

Frangible Emotion Becomes Tangible Expression: Poetry as Therapy with Adolescents

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Abstract

This article investigates a range of literature, research, and therapeutic outcomes associated with Poetry Therapy as a therapeutic modality for supporting adolescents. Poetry Therapy has been shown to be an effective counselling tool when engaging with adolescents and their experiences of transition from childhood to adulthood. Like all creative arts therapies, Poetry Therapy can strengthen self-understanding and be a bridge between known and forgotten aspects of the psyche. While there is a growing evidence base that strongly suggests Poetry Therapy is effective, there are recommendations to strengthen the reliability of research outcomes.

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“Through the act of arranging words on paper, we forge new meaning out of the feelings, images and memories that shape us.” (Chavis, 2011, p. 12).

This paper explores the descriptive and research literature associated with poetry as a therapeutic process, and considers its appropriateness to supporting adolescents.

‘Adolescence’ refers to a period between puberty and adulthood, a time full of change and transitions in mind, body, and emotions, connecting two opposite and complex worlds between the fading cries of childhood and the impending calls of adult life. Poetry Therapy (PT) is recommended as a way these worlds can be reconciled through a voice of resolve expressed through poetry. PT has been shown to be an effective counselling tool when engaging with adolescents and the meanings they associate with their transitional experiences. Like all creative arts therapies, PT can strengthen self-understanding and be a bridge between known and forgotten aspects of the psyche. As an adjunct to talking therapy, expressive writing can potentially unlock the propensity for unhealthy suppression or self-concealment, thus allowing the integration of a more authentic ‘Self’ (Larson, Chaston, Hoyt, & Ayzenberg, 2015).

Background

The written word, including poetry, has held a place in society for thousands of years; fragments of personal experience, descriptions of historical and social events, collected and collated for generations to come. From Biblical scriptures such as the Song of Songs or the Psalms; the Poet’s Creed within the Quran; Buddhist exaltations of life and death, they all express observations of the human experience from a catchment of distilled poetic thoughts and feelings shared through words. The Greek root word for poetry is Poesis, meaning “calling into existence that which has not existed before” (Gorelick, 2007, p. 117). The creation of poetry can be a healing process through the breaking of an internal silence and

overcoming barriers to authentic living (Bolton, 1999). This creative expressive illumination of ‘Self’ can be a powerful cathartic experience, which taps into the intuitive and often unreasoned or un-worded well of understanding within (Bolton, 1999). These aspects of self are positive qualities, strengths, or hidden treasures beneath surface awareness, until brought to light in a therapeutic moment of awakening (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). Those difficult-to-access aspects of the psyche deserve, and need, expression, and can incorporate transformations of anxious, confused or unsettled thoughts that have been implicitly stored (Bolton, 2008), to intentional resolve, illuminating illusive thoughts and feelings. Mazza (2016) asserts that life is defined in those fortuitous, but uncomfortable moments, when the only way through challenges is to crawl. In times of challenge a sense of emptiness can be replaced by a sense of hope.

Although the philosophers Sophocles and Nietzsche regarded the phenomenon of hope as illusory and deceptive, in the area of psychotherapy, it is now established that it is hope which leads to positive therapeutic changes (Tarhan, Bacanli, Dombayci & Demir, 2011). Daboui, Janbabai and Siavash (2018) found an eight-week group PT program increased hope and decreased anxiety with a group of women recovering from breast cancer. As far back as 1987, Mazza, Magaz and Scaturro provided case examples of abused young people’s PT creations that evidenced increases in hope, and discussed the way belonging to a PT group could enhance a sense of hope in individuals.

The best-known founders of Western psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, held conflicting viewpoints in relation to the value of poetry (Mazza, 2016). “Not I, but the poet discovered the unconscious,” wrote Freud (NAPT, n.d.). Jung saw symbols within poetry as holding an allusive quality, whereas Freud regarded those symbols as troubling psychological symptoms. Freud viewed poetry negatively and coupled art with neurosis, whereas Jung considered that the poet held the right to interpret his or her own poems,

believing a poet existed within each person (Mazza, 2016). Freud considered a poem to be a dream, which dismissed its value in communication, and his patriarchal perspective made it difficult to appreciate the matriarchal aspects of women's poetry (Burke, 1939). For Jung poetry was able to stretch beyond human imaginings to places unreachable (Conroy, 1999), allowing "a glimpse into the unfathomed abyss of what has not yet become" (Jung, 1961, p. 181), or a doorway to unconscious treasures. Along with Jung, other theoreticians, such as Adler, Jung, Arieti and Reik also confirmed that the poets were the first to chart paths that science later followed.

Samuel Crothers first used the term "bibliotherapy" in 1916, and in 1928, Eli Greifer, an inspired poet, began a campaign to show that a poem's message has healing power (NPTA, n.d.), and in 1932 Moreno uses the term "psychopoetry" to describe the use of selected literature in his work. However, the modern field of PT developed from the work of psychiatrist Dr Jack Leedy (1921 – 2004). Leedy opened a poetry therapy clinic in Brooklyn, and in 1986 published the classic *Poetry as Healer: Mending the troubled Mind*, with contributions from psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, who had all used poetry for healing. Leedy's passion and commitment attracted the attention of therapists and educators, and he was instrumental in the formation of the first Association for Poetry Therapy (APT) in New York (Gorelick, 2007).

Poetry Therapy in action

As one of the expressive arts therapies, PT is ideal for both individual and group therapy sessions. PT is pluralistic and therefore versatile and has been incorporated into several therapeutic modalities, such as Gestalt and Narrative therapies. The inclusion of storytelling, metaphors and journaling within therapy sessions are features of PT (Mazza, 2016). The value of poetry within counselling can be better explained through the mind of the poet Wordsworth, who stated that the act of writing poetry demands a depth of thought and is

“the spontaneous overflow of feelings”(Mazza, 2016, p. 4). During this overflow the writer has the opportunity to decipher what meaningful value is illuminated. Distinguishing and identifying emotions is a key task of Emotion-focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg, 2002). EFT offers clients coaching to discern which emotions need to be expressed out loud or reflected on, controlled or used to guide decision-making; when the emotional world is held secret, the flow of interpretation and understanding may be restricted or stifled by unconscious fear, or flooded by excessive expression.

The psychological turmoil that many adolescents experience has been identified since the early days of psychology when Hall (1904) referred to the ‘sturm und drang’ (storm and stress) that seemed to be associated with this developmental stage (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2013). This stress is partly manifested, for some, through the development of mental health problems. Adolescents are more vulnerable to developing mental health problems based on their stage of development. Some of the factors that contribute to adolescent mental health problems include genetics, poverty, family instability, divorce, and substance abuse. The consequences of adolescent mental health disorders are serious and include psychological disability and even suicide (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGarry, 2007). It has been argued that these dynamics appear to be worldwide rather than restricted to certain countries (Patel et al., 2007).

PT has distinct activities and uses within therapy that can begin to resolve adolescent stress. It can generate reflection, where the symbols, concepts and personal expressions of published poets can be discussed and individual meaning formulated. When joy or pain is shared, the identification the adolescent discovers with the poet is reassurance that he or she is not alone (Leedy & Reiter, 2016). The 19th Century philosopher and essayist, J. S. Mill (Chavis, 2011) identified the curative powers of poetry within the pages of his autobiography, as having suffered from severe depression in his youth, it was when he saw his own affliction

expressed in Samuel Coleridge's 'Dejection Ode' that healing began (Chavis, 2011). This positive experience encouraged him to explore poetry further, and it was through William Wordsworth's nature poetry he found the hope he needed to recover (Chavis, 2011).

Thomas and Krout (2006) researched the effects for bereaved adolescents participating in a 'Grief Song-writing Process', with poignant increases in rapport, trust, insight, integrating experiences, and creative responses to dealing with grief processes. Another PT activity is to allow the client space, a focused time of self-contact, where the emotional world can be explored and expressed in their own words. This may occur during a therapy session, or as a personal process outside of therapy sessions. There are specific gains through each process, particularly if the emerging self-awareness is shared with a therapist. An example of an outcome of self-expression from this process is demonstrated in 'Growing Pains'; the breach into adult concepts (Allen, 1975; See Appendix I). This poem accentuates the author's personal despair felt in "sleeping with dreams, waking with nightmares, black sunbeams, suicide light flares". During the process of writing a poem for the first time, a resolve occurs within this sixteen year old. He finds himself released through his tears, as expressed in the realisation that "suddenly it rains".

As with any style of therapy, the effectiveness of PT may be closely connected to establishing a therapeutic alliance, the readiness of the client, and the skill of the therapist (Angelotti, 1985). Counsellors need to get to know the client well, as well as the poetry being used to generate reflection, and recognise the creation and response to poetry as part of the normal adolescent development (Angelotti, 1985).

Pearson and Wilson (2009) expand on using the written word with the inclusion of drawings and symbols as part of a therapy approach to bring richly-layered meaning to undiscovered aspects of the client's inner and outer worlds. They suggest these forms of therapy can utilise methods such as *reflective writing*, to develop self-awareness; *process*

writing, to allow spontaneous emotional release; and *completion writing*, bringing together the fragments expressed as an integration of the experience (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). An example of reflective writing is presented here in the poem *No Need for Wings* (See Appendix II). In their experience, writing appears to have the potential to open and activate the neural pathways which previously carried traumatic information (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). They describe this personal journey in therapy, incorporating expressive writing, as an emotional first aid response (Pearson & Wilson, 2009).

Among the benefits of using PT with adolescents for personal insight gained through their experiences of transitional change, is also a way for clients to feel connected to others through a collective conversation across time and space, where identities are recognised through self-expression and/or the words of others (Kwok, 2010). Additionally, the expression of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual concerns can positively impact behaviours (Adedokun, 2001; Williams, 1990, as cited in Chuma-Ibe, 2011). Creating and reading these illuminations has a way of permeating or expanding an individual's understanding of life and the experience of the collective human condition.

Reflection on lyrics from songs which have personal significance for young people may be an alternative way to connect or share light on personal writing. A major strength of PT is the positive effect it can have on group cohesion, as where a sense of safety, comfort and belonging exists, then commitment can emerge. However, when choosing literature for the group, such as a poem or song lyrics, it is critical that care is taken by the therapist to select what is suitable for the particular clients (Golden, 2000).

In a study on the efficacy of art and writing therapy after traumatic experiences, Pizarro (2004) contended that participants using writing therapy showed a decrease in social dysfunction, and those using art therapy reported a positive reflection when relating the experience to others.

One group activity approach involving PT is to combine the creation of mandalas with writing poetry. Each participant writes down a word to express what they could see within each mandala and the creator of the mandala gathers the words to create a poem, as part of an integration process (Rappaport, 2014). This integration adds to both personal and group cohesion as a therapeutic process. Group therapy activities can add the social connection advantage, to increase positive outcomes.

The growing evidence-base

Qualitative or phenomenological research, though representing less than ten percent of research in counselling and psychotherapy, is more focused on exploring, describing, and analysing meaning within the human mind (McLeod, 2015), and may therefore be ideal to capture the outcomes from PT. Due to the difficult-to-delineate nature of PT assessment frameworks in some research projects, the emerging evidence is primarily qualitative. As with the early stages of research in many areas of psychotherapy, a predomination of anecdotal/clinical observation methods is prevalent in identifying outcomes based on the words and concepts used by adolescent clients, than exhibited behaviours.

People with experience as mental health clients, mental health nurses, writers and other professionals have used literature to benefit mental health service users in many ways, and various benefits have been described, but some accounts do not include evidence of clinical effectiveness (McArdle, & Byrt, 2001). “Further work is needed to clarify and measure the effectiveness of various expressive and therapeutic uses of literature” (McArdle & Byrt, 2001, p. 517). However, positive outcomes have been reported, with particular evidence of clinical effectiveness in some studies of PT.

In early research on the outcomes of using writing therapeutically, Pennebaker (1997) reported on the physical health improvements, subjective wellbeing and some positively adapted behaviours when emotional experiences are expressed in writing. Further research is

necessary, to explore the phenomenon associated with engendering neural pathway connections in the adolescent developing brain, as according to Frankfurt and Penn (1998), writing expands personal voices by associating with feelings, memories, images, dilemmas, dreams and unconscious relationships, that therapeutic conversation alone struggles to connect and convey.

A peak period of research into the effectiveness of PT was 1999 to 2010, and this research was primarily in the fields of psychiatry and psychology (Heimes, 2011). While PT is more established and documented in the USA, there is still a need for developing new methods of evaluating its use (Heimes, 2011), as most of the studies correspond to Level 5 on the scale of evidence-based medicine, that is “expert opinion” (Oxford Centre for Evidence-based Medicine). The effectiveness of PT has been explored as applied to anxiety disorders, depression and schizophrenia, and initial research in its application in care of the elderly and terminally ill suggests it will have a growing number of contexts (Heimes, 2011). For example, group PT has been found, through self-reports, to improve quality of life in breast cancer patients (Gozashti, Moradi, Elyasi, & Daboui, 2017), however self-reports, while widely used, are considered to have a level of unreliability, particularly around sensitive information from adolescent participants (Johnson & Richter, 2004).

A qualitative analysis of lyrics, notably rap and hip-hop favoured by young black Americans, revealed a tendency within the lyrics to rebel against accepted norms, but without showing how to combat life’s obstacles (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009). In response to this, PT was seen to inspire in a positive way, as this process allowed participants the time needed to consider the poems’ hidden messages and assist them to better understand their own identities (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009).

The statement that “Writing is a way of saying things I can’t say” (Bolton, 2008, p. 40), suggests that there are intuitive expressions that could, without expressive writing,

remain unexpressed. By allowing thoughts to travel from the mind via the heart through the hands, in a loop of emotional release, the physical body is engaged in the healing process (Bolton, 2008). This is clearly expressed in the words of the poet Anne Sexton, who claimed that “Poetry led me by the hand out of madness” (Lowe, 2006, p. 60). The fulfilling creative aspect of freely releasing words from the mind onto the page may stem automatic negative thoughts experienced by some young people (Jamison & Post, as cited in Lowe, 2006). Furthermore, there may be a more effective resolve achieved for some individuals, through other forms of expressive or experiential therapy approaches, or by presenting PT alongside another creative modality.

While research incorporating poetry therapy and expressive writing have shown positive outcomes with clients experiencing mental health issues, further research evidence is imperative to formulate understanding and applications that can positively influence mental health and wellbeing (McArdle & Bryt, 2001).

Cautions in practice

Discernment is a key factor in how PT can be utilised to access client’s emotions. Firstly, it is important to identify whether the emotions are core or *primary* emotions; chronic or *maladaptive primary* emotions; defensive or *secondary* emotions used to mask or obscure; or manipulative or *instrumental* emotions (Greenberg, 2002). Further cautions, Greenberg suggests, need consideration when a lack of rapport or safety is yet to be formed in the counselling relationship, when minimal insight into a client’s story exists, or when emotions are overwhelming.

PT as a component of Gestalt Therapy has further contraindications. The founders, Fritz and Laura Perls, stated that Gestalt Therapy was not suitable for clients suffering from thought disorders such as schizophrenia (Perls, 1992). However, this recommendation was not respected by all therapists and concerned its founders (Perls, 1992). Lowe (2006) adds

further sensitive approaches are required for clients with post-traumatic stress disorders, highlighting some negative effects of writing disclosure.

A consideration for the use of PT would be the levels of linguistic and cognitive functioning of adolescent clients. This could include past negative associations from the classroom, or being forced to write poetry as an assessable task. Gorelick (2007) acknowledges that PT needs to work within an individual's comfort zone and frame of reference.

Although there are no identified side-effects associated with PT, it has been found that children suffering from childhood traumas respond better to non-verbal therapies, such as sand-play therapy (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009). Therefore, with a younger adolescent client a counsellor could consider whether or not PT would be the most beneficial of the creative arts therapies.

Implications for counsellors

Group therapy involving poetry may have improved outcomes when poems by external authors are used as a basis for reflection (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009). It may be too personal for some young people to share their work with others, and they may be better suited to individual counselling. With vulnerable children care must be taken to choose the therapy that protects them from any further stress or trauma (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009).

PT fits well with Narrative Therapy as a way to express the meaning of a client's life experience (White, 2007). Problems can be objectified, metaphorically externalised and separated, re-claimed and re-authored by the client through sharing their poetry (Freedman & Coombs, as cited in Van Wyk, 2008). PT is well regarded in dealing with childhood behaviour problems, including bullying, anorexia nervosa, abuse, which are concerns common to adolescents (Carr, 1998).

Gestalt Therapy searches for the complex whole within each client, which consists of what is evident and hoped for, and unseen. Within Gestalt Therapy, in that search for wholeness and identity, poetry as therapy is regarded as a way to harmonise the complexities that exist within the client (Sučylaitė, 2016), and identifying and treating the client's core problem, rather than a symptom, is crucial to a successful therapeutic outcome. Coulehan (2010) shared his experience of successfully treating a post-operative distressed and angry patient with PT, following mismanagement by hospital staff. However, years later this client chose to send a story he had written to his hospital therapist, which revealed that his client's core problem or primary emotion was not anger, but loneliness. The anger was merely a symptom of this man's sense of isolation and aloneness (Coulehan, 2010).

Implications for clients

As expressed by the poet Shelley, within poetry exists the "power to reveal and illuminate" (Mazza, 2016, p.4), as there may be an individual meaning identified by the client. The encouragement to use metaphors within PT has the capacity to reveal how a client views the world (Mazza, 2016). PT allows emotions a voice through symbolic representation and then recognition. This process may quieten reactive emotions, and help a client to see their intuitive knowing, rather than be told they have flawed thinking. Venturing into the unconscious can create profound personal revelations, as Jung (1990, p. 31) persuades us "It is only the things we don't understand that have any meaning." Self-compassion develops, as increased self-awareness, resulting from examining experiences in a safe environment can develop an empathetic understanding in young people towards others as well as themselves (Williams, as cited in Xerri & Agius, 2015).

PT can take an adolescent on a journey of self-discovery, which has the potential to build self-esteem and resilience to confront fears. To support patients recovering from cancer, a field of psycho-oncology has developed, where PT is one pathway to help reduce the

inevitable negative emotions that diagnosis engenders. In this field, PT enables cancer patients to view their worlds from a different perspective, and to assist family members to deal with the imminent loss of a loved one (Heimes, 2011).

Conclusion

Poetry has been an integral part of human society throughout recorded history, expressing the human spirit and the search for truth and meaning. PT helps the 'Self' to find those difficult-to-reach parched earth spaces within the soul, where hope is re-kindled, and becomes the soothing rain. It is the versatility PT offers that enables it to speak to many different young clients, as it may be introduced within a variety of therapeutic modalities. For some, this comes by sharing in the anguish of poets whose suffering is similar; for others, peace is found when distressing emotions are released through their own words. Always the client is central, never the quality of writing. Releasing core problems and finding resolve are the counsellor's overriding concerns.

The link between the positive effects of mindfulness when introduced with PT, and the need to develop self-esteem and resilience in children approaching adolescence both need to be explored, along with establishing a more reliable evidence base. This paper has discussed the significance of poetry when viewed as a symbol of a client's frangible emotion, when guided to healing through tangible words.

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Appendix I Poem: Growing Pains

(Allen, 1975)

Now at sixteen my life seems long

Dreaming of days that time's past on

Friendship of our friends at eight

No longer seem to beautifully relate

Playing games of meaningless thought

No rules, no limits, no conscience brought

No weight to carry, or blame to bear

On wars, death, or the filth in the air

Spare me time so I may fly

Back to times and years gone by

For this life I'm living now

Has too much to do with what and how

Sleeping with dreams

Waking with nightmares

Black sunbeams

Suicide light flares

Then suddenly it rains...

Appendix II: Poem - No Need for Wings

Carter, 2012

Words are thoughts with flight,
When ill and weak may I call your name?
And ask of you to visit me,
And share your thoughts as once you might.
No need for words that crack and splinter,
And leave our souls all in a winter,
For once our thoughts have mingled so,
They have no need of wings...
They are already free.