Slam Poetry: An Online Intervention for Treating Depression

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Slam Poetry: An Online Intervention for Treating Depression

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University of Montana

Global Leadership Initiative

Note: This project was a capstone project for the Global Leadership Initiative at University of Montana during the 2015-2016 academic year. Professor Stephen Yoshimura, Department of Communication Studies, served as the faculty mentor. The project was funded by the UM Global Leadership Program, and was publicly presented at the 2016 University of Montana Conference on Undergraduate Research (UMCUR).
Slam Poetry: An Online Intervention for Depression

Depression is the “leading cause of disability worldwide,” impacting over 350 million people (WHO, 2012). Although common, depression can be a devastating illness impacting people from adolescence through adulthood and can significantly impair functioning in school, work, and social activities. A person who is depressed may experience persistent sadness or anxiety, loss of pleasure in activities they previously enjoyed, decreased energy, fatigue, insomnia, body pain, thoughts of suicide, and a number of other symptoms which make participating in daily life exceptionally difficult (NIMH, 2011). Sadly, 15% of people who are clinically depressed die by suicide (Verster et al., 2008).

Psychological interventions tend to be very effective in treating depression, but unfortunately, most people experiencing depression do not receive treatment. Less than 50% of people with depression worldwide receive treatment; in some countries, less than 10% (WHO, 2012). This staggering numbers of individuals often face barriers such as a “lack of resources, lack of trained health care providers, and social stigma related to mental disorders,” which contribute to their lack of care (WHO, 2012).

Previous research generally suggests that perceived emotional support and large, diverse social networks are protective factors against depression (Santini, Koyanagi, Tyrovolas, Mason, & Haro, 2015). Perceived emotional support is the feeling of being supported by one’s relationships and diverse social networks consisting of a varied “web” of connections, whether they are family, friends, coworkers, etc. In light of the findings by Santini et al., interventions that target perceived social support may be especially helpful in reducing depression by increasing an individual’s “social web,” especially through online mediums.
The purpose of the project is to implement and study the affects of an online resource providing social support through the medium of slam poetry, and to create a site that provides a platform for self-expression and social support, which would aid in the treatment of depression. Slam poetry is a style of spoken word poetry in which the subject matter is deeply emotional or introspective and makes some form of social commentary through means of personal experience. The slam poet becomes vulnerable to his/her audience, making this performative type of poetry an effective mode of relating to an audience through live performances and video recordings. Slam poetry can be political, personal, and/or humorous and can cover a range of topics. The message of the poem is typically very clear, pays attention to rhythm, and avoids ambiguous language or metaphors.

In this project the researchers developed a website in which participants were able to watch videos of slam poetry and reflect on the connection between their and the performers’ experiences. In theory, this should have the effect of building a cognitive community that may be helpful for decreasing depression. The most obvious benefits of creating an poetic online medium intervention for depression include its global scope, ability to reach users in both rural and urban areas, and its relative anonymity. Studies on Internet-based forums show great promise for individuals with depression, with the caveat that Internet use must be used for communicational purposes to have a positive impact. The value of friends, the therapeutic qualities of performative art, and relating to others with similar depression experiences through the catharsis of poetry all have real life relevance; this conglomerate of mediums, the researchers believe, will be the most efficient, effective, and far-reaching vehicle for delivering relief from the heavy burden of depression, in all or any of its intensities. The researchers believe watching slam poetry will increase the user’s mood, stimulate the user intellectually, help eliminate or
distract maladaptive cognitive practices typically associated with depression, expose the user to passionate opinions and experiences of depression, show the user strength in being vulnerable to telling one’s story about his/her experience with depression, and give users the cognitive tools and language needed to cope with depression in the long term.

The following literature review explores the effects of expressive writing on symptoms of depression, important studies in the tradition of art and performance art therapy, and studies that show the effectiveness of online communities in the prevention and reappropriation of symptoms of depression.

**Effects of Expressive Writing on Depression**

“Expressive writing” is a new field with practical clinical use, and part of the researcher’s project will entail gathering responses from site-users in written form as they reflect on the poetry they watched. Studies show that “expressive writing interventions,” as a creative mode of expression, can have lasting and positive psychological health ramifications. Additionally, including an expressive writing task provides an opportunity to perform text analysis on participants’ writing and learn more about participant mood states.

Pennebaker and Tausczik (2010) have determined that analyzing text through LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) can uncover participants’ thoughts, feelings, and mood states. This method of analyzing text looks at parts of speech such as pronouns, content, style, positive and negative words, etc., to determine the focus of the speaker/writer. For example, people who are feeling pain, either emotionally or physically, tend to be more focused inward. LIWC reveals this feeling by analyzing the use of personal pronouns. People focused inward tend to use more words such as “me,” “my,” and “mine,” than people whose attention is drawn
outward. Text analysis is useful for making determinations such as this, along with indicating a number of other mood states.

Previous studies have also indicated that analyzing language use can be an effective way to determine levels of depression. For example, a study by Grotner, Rude, and Pennebaker (2006), analyzed essay text from depressed, formerly depressed, and never depressed participants for positive and negative emotion words. Their results indicated a connection between greater negative word usage in essays and depression, which gives credence to the use of text analysis as a mood indicator in this study.

Experiments on the effects of expressive writing on treating Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) surrounding “emotion events” (depression directly linked to moments in time or trauma) have found similar results (Krpan, Kross, Berman, Deldin, Askren, & Jonides. 2013). For example, Krpan et al. observed subjects diagnosed with MDD writing expressively about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding an “emotional event,” and found that these subjects showed significant decreases in depression immediately after the period of expressive writing, and up to four weeks after.

Studies have also shown that expressive writing affects even lesser forms of clinical depression, such as simple stress and maladaptive rumination (Sloan, Marx, Epstein, & Dobbs, 2008). Rumination is “a mode of coping with distress in which the individual repeatedly and passively focuses on distress and its possible causes and consequences.” According to Sloan et al., rumination comes in two forms, both of which can be moderated by expressive writing. “Brooding rumination” focuses on abstract questions (ex. “Why am I here?” or “What have I done to deserve this?”), which “[facilitate] the belief that the situation is hopeless.” In contrast, “reflective rumination” is “a process by which the individual purposely turns inward to engage in
adaptive problem solving.” Reflective rumination is psychologically more stable and healthier than brooding rumination, and is associated with less depressive symptoms over time. Brooding, in contrast, focuses on more “negative stimuli” relative to reflective rumination.

Expressive writing is considered an “intervention technique” that challenges hopeless thoughts. Rather than increase rumination, Sloan et al. (2008) found that the effects of brooding could be “undone” in just a few session of expressive writing, though the benefits of the intervention tended to be short-lived. Not only those who suffer from depression may benefit from writing expressively about slam poetry, but those with undiagnosed depressive symptoms, such as excessive rumination, can benefit from this outlet of reflection and creativity as well.

**Performative Poetry as Therapy for Depression**

Art therapy can involve drawing, painting, poetry, acting, dancing, knitting, or any form of creative outlet. According to Blomdahl, Gunnarsson, Guregård, & Björklund (2013), art therapy is “an alternative treatment for persons suffering from depression” (Blomdahl et al, 2013, P. 322). According to some research, one factor that may lead more people toward slam poetry (or performative poetry) rather than a traditional method of therapy is “the triad of performer, host, and audience, rather than person-to-be-helped, helper, and therapy group” (Maddalena, 2009). Theoretically, performative poetry could be more helpful than written poetry in therapy, because performative poetry involves the constant rehearsal of emotions engaged in the creation of the poem, rather than just written feedback on a textualized piece of poetry from a third party (Maddalena, 2009).

**Therapeutic Effects of Online Communities**

Internet support groups have been found to be beneficial in treating depression as a supplement to face-to-face therapy. In fact, in a study done over the course of a year with a
sample of clinically depressed subjects 37.9% of participants preferred online communication to face-to-face therapy, and 42.9% of users in an online depression support group saw their depression alleviated when used in conjunction with face-to-face traditional therapy, compared to only 20.7% of participants using traditional therapy alone (Houston, Cooper & Ford, 2002). Most users reported that social support was a main factor in their online support group experience. These findings suggest a beneficial role digital support can play in reducing depressive symptoms when combined with traditional treatment.

Evidence also shows that utilizing the Internet in communicational-based ways, such as Internet-based forums, are helpful for relieving symptoms of depression. Selfhout, Branje, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus (2009) distinguished “communicational-based” uses of the Internet from “non-communicational” uses of the Internet, since the two uses affect depressive symptoms differently. For example, communication-based uses such as instant messaging (IM) or certain social media venues decreased depressive symptoms more than non-communicational uses such as “surfing the web” or online shopping, which were correlated with an increase in depressive symptoms (Selfhout et al. 2009).

Through questionnaires and longitudinal associations, Selfhout et al. focused on the quality of perceived friendship based upon the purpose of Internet activity. They inferred that the association between increased depressive symptoms and internet usage for non-communicational purposes was a result of short-term gratification. Short-term gratification lead users to return online again and again, which lead to a cyclic negative feedback loop, because each visit did not result in any real world rewards. This contributed to a phenomenon Selfhout et al. calls the “Poor Get Poorer,” wherein individuals who are already depressed utilize the Internet for non-communicational purposes and only getting “poorer,” ie. increasingly depressed.
On the other hand, Internet usage for communicational purposes and its correlation with decreased symptoms of depression may have been a result of long term gratification. For example, an individual who utilized a website to IM with another a friend, or with the purpose of making a new friend, experienced a long term result/gratification from this type of Internet use. Similar studies have been performed with samples of college freshman, and have found nearly identical results (Morgan & Cotten, 2003). The researcher’s website will utilize communication-based forums, where a user may message other individuals and meet other individuals via online communication; the researcher’s predict the website may decrease symptoms of depression through this use.

However, The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a study stating that they “did not find evidence supporting a relationship between the Social Networking Sites (SNS) use and clinical depression.” The researchers used Experience Sample Method (ESM) approaches to recording data, “multiple real-time assessments conducted over short periods.” The approach was best used for capturing “intermittent behavior” regarding depressive symptoms, in between Internet uses (Jelenchick et al., 2013). The AAP looked at a group of university students (older adolescents) and used an ESM to ask questions regarding how much time was spent online, on what websites, and what the students were doing on those websites. To measure depressive symptoms, the AAP used an online survey, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ), a “validated screening instrument for depression in adolescents.” The PHQ measured rates of depression symptoms over 2 weeks. Of all the activities recorded in the ESM, Social Networking Sites (SNS) were the most common Internet activity, reported as consuming more than half the time spent on the Internet, yet the AAP couldn’t affirm any correlation between the use of SNS’s and clinical depression (Jelenchick et al., 2013).
Given the above research, the overall success of the current project likely depends on how effectively the website is able to gather a community, and how encouraged users will be to participate and interact with the site for enduring periods of time. Yet, results from studies on the effect of performative poetry on individuals with depression look promising. The strength of performing poetry in therapeutic sessions, and ideally, experiencing this same poetry as an active viewer, is that subjects get the chance to relive the emotional output of writing a piece when rehearsing and performing it, similar to the process of reflective rumination.

**Method**

For this project, the researchers designed a website in which individuals could watch slam poetry performances and reflect upon their feelings and thoughts to examine whether poetry performances might be able to alter people’s mood states. The website was hosted by GoDaddy.com and was located at www.bluebirdpoetryproject.com. However, the Global Leadership Initiative provided funding for only a limited duration of site hosting, so the website may no longer be functional at the time of publication. Nevertheless, images of the web pages are provided in the Appendix A.

**Participants**

The researchers announced the website via social media (Facebook) to advertise to possible users. The researchers created a graphic for marketing purposes, which can be found in Appendix C. This graphic was enlarged and adapted to an 8.5 x 11 inch poster that the researchers hanged in 19 venues on the University of Montana campus and 4 venues in the Missoula, Montana community. The study was also announced in several University of Montana listservs, including the weekly newsletters of the Global Leadership Initiative and Davidson Honors College. The researchers were interviewed by Upworthy freelance writer Paul Nocchi for
an article about the Bluebird Poetry Project, but the article was not published before data collection began. The researchers also advertised the project as Craiglist advertisements in Ireland, Japan, England (amongst others). Each advertisement was renewed after three or more days. An announcement about the study was also emailed to several English-speaking poetry clubs abroad.

A total of 75 people visited the site over a week’s period of time: 67 from the United States, 3 from Japan, 1 from Brunei, 1 from Bolivia, 1 from Canada, 1 from India, and 1 from Malaysia. Thirteen users registered for the site. Ten users completed the series of surveys to absolute completion. Of those ten users, two completed the entire survey process twice, giving two separate free-responses and set of survey responses at two separate times. Those second responses were separated from the rest, however, and the analyses reported here were based on the first responses only. Participation in the study was completely anonymous. The focus of the study was on the textual responses provided, so the researchers did not ask for demographic information.

Measures

Mood state. To assess the effects that watching slam poetry had on mood state, three separate adjective checklists appeared throughout the process. These words were adapted from a selection by Lubin (1965), which helped the researchers quantify the textual responses through the selection of these adjectives. Each checklist contained 10 adjectives, five of which are positive words, such as “content,” “healthy,” and “happy,” and five of which are negative words, such as “distressed,” “apathetic,” and “lonely.” The adjectives for each checklist were randomly selected from a set a 30 total adjectives, half of which were positive and half of which were negative. When the checklist appeared, the user had the option to select as many words as he/she
felt applied to him/her at the time. These positive and negative words can be located in Appendix B.

Text. To examine the connection between mood states and language use, the participants were invited to provide the researchers with free-written responses about their own feelings and experiences. After watching a video of a slam poetry performance on depression, participants were given the following prompt:

“Now’s your chance to respond to the poem! Reflect on your own experience with depression. Write however long you want, whether you write one sentence or five paragraphs—for one minute or for thirty. Write about whatever you want. This is for you and only you. As long as you don’t put your name or other identifying information in your response, all responses will remain 100% anonymous.”

A disclaimer followed these instructions that directed the participant to a Resources page, should suicide ideation or major depressive symptoms incur during the survey, video, or response. The responses ranged from 14 to 382 words long.

The researchers purposefully curated an ambiguous prompt in order to encourage free, open, friendly, and positive creative expression. The researchers were also conscious that a free-writing response could place undue burden on the participant, and thus did not require of the user a character, word, or time minimum/limit as part of the response. These responses were intended to draw out moments of free-associative self-reflection that would not only focus on analyzing and deconstructing the poem they viewed, but also relate that poetry back to their own experience while finding commonalities between the two.

To track participants who repeatedly used the website, the researchers required that all users register with the site and create a username and password. This way, not only could the
researchers measure progress before and after watching a video, but could also measure positive emotional growth over time. The researchers recognize the plethora of confounding variables that would come into play when attempting to compare tests, and while inter-test results were noted, they were not taken into serious analytical account regarding the overall success of the project.

Procedure

Upon entering the website, participants saw the project’s homepage, as seen in Appendix A. The purpose of the homepage was to introduce the study and explain the reasoning behind the creation of the website. An “About” page could also be found here, which explicitly outlined the purpose of the project and what the researchers hoped to achieve. A passage from this page said that the website was “asking people to watch examples of slam poetry and describe how it makes them feel. We believe that doing this will help people become better.” It then goes on to describe some of the studies that have already been conducted with expressive writing, online mediums that aim to study and alleviate symptoms of depression, and slam poetry.

After proceeding to the next page, participants were led to instructions which described how the website was set up and what the user could expect. The first instruction explained how to register for the website. Registering only required a username and password, thereby insuring the user’s anonymity. The next few steps outlined instructions for the initial survey, watching the embedded videos, the second survey, the writing prompt, and the third survey (respectively). The final instruction informed the user to forward any comments, questions, or concerns to the group’s Gmail account. After hitting the “start” button, a small window opened where the user could make an account. A disclaimer was located below the “start” button detailing what to do in case any of the surveys, videos, or expressive writing prompts triggered depressive symptoms
with links the resource page. In the “Resources” page the users could find links to APA’s Therapist Locator, the National Suicide Prevention Website, as well as the phone number to the Suicide Prevention Hotline. Below the links were numerous scientific articles discussing depression, the effects of expressive writing, and other related topics.

After making an account, the user was taken to the first survey, a 10-item mood adjective checklist, where the user could choose any emotions that applied to them. The words were randomly selected an equal amount of “positive” and “negative” words. The surveys were all the same format but new words were used in each survey. Examples of the words used were: “strong,” “chained,” “awful,” “healthy,” “wilted,” “content,” and “connected.” (Again, a full list of words used in the researcher’s mood surveys can be found in Appendix B.) After selecting a number of emotion words that described how the user felt, the user hit the “submit” button at the bottom of the page and was transferred to the next page where the videos were located. The user had the choice to watch the selected video or click continue to select a new video. The videos, featuring slam poets performing pieces relating to mental illness and, specifically, depression, were chosen by the researcher’s and uploaded directly to the website from Youtube. The website did not have a limit on how many videos could be watched. When the user clicked “Continue,” he/she was directed to another mood survey. After the user responded to the second survey, he/she moved to the Free Write page. This page prompted the user to write about any subject, and it encouraged the user to reflect on his/her experiences with depression as well as reminding him/her that he/she would remain anonymous as long as he/she did not put any identifying information in the context of the free response. There was another disclaimer that directed the user to the resource page should the user see fit. The user could continue on from the free write section without writing anything if the user felt uncomfortable or vulnerable revealing personal
experiences for the researchers to read and analyze. After submitting a free response, participants were again asked to take a third and final 10-item mood adjective survey. After hitting “Submit” on the third survey, the user was brought a final page that thanked the users for his/her participation and invited the user to come back or email the researchers with any feedback or comments.

**Results**

**Mood Measures**

In order to gauge mood throughout the survey, three separate surveys made up of five positive emotion words (PEW) and five negative emotion words (NEW) each were used throughout the testing procedure. The full list of 30 words (15 positive emotion words and 15 negative emotion words) can be found in Appendix B. To analyze the change in positive and negative affect across the three surveys, the researchers counted the frequencies with which each of the words were clicked by the participants as they proceeded through the website. The full results are displayed in Figure 1, below.

The results indicate that, in total, participants used 26 PEW and 25 NEW in Survey 1, 36 PEW and 10 NEW in Survey 2, and 34 PEW and 17 NEW in Survey 3. Overall, the trend suggests that, while PEWs and NEWs were used almost equally in Survey 1, NEWs dramatically decrease immediately after watching the video when Survey 2 takes place. Furthermore, the number of PEWs used remains high in Survey 3 after participants wrote their free responses, though NEWs seem to increase as well. These data support the researcher’s hypothesis that participating in an online slam poetry experience would simultaneously boost one’s positive affect and reduce negative affect.

Figure 1 - Total Positive Emotion Words (PEW) and Negative Emotion Words (NEW) selected in each survey (next page)
Free Write Responses

The responses were analyzed using LIWC (Language Inquiry and Word Count), a program developed by socio-linguist James Pennebaker, a text-analysis dictionary that uses “dictionaries” of words to report linguistic content. The researchers used 30 of LIWC’s dictionary categories to analyze the free write responses, including those dictionary terms for first-person singular and plural pronouns, positive emotion words, negative emotion words, social words (family, friends), cognitive processes (insight, cause, tentativeness, certainty), biological processes (health/illness), core drives and needs (affiliation, achievement, power, reward focus, risk/prevention focus), time orientation (past, present, future), and personal concerns (work, leisure, home, money, religion, and death).

Participant responses included a wide range of unprompted genres, such as reflections on life, work, and depression, like or dislike of the poem, poem analysis, and reflections on how the content of the poem as it related to the life of the user. The participants provided a total of 1,745
words from all free responses. The free responses averaged 145.4 words and ranged from 14-382 words. To examine the content of the responses, the researchers examined 25 categories of words used. As seen in Figure 2, on average of all words used, 6.7% were first person singular pronouns, 1.62% were first plural pronouns, 6.49% were positive emotion words, 3.85% were negative emotion words, 10.96% were social words (.15% family, 1.02% friends), 14.69% were cognitive processes (2.68% insight, 1.68% cause, 4.57% tentativeness, 2.9 % certainty), 2.21% were biological processes (.98% health/illness), 8.78% were core drives and needs (4.05% affiliation, 1.66% achievement, 1.61% power, 2.1% reward focus, .19% risk/prevention focus), 3.82% were past oriented, 12.93% were present oriented, 2.48% were future oriented, 1.73% were work related, 1.06% were leisure related, .22% were home related, .33% were money related, none were religion related, and .1% were death related.

In short, the most common types of words used in free responses were first-person singular pronouns, positive emotion words, tentative words, and words indicating core drives, with users most commonly using social, focus, and cognitive words.

Figure 2 - Average percentage of word categories used by participants in the free-write section (next page).
Discussion

This study set out to explore the effect that engaging with slam poetry has on mood and symptoms of depression. Because expressive writing has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression over time (Grotner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006), a free-writing exercise was included in this study. Survey responses were also included as a mood indicator, with participants choosing their current mood from a list of positive and negative mood adjectives. The results of these measures indicate a general uplift in mood after participants watched the slam poetry videos, supporting the original hypothesis. In addition, the results showed that participants tended to most commonly use cognitive words (e.g., cause, know, ought), present focus words (e.g., today, is, now), social words (e.g., mate, talk, they), and core drive words (e.g., words that indicate drives in achievement, affiliation, power, reward, and risk).

At least two trends in the data are important to interpret. First, the fact that participants tended to increasingly select positive emotion words while simultaneously decreasing their
selection of negative emotion words probably indicates a general “upliftedness” experienced by participants. This feeling possibly stems from the relatability of the slam poetry videos and the connectedness a person may feel when listening to someone else describe an emotional experience similar to their own. It is important to note that participants continued to choose negative words throughout the study, indicating lasting negative feelings. This may be due to the “bittersweet” quality of being engaged on an emotional level concerning a person’s experience with depression. While there is much meaning to be found in connecting with another’s pain, this experience can also be saddening in itself, which may explain the general trend in the data toward positivity, but also the continued negative feelings experienced throughout the tests.

Second, the types of words that participants tended to use most frequently seem to reflect thoughtful contemplation on the subject of depression (from the frequent use of cognitive words), along with a positive and driven language (from the frequent use of present focus, social, and core drive words). The overwhelming use of cognitive words may indicate a sign of increased engagement with the subject of depression, which is one of the founding tenants of the Bluebird Poetry Project. The healing power of poetry comes not in ignoring or curing depression, but in confronting depression in meaningful analysis and conversation, learning to reappropriate depressive symptoms for insight into a powerful positive emotional and creative experience. That users spoke mainly in present tense and showed driven, socially-oriented language seems to support the researcher’s hypothesis that poetry can be used to create conversation and inspiration in a rather hopeless experience with depression. Focus on the present, rather than past tense, is a key linguistic indicator that supports positive emotional thinking, rather than excessive rumination on past. While symptoms of depression include loss of interest in previously beloved activities and social isolation, the use of social words and core drive words indicate that, by
watching slam poetry, site users undertook the very emotions/activities that depression normally undermines.

Overall, the findings of this study corroborate evidence that engaging in performance-based arts has a beneficial impact on mood. In a study by Staricoff, Duncan, Wright, Loppert, and Scott (2002), patients at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital found that their mood elevated after watching performing arts, along with other benefits. Although slam poetry was not one of the artistic mediums measured in this study, it is likely that a shared construct between the performing arts has an impact on mood, which was found in both studies.

While more research is required to broaden the scope of this project and similar efforts to determine if online interventions involving slam poetry are effective for treating depression on a global scale, it is important to note the overall effectiveness indicated in this study’s results and the global reach of the project overall. Users viewed the website from countries all over the world, including the United States, Japan, Brunei, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, India, Ireland, Malaysia, Russia, and The United Kingdom. Given more time to collect data, the researchers expect the country of origin breakdown of the participant demographics to grow further still. This diversity in participant origins supports the hypothesis that an online approach to treating depression could be accessible and effective on a global scale. With depression being such a serious global health issue and global treatment options being so scarce, further online depression interventions should be explored.
Appendix A

**Slam Poetry and Depression**

**Home**

Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, according to the World Health Organization.

Even though many effective treatments for depression exist, less than 50% of people suffering from depression receive treatment. Traditional treatment for depression is often expensive or inaccessible in rural areas.

**SO, WHAT DO WE DO?**

The creators of the Bluebird Poetry Project believe that watching slam poetry performed and writing about depression—in a safe, healthy space—can heal and provide a path to meaningfulness inside another otherwise hopeless experience.

Slam poetry is a genre of poetry that is performed, openly engaging the viewer in an intense emotional level and providing emotional catharsis and an outlet that helps to resolve internal emotional conflict. On this website, you’ll be able to watch poetry, write expressively about poetry, and engage in a community of poets—both amateur and professional—who need an emotional outlet, just as much as you do. It’s easily accessible, assures anonymity, and it’s absolutely free.

We highly encourage you to come back as the need arises as new videos will become available over time. Your responses will help us learn more about the benefits of slam poetry on depression.

Create an account and select Go to begin.

***By participating in the Bluebird Poetry Project, you will be submitting short survey data and brief writing responses to the researchers of the project in order to determine its effectiveness in treating symptoms of depression. ALL RESPONSES/SURVEYS WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS, EVEN TO THE RESEARCHERS. Your anonymity and safety are our number one priority.***

**About The Project**

The creators of the Bluebird Poetry Project are undergraduates at the University of Montana. This research is conducted as part of the Global Leadership Initiative.

The creators for this study conducted a feasibility study with mental health clinicians, slam poets, and potential site users to gather evidence for the effectiveness of an online intervention involving slam poetry. Overwhelming support for the feasibility of this project has led the researchers to phase two: website development. The third and final phase of the project will be using text analysis of user comments on the site to determine evidence of community building and impacts on mood.

On this website, we’re asking people to watch examples of slam poetry and describe how it makes them feel. We believe that doing this will help people become better.

Numerous studies provide support for the effectiveness of expressive writing, online mental health interventions, and slam poetry in particular for reducing symptoms of depression. Performing poetry has been shown to be an effective way of resolving internal-emotional conflict (Madalena, 2009). In addition, short, daily periods of expressive writing have been shown to have lasting and positive psychological ramifications, which is why the creators of the project have included brief prompts for reflection after each video (Brömer et al., 2006). Writing about emotional events—for example, depression directly linked to traumatic events—has been shown to lead to significant decreases in depression immediately after the period of expressive writing, and even up to four weeks after (Kripp et al., 2013). Expressive writing can also decrease brooding, suicidal ideation, and “undo” obsessive in just a few sessions of expressive writing (Sisian et al., 2008).

The project has incredible potential to achieve a global scope, an ability to reach users in both rural and urban areas, as well as allow users relative anonymity when seeking treatment for depression—which can open the user up to consider traditional methods of therapy in conjunction with online-based art therapy. The therapeutic qualities of performative art, and finding others who can articulate similar experiences with depression through the catharsis of poetry, all have deep emotional relevance; this conglomerate of mediums, we believe, will be the most efficient, effective, and far-reaching vehicle for delivering relief from the heavy burden of depression.

For questions, comments, and other words, you can contact the creators at bluebirdpoetryproject@gmail.com

**References**


Slam Poetry and Depression

Resources

Links
- ANY’s Therapist Locator
- National Suicide Prevention Website
- Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK

Scientific Articles


Instructions:

1. “Register” in the top right-hand corner of the website. It only takes a few seconds, and we won’t ask for ANY personal information. Pick a username that will protect your identity. When you submit your responses, the researchers will only see your username, not your real name.
2. Browse through the selection of videos of the greatest slam poets of our time. Click through until you find something that interests you, or something completely new!
3. Before watching the video, a survey will pop up asking questions about how you’re feeling right now. Answer them honestly and to the best of your ability. Don’t worry, you can close out at any time.
4. Watch the video. Sit back, enjoy, and think about how the poem’s thoughts and metaphors relate to your own experience.
5. Complete another short survey about your feelings after watching the video.
6. You’ll be prompted to write about the video! Take a look at the questions, or ignore them if you want! Write for 1 minute, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, or however long it takes to get your feels out. This is an opportunity for you to get it all out there—lay it on the table. You don’t have to analyze the poem, write a dissertation, meet a word count, or worry about sounding dumb. This is for you. Just say what’s on your mind, for as long as you want to.
7. Click “Submit.”
8. Take one last survey about how you’re feeling.
9. You’re done! Come back as many times as you want. If you have questions, comments, or other words, you can email us at bluebirdpoetryproject@gmail.com.

Start

*If the surveys, videos, or expressive writing prompts trigger symptoms of depression or make you uncomfortable, please remember that you can stop at any time and go to our Resources for Depression immediately.*
Slam Poetry and Depression

How are you feeling? (Check all that apply)

- Energetic
- Burdened
- Free
- Hopeful
- Depressed
- Lonely
- Distressed
- Good
- Peaceful
- Melancholy

Submit

Andrea Gibson: “the madness vase”
Slam Poetry and Depression

How are you feeling? (Check all that apply)

- Satisfied
- Lost
- Hopeless
- Determined
- Optimistic
- Broken
- Bold
- Dispirited
- Criticized
- Empowered

Submit

Free Write

Now’s your chance to respond to the poem! Reflect on your own experience with depression. Write however long you want, whether you write one sentence or five paragraphs—for one minute or for thirty. Write about whatever you want. This is for you and only you. As long as you don’t put your name or other identifying information in your response, all responses will remain 100% anonymous.
Thank you!

Thank you for participating in The Bluebird Poetry Project, please come back and go through the survey whenever you want to. If you have any feedback or comments email us at bluebirdpoetryproject@gmail.com.

We highly encourage you to come back as the need arises and as new videos will become available over time. Your responses will help us learn more about the benefits of slam poetry on depression.

Also check out our Resources page.
Appendix B

Positive words: Energetic free, good, empowered, peaceful, strong, great, optimistic, hopeful, bold, determined, satisfied, content, healthy, connected,

Negative words: Distressed, lonely, lost, broken, burdened, apathetic, chained, awful, hopeless, wilted, criticized, melancholy, depressed, dispirited, tortured

Appendix C

The following was used as an advertisement on Facebook and on posters around the University of Montana campus.
References


