



Reducing social isolation through creative writing

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Laura Wardleworth is the Loss and Lifestyle Counsellor at Inner North Community Health Services in South Australia. Counselling is offered for clients from three years of age and is available through the centre, home or hospital based. Laura graduated as a teacher and gained postgraduate qualifications in psychology and counselling. The focus of current work is provision of 1:1 counselling and the engagement of the wider community through interactive workshops and seminars that highlight strategies for improved daily living.

Rosie Rowland trained as a paediatric nurse at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in her home town of Edinburgh, Scotland and then completed her postgraduate general nursing degree at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. After migrating to Adelaide she worked as a registered nurse at the Women's and Children's and Modbury Hospitals. Rosie completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Science (Health Counselling) at the University of South Australia and then joined Anglicare SA in 2001 as a family support worker. Rosie works in the family support team in the Barossa Valley in SA and in addition to her counselling work has set up and runs creative writing groups for women in the region. These groups were so successful that, in partnership with Country Health SA and the University of South Australia she won a grant to create and publish a book of the women's writings to be used as a therapeutic tool.

Lost

**My fear is black aggregate found on
the side
of the road. Unnoticed, unimportant
and very
sticky. It sticks to the sole of a foot in
the heat.
A little girl stands in the sun in gravel
next
to fresh laid asphalt. A small spot of
soft
warm bitumen sticks to her foot.
It's Barossa bitumen – good Lutheran
morality and blindness – that enters
into
a world of sunlight and colour and
takes up
residence in a deep site in her brain.
It is Germanic repression, dark
Victorian
furniture, unspoken, unarticulated
grief, fear,
violence, cruelty, anger,
powerlessness.
Dim shadows in hot afternoons
trapped
in an adult's world of teacups and
doilies
and doing the right thing. Somehow I
am
unlovable and unworthy.**



You may be surprised to know that the poem you have just heard is not from an experienced poet but from a woman that decided to attend a Free to Write creative writing course. The Anglicare Family Support Team initially developed Free to Write to be used as a therapeutic tool to empower women to write.

The women that attended these groups were not poets or experienced writers but women who had one thing in common; they were all struggling with some aspect of their lives. For some it was mental health issues for others it was a brief escape from domestic violence. Some women were so vulnerable they had to be brought by carers and so unwell they couldn't even share their name with the others in the group.

The aims of the Free to Write were:

- To develop collaborative partnerships between agencies to promote the well-being of participating clients.
- To build community capacity to enable participants to be resilient to factors that may have a negative impact on the wellbeing of the community.
- To provide opportunities for individuals to identify and to realise aspirations, to satisfy needs and to change or cope with their environment.
- To provide opportunities for personal reflection and expression through writing.

For professionals, creative writing is another useful and additional tool to a clinician's repertoire of short-term psychological interventions for their clients. In institutional or community settings, groups or one to one creative writing can be used to record mood over time, for problem solving goal setting, relaxation, mindfulness, resolution of long term issues, diffusion of emotionally charged memories and past traumas, (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005).

For the individual all of the above apply plus the added benefit of writing creatively whenever and however they like.

'Writing about earlier traumatic experience was associated with both short-term increases in psychological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems' (Pennebaker & Beall, 1996: p. 280 cited Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005)

When a person is referred to an agency for help and therapy the level of anxiety is generally pretty high and there may be a reluctance to talk about thoughts, feelings and events that have brought them to the agency. Through the Free to Write program clients are offered the opportunity through journaling and creative writing to recognise their strengths and write towards an improvement in psychological wellbeing. The environment created by the facilitator and clients for the Free to Write program needed to be safe, trusting and non-judgmental enabling the expression of internal conflicts (Lowenstein, date ?).

The very first writing group was held at Angaston hospital in partnership with Barossa Health 2005 ten women attended. Since then Free To Write groups have been run throughout South Australia in a variety of settings. Including the Adelaide Women's Prison, Domestic Violence Shelters, Grief and Loss, and Living Beyond Suicide groups.

What are the barriers for women attending these groups?

The sessions were run with an exercise in writing and then an opportunity to share writing.

For these women a fear of disclosure was often a barrier preventing them from sharing. When women did learn to share they expressed a sense of fulfilment and relief at having shared a problem or a secret. As facilitators we discovered that sharing the writing was equally as important as the writing itself.

Women lacked self esteem and found it difficult to begin writing.

Women compared their ability with others attending the group and therefore wouldn't share what they had written.

Women expressed concern that someone might know them within the group,

Important elements to consider in creating a safe environment for writing are:

- confidentiality
- trust is essential
- spelling and grammar are irrelevant
- words and feelings are important
- sharing writing is encouraged but optional
- don't compare writing
- don't ask questions about writing.

How did we get the women to write?

Ten, weekly morning sessions held during term time, the facilitator enabling a gentle start to expressive and creative writing in the form of journal writing using craft materials provided clients with structured, consistent and achievable writing tasks. Over the course of the term more complex writing challenges, encouraging the women to take risks with their writing were presented.

St Lukes innovative resources were often used in the initial phase of Free to write but as the women became more comfortable with writing, word prompts, photographs, objects for home or elsewhere, symbols leaves or even a feather would stimulate writing

The women therefore progressed from expressive writing - about their personal experiences to creative writing about their thoughts and feelings.

How did writing change them?

From evaluations at the end of every term the following significant health benefits were reported by the women

- increased self esteem
- improved mental health
- reduced social isolation and positive impact on family relationships
- groups provided nurturing environment for increased confidence
- feeling more valued
- less isolated and more optimistic about life.

How do we gauge this response?

From the participants themselves and here are some of their responses

It has been a therapeutic journey through my personal valley of shadows. Writing has brought stability, a new group of friends, an opportunity to communicate creatively. My journal is me in my own personal beautiful space

I have made a friend in Adelaide and it has made feel so happy.

Coming to group has allowed me to see that I have the capacity to do more. I am physically and mentally more able than I realised.

I'm getting a handle on the changes in my life, appreciating these changes rather than heading towards resentment.

I can get stuff out, allowing me to be calmer and more objective

I was dwelling in the past, imprisoned, unable to escape but NOW I can be heard, I can show my pain, I'm not hollow anymore and I'm sharing myself with others.

When I am nurtured I can better nurture my family

Being in a new community, a new country-this group has created social opportunities for me.

After attending Free to write groups in the Barossa, a group of women who had participated in these courses felt so passionate about the positive experience that they had from writing and sharing their writing that they wanted to provide other women with an opportunity to do the same.

In 2010 Anglicare SA in collaboration with Barossa Area Health and university of South Australia completed a \$10000 Primary Health Care grant from Country Health SA. The result was the publication of a book of the women's writings and a resource for other workers called Finding My own Way. This book is now being published under St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria

Chains

I'm so fine
Fear chains are broken
A change is at hand
I'm enjoying the feelings
My life's in my hands

