CultureCase

Personal writing can be healing for people with mental health conditions

This research was conducted by **Kristine Lynn Haertl** and **Adrienne Maiers Ero-Phillips** at **St. Catherine University** and **Abbott Northwestern Hospital, USA**

Summary

This study set out to explore the healing properties of “personal writing” (i.e. that which does not take place in a formal or structured setting). Specifically, it looked at the effect of writing on the quality of life and relationships of people with a mixture of conditions who had engaged in personal writing for three or more years. The research found writing helped with ‘perspective taking’, offered an enhanced ‘understanding of the self and others’, it had a ‘spiritual’ dimension, and helped promote health and healing.

“Personal writing” encompasses activities like poetry, journaling and exploratory writing

The participants in this study had been diagnosed with a variety of mental health conditions including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety. Some described themselves as writers and for some writing was part of their identity.

The study is based on 12 face-to-face interviews

‘Nearly all participants identified the importance of writing in perspective taking, personal growth and self-awareness.’ A variety of therapeutic benefits were revealed via the interviews, including ‘improved feelings of self-worth, enhanced perspectives of mental health and mental illness, increased coping

strategies, improved stress management, and ability to cope with life's ups and downs'. The participants in the study also talked a great deal about the creative aspects of writing: self-expression, imagination and connecting with others.

Personal writing could be a useful device in clinical settings

Ultimately the authors believe that writing down (and sometime sharing) personal stories can provide many health benefits. Because writing is so individual it allows people to respond in their own ways to their conditions and their life situations, this can be hugely beneficial when under the guidance of trained clinicians and therapists.

Keywords

interview **mental health** **USA** **writing** **literature**

Title	The healing properties of writing for persons with mental health conditions
Author(s)	Haertl, K. L. & Ero-Phillips, A. M.
Publication date	2019
Source	Arts & Health, Vol 11, Iss. 1, pp. 15-25
Link	**https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17533015.2017.1413400**
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