

Expressive writing groups: A powerful modality to promote health and wellness in older adults

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They can be like a sun

They can be like a sun, words.
They can do for the heart
what light can
for a field.

By St. John of the Cross
Love Poems from God (2002)

The above poem is an inspirational reading I use in the first session of expressive and autobiographical writing groups to set the tone for the insightful writings participants are about to create. The genre of autobiographical writing is often credited to St. Augustine, the fourth century theologian, who wrote about his growth in Christian spirituality. The tradition of writing one's story through journals and diaries has been found in both Eastern and Western traditions throughout the ages. In recent years journal writing has gained popularity in American culture and has been connected with enhancing spiritual awareness and overall creativity (Cameron, 1992).

Findings from a qualitative study of older adults who regularly keep journals (Brady & Sky, 2003) reflect the anecdotal results obtained in intergenerational writing programs I conduct. Regular journal writers identified benefits such as the following: enhancing day to day problem solving skills, sorting out relationships with others, aiding memory of events, enabling personal discoveries, contemplating the meaning of one's life, and developing a new level of consciousness or spirituality.

Pennebaker and Beall (1986) published the first randomized control trial showing the health benefits of writing about traumatic events compared to superficial topics. Since that first publication, over 200 studies on expressive writing have surfaced, with a large number showing positive effects on health. In a recent review Stuckey and Nobel (2010) highlighted research that demonstrated expressive writing's positive impact on health measured by frequency of physician visits, stress hormones, immune function, blood pressure, pain severity, working memory capacity and depressed mood.

Studies of expressive writing that have focused specifically on caregivers have had mixed results. For example, in one randomized control trial caregivers of older adults found time management was associated with greater health benefits than expressive writing. However, in a follow up study, researchers found that for positive health effects to occur writing about caregiving needed to be filled with honesty, describing the complexity of the situation but maintaining a sense of optimism and hopefulness (Mackenzie, Wiprzycka, Hasher, and Goldstein, 2008).

My inspiration for conducting writing workshops resulted from a personal experience. A few months following the death of my father, I participated in a creative writing workshop sponsored from a grant I directed at a retirement community. By attending the writing series conducted by a poet from Kent State University, I learned first hand the power of expressive writing to soothe emotional pain. The instructor gave gentle writing prompts and even gentler critiques of our writing effort. It became clear to me that writing workshops had the potential for intense therapeutic impact.

This paper describes two types of writing workshops I have led, examples of non-traditional services that therapists who enjoy writing can offer to clients and caregivers in out-patient clinical settings, retirement communities, churches, hospitals or senior centers. A comprehensive tutorial I used in designing the programs is Gillie Bolton's book, *The therapeutic potential of creative writing* (1999).

Written Reflections for Health and Healing

One intergenerational workshop, "Written Reflections for Health and Healing," consisted of eight sessions, each lasting two hours. Group size varied from 7 to 12, and participants ranged in age from the early 30s to mid 80s. In order to promote a sense of calm and focus prior to writing, I began each session with a brief meditation or yoga breathing exercise followed by reading of poetry from sages of varying faith traditions. *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and the West* (Ladinsky, 2002) is an excellent source of inspirational work. Writing prompts included broad, emotionally evocative themes such as death, birth, anger, forgiveness, resilience, health, guilt, and handling adversity. I introduced two themes each week. In the first session when given the choice of writing about either birth or death, all participants chose to write about their experiences with death and dying.

The actual writing on the themes lasted 30 to 35 minutes and was done within the confines of the workshop. Although this was optional, many of the participants chose to edit their writings outside of the workshop. The expectation was that each writer will read aloud part of or the entirety of his/her work to the group, followed by a time for brief reactions or questions from other participants. Because significant emotional reactions occurred during this part of the workshop particularly with male participants or those who have admitted difficulty expressing emotion, I recommend that therapists who lead such programs have prior group therapy training and experience.

The act of writing long-hand without a word processor, the sharing openly of one's writings with others, and listening carefully to others' words are ingredients that produced profound personal insights, strengthened connections with the group, and ultimately led to healing from past hurts or reduce guilt for past perceived wrongs committed. One 86 year old woman wrote, "I secretly wished my husband would die because he took my freedom away from me for years. When he talked to a visitor once, he said I was an angel for taking care of him. He never told me that." Following writing of this piece, the woman reported she felt her depression had lifted despite months of previous therapy during which she had not mentioned her thoughts about the death of her husband or the guilt she harbored.

Participants could select the manner in which they wanted to express themselves and explore the themes, choosing any writing genre with no minimums or restrictions on the length of the pieces. The participants' work ranged from traditional poems, prose poetry, creative nonfiction, stream-of-consciousness writing and traditional journal entries.

In order to lessen any anxiety in the participants who had minimal writing experience, I introduced the concept of "thematic journaling," a phrase coined by one of the group members. In this style of self-expression, I encouraged each participant to simply write without fear of criticism and without worry over grammar, sentence structure, or spelling. However, if I thought that the ideas of the piece might be reworked more succinctly through poetic expression, I encouraged the writer to try re-writing the piece as a poem after the class. Some writers doubted they could do so but ended up surprising themselves with more compelling word crafting.

Guided Autobiography: Writing One's Life Story

Another type of therapeutic writing workshop, Guided Autobiography, consisted of 12 sessions with approximately eight regular participants. In this workshop there was a much greater flow of participants coming and going than in the first workshop. For example, two individuals participated only on occasion because of health problems, work conflicts, or caregiver responsibilities. Participants ranged in age from the early 30s to early 90s. One man who lived in a nursing home attended three of the sessions. Because of his stroke, his caregiver transcribed his dictated submissions.

I used the book, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*, (Birren and Cochran, 2001) to generate writing themes based upon sensitizing questions throughout the series. We covered nine themes described in the book: major branching points, family, money, major life work or career, health and stress, sexual identity, death, spirituality, and future goals and aspirations.

Some of the topics lent themselves to further exploration than could be covered in one week; therefore I extended the workshop series to 12 sessions, covering the topics of death, health, and spirituality over a two week period.

One major difference from the first workshop was that the participants wrote their autobiographical pieces at home, following the suggested guidelines from Birren and Cochran. Participants were expected to complete at least two pages on the identified themes to bring with them to each session. The writers read at least two pages aloud during each session and reactions and discussion followed. The younger participants said they were amazed to learn about aspects of life before their birth such as the impact of polio on family members and the effect of the 1970 Kent State shootings on the community. Similarly, the older writers reported that they found discussions about sexuality, including homosexuality, to be refreshingly honest and enlightening.

In the guided autobiography groups we began sessions with a brief, quiet meditative exercise. The major group discussion centered on the theme introduced during the previous session. As with the first workshop, the act of sharing and reflecting on one's own writing played a central role in achieving greater depth of understanding of our life experiences.

Role of the group leader

What turned out to be an unexpectedly powerful aspect of both workshops (based on feedback from the participants) was a controversial choice I made to take on two roles in each workshop, that of writer-participant in addition to facilitator. Acutely aware of therapist-client boundary issues, I decided to carefully write in a self-disclosing although careful way, rather than take on the more typical, hierarchical teacher-therapist role. I believe that by modeling how to disclose insights about my life, I fostered significantly deeper levels of writing, insight, and sharing in my fellow writers. Topics I chose to write and share included the roadblocks I overcame in becoming a psychologist, my mother's views of money, the resilience modeled by my coal miner father, and musings about God and spirituality.

Participant Bonding

There was considerable overlap of attendees for both workshops, lending itself to the creation of strong connections and bonds among several of the participants. The last session brought both tears and celebration, ending with a splendid potluck luncheon.

One participant wrote: "I felt the power of positive group dynamics as we shared the depth of our feelings through our writing assignments. Our varying backgrounds, life experiences and various physical imitations added richness and aided our understanding and our depth of caring for each other. ...I look at the totality of these experiences, I realize the impact they have had on my

emotional growth. I am indebted to each of you who have provided support, wisdom, and encouragement as I began to open areas of my life that had been sealed for many years...Dr. Paula, your sense of knowing each of us was so apparent when we needed a push to do what we needed to do or when we needed compassion to deal with a difficult time.”

Nuts and bolts of payment

The two types of workshops described in this paper are outside the traditional realm of psychotherapy. Therefore, participants paid privately for the writing workshop sessions. I charged them a modest sum similar to co-payments for group therapy.

Clearly, the therapeutic nature of the writing programs suggests that adding an element of expressive or creative writing to group therapy is appropriate. I routinely ask my clients to write as part of their therapeutic homework. My anecdotal observation of the process of the writing groups suggests that the level of self disclosure is deeper, more cognitively complex, and more forward thinking than the written homework I usually receive from patients in individual or group psychotherapy. One writing group participant who also attends my monthly psychotherapy group for older adults remarked, “The expressive writing workshop is like attending graduate school compared to the “high school” experience of the traditional psychotherapy group.

I lead expressive writing programs regularly for my clients, the general public, and professional audiences. It is the most gratifying aspect of my professional work life.

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