

# A Randomised Controlled Trial Comparing an Online Support Group to Expressive Writing for Depression and Anxiety

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## Outcome research

- Griffiths *et al.* (2009) review of OSGs with depression outcomes
  - 10 of 17 studies (many involving breast cancer) found positive effects on depression
  - only 2 studies looked at OSGs solely for depression
    - Houston, Cooper & Ford (2002): positive, no control group
    - Andersson *et al.* (2005): OSG as control, not positive
- Griffiths *et al.* (2012): 2×2 RCT of OSG and cCBT
  - OSG better than control at 6 and 12 months (but not 3 months)

## Present study

6-month RCT:

- (1) Online support group (OSG)
  - take part in an existing online support group ([www.psychcentral.com](http://www.psychcentral.com))
- (2) Expressive writing
  - write about an upsetting experience for a minimum of 5 mins every two weeks (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986)

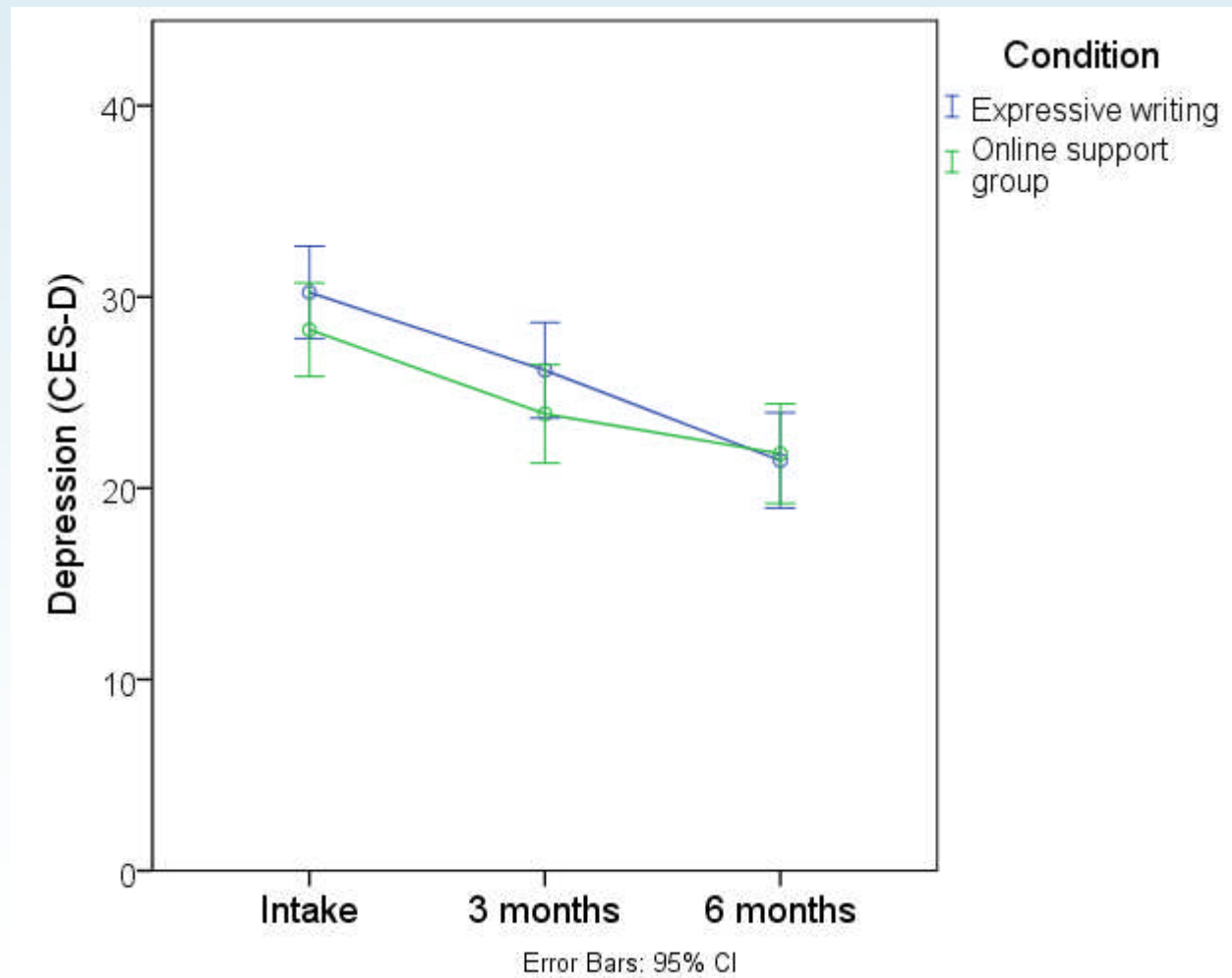
Participants emailed every fortnight

- OSG condition: asked about usage
- expressive writing condition: reminded to submit their writing

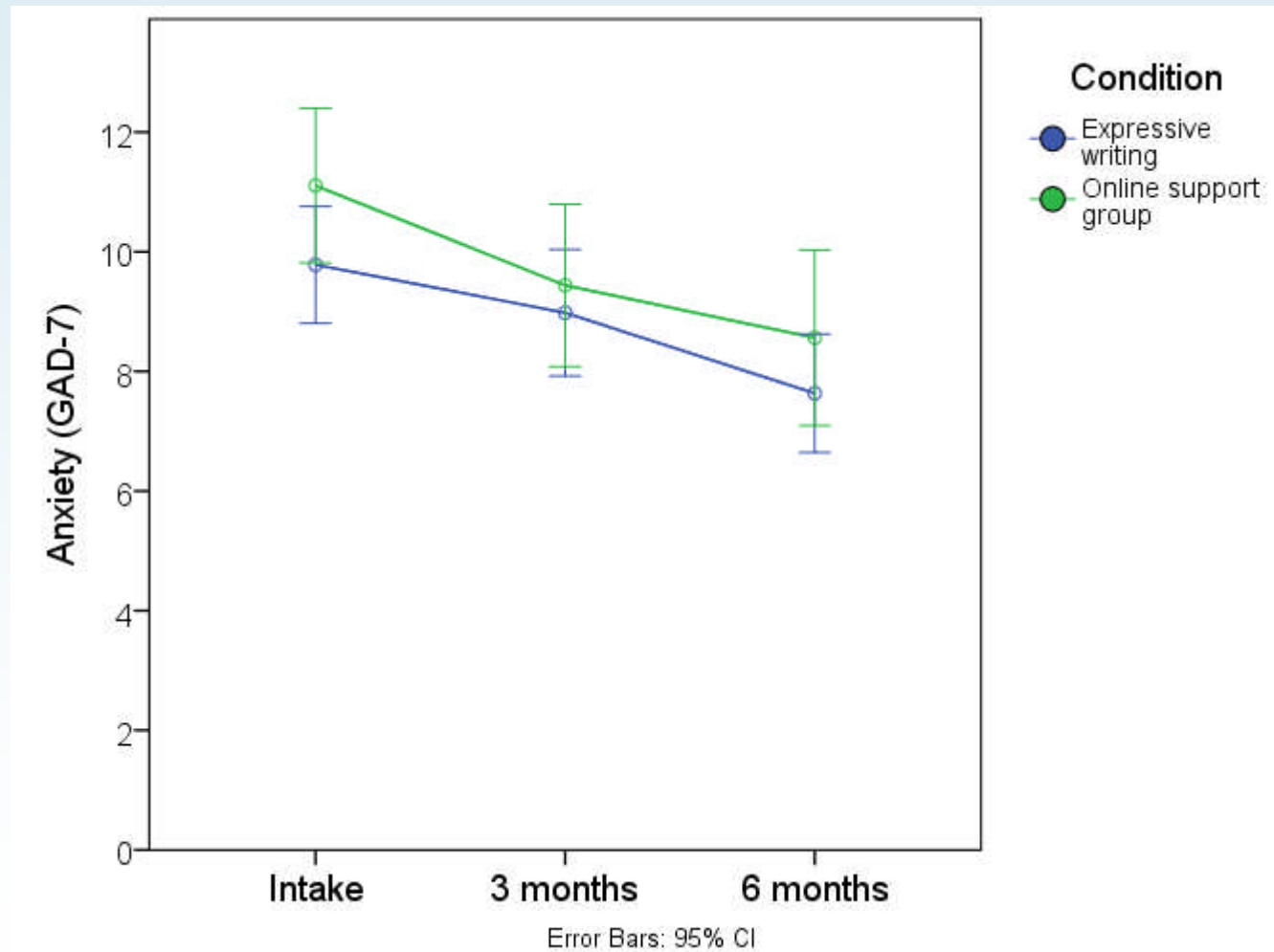
## Participants

- 863 participants (628 female) recruited online
- 578 from UK, 252 US and 33 Canada
- Depressed sample (mean score on CES-D 29)
- Anxious sample (GAD-7 mean 10 = moderate anxiety)
- Well-educated (87% some tertiary education)
- 46% in recent contact with mental health services
- 22% seeing a therapist; 30% taking medication

## Results: Depression



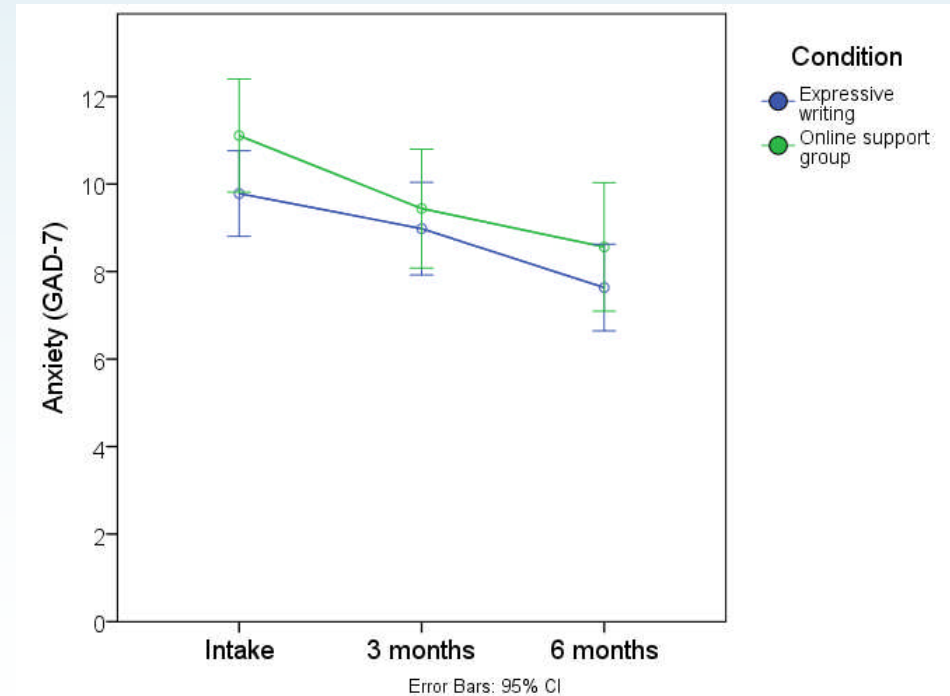
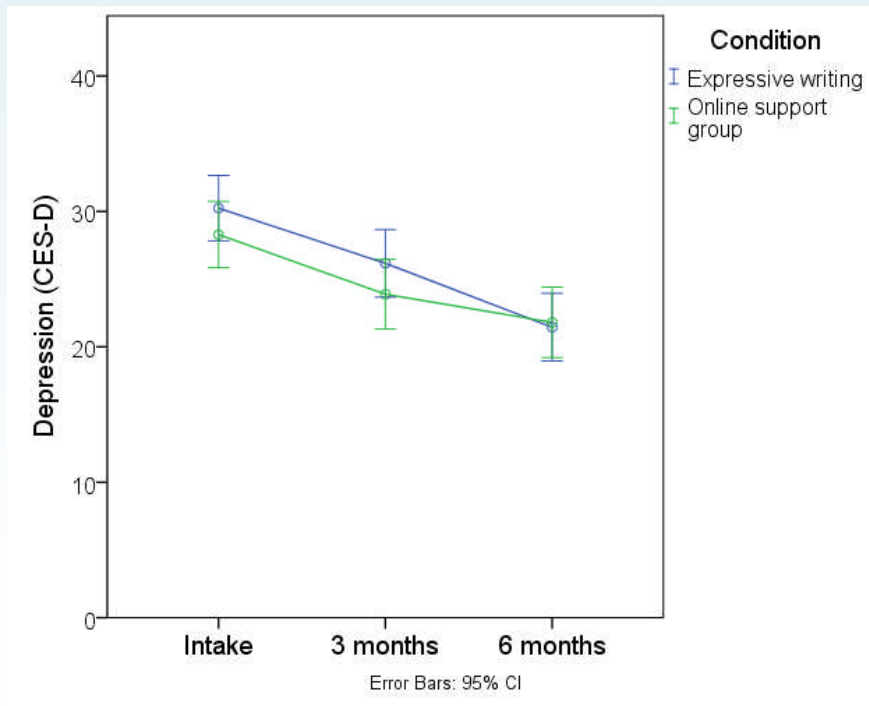
## Results: Anxiety



# Results

Both groups improved over time, but no difference between conditions.

Not clearly different from usual progression.



## Results

- At 6 months, 82% attrition in OSG group v. 65% in expressive writing group
- Only 57 participants engaged with the OSG, even fewer to much degree
- Acceptability:
  - positive feedback for expressive writing
  - mixed feedback for OSG: UK participants reported US group members “more depressed” than them
- Engagement with the OSG best predicted by expectations



## Two RCTs for OSGs for depression, with very different results

### Griffiths *et al.* (2012)

- 12 months
- Control: Online material on health
- Score over 22 on K10 following mass screening
- OSG built for this trial
- Lower attrition

### Current study

- 6 months
- Control: Expressive writing
- Self-referred volunteers
- Refer to existing OSG
- High attrition

## Conclusions

- Little difference in outcome between online support and expressive writing conditions
- OSGs less acceptable than expressive writing
- Higher attrition and less adherence in the OSG
- Can psychologists routinely recommend when acceptability so low (10% engagement)?
- ... or, might some groups be useful for some people?

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Thanks for listening

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Also see:

P92. “Impact of an Online Support Forum for Carers of People with Dementia”, by McKechnie, Stott & Barker

P45. “Exergame Efficacy in Clinical and Non-Clinical Populations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis”, by Douglass-Bonner & Potts

P50. “Motivations for Contributing to Health-Related Articles on Wikipedia: An Interview Study”, by Farič & Potts