

The Transformational Power of Expressive Writing

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Abstract

In this paper we write about our collaboration setting up and running expressive writing groups, which became workshops, in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health service in a National Health Service in London. Thivvia was a psychiatry core trainee on placement and Dawn the lone family therapist. The idea for the group arose during lockdown when we were in the office, and in a chance corridor conversation, we discovered we shared a love of journalling and poetry. Dawn related this to narrative therapy ideas, which resonated well with Thivvia's cultural storytelling traditions. Creativity sparked between us and together we were able to navigate the power structures in the service and evidence base discourses to get management permission to do this. Thivvia drew on her knowledge of poetry to create prompts to facilitate others to write creatively as a form of self-expression. In this writing, We write in a poetic style congruent with the poetic expression being developed in the workshops. We practice and write with decolonising intent, differentiating our voices, so that our separate nuances can come through as a resistance to dominant white western academic co-writing practices of seeking consensus, which can drown out alternative ways of knowing. Dawn reflects on the decolonial stance she actively adopts to support Thivvia's instinctive storytelling and ways of knowing that had been suppressed by her medical training. We reflect on the experience throughout, include some of the poems we created and conclude by encouraging others to be bold in bringing in creative practices, offering suggestions of prompts to use to encourage expressive writing.

Introduction – The collision into collaboration

This is the story of how we found each other, sparked by a mutual love of poetry and journalling, and how we collaborated to create and deliver an expressive writing group for young people using a child and adolescent mental health team in the National Health Service in outer London where

Dawn was working as the sole family therapist and Thivvia, at the time, as a psychiatry trainee. We are both cis-gendered women, Thivvia is Tamil Sri Lankan, Dawn is of white English, French, Irish and Norwegian heritage and from a working-class background. Thivvia identifies as a writer, Dawn is in a process of developing as a writer. We chose to keep our writings clearly distinct and separate in this paper but together they tell the story of what we created with each other and how we developed through this process. An example of separating authors' voices rather than creating a combined narrative is in an article by Martin and colleagues (2019), where seven authors wrote from different cultural perspectives across an Australasian context. Their writings, which they call multi-vocal, were separated, clearly indicating who wrote what - as an "indigenous notion of a collaborative meeting of minds, seeking though not demanding consensus" (p. 1). They wanted to break from academic traditions of co-writing papers, where it is not clear if there is any difference of opinion. The process of seeking consensus can result in writing where dominant white western discourses dominate and nuances of alternative ways of thinking and expressing get overridden. In this paper we write from each of our perspectives to take you on a journey from the germination of the idea to create an expressive writing group through the process of how we made it happen. We alternate our voices. Even this part of writing as "we", feels like assumptions are being made about our consensus, although through mutual excitement about the power of poetry and expressive writing we trusted that our visions were similar enough. Deeper trust that we would challenge each other if needed, emerged through the process. Sharing poetry with each other created an intimacy and took us to a level of understanding between us that might not otherwise have been achieved. Because of this deep respect we supported each other to articulate what we are each trying to say, which has contributed to enhancing each other's growth.

Creative psychotherapies used to be routinely offered in the service but were casualties of cuts and evidence base discourses. Even the psychologists complained that their skill set was being limited to cognitive behavioural therapy, often recommended in NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) guidelines. Given this context, we worried (Dawn more so), that the idea of using poetry in therapeutic work could have been seen as controversial at the time.

In this writing, we decided not to include a review of literature on the use of poetry and creative writing in health and mental health services (for example, Xiang and Yi, 2020; Slaughter and Brummel, 2019; Horsch et al., 2016; Mcardle and Byrt, 2001; Lorenz, Pulverman and Meston, 2013). Rather than an overview, we wanted our article to be a poetic read in itself, to illustrate the evocative power of poetry and expressive writing. We wanted to include more of the poems we created during the process along with reflections on our dilemmas at each stage and how we found ways to go on, so as to inspire others. Ultimately this article has become about our working together and striving to introduce an innovative creative approach, in a highly regulated context. We hope that the magic of our endeavour comes through.

Thivvia

I will introduce myself as a writer before I bring in my role as a doctor. Since I can remember, I have been a logophile. I have created words to articulate my experience when I have not found them. One that encapsulates my love of storytelling and the reverence I give to it is mytherlust – the state of being lost in a story with no desire to be found. Perhaps that is what led me to people's stories - and psychiatry. In this writing, I wrestle with my first-person voice, because I am still unlearning the ways

in which I have created distance between myself as a person and a doctor in the name of professionalism. I am learning to invite all of myself in, rather than aspire to achieve “objectivity”.

After six months in child and adolescent mental health services, I was left with a bittersweet yearning for more creative approaches. I felt this lack more acutely within a service for young people who I felt were closer to play and experimentation than those I had met in adult services. I found myself questioning what it meant to be holistic. The holistic approach of the service involved reaching out to the network around a child which is important but often overlooked the therapeutic possibilities of creating spaces that facilitated fullness and expression outside of notions of illness. In a digital age where we can create personas and present them to the world, open to judgement and filling a need for validation, it feels essential to create spaces that are honest and transparent, that allow people to see themselves and be seen without the dance of disguise. I found I was asking for accountability on a mental health service that did not believe these spaces were within the remit of therapy. I had only seen this being facilitated by artists in workshop form. Can we as clinicians use the power of expression as a tool for transforming difficult emotions and transmuting our experiences into narratives that are empowering and expansive? I was hopeful.

Within medicine, palliative care and chronic pain are two areas that see the importance of narrative and subjective experience of illness. Davies (2018) states that, “within palliative care, however, there has been a long-standing interest in how poetry may help patients and health professionals find meaning, solace and enjoyment”. Dr Sophie Ratcliffe (2016) at Oxford University has published on the ongoing “The Poetry of Medicine project”, which involves a series of one-day workshops “providing a space in which those caring for others could consider the challenges and pleasures of their working life”. Pain support groups have been used as spaces for healing – the truth of living with pain cannot be seen externally and the invisibility of it requires a deeper kind of expression. The cathartic poem promotes movement from the inside to the outside, moving a person to open up to a new reality, releasing words onto the page; it is an act of unburdening instead of coiling in on oneself. Rediscovering or reclaiming our story through poetry is a holistic process and a form of care toward ourselves that can improve healing (Hovey et al., 2018). If we allow for honest evaluation of our current approaches to mental health, and radical imagination, could it be that the opposite of depression is expression? Do we encourage suppression or expression?

My imagination took me to expressive writing workshops that combine art and narrative therapy. I wanted to collaborate with Dawn to use systemic and narrative techniques when designing the workshops. The act of writing has been a cathartic force of finding my truth through penquilibrium (another word that I created to put my finger on a feeling) – the act of restoring balance by putting pen to paper.

What if we could use expression rather than conversation to construct meaning?

Dawn

In the five years I worked in the service, the family therapy and systemic consultation I provided became well valued by the multi-disciplinary team and I completed systemic supervision training eligible for Association of Family Therapy accreditation. I was looking to spread my wings further and feeling frustrated that I was being prevented from supervising although I understood that this should not be an expectation of my pay band. At the time, I needed to unleash my creativity. I relate to Sara

Lawrence Lightfoot's (2009) exploration of the twenty-five years after reaching fifty in which she found many who did not want to wind down and retire gracefully; she interviewed people who were more interested in trying new and different ventures. At fifty-seven, I was wanting to put my years of experience to good use and perhaps I was looking to embark on a similar type of adventure. I was in the process of applying for the professional doctorate in systemic practice and I was drawn to the idea of poetry as methodology as I have written poetry as a way of expressing and processing my feelings for as long as I can remember. I had just had a poem published, see Thibert (2021) which boosted my confidence.

So, my ears pricked up when at the end of a corridor conversation with Thivvia she said that she was going to write a closing poem to a young person she had been working with. What a lovely idea.

Thivvia

I had seen writing used therapeutically as a solitary practice - in compassionate letter writing and in journaling. Prescribing poetry inspired by the patient's story or words as an act of co-creation has been a way I have softened the medical model in professional work with people experiencing mental illness. I was always looking for ways of pushing the boundaries of my clinic room. In an ending letter to a young person, I included a poem reflecting the journey I had witnessed.

*One day
Far away
From the feeling
Of coming home

The sound of waves
The warmth of sand
Faded footprints
To another land

One day
I'll find a shell
In a pocket
Of memories
The shell of
Who I become
In the story
I'll carry it with me
To listen to the waves
When I can hear
Past the screams
Drowning the thoughts
Of my mind gasping
For the safety in silence

I'm safer from them here
I'm safer from myself there*

A small act of dissent that I had never shared with any of my colleagues. But I discussed this work with Dawn and it sparked her interest. I was acutely aware that there was too much of my own perspective in that writing, and I wanted to create spaces in which people are inspired to write their own story, in their own words. To tell your story, from the oratory culture that I hail from, is a healing act, and it is political. Whose stories are told, and who tells them are questions I had to interrogate within myself.

I have witnessed and experienced the vulnerability that comes with being a patient – of how someone enters the room and undresses their deepest insecurities without reservation. I had not yet figured out how to be a doctor without being limited by the confines of a power imbalance between doctor and patient. I found myself wondering what it would be like to create safe spaces to facilitate discovery rather than hiding behind power in order to bring about disclosure.

*Some say I'm a doctor
I'd say a storyteller
You are the source
I am the sorceress*

*The only magic I know
Is when you and I
Rewrite the story*

*From why you weep
Like clouds*

*Why you rage
Like thunder*

*To why you still rise
Everyday
Like the sun*

I wrote this two years before the idea of expressive writing workshops took form. And in hindsight, as with prescribing poetry, I was still struggling to give up the 'I' in the writing of the story, to not centre myself in another's narrative and name it *collaboration*. I was also still insisting on changing the narrative in order to transmute discomfort or pain, rather than allowing it to exist in all the nuances and hues of that state. I saw that shift in my own journey when I started doing acceptance and commitment therapy for others and I could not sit in their pain without the capacity to confront my own. Medicine succumbs to the desire to take the pain away, and playing the role of a doctor allows me to deepen the denial of my humanness whilst indulging my saviour complex. By the time the idea of an expressive writing group surfaced, I was ready to bring more of myself into my clinical role as a doctor, and I was ready to be bolder with what was possible.

I wanted to decolonise the way I had come to rely on power imbalance in my role as a doctor, trained within a Europatriarchal system. In my role as a facilitator, I wanted to invite participants to bring in their personal power - of telling and sharing their story on their own terms, in safe spaces, and only to those that have earned the right to hear it.

Dawn

When Thivvia spoke about using poetry as an ending letter, I related this to narrative ideas of reauthoring letters (Hugh Fox, 2003), storytelling, unique outcomes, preferred futures, shy stories (subjugated and dominant discourses), all to be found in writings by Michael White, David Epton and others (White and Epton, 1990; White, 1992, 1998). I shared some resources on narrative therapy and gave Thivvia a mini lecture. I feel that storytelling evokes a distant, perhaps ancestral memories of connection, something like the concept of “Ubuntu” written about by Cynthia Dillard (2012, pp. 83-120), an African value of collective togetherness which is missed and yearned for in white western cultures where individualist values predominate.

We were both excited about the idea of using poetry in practice and the kinds of ways this could be done.

I had just set up a service user-led group and I invited Thivvia to talk about creative ways of working, as this would be only time she would be able to attend because her placement was ending. In the first meeting, as a warm-up exercise, I asked everyone to introduce themselves using an object. Thivvia took this to a whole other level by facilitating participants to write a poem using prompts, by imagining themselves as the object. This was a great success. Here is the poem I created with Thivvia’s prompts in bold.

I am a net
I am holey
I create safety
I let things through
In the sea
I dream of floating in the air
My nightmare is falling on the earth
I fear being too stretched
My purpose is to be a container

I had not realised that I would find a metaphor for how I see my work as a family therapist in a random object that came to hand. Other people’s poems were amazing, we were all taken with the power of what happened.

I was delighted when Thivvia suggested we run an expressive writing group together. I was encouraged by her optimism. We had the backing of the consultant psychiatrist, who was also lamenting the loss of creative therapies in the service. Once we had the green light from management, we presented the idea to the team, and they seemed to like it even if they could not imagine what it might look like. At that stage we did not really know ourselves. It was a leap in to the unknown. Thivvia and I held a consultation meeting for parents, young people and professionals to answer any questions; three mothers attended.

We initially imagined that this would be a group experience with group sharing and I was expecting to be facilitating group dynamics. It did not emerge in that way and became more like a workshop.

Thivvia

When presenting the idea to the rest of the team, I was conscious of my own difficulties of describing what I had planned to be an emergent process. I could only plan the details of the first workshop so that the group could grow without the limits I place on it. The feedback was that new ideas were refreshing, and that as long as we had thought about risk and could mitigate potential hazards it would be supported by the team leads. I had done my research and spoken to colleagues both within the service, as well as in the child and adolescent crisis team. They had run an online art group during lockdown, with young people who would be deemed to be higher risk which filled me with hope and confidence.

Kate Clanchy's (2020) manual, "how to grow your own poem" was instrumental as a guide to lifting prompts from poems, with examples. When choosing poems and designing the workshops I started with thinking about how to make it accessible and suitable for young people who were neurodiverse with a mix of backgrounds, identities and creative abilities. I also thought about the balance of structure and fluidity in how I facilitated whilst being responsive to the needs of the group. I had more ideas than I could fit into a workshop, so that I could choose the best fit in the moment.

Ultimately, I believed in the power of expression, and I believed that at the very least we would do no harm. Between us, I was confident that we had the skills and experience to hold the space, and I had no expectations (or so I thought) on the outcome. The collaboration would hold me accountable to transforming this idea into reality, ground me in systemic theory, and the most revered gift of confidence – Dawn's years of experience to catch us should we fall.

Dawn

I wanted to avoid exerting a colonial stifling influence on Thivvia's ideas. I was aware that what I said and how I said it would alter the process and possibilities for what emerged. I encouraged Thivvia, avoiding exerting control as 'the experienced therapist'. I would have taken a different approach if I thought what she was doing was not safe or disempowering. I opened myself up to learn what I could from how Thivvia imagined how the groups would run and I offered suggestions to enhance her plans, respecting and trusting her vision. She paid attention to the space she was creating, she had music playing, incense burning, almost a meditative space to be able to tune in to what might be needed. I felt calmed and brought into the present, ready and receptive to her guiding us on a journey of expressive writing.

The Workshops

Thivvia

I had encountered *list poems* in poetry workshops as a participant, which are an easy way to let go of form and coherence. An example of this, in the first session was, "a list of things no one knows about me". They were invited to write whatever came to mind. I wanted participants to reflect back thoughts they had? never told anyone – to have them written down and staring back at them. Most importantly, these thoughts, were for no one else.

I had an idea of six workshops that would build on each other and grow as the group became more

comfortable with expression in this way, and with each other.

The beginning – emotional safety and boundaries

The first two workshops were aimed at cultivating the skills of free expression so that those not familiar with writing, or writing freely, could start to explore this. There were mindfulness exercises woven in, inviting all to be more observant of our inner lives.

Shifting perspectives – soothing the self and stepping out of the self

In workshop two, the poems encouraged shifting perspective, using metaphor, and writing from the point of view of some object, to get into complex emotions; to access the depth of how something - anything, real or imagined - makes you feel. I tried a prompt in the form of a letter - “open me when you need me most”. I had tried this myself and found it to be a powerful exercise that helped me self soothe. It was a journey through my grief, and the only way out was through.

Here is what I wrote:

*Open this when you need me most
She said before she left and never returned
When she returned home to the source*

*What is opened must be closed
What is expanding must contract
Such is the way of the world
And of the universe*

*On birthdays
On celebrations
On funerals
It will be a box of magic
A piece of her silk saree
A snippet of a story
A bowl of peeled fruit
That kept the doctor away
The glasses of clairvoyance
The patience of calculation
It is a box with instructions
A timetable with her watch
And at the bottom*

*Close this when you need me no more
Leave it where it was found
It was never yours
Or mine*

Although my letter took the form of a conversation with someone I had lost, I chose to deliver the prompt to the group as a letter that they would be writing to themselves, using self-talk as a tool to soothe.

Finding the worlds of untold stories within us

Workshops three and four were focussed on the narrative therapy concept of deconstruction. The exercises were designed as a stimulus for thought about prescribed ways of being, objectifying and externalising the problem, and how we get recruited into beliefs about ourselves. Recruitment referring to other people's views being imposed on us implying a choice as to whether we accept that or not. In workshop three, this was done with the help of poems, which talk about younger versions of self and lived experience that is unspoken, for example "Some People", by Rita Higgins (1998), so that the young people could start "seeing" themselves, even when they are not seen by others. I introduced the session with a question rather than an explanation – *"If you were to write the story of your life until now, what would you title it and why?"*

It was a session that I was excited about from when I had tried out the prompts myself – prompts that turned into a rant, and one that turned into a nuanced and deeply personal ode to my lived experience. It did not have to resonate with anyone else, and I found this took away the frustration of trying to explain yourself when you are navigating a world in which you cannot see yourself reflected. I suspected that most people have similar experiences – we all have worlds within ourselves, and untold stories.

What is the label you believe that the world around you sees or defines you by?

The theme of workshop four came from the endless ways we present ourselves that is not in harmony with either the states we inhabit or what feels authentic. My own journey towards self-expression is liberating, ongoing and challenging. 'We all wear masks' by Atticus (2019) served as a reminder of this as well as an affirmation. It also occurred to me that using prompts from an Instagram poet might be more accessible and I felt it was worth trying out with young people. A poem coming from a poet, who chooses to remain anonymous as an act of protest may be of significant importance to younger people.

There are some emotions that are expressed as sounds, not quite words with a form, not in a particular language, sounds from my mother tongue that speak from my womb. This is what inspired me to use "I can't", by Charlene Shaff, which I remember but can no longer find the source, as it gives permission to add sounds to words and create new words. There is something special about a word that you have never heard before amongst other words sitting together in a line of chaos. I wondered if participants could connect to that; I was unsure, as with a lot of things in this process, of what is personal and what is universal – my connection to the poem is my experience of sound, of another language, of chaos.

Dawn

This is the poem I created from those prompts:

Can I?

Can I just do it?

Can I take my space?

Can I protest when I am tired?

Can I hire a cleaner and cope with it?

Can I have a rest please?

Can I have you pick up after yourself?

I can say no.

I can be who I am.

I take my time.

I can do what I need to do.

I can make it work.

I can just say I need some time now.

I can go at my own pace, I can write, I can get my doctorate application in.

And I will!

I can't

I can't

I can't do it all

I can't be everything to everybody all of the time.

I can't be the one to listen to everybody's woes.

I can't be the one to mop up all your messes.

I can't carry the weight of all the work.

I need some space to do what I need to do.

I can't, cantaloupe, cantankerous, cantifidious, cantipede, cantipedical, cantilungus.

I can, canape, cannon, canefficient, canepnation, canect.

Can do

I felt amazingly uplifted and empowered, and I did get on to the doctorate! I felt liberated by being given permission to experiment with language.

Re-storying with time travel – going back into our past selves, and reimagining our future selves

Thivvia

Workshops five and six were focussed on the narrative therapy concept of reauthoring. These exercises attempt to create more balanced, rich descriptions of our experience and stories we tell ourselves. In the first exercise we used five stanzas to work through a current source of conflict. Starting from where we met this struggle, describing it and objectifying it, naming it and having a conversation with it. This was followed by a stanza on overcoming the struggle and then imagining life without it. I added to the exercise by reinforcing the themes we were already working with - the power of questions and restorying. This exercise lent itself to the work of previous prompts, and it felt like it was all coming together. It called on imagination and courage, with an opportunity to expand what is possible. It was an exercise I had done in an online workshop with Rupi Kaur during lockdown, which I share below. It felt like a one size fits all warm blanket on a cold night, the chicken soup as the cure for all ailments, and I could not wait to share the exercise. It felt like spellbinding in more ways than one – to time travel, to change how much importance we allow things to have, to take back our own power.

We met in the cold air that greets

Immigrants with skin that radiate

Warmth

We met running from myself

*The first time I played kiss chase
Knowing it was wrong*

*And here you are
The final drops squeezed
From lime
The sour expectations of
Hands that gave their softness
To hold you in a palm*

*I cannot tally your sacrifices with mine
Mould my love and duty for your approval
This is not a double life
Choosing myself does not make me
Someone else
Who will keep holding a version of me
That never existed
Who will shatter if you drop a
Glass made of water*

*Somewhere inside me
Is the sound of a waterfall
The knowing gush of
Where to flow
The force of nature
That asks no questions*

*In this paradise
There are no thorns
Or rose petals
To welcome my arrival
The ground beneath my feet
Is the Earth
Everything is exactly
Where it is meant to be
Everything is waiting
The mermaids
The birds
To see me walk
In my humanness*

Double life

There were other prompts I had initially planned from poems with more complex storytelling such as “Someday I’ll love Ocean Vuong” (Vuong, 2015), however, the journey had not been what I had planned. Complex storytelling was not achievable in those six sessions and did not seem possible in a virtual setting and blank screen. Instead, I had thought of themes such as advice to your younger self, in forms that would bring together letter writing and poetry.

Participants and special moments

Dawn

Three young women attended, one from an African cultural background with a dark brown complexion, who I met in a family therapy consultation. She was being seen by a psychologist and her mother had requested a Black therapist, which we were not able to provide. She was being treated for low mood and autism was suspected, however her mother did not welcome the idea of autism assessment. She only attended the first session and commented that it was like being at school with no other feedback. Another participant's family had relocated from Iraq; she was the youngest, nearly twelve years old, diagnosed with Attention Hyperactivity Disorder. At the time of her neurodevelopmental assessment she was considered to have autism traits but did not reach the threshold for a diagnosis of autism, which her mother consistently questioned. I had been seeing her in family therapy and I referred back for autism assessment. Interestingly the neurodevelopmental service wanted to see how she participated in the expressive writing groups to inform their decision about re-assessing. She attended all of the sessions and her mother told me that she was always ready with pen and paper and chose not to share what she did in the group with her mother. She shared a poem with us, which was more than she had ever expressed in the family therapy sessions. It was amazing, I felt moved and touched by the beauty of what she wrote. Here are Thivvia's comments about her poem, "I was taken aback by the nuance about a rock and a moment of finding – discovery leading to further discovery which she has identified as growth in this poem. It is layered". Her mother told me that she had noticed a positive effect on her daughter from attending the sessions. The third young woman is of Asian origin and had been brought up in Gibraltar before moving to England. She was being seen by a psychologist and was having family therapy. She was being seen for low mood and self-harm. She could not attend two of the sessions but attended the rest. All chose to keep their cameras and microphones off, wanting to keep what they were doing private, apart from communicating via the chat function. This was a test of my capacity to cope with "not knowing" (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) in a real sense.

I was able to become a participant myself and from the beginning I found the exercises and prompted poems challenged me to express myself from deep places that drew out my inner conflicts in a way that surprised me. For example, I felt the power of what emerges on the page from prompts about love and hate, when I found that I had written:

***What I love** about disappointment is that it holds me back from really connecting with others.*

To counter this, I followed with:

***What I hate** about disappointment is that I mistakenly wrote that I loved it – what is that about?*

This was like a shock to my system, a challenge for me to face how I hold myself back, nurturing my hurt, allowing myself to be blocked.

I never knew what was going to appear on the page. I felt reassured when participants did share the poems they created and showed me that they were more than capable of responding to the prompts and to bring out their own heartfelt dilemmas and challenges in a beautifully poetic way.

Reflecting on what it became, and what we became

Thivvia

I prioritised setting the tone of the group, being clear that the space was being for one self and one's own expression – I explicitly spoke about choosing whether to engage with particular exercises, and only sharing if they wanted to.

I was disheartened when it became a space I was talking into, with a lot of silence and without faces or voices. The most uncomfortable part of facilitating was not being able to be guided by feedback during the exercises – be that facial expression or noticing someone putting their pen down.

At the end of the third workshop that only had one participant, debriefing with Dawn kept me going. She reminded me to be patient, it was for us to keep the space open and see how it evolved. I had to challenge the source of my disappointment and unlearn what makes something valuable. I was worried that asking bold questions about how we define ourselves could be unsettling. We introduced a brief “check in” conversation at the beginning and end to know what was being brought into the space, again guided by intention – although I did not want people to feel pressured to share, I felt reliant on some communication to ensure it was a containing space.

How do we measure expression?

After each session, participants gave feedback using an online poll I had set up with statements on a Likert scale inspired by the UCL generic wellbeing questionnaire. I was reassured and relieved to see that the statements “I felt safe and secure” and “I felt comfortable” received the most consistent feedback: ‘All of the time’. I encouraged a feedback poem, with a prompt. Here are the responses:

Participant - *“**This is for me because** this is a way to express my feelings, unlock good memories, do the things I like and I just think it's amazing and I feel so free. To me it feels like a way of letting your feelings out and just enjoy and relax.”*

Participant - *“**This is for me because** I feel engaged and finally do something I like”*

Dawn - *“**This is for me because** I like writing, I find I can express feelings in an unexpected way especially the free flow. I have been surprised as to what the prompts have brought out. I have also felt looked after, emotionally, dreams, hopes, pleasures, mine all mine, development, growing, an avenue, a departure, place for creativity, play, draw out.”*

There were moments that make it all worth it, and this was one of them for me.

Dawn

I was delighted when Thivvia used prompts when we met to reflect on the experience:

***The bad news is** – outcomes are measured by clinician time versus clinical hours and evidenced progress. Just saying it was good does not seem to count in the frame.*

***The good news is** – that two young people, along with Thivvia and I got more out of doing this than can be expressed. A seed has been sown, it happened, we have all had this experience, it cannot be taken away, it has been witnessed and authorised to happen, it has been legitimised through pluck and bravery. You cannot take that back and there is enough to nurture and*

elaborate on the benefits to spread the words and develop this more.

It was not a space to be rigidly defined, nor a way of ticking boxes, a restrictive arena

It was not well attended

It was not expected that we would be able to do this at all

It was not rejected

It was not unappreciated

It was not a blunt instrument

It was not a creativity killer

It was not really accepted by the existing structures

It was not dismissed

It was not suggestive

It was not expected

It was not more of the same

It was not a rigid box

It was not a bad experience

But it was expansive

But it was enriching

But it was special

But it was innovative, far reaching, magic, enriching, revolutionary, decolonising, appreciating, validating, all the things that therapy is meant to be.

But it was a way of going beyond frames that restrict and enlist

But it was a challenge to stick with a form that took me away from the list of chores to find expression beyond the mundane.

And is it not a beautiful thing

How we surprise ourselves with what emerges from the act of writing, prompted in ways that are unexpected, yet so revealing, so why unexpected? The deeper truly held responses that refuse to be suppressed and denied, much as I tried. Also, how others connect not needing to know, just being together, sharing and to grow.

Thivvia

Dawn kept encouraging me to keep writing, to use each other as inspiration and motivation in whatever this was to become. Our working together has reframed collaboration, not only did our skillsets complement one another but we celebrated each other in ways that were nourishing.

It was not something I knew

How to pitch or describe

It was not somewhere I could see

What people look like when they think

If they chew their pen, or stare out of windows

It was not somewhere you get the sense of readiness to move on

It was not something that had been done

Like this, in this way, in this place

But it was a safe space -

A space that existed in another space

*A sanctuary in Spain
 A screen in a room you already hear
 The door creaks, barefoot,
 The noises of your everyday spilling over
 The smell of crumble in the oven
 And is it not a beautiful thing
 How we surprise ourselves
 With what we write
 Who we can be
 In a space that is whatever
 We will it to be
 Unapologetic, raw, real
 And it absorbs it all
 Like the lake at dawn.*

Running the workshops was my first experience of facilitating without co-creating the story that is told – of delivering universal human experiences packaged in words for others to find and discover what it brings out in them. I am not in that finding. I am the space. We often make ourselves part of another's discovery as therapists, but I ground myself by coming back to the following question - whose stories are told (or written), and who does the telling of it?

This project started as an attempt to add to the evidence base and ends by opening a conversation on how we can imagine differently. It started with curiosity about what it would bring about and ends with more curiosity about what is possible.

There are many things we do not know after running these expressive writing workshops – it did not tell us where to go next, if it could be successful in a room, or how to quantify its success for a system like ours. But perhaps we cannot expect solutions from a system that has created the problem itself - a culture that lacks creativity. Perhaps we cannot use the same measures to validate expressive writing workshops, or any creative therapies. We can use a creative mindset to approach the problems of a restrictive model and bring more of ourselves into the roles we play as mental health clinicians. We can re-story what it is to be clinical – moving from the illusion of objectivity to modelling authenticity. We can choose to give up our power and embrace the vulnerability we ask of our patients.

The unlimited potential of expressive writing

Dawn

At the editing stage, I had just finished reading Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2012) book about exits, based on interviews of people going through important endings. I chime with Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2012, p. 186) quote from an interviewee she named Josh Arons;

"As I leave this job that I love beyond description, my greatest feelings of personal failure, of not rising to the challenge, where I surrendered to the institutional inertia rather than challenging it. Where I deferred taking actions that may have offended the norms of the institution."

The expressive writing group was a vehicle for me to find a boldness in enabling an innovation that challenged conventional (in line with medical and psychological discourses) ways of doing things, where I had been previously dampening down my ideas, so as not to appear too controversial.

During the editing, I deliberated on how much of the poems I created, I wanted published. I did not want the focus to shift too much on my process, however a large part of this journey has been about the growth that Thivvia and I have made separately and together. Soyini Maddison's (2006) article about the dialogic performative - where she highlights that we do not just reflect on ourselves, the reflections have implications and are transformative - makes me think that publishing the poems I created is a performance. In earlier drafts I included more of the poems I created, which evoked different reactions from people I asked to read it from awkwardness to celebration. In bringing some of my more bitter, angry, lonely, lamenting feelings to light is also a way to embrace and move on from these, to lessen their hold on me. If I cannot expose these feelings or hear them, how can I help others with their traumatic experiences? I found surprising how much was revealed to myself with the use of poetry prompts, which I found liberating and transformative.

I left the service shortly after we finished running the group, I wanted a new adventure. Interestingly in my new role in adult forensics I have suggested running an expressive writing group and it has been accepted without question. The "evidence-base" is not considered to apply so concretely to adult forensics as this population is often excluded from randomised control trials, as highlighted by Jackson (2015) and Lakeman (2013), and standard treatments have often not achieved sufficient change. Perhaps there is more room for creativity with the marginalised of the marginalised?

I have now used poetry prompts in several workshops I have presented, those who thought they could not write poetry, have changed that narrative about themselves. Poetry prompts could be used with family members creating a line each to create a family poem, or as a way of communicating with each other. The possibilities are endless. Or in supervision, I am sure you can think of other ways that poetry and writing prompts can be used.

Thivvia

Shortly after the expressive writing groups ended, I came to the end of my training and chose to spend my time focussing solely on my writing. Perhaps as a writer I will feel less constrained in my creativity than as a doctor. I look forward to bringing expressive writing to a room in physical space, in different groups, in different contexts. It will be shaped by what people connect to, and what it becomes will be entirely different to what this expressive writing group was. I invite you to challenge the culture that we must know what we are doing even before we begin.

Every ending is a beginning!

If you are feeling inspired, try some free writing:

A list poem:

A list of things I can share with the world...

Prompts from Najwa Zebians (2018) – "what story do I tell you"

What story do I tell you?

If I were to tell you my story

I'd wonder:

What story do I tell you?

Do I tell you the story of..

The story of..

Do I tell you the story of..

Which story do I tell you

When the only story that you might see

When you see me is..

They forget about the world within me

The wonder within me

The depth within me

They forget about...

And it saddens me that many people don't believe..

And it makes them not see

All of the other stories buried within me

I am so afraid..

No matter what..

If I can put myself in your shoes

Please try to put yourself in mine

Becoming

Thivvia

We emerge in the space between silences

We write to affirm what was spoken

1+1 does not always equal two

We is always more than you & I

Decolonising is not a metaphor

These are not our words

We have heard them before

This idea is not ours

It is all of ours

The transformation of food into flesh

The translation of feeling into expression

Creativity is our nature

Dawn

*I thought I was a rebel
 And then I met you
 Veiled in conformativity
 Irreverence seeps through
 We refuse to tame our writing
 And hide behind a we
 We found a way to be ourselves
 Challenging each to grow
 Resisting prescribing poetry
 Trusting readers to know
 How to use a good idea
 And make it now your own*

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