Introduction to Therapeutic Writing & the Journal

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“A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as (s)he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things (s)he would not have thought of had (s)he not started to say them.”
(William Stafford)

Therapeutic Writing in The Health Professions-

Therapeutic writing is the use of various forms of writing (i.e. journals, poetry, prose) for therapeutic benefits. The therapeutic process takes place within the client’s interface with the journal, the therapist, and the self.

Key questions for health practitioners to ask prior to use of therapeutic writing in practice: (Adapted from Haertl, 2008)

1. What is my knowledge regarding the use of journal/ therapeutic writing as a tool in therapy?
2. What are my training needs?
3. What form of journal or therapeutic writing will be used and how often (e.g.: computer based/Internet, hard bound, homework based, structured assignments, etc.)
4. Who will the journal/ therapeutic writing be shared with?
5. What level of confidentiality will be maintained?
6. Will the therapeutic writing be done autonomously or in conjunction with a group?
7. Do the client’s strengths, needs, and interests lend themselves to the use of the journal? (Consider the client’s writing skills, motivation, interests, and capacity for insight)
8. Is the client interested in the use of therapeutic writing, and is follow through likely?
9. What is the underlying theoretical background that will be used?
10. Is it expected that this skill will carry beyond the health care setting and into the client’s daily life?

Examples of Theoretical Backgrounds for Therapeutic Writing-

Psychodynamic-

- Focus is on the psychological constructs that affect human behavior
- The use of projective and expressive techniques are designed to elicit both conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions leading to personal insight
- The therapist/practitioner works with the client in a collaborative relationship in order to understand the meaning and application of the personal writing
- Writing techniques often involve use of (a) stream of consciousness, (b) free write, (c) flow writing, (d) expressive writing, and (e) dream analysis.

Cognitive Behavioral Techniques-

- Focus relies on the premise that thinking influences behavior
- The use of structured writing assignments is applied for the purposes of self reflection, personal insight, and goal attainment
- Homework is often used in both cognitive behavioral and DBT therapy
- Writing techniques often involve the use of (a) lists, (b) clustering, (c) structured dialogue, (d) unsent letters (also used in psychodynamic applications) and (e) reflective questions
Journal- comes from the French word “jour” meaning day and is often used to depict a form of daily writing and reflection. (Bender, 2000)

Diary- “daily record of events and observations” (dictionary.com)

- Some writers use the terms journal and diary interchangeably while others focus on the diary as a report, often of facts related to external events, and a journal as encompassing the thoughts and feelings from within. (Baldwin, 1991).
- Journal writing goes back many centuries- in modern day, Ira Progoff has perhaps been the most recognized writer and user of journals and developed the Intensive Journal Writing Workshop (Progoff 1975; 1992)
- The therapeutic use of journal writing in health care has largely been focused and studied within the field of psychology.
- Within academic settings, reflective journaling is perhaps most known in the field of education, however increasingly health care professions are utilizing journal writing as a tool to develop critical thinking skills and develop reflective practice.

Trauma Narrative- “The goal is to unpair thoughts, reminder or discussions of the traumatic event from overwhelming negative emotions such as terror, horror, extreme helplessness, shame or rage” (Cohen, Mannarino, Deblinger, 2006, p.119).
- Also known as generalized exposure
- Writers of the narrative need to have coping skills, and have insight into own cognition before narrative writing will be successful (Gidron, Peri, Connolly, & Shalev, 1996).
- The writing of the details alone is not sufficient. A person must incorporate the thoughts and feelings experienced during the traumatic event into the narrative, for the narrative to be most effective (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996).

Narrative Therapy- Encourages clients to re-author the stories of their life.
- Externalizing
- Re-authoring
- Re-membering
- Definitional Ceremonies
- Scaffolding (White, 2007)

Spirituality-
- Writing is often used in personal and therapeutic applications as a means to explore spirituality
- Writing may be used in conjunction with spirituality in matters of grief, loss, bereavement, and healing
- Spiritual applications of writing often focus on the spiritual, the meaningful, and matters of the heart and soul

Ethical Considerations-
- Utility, feasibility, and efficacy of using therapeutic writing as related to client, therapist, and environmental factors
- Importance of establishing trust
- Group vs. individual use and questions of confidentiality
- Within a group, the provision for conflict management and the establishment of ground rules
- Consideration of boundaries
- Personal vs. public sharing of the writing
Research- (Examples)

- Much of the research on therapeutic writing is within the field of psychology
- Pennebaker’s studies demonstrated reduced stress and statistically significant improvement on physiological measures in students that wrote about traumatic events as compared to those who didn’t. (Summary of Pennebaker’s multiple works in L’Abate, 1991)
- Expressive writing may lead to psychological health and well being. (Smyth, 1998) A study completed in 2004 (Frisna, Borod and Lepore) showed greater benefits for those with a physical illness when compared to those with psychological illness.
- Journal writing may lead to improved personal coping skills (Brady & Sky, 2003)
- Studies on therapeutic writing suggest benefits including (a) greater client control within the relationship, (b) provision for emotional expression and (c) increased participation in the healing process. (Wright, 2002)
- Improvements in marital satisfaction for post-deployment veterans who had participated in expressive writing (Baddeley & Pennebaker, 2011).
- Participants in research studies experience less benefit if they are directed to focus only on the positive or negative emotions (Pennebaker & Chang, 2011).

Reflective Journaling in Academia

Potential Utility (Hiemstra, 2001)

- Development of reflection and critical thinking
- Personal growth and development
- Opportunities for problem solving
- Stress reduction and health benefits
- Opportunity for use of intuition and self expression

Major Considerations

- Types of journals to be used (i.e. loose leaf, internet, open space software, homework)
- Structured vs. Non-structured ** Most of the research suggests that for the development of critical thinking there should be some structure in conjunction with regular feedback
- Consideration of matching the purpose with the type of journal, its implementation, the student, and the environment
- The motivation of the student, the skill of the teacher, and the relationship between the student, peers, and teacher
- Clear expectations for journal writing, feedback, and assessment should be outlined in advance
- It is important to consider the entire curriculum so that a student isn’t burdened with multiple journals, blogs, or online expectations

Questions to Consider

- What is the knowledge of the instructor related to the use of journal writing?
- What incentives are there for the students to journal?
- Will there be an assessment process, if so what will it entail?
- Is the primary purpose for student personal growth, academic growth, or both?
- How will confidentiality be maintained?

Ethical Considerations

- One must be cautious regarding the use of assessment within the journal- if assessment is used the expectations must be clear, and assessment criteria equal for all
- The use of assessment may discourage some type of open dialogue within the journal
- Considerations should be given as to whether the entire journal is accessible to the instructor and peers, or whether there are reflection exercises that portray what is learned within the journal
- Confidentiality is key to open expression of thought
Those who read the journals should be trained in how to respond—feedback should be non-judgmental, but pose challenging questions and topics for dialogue if reflection is the main goal. If journal writing is used in an academic setting, there should be a consideration of boundaries and how personal sharing will be addressed should a need arise (i.e. if a student clearly identifies a personal need for counseling, etc.)

Means of Response (Fenwick, 2001)
- Writers may respond in roles as a comforter, mirror, provoker, director, friend, evaluator, or biographer—the roles should be understood in reference to the setting.
- Responses may serve to (a) affirm and motivate the journal writing, (b) assist the writer to see additional areas for potential exploration, and (c) be used to enter dialogue such as through probing, extending, and connective activities.
- Responses should be caring, respectful, and must involve trust between the reader and writer.
- The respondent must have some intuition as to the nature and context in which the journal entry was written.

General Suggestions Related to Literature
- Factors influencing an individual’s willingness to reflect: (a) individual developmental level, (b) perception of trustworthiness of the reader, (c) clarity of expectation, and (d) quality of feedback (Patterson as cited by Bain et al., 1995).
- Linking academic knowledge to practical experience is critical in reflective practice.
- Regular instructor feedback / peer-student feedback is critical in the learning process.
References/ Bibliography


**Journal/ Writing Resources**

**Articles**

*Note, individual chapters from the book *New directions for adult and continuing education* are cited here as they are available on EBSCO article databases.

**Academia**


**Clinical and Therapeutic Use**


**General and Personal Use**


