

Capstone Research – by Heidi Sistare, MSW '16
Self-Understanding and Self-Care: Expressive Writing Intervention

My Capstone research is rooted in my interest in how our work influences us and how who we are and how we care for ourselves influences our work. I designed a study that combined this inquiry with my commitment to writing as a practice for self-understanding and self-care. The question I asked was: How does an expressive writing intervention impact levels of compassion fatigue among second year MSW students?

I conducted my study in two seminar classes. Each class took a pre and post-test Compassion Fatigue Scale, five weeks apart. In the experimental class I came in for four weeks and asked the students to respond to a writing prompt about their experiences in field placement. Students were asked to write for fifteen minutes, focusing on their thoughts and feelings and without lifting their pen from the paper. The other class served as the control group. At the end of the writing weeks I also interviewed students who participated in the writing—collecting their thoughts about the experience.

My data showed that the writing group had larger decreases in their rates of compassion fatigue between the pre and post surveys. In fact, in one area the control group's rates actually rose. Of the students I interviewed, five had positive experiences with the writing and one did not. In their interviews students reported that they wrote about topics they were still processing, did not feel comfortable sharing in class, and were sources of anxiety or struggle. They reported that the writing increased their confidence, felt therapeutic, improved their experience of supervision, and increased their awareness of biases and triggers.

Future studies could improve upon this research by including a larger sample size and designing control and experimental groups to mediate the impact of external variables. Additional questions arose during this study and might inspire future research: What other forms of creative expression could be incorporated into seminar classes? Does expressive writing have an impact on the development of students' reflexive practice? What would rates of compassion satisfaction look like? How do rates of compassion fatigue change based on type of field placement, years in the field, etc.?

This preliminary research offers important information for social work educators, particularly field seminar instructors. I believe that social work education has an opportunity to offer students multiple, creative ways to process their experiences in the field, preparing them for responsible social work practice and effective self-care.