

The Writing Group

The Gateway, May-August, 2008

The therapeutic benefits of writing for healing and personal growth are starting to be recognised and researched more widely. Particular models of therapy, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Cognitive Analytic Therapy and Narrative Therapy use writing as a therapeutic tool (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006). This writing group was initially inspired by Nicki Evans, one of the group facilitators, whilst attending a *Psychology in the Real World* course with Guy Holmes. She had found writing to be a way of expressing what was at times difficult to say, and had also met several other people who had found writing to be cathartic and helpful.

The group was developed with similar philosophies to the *Psychology In the Real World* courses (see www.shropsych.org); for example, being open to anyone with an interest in joining a writing group rather than confined to people accessing mental health services, and taking place in a location outside the mental health services. Such groups offer opportunities for people who may be socially isolated to interact with others with similar interests and are geared to combat rather than increase the effects of stigma (see Holmes and Gahan, 2006). Research has shown that such opportunities enable and increase a sense of solidarity with others (Hoggett, 1996), challenge discrimination (Campbell, 1999) and can help people to experience a greater sense of meaning through participating in shared activity. For these reasons, the non mental health setting of the Gateway Arts and Education Centre was chosen.

Nicki Evans, Lucy Gahan (a trainee psychologist) and Guy Holmes (a clinical psychologist) met several times to share their ideas and try to put into action what had been envisaged 4 years earlier by Nicki and Guy. The aims of the group were clearly communicated in the flier (see www.shropsych.org for a copy). It was not intended as a creative writing group to learn about writing technique, but a safe, encouraging environment where people could share their work in an accepting atmosphere, without feeling judged or criticised. We aimed to communicate clearly that people could participate in any way they felt comfortable, such as asking another group member to read their work aloud, with the hope of increasing people's confidence in sharing their work in an informal and relaxed environment, and hoped that group members would take something away from sharing and discussing their own and other people's work. With this in mind, we settled on a small group of 7, plus Nicki, Lucy and Guy. Fliers were circulated in Community Mental Health Teams and other mental health settings as well as in the Gateway Centre and other non-mental health settings in Shrewsbury. 7 people signed up, with one person on a waiting list.

The group

The Writing Group ran fortnightly at the Gateway from 19th May to 11th August 2008. The aim of leaving 2 weeks between each session was to give group members the time and opportunity to write between sessions if they wanted to.

6 people attended the first group (one person having been unable to attend for personal reasons). 2 of the initial group members subsequently dropped out, allowing the person on the waiting list to join us. Throughout the time the group ran, there was a core 'collective' of 5 who attended regularly, plus the 3 facilitators.

In planning the group we had aimed for a loose structure. During the first session, where members of the group initially introduced themselves and described their hopes for being part of the group, group members quickly began to share poems and other writing, such as articles, stories, observations and diary entries. Later feedback showed that initially people seemed unsure of how to use the group, due perhaps to the loose structure. However, people very quickly seemed more confident than anticipated in terms of sharing their writing, which was often personal and moving. The group quickly became the safe, cohesive group that we had hoped and aimed for. This occurred despite some early problems when two of the facilitators could not be present, which we feared might de-stabilise the group. However, the group atmosphere and cohesion proved to be stronger and more powerful than the challenges presented to it.

The group settled into a pattern each fortnight. A group member would start off by introducing a piece of writing and give some background information regarding the work they intended to read. After reading the work, we would discuss the things it brought up – not its merits in terms of grammar or style, but rather the themes expressed in the writing. Themes explored included: death and mourning; psychiatric treatments; impasses in family life; fears of going mad; war; motherhood; how to survive the rigours of life; painful and frightening childhood experiences and their impacts; loneliness and depression; smiling. We had many discussions about the benefits of writing: the cathartic effects of getting something buried inside out in the open; the possibility of expressing something that we felt unable to express in conversation; the conjuring of something that had troubled us but seemed inexpressible. The discussions about the themes behind the writing were often electrifying, with people relating these to their own experiences. Sometimes people would ask other group members to read their work aloud for them. Early fears that the group would dry up with not enough to say proved unfounded. Reading and hearing peoples' work was often very emotional and moving, as people shared thoughts, feelings, fears, anxieties and passions. The hour and a half was only broken by a regular 15 minute coffee break half way through, which gave people a chance to get to know each other in a slightly different way to the more structured group sessions.

Hearing people talk about their experiences in the group, and hearing their work, was particularly meaningful in the context of knowing a little about the person reading their work, and hearing about what was happening in their life when they wrote it. It may be that reading the poems and stories without this context is less meaningful to people who were not in the group. However, some of the work read and discussed in the group can be accessed by opening the attachment *The Writing Group Booklet* that accompanies this report. Some group members wished to put together a selection of the writing that had been read in the group sessions. We collected works that people wanted included and collated them in a booklet for each of us to keep.

Evaluating the group

The aim of evaluating the group was to assess benefits that members had experienced through being part of the group, as well as to gain feedback on how any future venture of this type might be improved to maximise benefits for participants. This was particularly important as this was the first time a group of this nature has been run by the facilitators. The three facilitators had discussed and reflected on each meeting of the group throughout the three months that it ran. However, it was important to hear individual group member's thoughts and reflections on the Writing Group experience. These were discussed in the last session, for which all group members (including facilitators) had been invited to write about their experiences of the group and to read these out to the group. Although there are difficulties in using such 'data' for research and audit, evaluations of this nature are used widely in therapeutic writing groups (Williamson, 2004). All group members contributed to this feedback, which included poems and narrative pieces expressing their experiences of being part of the group.

Feedback from group members

What people wrote is presented in full rather than analysed.

The Writing Group has helped me to realise that I use writing to gain insight, so far primarily for myself, but some of it is also relevant to others and worth sharing. One of the greatest achievements ever is that I have learned to listen to poetry. Other members of the group have been prepared to share their poetry, their feeling and their meaning. As a result, I have heard the often very intense feelings of the writers, and the way they have expressed these feelings with image and metaphors has given me a much more "real" sense of the emotion they experienced than mere feeling words can do on their own.

It's been a real privilege to have been part of the group and to share everyone's feelings and experiences.

Rachel

I had a voice

My specialist said it was imaginary due to my vivid imagination

I have been given psychology help because my first husband

said he would divorce me because I could not have children

When I went to the psychologist

I told her I wanted to write a book

She said I should see Guy as he had written books

I don't think I can do this but I'm trying hard to fight the urge of writing

Why fight?

Why not just indulge.

Writing is an extremely lovely hobby and the group was great to give me some confidence to start writing again.

Kate

Unless writers meet together, their work can sometimes seem a lonely task, and it was great to share with new friends. It was good to level with folk of different experiences and the ways they were inspired to express things, and to realise that for anyone to feel better in life depended on where one came from, and how best to find better days and different situations...for me it was a privilege to meet other writers, and to be alongside the ways they saw things, and to feel welcome...in the group I felt I had understood more clearly, and had been understood – that makes such a difference.

Don

Don also gave feedback in the form of a poem:-

Arise Friendly Poets in New Beginnings

*Arise Friendly Poets with pens so poised this era of relevant time
From all ashes past – fervently create fresh fields of beauty
Time to be new prophets who can point the way they clearly sense
Shine healing rays to ones despairing of any race or creed
Patiently and gently show inspiring and viable pathways
That they can bless with loving and compassionate care.
If need be now, reveal best depths of soul to those who read
Shout, cry, smile or laugh in appropriate emotion for value added
Point direction for those lost, lonely or desperately perplexed
Let's help contain worst manic moments of man's lows and highs
Faithfully lead the way to joyous Heavens of Glory bright
Speaking close to heart's pains with healing rays of sacred thought
Heralding new age of better times – as angels of such timely need
Let now humanity's very best features – warm this globe
Till the river of freshened life flows along – so beautiful
Perceptive Poets pacing prized pathways of potential peace
That a hurting world awaits receptively to hear.*

Don

Buzzy Bee

*A little bee buzzed
Up to me
Upon a summers day
You're looking very glum
my friend
Is what he had to say
Why don't you follow
me, my chum,
We'll get you
some good cheer*

Down to the Gateway Writing Group

Where all sorts

You will hear

Writings, prose and a

poem or two

You could even tell us

something you would like to do

Something in your very own way

This would add

Extra pleasure to

A very special day

Campbell

Jenny wrote a poem which referred to many of the pieces of work which had been presented by different group members over the previous weeks:

Goodbye

A moment of madness

A second of sense

To sit here with strangers

Life without pretence

Like ripples on a pond

We drift far away

Our temples

Are different

Or the same would you say?

A sister so loved

Framed in one heart

One for the road

But where do we start?

Why do we take them?

These drugs and these pills

A smile is for free

And brings us no ills

Unlike maggots and demons

Which gnaw at our mind

Or just like that woman

So cruel and unkind

Where is the fire?

I hear you cry

Polystyrene people

Who burn but don't die

Who wears the crown?

Who sheds a tear?

*Who lives in the sunlight?
A life without fear
Strike not the first blow
The good man will say
But attack for defence
May just win the day
And so it's goodbye
One humble request
Go forward in peace
And may you find rest.*

Jenny

Nicki, Guy and Lucy also wrote about their experiences of being part of the writing group:

Although naturally full of apprehension and nerves at the prospect of sharing my writing which reveals to me and others what I have long considered flaws in my character, and the model mental illness trap I find myself in, I found that almost immediately there was an openness, braveness and, importantly to me, acceptance of who I am and who we all are. Regardless of whether everything I read out is on the depressing side of things, that's the way it is for me, and I saw no point in writing happy poems about a joyful, fulfilled life. That would be a lie.

It is liberating for me to read something out that is not judged, ridiculed, or almost used in evidence of my mental instability. Furthermore, my fragile mood and what has long been drilled into me that I am flawed or wired up wrong, as is often said to me, is not a flaw. I will continue to write, for it helps me express what the spoken word cannot – it can be used to my advantage. I hope one day to publish things.

So many people's work has brought a lump to my throat and has moved me greatly and has helped my confidence. To be truthful, I often walked around with an 'I don't like people, they are too complex and screw your head up, I'd rather be alone' attitude, but to once again participate in a group such as this one, where everyone bonded so well, I feel was incredibly unique and special. I am so glad I did this, no regrets, and to top it all, I'm a little more accommodating to people I meet.

I wish the group was not ending. I could rattle on for weeks more. However, as everything ends, new openings begin. I think we all heal each other in our own subtle ways, and indirectly this group, although not set up for that, has achieved a sense of healing for me and hopefully others. I thank you all for this, and for the courage to reveal every word spoken and shared.

Nicki

I've heard that when we write, many of us experience this little man looking over our shoulder, judging what we're writing - is it really good enough for the invisible audience, whoever that might be. And so this little man on my shoulder is ever present as I search for words to describe my experience of being part of this group. Until the age of 7 or 8, I was praised by my teachers for producing imaginative, creative stories – I would sit quietly in the corner and get lost in my own world of writing stories which I would

proudly take home to my mum. But somewhere along the journey between the freedom of expression of an 8-year-old, and adulthood, that creativity has been buried under a mound of passes, fails, comments, and writing simply to say what I think I'm supposed to say to jump the next hurdle. This may be why I've been so struck by the bravery of a group of individuals, initially strangers to each other, who can come together to share, through writing, intensely personal poems and stories, despite I imagine, your own little men sitting on your shoulders. Witnessing and sharing in this has caused me to reflect on the value of writing to communicate, to make sense, to say the 'unsayable', or to express feelings in creative ways that simply can't be said better than through a poem or narrative. In a time where we race around, always one step ahead of ourselves, writing may be one way that we may tell each other a little bit of our story. Hearing your poems and stories has reminded me of the value of stillness and noticing the often beautiful things that are going on around us, in nature, as in Don's tree, or in relationships, as with Nicki's stranger on a park bench.

So thank you, each one of you, for sharing your beautiful words so openly and bravely, making my first experience of facilitating a writing group so inspiring.

Lucy

*As well as helping Lucy and Nicki plan, set up and at times run the writing group, because they have taken the leading roles in this and done it so beautifully, I have also had the pleasure of taking part in the group in ways that are not normally open to me, including reading some of my own work and joining in discussions of people's writings alongside other members of the group. This has been tremendously enjoyable and frequently very moving. To witness Jenny reveal so much in her first poem, a poem written for her son to help him understand her, but shared with us so that we could also be close to Jenny was astonishing. To hear Rachel's comments about the importance of writing to her, in terms of validating her own beliefs and sense of who she is, and be part of a process where she gained confidence to read a variety of types of writing all of which seemed to visibly strengthen her was very uplifting. Kate and Nicki have read out accounts of unsettling and deeply personal experiences and I hope have come to realise that they are not 'mad' but in fact share much with the rest of the group and in deed rest of humanity. Their bravery and honesty helped all of us take the types of risks that can help create something beautiful. Campbell's deeply moving poems about his family brought me to tears. And I am so glad Don was able to join us. Initially the group was 'full' but when a space arose he made his way here from Madeley and said many thoughtful things about our work. His description of writing his poem *Beside the River Severn*, and the poem itself, has helped me hold in mind what I know but frequently forget...that time moves on, even when we feel stuck and even when we wish it to stop. Time has moved quickly during the 14 weeks between our first meeting and our last. All enjoyable things of course do this, and although it has come to an end the Writing Group – the people in it, the writings and the ineffable essence of the group – will always be with me and connect me to these people and this time.*

For this gift, I give thanks to everyone involved in the Writing Group.

Guy

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