

BOOK REVIEW

Thompson, K. (2011). *Therapeutic Journal Writing; An Introduction for Professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 978-1-84310-690-6

Margot Lindsay RGN BA MPhil MCLIP PhD

Correspondence address

Dr. Margot Lindsay, Research Department of Mental Health Sciences, Charles Bell House, 1st Floor, 67-73 Riding House Street, London, W1W 7EJ. E-mail: rejumev@ucl.ac.uk

Accepted for publication: 24 October 2013

Introduction

The practice of therapeutic journal writing is a very practical tool for: health professionals, teachers, lecturers, social workers and writing tutors. It is also recommended for counsellors and life coaches. Therapeutic journal writing may well be seen as part of Occupational Therapy, rather than as a separate discipline.

Therapeutic journal writing may include any personal writing which brings another insight or perspective on our lives. This writing implies the conscious intent and deliberate attempt to write in ways which will produce change, healing and growth. The technique takes particular writing techniques and uses them to support the tasks of supportive therapy. It is a reflective (thinking about, pondering, exploring) and a reflexive/integrating and using the awareness gained from reflecting) practice which can help to develop greater understanding of self and the world and self-in-the world offering a way of looking at the self, relationships and context in writing.

Journal writing can offer an additional way of looking at the self and finding another way through the difficulties of the lives and their existential concerns of the patient. Ultimately, the most important relationship with the self and journal writing can develop the intimacy with the self which allows other relationships to flourish. The author uses the words 'diary' and 'journal' interchangeably. She explains that people constantly attempt to debate the differences and similarities between the two and that they try to lay claim to the merit or distinction of one over the other. Some people believe that a diary is a daily record, whereas a journal is a freer record of thoughts and feelings.

The author distinguishes between 'product' and 'process' writing. Product writing is intended to produce a finished item, perhaps a poem, story or memoir. Process writing, on the other hand, is about the act of writing and recording itself. Therapeutic journal writing in this context is definitely process writing. This means that the outcome will not be measured by anyone other than the writer. For some people their journal entries will of course be the first step towards a product, such as a poem or story or article

which in turn may or may not be published or shared. The idea of a journal being a 'first step' towards a product was used by some of the individuals mentioned in this book. Some people become published writers through the practice of journal writing. One of the benefits of journal writing can be the discovery of a creative voice. The author claims that most people who practise the process of therapeutic journal writing can achieve greater understanding, change their behaviour or promote enhanced wellbeing through the writing experience itself.

Practice contexts for journal writing

The use of the word "therapeutic" refers to the potential benefits of practice contexts for therapeutic journal writing for the author, not necessarily the environment. In education settings there is already an expectation that work, particularly written work, will be scrutinized, judged and marked. It is important in this context that it is not seen in the same way as assignments or projects. In educational settings, students who keep a learning journal in which to record their experience can write dialogues with their work, their colleagues, their lecturers, or they can write unsent letters to investigate relationships or clarify misunderstandings. They can write songs or poems about their experiences or mind maps / diagrams to plan their work and set their intentions.

The introduction of writing in health and social care may well be met with surprise or resistance, from the organization, if not from the patient. It is not yet widely known to be taken seriously in the same way as other treatment interventions are. Therapeutic journal writing and other forms of expressive writing may, therefore, well be seen as part of occupational therapy, rather than as a separate discipline.

In creative and cultural settings there may be expectations or preparing a written product for publication, rather than a desire to focus on the process of writing. People come because: (1) they are curious to find out what

it is; (2) don't know what to expect, but will give it a try; (3) know what they want and have a good idea that they'll find it here; (4) want to deepen their understanding and practice, keep journals and want to discover new techniques and (5) want to work on specific aspects of the self.

Thesis of the book

The author has identified evidence which suggests that a positive outcome in the use of journal writing as a therapeutic tool is more likely to become therapeutic. If people are already familiar with the concept and experience of keeping a diary or journal, particularly if it was a useful or positive experience, then they will take more easily to the idea of using journal writing for therapeutic purposes. People who are motivated to change are likely to be more open to trying new and different ideas. They are willing to try something to see if it 'works'. If individuals are committed to themselves and to the process of therapy; then they will help patients begin to commit to the ongoing process of keeping a therapeutic journal. People who have had a positive relationship with writing, often from their early educational settings, or from their professional lives, will be predisposed to undertake therapeutic tasks which involve writing. A strong relationship with the health professional or teacher will predispose individuals to look favourably on their suggestions. Research has shown that *relationship* is the key factor in therapeutic change.

We are provided with several very persuasive reasons for keeping a therapeutic journal. A journal is available at any time; it does not rely on the availability of other people or their willingness to listen. Stories can be told and re-told in a journal. Repetition can be a valuable part of any healing process, but human listeners may get bored before the speaker does or before a point of change is reached. A journal provides a map of the journey towards growth, healing and change. Re-reading it gives a record of how and when change happens, a reminder that things do change and that change can happen gradually and almost imperceptibility and perhaps change can only be seen in retrospect. Individuals can create their own therapeutic map. A journal helps find a voice and to give voice to the previously unknown, unspeakable or unacknowledged. An authentic voice can first emerge in the journal. A journal helps develop intimacy with the self. It allows different parts of the self to emerge and step forward from the unconscious (the familiar cry "Where did that come from"? testifies to the power of this process). The person can get to know him or herself deeply. A journal is a powerful organizational resource. It is a means of helping individuals to stay in control of life and develop coping strategies. It is invaluable as a time management tool for personal and professional activity. The person can become better organised and able to cope.

A journal can become a rehearsal platform for events, conversations, other writing and indeed life itself and this helps to ameliorate anticipatory anxiety. It can be a tool

used to practise for difficult or stressful experiences. A journal can contain uncomfortable states, such as ambiguity or indecision and, make them more bearable. In this way people can begin to mature. The individual can put all the unbearable bits of him or herself in their journal to find they are bearable after all! A journal is a way of developing and understanding a coherent narrative. It can repair a fractured life by giving shape to experience. When trauma causes a rupture in the narrative of a life, then keeping a therapeutic journal can restore it. The writer can repair the narrative of their life in their journal. A journal is available at any time; it does not rely on the availability of other people or their willingness to listen. Stories can be told and re-told in a journal. Repetition can be a valuable part of any healing process, but human listeners may get bored before the speaker does or before a point of change is reached.

The benefits of journal writing are considered in different settings. Using the journal, writing in clinical settings, can help people using healthcare services access thoughts, feelings and previously unacknowledged material. For some people, writing something can happen before it can be spoken and it is as if they can write the unspeakable. Shame is a powerful silencer; whatever the underlying issue is, it can be hard to talk about things which induce feelings of shame and the journal writing can be a helpful stage in doing so. A journal provides a map of the journey towards growth, healing and change. Re-reading it gives a record of how and when change happens, a reminder that things do change and that change can happen gradually and almost imperceptibility. A journal helps people find a voice and to give voice to the previously unknown, unspeakable or unacknowledged. Individuals can create their own therapeutic map. An authentic voice can first emerge in the journal. To have your words received by someone else or others is to feel yourself being received and heard in a different way. In the journal groups or in one-to-one therapy, this is an important and powerful therapeutic experience. When your words are received by an accepting and non-judgemental audience, it is a most affirming experience. This kind of witnessing is almost a way of confirming experience.

Kate Thompson, the author, offers many techniques for therapeutic journal writing. Everyone makes lists, even people who say they never write, well, generally they do so. Beginning with lists is a way of engaging reluctant or self-professed non-writers. Making lists is a structured, contained and concrete activity: it can be the first step in writing coherent prose or poetry. Lists can help manage the *chaos of life*; they are a way of organizing and prioritizing information. Making lists can structure or acknowledge achievement. This makes them an ideal introduction to structured therapeutic journal writing. They can be short enough to be manageable for people suffering from debilitating conditions such as depression or for people on the edge of recovery. The first thing on a list of achievements for a seriously depressed person might be 'Get out of bed'. Lists are good for focusing and seeing what the priorities are. Sometimes lists are preludes to more extended exploration. At other times, the list itself is

the therapeutic intervention. List-writing provides a manageable task for most people and can be adapted to individual needs. Small lists are particularly appropriate for those who are less literate, dyslexic or second language speakers. The familiarity of the list form is reassuring, its brevity and conciseness is unthreatening.

Another technique is to use people as steppingstones. Distinct categories of people and relationships can form sets of steppingstones to pull together different threads in our lives. These might include: significant relationships - lovers, friends or colleagues. People in authority and heroes, mentors and influences.

Journal Dialogues

Journal Dialogues are conversations between two or more participants. The participants can be almost anyone or anything; they can be people, feelings or activities. Wherever there is a question or a curiosity or an openness to allowing ourselves to see what we can learn, there can be a journal dialogue. The dialogue begins with a greeting, then a question and continues backwards and forwards between the participants, until they are ready to say 'goodbye'. On the page, a dialogue looks like the script of a film or play, rather than the typical conversation in a novel. Dialogues can include: people, the body, events, society as well as emotions, objects or past and future selves. Writing dialogues can lead to integration and acceptance.

Journal dialogues can help to: make decisions, look at unfinished business, change or modify behaviour, gain clarity and understanding, overcome writing blocks, come to terms with difficult situations and improve relationships and communication. Suitable dialogue partners can be living or dead, people whose existence mattered to the writer. We can also dialogue with fictional characters who embody some part of our experience or feelings. This could include: relatives, ancestors, lovers, friends or colleagues. There may be an unresolved aspect of the relationship or there may be some curiosity or a feeling that something needs to happen or be clarified. Journal dialogues give us an opportunity to have conversations that never happened or have not happened yet.

Unsent Letters

Unsent letters are a familiar form to most people from the early experience of 'thank you letters' expected of children on birthdays and at Christmas. When a form has been familiar from an early age, it can subsequently be easily accessed for journal purposes. Even if computer-generated 'thank you notes' exist, people still understand the 'idea of a letter'. The idea of keeping a journal can be dismissed as 'self-indulgent', but writing a letter is a normal part of social intercourse and communication. Letters are a way of continuing conversations over time and across space. This is just as true with unsent letters as with normal posted letters. Through unsent letters the relationship with the self

can develop and deepen and new conversations can in this way be developed.

The therapeutic benefits of unsent letters in bereavement and grief are recognised. Following the death of her mother, one author wrote her journal entry as if it were a letter to her mother. Whenever she moved to a new place or a new house, her instinct was to write to her parents to tell them about the experience, almost as though she could not really experience it directly until she had filtered it through a letter to someone else. She also wrote regularly to her father after his shockingly early death. This allowed her to continue to have him witness some of the events in her life and for her to recognize how important he had been to her in shaping her thoughts and values. She wanted him to know how it all turned out and how her experience felt more solid as a result of doing this.

Regarding unsent e-mails, it may be advisable to consider the possibilities and pitfalls of unsent e-mails. A useful tip is to write them leaving the address bar blank if it is intended or desirable for them to remain unsent.

Intended recipients can be real or imaginary, known or unknown, living or dead. Some diarists write their diaries as a series of unsent letters, creating an imaginary reader or companion; which is not a modern phenomenon. Indeed, Anne Frank who, in 1942, began to write her diary and said: "I want this diary to be my friend and I shall call my friend Kitty" (Frank 2009, 15). The creation of an imaginary friend is someone with whom to share daily and extraordinary events of life, someone who will witness your life and always be there.

Unsent letters are ideal vehicles for discovering what you really feel, for seeing the emotion of the situation without the usual socially acceptable restraints. The emotion has a way of appearing on the page; it's there in the writing and sometimes even more apparent in the reading. Sadness, forgiveness and compassion can all be recognized for the first time in unsent letters, but the most potent use of the technique can be in recognizing and acknowledging anger. Other themes might include 'love letters', letters of forgiveness or the more difficult aspects of individual life involving shame, guilt or hatred. Other emotions, such as fear, joy or anxiety, may also come to light and be worked through in unsent letters.

Reading aloud

Reading groups should always allow time for adequate response after someone has read. When personal and perhaps difficult or uncomfortable material has been accessed and shared, the writer needs to be contained by the group and not left with an overflow of feelings needing to be processed. Reading aloud can allow emotions to be recognized in a new way and can help someone to know what they are experiencing. The example is given of a woman who was angry at her husband who was having an affair and read out an unsent letter to him. As she read, her voice became angry, she spoke more quickly and more strongly. This marked a real transformation from the hurt and bewildered woman who had previously spoken.

Somehow, she had written her own script in the letter and was then putting the authentic feeling into the reading. To have his or her words received by one or several people is to feel oneself being received and heard in a different way. In therapeutic journal groups or in one-to-one therapy, this is an important and dynamic part of the process. Writing and reading in a community, in a supportive environment, is a powerful therapeutic experience. When the writer's words are received by an accepting and non-judgemental audience, it is a most affirming experience. This kind of witnessing is almost a way of confirming existence.

Sometimes, the destruction of unsent letters can be an important and therapeutic part of the process. It could be to rid oneself of unpleasant thoughts or material, or to signal a definite kind of closure. Unsent letters could be destroyed by burning in bereavement work or they could be torn up when a relationship has broken up. It would be an important part of letting things go, literally, 'up in smoke'. This can be part of a purification or purging ritual.

Benefits - A scream on the page

Catharsis is a particular type of writing without structure; the pace is usually fast and the only 'containment' is the physical page. This type of writing is the venting, ranting and emotional purging which can be useful and necessary at times of great and overwhelming feeling. When engaging in cathartic writing, the journal can become a container for all of those reactions and feelings which threaten to overwhelm and can potentially poison ourselves and our relationships. It is a kind of 'writing in flow' and, by not imposing boundaries, it gives the person a 'permission' to 'dump all' held feelings 'on the page'. Often, a cathartic rant is the first necessary step in being able to understand and transform those overwhelming states which could prove damaging if allowed to get out into lived experience and relationships. However, catharsis alone is not enough; it is only the beginning of a process of understanding and integration. Cathartic writing followed by a feedback loop, can transform journal writing into therapeutic journal writing. Cathartic writing can be helpful in working with anger management issues - unexpressed anger can build up into a 'toxic volcano', which can erupt with damaging and sometimes irreparable consequences. Exploding on to the page is a controlled explosion and some people destroy their angry rants immediately afterwards. This may be for any number of reasons: because the job is done and the toxin has been removed or defused; because the writer cannot bear to have the reminder of being out of control or potentially extreme, or because destruction of the words on the page is part of the catharsis.

Conclusion

It is natural to think of a journal as "a serious magazine or newspaper that is published regularly about a particular subject." These scholarly collections of articles can be

found in libraries, but other dictionary definitions do accept that a journal is a register or diary, which is how Kate Thompson uses the term.

While the practice contexts for journal writing include education, health and social care and creative and cultural settings, it is up to the reader to create opportunities for writing groups in each individual work setting. Perhaps the best scope is in rehabilitation centres and hostels, elderly day care, or other settings where people are given time to think with supportive facilitators. The chapter on perspectives shows that therapeutic journal writing encourages people to explore their lives from different perspectives, by changing their points of view, the voice, the time, tense or place in order to gain fresh insights. The shift in viewpoint can help the writer to see things in a new and different way. Practitioners who develop therapeutic writing skills can make an important contribution to rehabilitation of patients with physical symptoms, chronic illness, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, family relationship issues and bereavement. This is, perhaps, one of the best ways of practising person-centred care, which could be a cost-saving exercise in the context of preventive medical and social care.

My biggest regret, as author of this Book Review, is that I didn't discover this book earlier than I did, as it offers, in my view, invaluable information for health professionals, teachers, lecturers and writing tutors.

Certainly, I recommend it to all such groups.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.