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## **SAFEGUARDING WRITING FOR WELLBEING: HOW SAFE IS TOO SAFE?**

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There has never been a more critical moment for creative writing interventions for mental health. Although the therapeutic benefits of writing have been documented as far back as Freud's 1907 paper, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', it wasn't until James Pennebaker's 'expressive writing' trials in the 1980s that writing-as-therapy was considered a serious method of clinical practice. With suicide rates increasing 60% worldwide in the last 45 years, and antidepressant prescriptions soaring in the UK (64.7 million prescriptions in 2016 – more than double the number issued in 2006) it comes as no surprise that creative writing workshops for 'wellbeing', 'healing' or 'mindfulness' are springing up in venues all over the world in an effort to deploy the positive force of writing against a sea of troubles.

Writing for wellbeing workshops are commonly facilitated by experienced creative practitioners with a counselling background, who guide participants (usually in community centres) in using writing as a tool for re-forming a relationship with the self and reflecting on the past. Personal Development pioneer Celia Hunt advocates 'placing one's experience on the page' as 'a means to a deeper self-engagement and self-understanding' (*The Self on the Page*, 10). Efforts to create accredited courses in therapeutic writing are underway in the UK, with the Metanoia Institute's MSc Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes and the US-based National Association of Poetry Therapy producing their first graduates in recent years.

While all of this sounds very auspicious indeed, there is a problem. In the UK, music therapy, dance movement therapy, dramatherapy and visual art therapy all have recognised professional bodies which provide regulation and codes of practice for members. Therapeutic writing remains unregulated and without a statutory code of practice. Whilst accredited courses are emerging, Poetry Therapy is still not a recognised profession in the UK, as it is in the US. One study found expressive writing to be detrimental for adult survivors of childhood abuse, and another found a group of veterans suffering from PTSD to present worsened symptoms after a trial involving expressive writing. As I write, *anyone* can set up a writing for wellbeing workshop, and regardless of how experienced or well-intentioned a facilitator may be, writing workshops can have potential catastrophic outcomes if safeguards are not in place.

### **Taking Precautions**

For this feature I interviewed a substantial number of workshop facilitators, practitioners, psychotherapists and psychologists, as well as several directors and founding members of *Lapidus International: The Words for Wellbeing Association*, which was established in 1996 to address the issue of regulating writing for wellbeing programmes in the UK. My interviews showed that most facilitators of writing for wellbeing workshops are extremely empathetic and experienced in balancing creativity with therapy. All of the people I interviewed had a background and/or qualification in counselling, and were aware of their duty of care and confident that they could manage any issues that arose within the group. As professional tutor and Lapidus member Wendy French told me, ‘you don’t know what people are carrying with them.’ With this in mind, French always takes precautions when working in healthcare settings, particularly in making course content explicit so that

prospective participants can decide whether they feel up to it or not. For instance, whilst working for Macmillan Cancer Support, French engaged patients in a workshop series called 'Writing the Memoir.' Although the workshops were not intended to be particularly 'therapeutic' (memoir is of course a literary form) a specialist nurse interviewed interested participants prior to the course to ensure that they were up to the *possibility* of confronting and/or uprooting deeply buried personal narratives and memories. Some participants had second thoughts about their ability to participate and opted not to continue.

Likewise, Dr Siobhan Campbell made sure that participants for her Combat Stress UK workshops were pre-screened by a psychologist to ensure that they were ready for potentially upsetting writing exercises, whilst Lapidus Director Lisa Rossetti commences her workshops in healthcare settings by drawing upon Kathleen Adams' group agreement 'Our Group CARES' ('Care', 'Acceptance', 'Respect', 'Encouragement', and 'Support') (Adams & Barreiro, *The Teacher's Journal*, 103). For Rossetti, setting the tone for the group is vital to manage expectations and responsibilities and to signpost the fact that participants may well encounter some troubling memories whilst writing about their personal histories. As writer and poetry therapist Victoria Field says, it is vital that 'everybody knows what they have signed up to', though this is not always completely possible or practical.

Problems can occur even when the most rigorous pre-screening has taken place, and this is where the notion of safeguards becomes a little more complicated. As Field says, 'you can't make something absolutely safe.' Field recounted a colleague who lead a group exercise using household objects, including a ball of wool. One participant was distressed because the wool reminded her of her grandmother who had recently died. In two other

(separate) interviews, writing exercises about food triggered participants who had suffered sexual abuse. More often than not, writing for wellbeing workshops are not supported by a counsellor. As stated before, there is no regulation requiring a counsellor to be present *or* that the facilitator should have a counselling qualification.

### **Alchemy or Personal Documentation?**

I interviewed a number of workshop participants, too, and whilst few of these interviewees experienced any problems in writing for wellbeing workshops, quite a few encountered challenges within *general* creative writing workshops. Indeed, as the number of undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing programmes continues to rise, so does the number of students confronting deeply buried personal narratives and disclosing trauma in otherwise non-therapeutic, academic settings. This indicates that boundaries are often clearer writing for wellbeing workshops, with the word ‘wellbeing’ or ‘healing’ flagging a writing process that involves personal material. In ‘general’ writing workshops, boundaries between personal and fictional material are occasionally not clear. Triggering and/or emotional material can be encountered inadvertently in the writing process, proving shocking and sometimes painful for participants.

One interviewee attended a workshop expecting to be instructed on poetic form, only to be engaged in ‘primal scene’ writing, which involved quarrying original trauma. Another disclosed a personal trauma in a writing workshop – which ‘came out of the blue’ – but she ended up ‘falling to pieces’ in front of the group. Whilst she ‘thought [she] could manage it’, she felt the writing process and group dynamic ‘cracked something open’ – and it is precisely this potential for surprising exposure and vulnerability that makes writing powerfully healing *or* very harmful.

Facilitators of writing for wellbeing groups are every bit as much at risk as participants. Transference and counter-transference – which refer to the redirection of a client's feelings from another individual to a therapist, and vice versa – can arise in the course of writing about and sharing personal narratives during a writing session. One of my interviewees only discovered during the course of a workshop that one of her participants had significant mental health problems. While this facilitator did not engage the class in autobiographical or life writing, the participant felt a connection and broke boundaries, going on to stalk the tutor and prompting police action. In my own experience, a commissioner once plunged me into a workshop with in-patients at a mental health unit without any forewarning, and a poorly-managed prison workshop in a sex offenders' unit left me feeling shaken.

As writing is used increasingly in therapeutic contexts it would seem that a move towards a regulatory body is sensible in order to safeguard both participants and facilitators whilst holding organizations to account. My interviews revealed passionate, dedicated facilitators, but also some exploitative and unethical practices that will likely continue if not checked. Arts therapists are required to practice according to the Health and Care Professions Council's (HCPC) statutory standards of proficiency and of conduct, performance and ethics, so why not facilitators of writing for wellbeing?

### **A Way Forward**

Safeguarding is not without risks. A heavy-handed approach to drawing up regulations and codes of practice can undermine otherwise valuable elements of the writing activity. For example, if facilitators are required to provide additional support, whether in the form of a

counsellor who attends sessions or garnering counselling qualifications, logistical burdens can well make such workshops unfeasible.

Examples of good practice abroad are worthy of mention. In Adelaide, poet J V Birch is a member of the South Australia Writer's Centre, which works with a large number of national organizations to assist them in safeguarding practices. Birch shared with me an excellent resource provided by Country Arts SA, 'Bringing it all together', which is a clearly-defined set of protocols for artists, mental health workers and participants in arts environments. Notably, these guidelines were developed after the former Arts and Mental Health Development Officer, Simone Gillam, grew concerned about a lack of supporting information to foster good practice between artists and health service users in the state. Simone was inspired by a document from the UK, 'Participatory Arts Practice in Healthcare Contexts', produced by Mike White and Mary Robson at the Centre for Medical Humanities at Durham University. This document lays out the roles and responsibilities of the writer/facilitator, participants, mental health workers and the organization by whom the writer is contracted.

Lapidus has previously created similar guidelines and I'm informed that plans to 'revisit' these are underway. Likewise, Paul Munden at the National Association of Writers in Education told me that 'it is probably time that NAWE did indeed publish something new on [safeguards]'. As someone who teaches creative writing primarily in a University setting, however, I'm aware of crossovers between writing-as-art and writing-as-therapy, and propose conversations about professional safeguards that take *non*-therapeutic settings into consideration. Disclosure and transference happen frequently in general writing workshops – primarily, I believe, because every act of writing is a dialogue with the self –

and writers working in such contexts would profit from deeper understanding and embedding of the therapeutic potential of writing. Tensions between writing-as-therapy and writing-as-art are unfortunately rife, but I call for increased exchanges between practitioners and counsellors and heightened research activity around the new contexts in which creative writing is now employed.

What remains abundantly clear is that further dialogue about safeguarding – which protects, prepares, and professionalizes the work – is urgently needed if the full benefits of writing are to be realized.

### **Checklist for Safeguards in Writing Workshops**

- Get as much information as you can from the organizer about who you will be working with. *Where* will you be facilitating? *Why* is the environment appropriate for your activity? *How* many people are attending? *What* is expected of you?
- Make the content of the workshop as clear as possible beforehand. Is there anything that participants might need to consider before joining?
- Consider pre-screening potential participants to ensure that they feel able to contribute. If this isn't feasible, draw up a Group Agreement at the outset. Can you advise participants on appropriate mental health support and resources during and after the session(s)? Do you need a counsellor to provide additional support during or after the session?
- Enable experimentation and evaluative approaches that build confidence



- Practice self-care and support independent creative practice with appropriate safeguards beyond the session – organisations like the London Arts for Health Forum (<http://www.lahf.org.uk>), Creativity Works (<http://www.creativityworks.org.uk>), and Lapidus (<https://lapidus.org.uk>) offer a range of resources, events and memberships for writers to provide support
- Create opportunities for structured feedback on the group and your own approach, and always maintain confidentiality
- Be genuine, be empathetic, and be boundaried
- Some excellent training programmes include: Introduction to Therapeutic and Reflective Writing – 8 weeks – start dates January, April, September <https://www.profwritingacademy.com/therapeutic-and-reflective-writing> and Running Writing Groups – 6 weeks - start dates January, April, September <https://www.profwritingacademy.com/running-writing-groups>

*The Writing Recoveries Conference at Glasgow University is hosted by Dr Carolyn Jess-Cooke throughout 21-23 March 2018. Tickets are free but limited. See Eventbrite <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/writing-recoveries-conference-writing-interventions-for-mental-health-tickets-38622731630>.*