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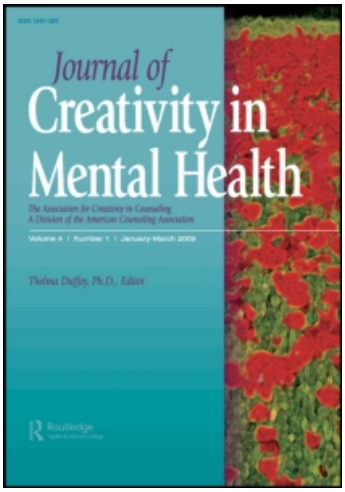

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The Therapeutic Use of Journaling With Adolescents

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In this article, we discuss and provide an example of journaling in the context of counseling, focusing on its application with adolescents. A script to be read by the therapist is included with prompts for self-reflection and journaling by the client. The excerpts presented are the actual journal reflections taken from a teenager's journal. The proposed technique has been used with positive results with adolescents in a clinical setting. Additionally, we provide suggestions for expanding the concept of journaling to expressive artwork.

KEYWORDS counseling, journaling, expressive writing, adolescents, creativity

Therapeutic interventions that involve self-directed exposure to emotionally laden material are common clinical practice; by definition, this category includes expressive writing interventions such as journaling (Figley, Carbonell, Boscarino, & Chang, 1999). The use of journaling as a counseling intervention is a creative way to engage clients in a therapeutic activity that can lead to greater self-awareness and growth, both during session and in between sessions (Gladding, 1992; Schneider & Stone, 1998). Reflective discipline is no longer bound by the stereotypical lock-and-key diaries holding secrets of teenagers, but is considered an effective modality with both psychological and emotional benefits (DeGangi & Nemiroff, 2010).

A growing number of studies report the benefits of expressive writing in a mental health setting, particularly if the writing promotes deeper emotional expression (Boone, 2006; Fonagy, 2009; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010). DeGangi and Nemiroff (2010) argued that expressive writing has particular benefits with adolescents in that writing helps adolescents express,

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in a tangible way, what they think and feel and helps them fill the gaps in self-understanding.

Steinberg (2002) noted that children of today's world mature earlier than in previous generations and adolescence may begin by age 10. The psychophysiological and emotional needs of this group are often regarded as challenging for mental health practitioners. Steinberg (2002) added that the adolescent is in a state of transition from being a child to being an adult, and the tone is one of dramatic development. Adolescents may be wary of adult figures and consequently come to therapy reluctantly and with resentment. Several researchers noted that clinicians serving this population need to use creative approaches to engage adolescents in the healing process (Fonagy, 2009; Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002; Marzelli, 2006).

In this article, we discuss journaling in the context of mental health counseling and focus on its application with adolescents. We offer an example of a therapeutic activity using expressive writing as an adjunct to counseling with adolescents. Included is a script to be read by the therapist with prompts for self-reflection (journaling or other creative expression by the client). The excerpts presented are journal reflections written by a teenager, the first author, who is now an adult. The proposed technique has been used with adolescents in a clinical setting with positive results. Additionally, we provide suggestions for making journaling and expressive artwork therapeutically meaningful.

JOURNALING AS A COUNSELING INTERVENTION: AN OVERVIEW

For researchers applying constructivist theory, the 1960s was an era of new perspectives regarding writing; putting pen to paper was no longer a mechanism for merely passing on information (Fatemi, 2004). Elbow (1975) summarized the essence of this perspective when stating that "writing was more than a transmission of meaning; it was a construction of meaning" (pp. 134–135). Watts and Garza (2008) expanded on the concept of constructivist theory and described the theory as a process in which we are active agents in our own experiencing and, therefore, construct meaning as the theory relates to self-identity. "Knowledge is socially embedded and relationally distributed without emptying the aforementioned sense of selfhood or personal identity" (Watts & Garza, 2008, p. 149). Subsequently, expressive writing as a tool in counseling offers clients a unique way to unravel stressful reactions to self, others, and events and to formulate a more controlled and logical understanding of their experiences in the presence of a trained listener (Boone, 2006).

Expressive writing in a therapy setting, although still embryonic, is growing in popularity. Writing therapy allows clients to interpolate thought and attenuate subjective distress; this leads to psychological and emotional

healing (Frattaroli, 2006; Hunt, 2000; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Bolton, Howlett, Lago, and Wright (2004) suggested this type of abstract expression may not be useful with disturbed or psychotic clients. Additionally, Bolton et al. (2004) warned that therapeutic writing involves training and needs to be "weighed, considered, and utilized judiciously" (p. 2). One appeal of the journaling intervention lies in its adaptability; approaches are as varied as the client. Therapeutic writing exercises can be guided by a list of questions or statements compiled by the counselor, guided by the client's original thoughts and reactions to life situations, composed of creative endeavors in poetry or art, or created from an adaptation to any of the above (Lange, 1996). Additionally, therapeutic writing can be used across theories, populations, and settings (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997).

Journaling as a Learning Tool

Many authors have expressed belief in the benefits of journaling as a learning tool (Burnett & Meacham, 2002; Edmands & Marcellino-Boisvert, 2002; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Martin & Thomas, 2000). Hubbs and Brand (2005), proponents of learning theory, suggested reflective journaling serves as a "vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions" (p. 62). Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) postulated that the act of writing helps integrate the fragments of a stressful reaction into one coherent narrative. Burnett and Meacham (2002) proposed journaling as a necessary component in demonstrating evidence of clients' assimilated self-knowledge regarding their total experiences (obstacles and victories). Consequently, once a person has developed a new understanding of the experience, the event can "be summarized, stored, and forgotten more efficiently" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1248). Rogers (1993), a proponent of self-actualization, conceptualized journaling in this way: "Creativity is not a tool. It is a mystery that you enter: an unfolding: an opening process" (p. 105).

Martin and Thomas (2000) discussed how journaling aided a group of self-identified shy clients, a group more comfortable with introspection than the spoken language. Martin and Thomas noted that journaling promoted insight for these clients by helping them form connections between past experiences and physiological symptoms. Edmands and Marcellino-Boisvert (2002) similarly described how clients dealing with grief work used journaling to learn the interface between emotional pain and physical symptoms.

Journaling as a Means to Heal

A review of previous research revealed a therapeutic rationale for journaling, because this activity helps heal deep emotional wounds. Honos-Webb, Sunwolf, Hart, and Scalise (2006) employed the use of journaling as an intervention in reducing traumatic symptoms after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The reflective journaling provided participants the opportunity to "honor the wound" (p. 76) by recording their reactions and feelings in a notebook. The participants in this study experienced a decrease in reported trauma symptoms.

Linder, Miller, and Johnson (2000) presented journal writing as a way to create a therapeutic environment that acknowledges and welcomes client suffering; processing the pain is a necessary means to healing. They noted that journaling helps navigate the client-generated meaning of suffering and serves the purpose of validating the pain. "Journaling finds the meaning in meaninglessness and negates emptiness through creating writings from the heart . . . it is an outlet to the truth without being judged" (Linder et al., 2000, p. 7). This potential for healing is further credited by those who recognize the kinesthetic quality in journaling, which allows the client to assimilate new meaning that is attributed to the act of writing (Bolton et al., 2004).

It has been suggested that the act of writing allows for a healing response through mind–body interaction (Badenoch, 2008). Through the act of taking pen to paper, clients clarify the invisible intricacies of their journey, connecting the feelings of the soul with the words on paper. This mind–body connection serves as a conduit for healing and change to flow through the client's life. Badenoch (2008), in *Being a Brain-Wise Therapist: A Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology*, noted the interplay between kinesthetic experiences in the context of therapy and changes in the brain regarding traumatic experiences. Badenoch purported that clients ultimately report the trauma experience as having less intensity due to this type of processing.

A trauma experience may be a stressful reaction to an event that the person perceives as harmful or as involving loss, threat, or challenge (Lazarus, 1999). According to Gregory Orr (2002), a contemporary poet, "Survival begins when we translate our crisis into language—where we give it symbolic expression as an unfolding drama of *Self* and the forces that assail it" (pp. 4–5). King (2003) posited that expressive writing was associated with stress reduction and catharsis and resulted in conflict resolution. Lepore and Greenberg (2003) attributed these effects to the fact that writing was a way to expose oneself to fear-provoking stimuli in a safe way and ultimately facilitate recovery. However, it is important to note that several authors postulated that writing served to merely distract the client from experiencing symptoms, may not be effective, and without the safe atmosphere of counseling, may result in negative consequences (Brewin & Beaton, 2002; Brewin & Smart, 2005; Hunt, 2000).

JOURNALING WITH ADOLESCENTS

Expressive writing can be a useful tool with adolescents (DeGangi & Nemiroff, 2010; Marzelli, 2006). Writing for expression is a cultural medium

of communication for today's youth, particularly with the rise of computers and cell phones. Texting, e-mailing, blogging, and tweeting are all writing-focused technologies familiar to many youth (Riviere, 2008). The rise of social networking Web sites such as Facebook and LiveJournal have become an integral part of adolescent culture and allow teenagers to remain in virtually constant contact with their friends. These sites allow users to create a profile, post contact information and photos, and list personal interests. The user can create a network of friends who become part of their social network. Additionally, social networking sites allow users to have live chats or share ideas via a blog page (Windham, 2007).

DeGangi and Nemiroff (2010) noted that writing in the context of therapy is particularly helpful with adolescents because it has multiple benefits. It contributes to the understanding of self within the context of peers (identity formation), and promotes problem solving, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotional regulation. In a therapeutic session free from criticism or constraints of grammar, syntax, and form, the therapist encourages a client to create a narrative. By its very nature, the narrative expresses the clients' ideas and emotional meaning and helps clients to "fill the gaps in their understanding of themselves and how they have come to be the way they are" (Fonagy, 2009, p. 21). Therapeutically, expressive writing allows clients to work within the context of their lives in a less threatening format, while providing the clinician with rich insight into the clients' subjective experiences.

From a developmental focus, adolescents think abstractly and reflect on how they feel, what they think, and how they are perceived by others. Therefore, expressive interventions, such as journaling, that use symbol and metaphor are developmentally appropriate for this population. From a neurobiological focus, there is direct benefit in the writing process. Badenoch (2008) suggested that expressive techniques help clients embody their full experiences (ideas and emotions) and writing allows a therapeutic process that facilitates a reciprocal exchange of understanding. In expressive therapies, the symbolic metaphor is viewed as a key, lead, or guide to understanding the internal ambiguities of one's true self. Clinicians liken this to Heidegger's (1971) concept of "essential essence" or the "unconcealedness of being" (p. 65). Heidegger (1971) described art as "the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is" (p. 72). Subsequently, the metaphor lends meaning to the experience and helps the experience take shape in both depth and breadth. This may be truer for children and adolescents than for adults. For example, Marzelli (2006) found journaling with adolescents was helpful because the technique helped the client to: a) examine a problem from multiple perspectives, b) acknowledge the use of metaphor in intuitive exploration, c) validate the self as authority, and d) understand self in relation to others.

Therapeutic Distance

Journaling is less threatening for adolescents than traditional talk therapy because it offers a therapeutic distance between the person and the narrative (DeGangi & Nemiroff, 2010). Furthermore, the journaling process allows clients to externalize their unspoken thoughts and feelings, assign the pain a meaning, and test the pain level on paper. This process provides a springboard for meaningful discussion and may be a means for relationship building with nonvoluntary clients, as is often the case with adolescents (Bolton et al., 2004). Journaling may be used as a precursor to the client–therapist relationship, whereby the client develops comfort regarding self-intimacy before forming a deeper connection with the therapist. Keeling and Bermudez (2006) combined the intervention of journal writing with sculpture art for the purpose of helping clients externalize identified problem areas. They reported that one benefit of this act of externalizing was that the process "compelled participants to deal with problems rather than to avoid them and to work through their problems with privacy, safety, and with a naturalistic [time frame]" (Keeling & Bermudez, 2006, p. 415). Additionally, activities that have an aspect of spontaneity and fun reduce inhibitions when paired with the act of reflecting on stressful events (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Power

Bolton et al. (2004) illustrated the empowering component of writing in family therapy. Adolescents and children were encouraged to write about their experiences in foster care to enhance communication with professionals who make decisions over their lives. As Bolton (1999) stated, "Story making is a therapy for both the body and soul" (p. 27). Creative interventions such as journaling enhance internal motivation (drive, power) toward treatment; therefore, the client becomes internally motivated rather than externally motivated toward change (Drew, Bitar, Gee, Graff, & Springer, 2007). Internal motivation brings about a sense of following through on one's own terms, so choice allows adolescents to be experts in solving their own problems (Rogers, 1993). Additional groups that would benefit from internal motivation include: a) groups who are perceived as powerless, such as adolescents (Wright, 2000); b) cultural groups who feel shame or are hindered by the spoken language (Bolton, 1999); c) clients who need to disclose a stressful or traumatic experience (Lepore et al., 2002); and d) clients experiencing strong feelings at particular developmental or life stages (e.g., adolescence or the dying; Lepore et al., 2002).

SUGGESTED PROCESS

This section offers counselors an example of a therapeutic expressive writing intervention used with adolescents receiving mental health services. The

excerpts presented are the actual journal reflections taken from a teenager's journal (the first author, who is now an adult). This technique has been used with adolescents in a clinical setting with positive results. Particularly, clients seemed excited about the opportunity for a creative outlet rather than being limited to strict talk therapy. While this is a basic journaling technique, we suggest including the option to journal and/or use expressive art materials to increase the client's sense of choice and power over the activity. We propose the following format for using the technique.

Materials

1. A pen and journal
2. A variety of arts and crafts materials used for expressive arts (e.g., magazines, construction paper, glue, scissors, glitter, beads, buttons, glitter, paints, clay, pom-poms, popsicle sticks, foam, felt sheets, stickers, etc.)
3. The script offered below, or a suitable adaptation

Activity Preparation

The counselor describes the activity to the client. We offer the script below as an example. The counselor may read the script directly (word for word) or choose to state a modified version to the client. The example script is as follows:

> Today we will begin an expressive arts exercise. Whether you choose to journal, use craft materials to create something, or do both is up to you. I think you will find this activity interesting, because the scenarios I will read to you are excerpts from a journal of a teenage girl who found this activity to be useful in helping her deal with some difficult times in her life. The girl, now grown up, has shared her journal in hopes that the concept would benefit others. Also, I believe this activity will help me know you better. What I will do is read a part of her journal, and then I will give you a phrase to reflect on [identified in this article by italics]. You can then decide whether you'd like to journal your response or express your response using any of the materials I've laid out for you here. Afterward, I will ask you to share the parts of your reflection that you feel comfortable sharing. We can do the first exercise and see if you have any questions. We don't have to get through all of these today; we can save some for later if we need more time. So, I'd like you to take the time you need, and I will let you know when it is time to stop to ensure that we leave time for discussion.

Processing

Processing is done immediately following the client's completion of each excerpt. The facilitator should weigh the client's comfort level regarding

depth of disclosure; it is imperative that the client feel safe before proceeding to the next excerpt. Additionally, some clients may feel vulnerable about sharing. Nonjudgmental, accepting reflections may help clients feel more at ease with sharing. The facilitator may process in any way that is familiar to them; however, we have listed below 12 suggested processing points for reference. You may choose any of the following processing points and use your own reflection, clarification, and summarization skills.

1. You had the choice of two mediums: the journal or the art materials. Tell me about your choice for this reflection.
2. I'm curious whether your work has a title.
3. I noticed how you took your time to really reflect on this. I wonder what you were experiencing at that time.
4. The look on your face tells me there is something significant about this response: What are you feeling right now?
5. Your facial expression seemed to say_____, but your response seems to say_____; I'm curious about that difference.
6. There is something about this particular reflection that seemed to really resonate with your own experience. I'd like to hear more about that.
7. I'm wondering if any of her experiences were closely tied to your own.
8. I'm wondering if any of her experiences were extremely different from your own.
9. What are your experiences with writing or creative expression activities?
10. Was there any part of what you did here today that you would like to do more of?
11. What is the most memorable part of today's activity?
12. One thing I learned about you today is . . .

THE CATALYST

This section includes six narratives and accompanying prompts for client reflection. First, each short narrative is to be read aloud to the client. Next, a prompt (in italics) is provided as the catalyst for reflection. The client will be encouraged to use the italicized phrase for reflection. After a short period of reflection, the client can journal and/or create something symbolic of their experience related to each prompt. The narratives and prompts to be read aloud to the client are as follows.

Childhood

> Narrative: This is the story of an ordinary girl who was very much like many of the kids you know, except in one big way. You see, as a young

girl, her imagination caused her to fear many things. She feared being alone, she feared the darkness under her bed, and she feared all the things she could not know. She wished she could escape childhood altogether.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *My childhood.*

Questions

Narrative: As a teenager, these fears turned into questions; even though she tried, she could not prevent the questions from entering her mind. She questioned things she did not know about and everything she thought she was certain of. She believed even the universe would be too small to contain the questions of her soul.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *Questions that go through my mind.*

Fears

Narrative: The world began to look strange to her. She saw muted colors as if the world had drained the pretty blues, reds, yellows, and purples and only left the grays and blacks. This was frightening, and she felt as if she was living a nightmare.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *My fears.*

Support

Narrative: Still she believed that even as she lived a life in the shadow of these questions, there was a glimmer of hope that she would one day find peace. She knew this when she opened her heart long enough to trust and find support, someone to rely on. She no longer felt alone.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *My support.*

Sadness

Narrative: One day, her faith was tested. A great sadness came, and as most sadnesses come, it was unwelcomed but unavoidable. She was reminded of the poet Dylan Thomas (1952/2005) who wrote, "Do not

> go gentle into that good night; rage, rage against the dying of the light." This event brought back the fears, the meaninglessness, a feeling of being betrayed. Like a wave that crashes against the unassuming sand on the shore, altering its landscape, grief crashed against her soul and changed her as well. Life was again distant, cold, and unfamiliar.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *My sadness.*

Hope

> Narrative: Unsure of exactly how she gained her resolve, she reached down deep to clutch the grain of hope still left within her soul. She created meaning, strength, and beauty to make sense of life. She recognized within herself a desire to live life well, not sit passively or be a victim.

Prompt for reflection and creative expression: *My hope.*

CONCLUSION

Expressive writing is espoused as a powerful therapeutic technique by many clinicians. The kinesthetic quality of expressive art techniques facilitates internal healing. Additionally, the initial therapeutic distance offered to clients as they process painful material may later facilitate therapeutic communication between client and counselor. In this article, we offer a creative intervention for facilitating the journaling process with adolescents. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed to further investigate the extent that expressive writing enhances therapeutic rapport and healing.

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