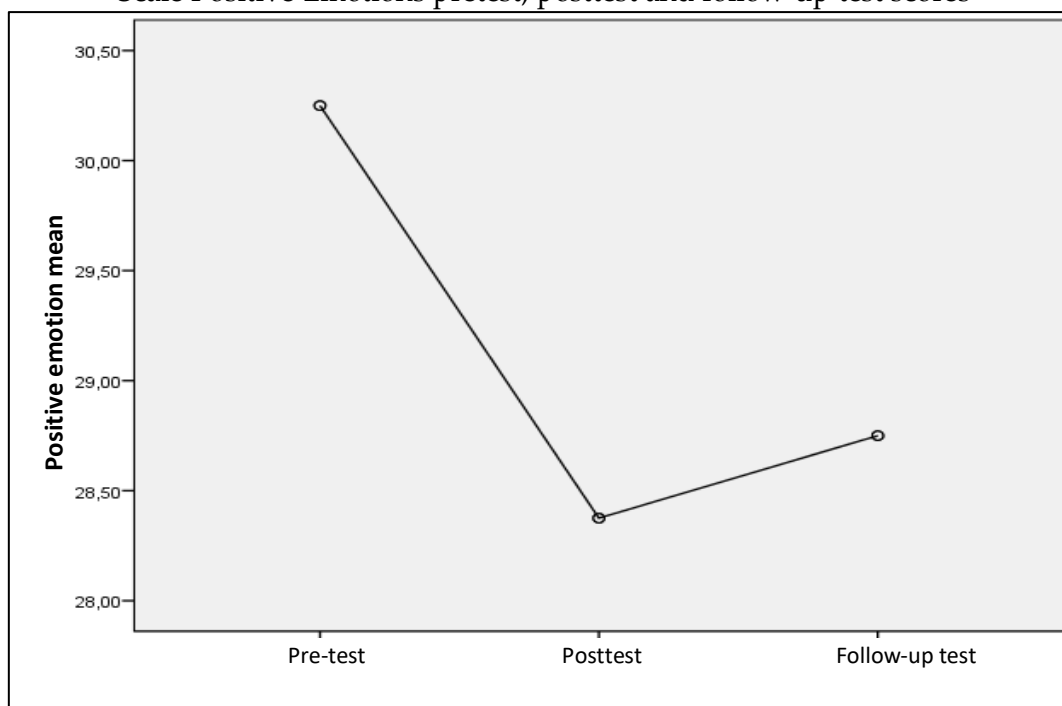
Graph 2: Arithmetic mean of PANAS Scale Negative
Emotions pretest, posttest and follow-up test scores
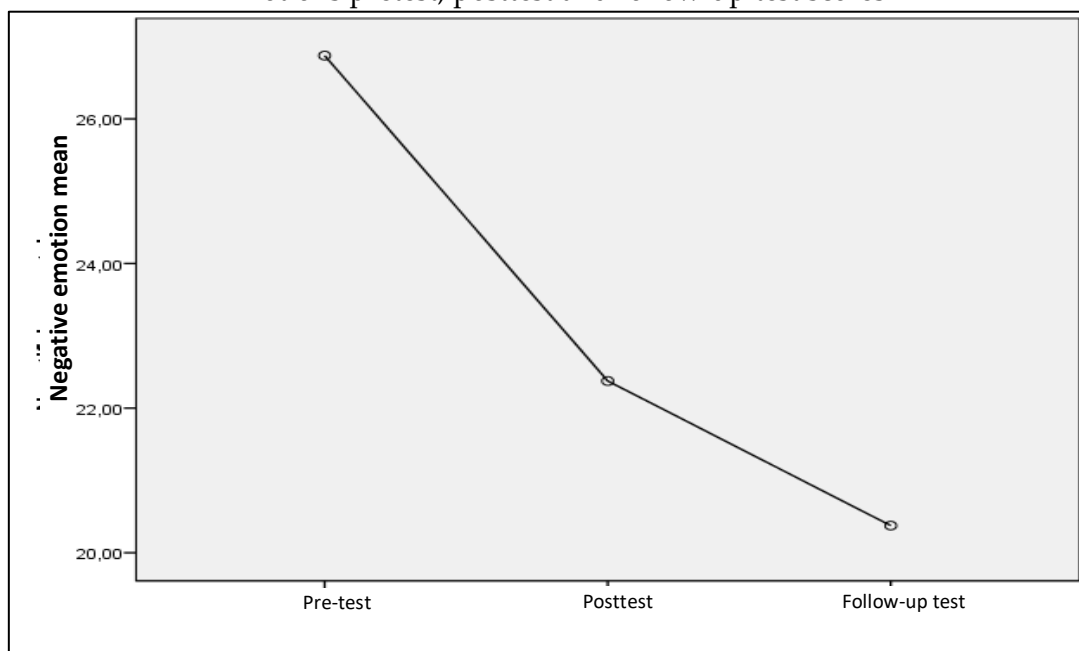
All these findings reveal that the practice of written self-disclosure has a continuous effect in decreasing the negative emotions in the Negative Emotions dimension of the PANAS Scale, applied after the practice as a posttest and also as a follow-up test one month later, and that it does not have an effect in the positive emotions dimension of the PANAS Scale (Graph 2).

4. Result and Discussion

In this study, the effect of written self-disclosure on the positive and negative emotions of individuals was examined. Participants who have had personal, emotional or physical problems for a long time, but who do not want to share these problems with anyone, were asked to self-disclose by writing instead of talking about their problems and by doing so, it is tried to reduce the negative emotions of individuals and increase their positive emotions. The research revealed three main results. The first result is that written self-disclosure has an effect on the negative emotions of individuals and "reduces the negative emotions". In addition, as the second result, it was observed that written self-disclosure has no effect on positive emotions. Lastly, based on the follow-up tests conducted one month after the study was completed, it was seen that the effect of written self-disclosure on negative emotions remained one month later as well, which was the third main conclusion of the research. The foregoing results of the research were similar to those of the studies examined in the related literature (e.g., Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebacker & Beall, 1986).

The results of the research indicated that written self-disclosure is significantly correlated with negative emotions. The results are consistent with previous studies stating that written self-disclosure has a significant impact on psychological well-being

(Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Riddle, Smith, & Jones, 2016). Even though sharing problems with others can help people in getting social support and organize, assimilate, and give meaning to cognitively distressing events, it can sometimes be difficult to talk about such events (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). People may think that sharing negative things can cause others not to like them and aim to present themselves in the best way possible (Zhang, 2017). From a Freudian point of view, talking about sad events and problems can lead to catharsis and help people to relieve stress. (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Researches conducted on this topic has also revealed that self-disclosure is beneficial for people with emotional problems to have a better mental health (Smith, 2018), and helps to reduce perceived stress (Zhang, 2017) and anxiety (Levi-Belz & Elis, 2017).

Past researches shed light on the relation between negative emotions and self-disclosure. It was explained in the conclusion of a research that when people experience negative emotions, instead of talking about these negative emotions, they tend to suppress or transform themselves in order to deal with their problems and avoid negative emotions and thus they feel more relaxed and calm (Albets, Schneider & Martjin, 2012). However, it has also been shown that this method consumes the energy of the individual much more and reduces the ability to control oneself. (Albets, Schneider & Martjin, 2012). Furthermore, people tend to change themselves or their environment until negative emotions are transferred into positive emotions (Wang, Zhang, Chen, & Zeng, 2018). A better way to deal with and overcome negative emotions is to fully accept these emotions without trying to avoid them (Albets, Schneider & Martjin, 2012). Generally speaking, people, when experiencing negative emotions, actively avoid negative emotions and they seek to maximize positive emotions (Wang et al., 2018). In conclusion, this study showed that instead of avoiding negative emotions, written self-disclosure may be a more effective coping strategy to deal with negative emotions and also to reduce negative emotions.

In addition to the foregoing, negative emotions have a much stronger effect on regulating emotions than positive emotions. Negative emotions have much closer relation with safety or survival (Cohn et al., 2009). In conclusion, people who cope with depression, loneliness, and other negative emotional problems have a stronger motivation to regulate their negative emotions than positive emotions and are therefore more likely to use self-disclosure as a way to deal with problems (Wang et al., 2018). Written self-disclosure can provide an easily accessible method to reduce negative emotions and is therefore preferred by people who have more advanced negative emotions (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). It is possible for the participants of this study to use written self-disclosure more to minimize their negative emotions.

4.1 Implications

The results revealed that written self-disclosure has an impact on negative emotions. Negative emotions are one of the most important factors affecting people's life and well-being satisfaction (Arslan, Hamarta, & Uslu 2010). Therefore, consultants and professionals can use self-disclosure as a method that reduces the destructive effect of negative emotions on the lives of people who have emotional problems (Hill & Knox,

2001). Self-disclosure can be used in various ways by professionals during interventions, and in therapy sessions. For example, online self-disclosure. It can be a potential method during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, journaling can be used as another self-disclosure method for individuals who have emotional problems.

Taking into account the relation between self-disclosure and psychological problems with negative effects such as anxiety and depression, self-disclosure can also be used for people who have anxiety and depression problems, or for people who experience loneliness (Kahn & Garrison, 2009; Wang et al., 2018). Professionals should encourage people who have emotional problems and personal difficulties to express their emotions and thoughts in a healthier manner. Reducing negative emotions can help people who cope with emotional problems increase their subjective well-being and feel more positive emotions. That being said, self-disclosure can be used by people who have or do not have emotional problems as well (Leung, 2002).

Self-disclosure is a way for people dealing with emotional problems to overcome their emotional problems (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). However, it should be noted that self-disclosure is only efficient when used under favorable conditions (Knight, 2014). Professionals dealing with people who have emotional problems should be careful about when to use it and how to use it. Therefore, it is important to emphasize developing a safe relationship with clients before encouraging them to self-disclosure (Corey, 2011).

4.2 Limitations

This research, which examines the effect of written self-disclosure behavior on positive and negative emotions of individuals who have a problem that they have not/could not or wanted to talk about for a long time, has strengths as well as limitations. These limitations should also be taken into consideration when evaluating the results of the research. In this research, a pretest-posttest (without a control group) semi-experimental pattern that limits internal and external validity was used due to the relatively low number of volunteers. This situation limits the generalizability of the results. The research was originally planned with the idea that there could be more participants and that it could be conducted by forming both experimental and control groups based on the number of participants, however this was not possible. Furthermore, the fact that the participants were not asked about the type and content of their private problems means that the results of this research cannot be interpreted for a specific problem type.

4.3 Recommendations

This study, which was conducted to determine the effect of written self-disclosure behavior on individuals' positive and negative emotions, is one of the pioneering studies on this subject in Turkey. There are a limited number of studies in the world investigating the effect of written self-disclosure on positive and negative emotions. Yet, the act of writing is an action that the individual can do alone and at any time. People can write down their own problems they don't want to talk about with anyone, whenever they want, and in this way they can reduce their negative emotions by expressing them out. However, in order to recommend this to people more and more strongly, more research

is needed to be carried out on this subject. It is also considered as an important suggestion to conduct similar studies with a much more generalizable number of participants and to reveal the results by evaluating them based on the problem types of the participants and specifying the types of the problems as well.

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