
Innovating a Writing Group for Female Cancer Patients: A Counselling Field Description

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ABSTRACT

The effects of a cancer diagnosis can be devastating and far-reaching. Expressive-supportive group therapy has proven useful for treating patients struggling with many of these effects. In addition, individual therapeutic writing methods have shown benefit for many individuals addressing a variety of difficult life circumstances including cancer. In this article, we describe specific techniques and processes of an innovative expressive journaling group for cancer patients offered at a comprehensive cancer centre in western Canada. Further, we discuss existential and constructivist connections to our clients' experiences and our work. In addition, we note specific practice considerations and references. Finally, implications for research into journal writing groups are provided.

RÉSUMÉ

Un diagnostic de cancer peut avoir des conséquences dévastatrices et d'une grande portée. Une thérapie de groupe par l'expression et par soutien s'est révélée efficace pour traiter les patientes devant faire face à plusieurs de ces conséquences. De plus, des méthodes individuelles d'écriture thérapeutique se sont révélées utiles pour de nombreuses personnes affrontant des circonstances de vie difficiles, y compris le cancer. Dans cet article, nous décrivons les techniques et les processus particuliers employés par un groupe novateur d'expression par l'écriture, destiné aux patientes atteintes de cancer et offert à un centre de soins anticancéreux intégrés de l'Ouest canadien. De plus, nous discutons des rapports existentiels et constructivistes entre nos travaux et les expériences de nos clientes. Nous offrons des considérations d'intérêt aux praticiens et praticiennes, ainsi que des références bibliographiques. Finalement, nous indiquons des implications pour d'éventuelles recherches sur les groupes d'écriture thérapeutique.

The psycho-social consequences of a cancer diagnosis can persist during treatment and long afterward. Uncertainty and change prevail as a person works to make sense of the impact of the disease on body, family, friendship, employment, spirit, and even lifespan. Various methods of psychological treatment have been employed to support cancer patients through these difficult, transitional times. One treatment, a journaling group, was initiated in the Department of Psychosocial and Spiritual Resources at the Cross Cancer Institute in Edmonton, Alberta.

This group was designed to assist patients in dealing with the impact of cancer and medical treatment on their lives. The group was established in response to the requests of many of our patients that we develop such an initiative. This field manuscript describes our innovation of that group. As is characteristic of many individuals attending for counselling in the Department of Psychosocial and Spiritual Resources, the participants in this group were female and many were breast cancer patients.

While some cancer counselling groups employ participant writing, no published research or field work specifically describing journaling groups with cancer patients was revealed in a search of relevant scholarly databases. As a result, our counselling approach was informed by existential cancer treatment models such as supportive expressive group therapy (Gore-Felton & Speigel, 1999). In addition, writing techniques were borrowed from a variety of commonly respected sources (e.g., Adams, 1998; Cameron, 1992; Progoff, 1992). Finally, many specific aspects of the group process evolved in response to discussion emerging from group members themselves (Spira, 1997a).

The intent of this manuscript is to provide practitioners with descriptions of our program, and references which may be useful when considering the development of group journaling programs. In addition, research and theoretical discussions relevant to our journaling group work are intended to spark the interest of both practitioners and researchers who may choose to formally explore the benefits of counselling using group journaling. For the purposes of this article, the reader should note that the terms journaling, writing therapy, expressive writing, and therapeutic writing will be used interchangeably to refer to writing reflectively on one's experience.

To begin this article, we briefly review relevant theoretical and research literature as well as provide some information about participants in our group. Then, with the aid of sample writings from these individuals, we document the journaling methods employed and some of the group process. Further, implications of existential and constructivist theories as they relate to group journaling and cancer treatment are discussed in addition to important practice considerations. Finally, future research directions are highlighted.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

To appreciate the importance of expressive writing groups for cancer patients, it is useful to start by consulting the literature on the following topics. First, we briefly draw attention to possible differences in experience as well as common long-term effects of cancer. This is followed by an overview of reflective writing as a counselling approach for individual work. Because our practice was informed by expressive-supportive group therapies with cancer patients, we go on to review important aspects of this literature. Finally, we review background literature on therapeutic writing in a counselling group context.

Impact of Cancer Diagnosis and Treatments

Cancer is not one disease but many different illnesses and their impact can vary greatly between individuals. Specifically, the psycho-social impact of cancer

can depend on a number of factors including, type of cancer contracted (Zabora, Brintzenofszoc, Curbow, Hooker, & Piantadosi, 2001), stage of disease, spread of disease, prognosis for recovery, patient age, and life stage (Kornblith, 1998; Spencer, Carver, & Price, 1998). Nevertheless, while individuals with specific kinds of cancer (e.g., breast, ovarian, head and neck) may be likely to have concerns specific to their disease, there are also very clearly documented similarities in psychosocial responses among patients from differing tumour groups (Spencer et al., 1998). Thus, possible differences in disease impact as well as similarities in psychosocial impact across cancer conditions are important considerations when employing group work with patients having mixed cancer types.

Sharing experiences with cancer often forms an important foundation of the cancer support group experience. Common to patients with many types of cancer is the long-term impact of diagnosis and treatment (i.e., surgery, chemotherapy, and/or radiation) which can extend for months and years — often long after treatment is completed (Kornblith, 1998). Long term effects of cancer can include: decreased energy levels, changes in body image, changes in self-understanding, changes in family and other relationships, fear of recurrence, and grieving a number of losses (Kornblith, 1998; Irvine, 1996; Wenzel et. al., 2002). Clearly, much of the impact of having cancer can be linked to existential concerns such as identity, life purposes, meaning, relationship, and death. Beyond the common emotional aftermath, such as anxiety and depression, the fear of dying can prompt attempts to create meaning and purpose from the experience (Serlin, Classen, Frances, & Angell, 2000). Conducting a grounded theory study, Little, Paul, Jordens, and Sayers (2002), interviewed 13 survivors of mixed cancer types and 3 lay caregivers. They concluded that cancer is an extreme experience that threatens continuity of identity and self-narrative. Consequently, we anticipated that our journaling group for cancer patients would need to address a number of issues including those of an existential and constructivist nature.

Expressive Writing as a Counselling Approach for Individuals

Within scholarly literature, researchers and counsellors coming from a variety of theoretical perspectives have specifically described writing as a vehicle for psychological insight (Dreifuss-Kattan, 1990; Hunt, 2000; Proffoff, 1992). Talerico (1986) represents expressive writing as opportunity for creativity, feeling expression, personal insight, risk taking, and impasse resolution, each of which is repeatedly mentioned in accounts of therapeutic writing (Leavitt & Pill, 1995). Specific to cancer, Little et al. (2002) note that survivors may use diaries over the course of many years to confirm a continuity of self that has been threatened by the extreme disruption of a life threatening illness.

Systematic empirical studies further substantiate some of the claims of therapeutic journaling advocates. Most fundamentally, Smyth's (1998) research synthesis of 13 available studies, using effects sizes to compare between-group differences across various domains, confirms that the benefits of expressive-writing are wide ranging. Overall, these benefits include improvements in (a)

psychological well-being, (b) general functioning, (c) physiological functioning, and (d) (reported) physical health. Benefits were evident for both clinical research participants as well as healthy participants, though the strength of effect was not as strong for those with clinical problems. Interestingly, while emotional well-being was found to improve, emotional distress increased immediately in the period preceding and following expressive writing sessions. In fact, short-term distress as a result of expressive writing has been considered related to long-term improvement (Pennebaker, 1997). Therefore, in our expressive writing group it was reasonable to assume that there would be some short-term increase in emotional distress but that longer-term personal well-being would be enhanced. We now briefly review literature addressing social support within a group format before turning to an overview of group writing.

Importance of Group in Supportive Cancer Counselling

Across a variety of conditions, social support has been demonstrated to assist patients in their attempts to cope with difficult life events, including serious medical illness (e.g., Rodin & Voshart, 1986; Spira, 1997b). Support groups provide needed social support and enhance quality of life for many cancer patients (Cope, 1995; Goodwin et al., 2001; Gore-Felton & Spiegel, 1999; Kissane et al., 1997; Edmonds, Lockwood & Cunningham, 1999; Fawzy & Fawzy, 1998; Classen et al., 2001). In fact, a limited number of studies suggest that group counselling may have a beneficial impact on the course of cancer and life expectancy (Fawzy et al., 1993; Spiegel, Bloom, Kreamer, & Gottheil, 1989). While serious methodological questions have been raised about these studies, the psychological benefits of psychosocial interventions and, notably, group interventions are generally well supported by research (Carlson & Bultz, 2002). Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is not yet clear which group methods provide clearest benefit to cancer patients. Relatively few randomized trials have been conducted and, of course, individual response to differing group treatments varies.

Factors found to be of benefit to cancer patients receiving group counselling include the opportunity to exchange information, share their illness experience, clarify their thoughts and feelings, give and receive support, and experience a sense of belonging and feeling understood by others (Cope, 1995). Like the writing group described in this article, group counselling with cancer patients often employs a supportive-expressive format founded on common existential concerns – freedom, isolation, death, and meaning (Spira, 1997a; Yalom, 1998). Hence, a strong history of practice research support for a group intervention existed at the implementation of our journaling group for cancer patients. Yet, a careful search of the literature revealed that the vast majority of supportive-expressive cancer counselling groups do not systematically employ therapeutic writing. No reasons for the absence of counselling writing groups are noted.

Group as a Place for Therapeutic Writing

Interestingly, journaling (i.e., a regular program of expressive writing) as a therapeutic method for cancer patients appears to be used primarily when group

involvement is not possible because patients live great distances from treatment centres (Serlin et al., 2000). In these cases, journaling becomes a solitary journey sometimes informed by the written stories of other cancer patients but almost always occurring as a private activity. As a method for individual counselling, writing is most commonly prescribed to address specific issues or accomplish specific tasks (e.g., Bass & Davis, 1988; Kissane et al., 1997; White & Epston, 1990). Though group journaling receives little attention in psycho-oncology literature, patient demand compelled us to consider innovating a journaling program which would responsibly meet the needs of clients and be based on existing knowledge in the area of group counselling and therapeutic writing.

THE PROGRAM AND THE PARTICIPANTS

Our journaling group took place within the Department of Psychosocial and Spiritual Resources at the Cross Cancer Institute (CCI), which is a comprehensive cancer centre in western Canada. In addition, the journaling group was affiliated with and funded by the Arts in Medicine (AIM) program at the CCI. Like many other clients in the Department of Psychosocial and Spiritual Resources at the Cross Cancer Institute, the journal group participants were all white, middle class women and all had received previous career training even if they were on disability leave or homemaking fulltime at the time of the writing group treatment. All potential group participants were verbally screened by a licensed counselling psychologist. Those for whom the program was unsuitable due to factors such as substance abuse were referred to more suitable programs in the community.

The journaling group met for two hours each week for eleven weeks. It was a closed group with fourteen members whose mean age was 53 years. Ten group members had breast cancer diagnoses and of these four had metastases. The four remaining group members had various types of cancer and two of these individuals were in advanced stages of cancer as well. Most participants were in the post-treatment stage and prognoses for the participants varied from optimistic to guarded. Participants were self-referred, psychologist referred, or physician referred. None of the women had ever journaled before, but they were enthusiastic to try.

ESTABLISHING THE GROUP AND SETTING THE STAGE FOR WRITING

Aspirations to journal writing are relatively common but even more familiar may be the chilling fear of putting pen to paper to explore difficult experiences. This process can be especially difficult knowing that one might share this writing with others. Because our group gathered with the clear intent to share stories and experience through therapeutic writing, developing safety within the group was imperative. Part of creating a safe writing space included addressing common fears about sharing written work.

Beginning in childhood most of us learn that writing is a primary target of evaluation (Elbow, 1998). We shield our writing from the potentially derisive gaze of others and are thereby robbed of the opportunity to read our own written voice. In leaving life experience unwritten, we lose a potentially rich opportunity to organize, learn from, and witness our experiences, thoughts, and feelings from another more external perspective and to discover the changes that this might make for us. In short, we lose this unique opportunity for a relationship with self.

In the group, impediments to writing were addressed directly. Discussing and establishing writing rituals that supported each writer were important and included claiming a physical space for writing, choosing writing implements, considering atmosphere such as music and candles, selecting rewards for taking the time to journal, and ensuring safe storage of the journal.

INTRODUCING JOURNALING METHODS

Because journaling was new, a graduated introduction to various journaling methods was important for the participants to feel competent, successful, and safe in returning to the group. The following figure outlines the various journaling methods employed during the group journaling sessions from week 1 to week 11. Early sessions focussed on building group cohesion (Yalom, 1998) and employed highly structured writing exercises designed to limit demands on nervous writers and enhance their sense of accomplishment. Once a sense of security had been established in the group and participants were willing to take more risks, less structured forms of writing were introduced.

While the description of group writing activities in Table 1 can leave a strong impression of technique, it is important to note that the spirit of the group was not centred on a journaling technique. Rather, it was designed as a group experience in which journaling was employed as a vehicle to assist participants in adjusting to the many life changes associated with cancer.

Group sessions followed a standard format. Each session began with a discussion and sharing of material written in response to a new journaling method that had been introduced at the end of the previous group session. Without exception, every writing exercise held appeal for various group members. The following discussion provides an elaborated description of various writing tasks as well as sample writings from group members. Due to space constraints, not all sessions will be addressed directly. Instead, we choose to highlight those methods about which we received the most supportive feedback from participants.

Sentence Stems

The technique of completing sentence stems proved to be a safe, highly structured approach to initiate writing within the group. This exercise appeared to gently ease participants into the experience of writing by providing a clear framework for emotional disclosure. It also offered an opportunity to test the safety of group members' responses to shared written work.

TABLE 1
Brief Description of Each Group Journaling Session

Group Session	Group/Writing Task
1. Establishing a Foundation	Facilitate discussion of interest in and feelings of excitement and vulnerability around writing. Establish group 'rules', e.g., nonjudgemental ethic, confidentiality, right to decline to share aloud. Normalize fears of writing (Elbow, 1998). Group members brainstorm alternatives to ensure journal privacy. Establish personal writing rituals. Share experiences with various types of journaling in the past.
2. Sentence Starters	Writers respond to a series of sentence stems such as: "I could be described as . . .", "Things I am grateful for . . .", "As I write, I notice . . .".
3. Time Out	Writers free associate three words that first come to mind. Select one word and write for a predetermined time-limit of five to ten minutes (Adams, 1998; Pennebaker, 1997; Progoff, 1992).
4. Reluctance Writing (aka: "I Don't Want To Write!")	Group members simply write as much as possible about their desire not to write (adapted from Cameron, 1992).
5. Mind Mapping	Participants each choose a word or topic upon which to reflect. Placed in the centre of the page, spokes of related words and ideas are connected to the root word. Once the <i>map</i> is created, a single leg of the map can be chosen as a topic for a time out sprint.
6. Taming Invisible Dragons	Group facilitator begins with relaxation session (e.g., Borysenko, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 1994) Participants write three feeling words at top of a page. Respond to the following series of sentence starters: 'I first think of . . .', 'Beneath this I discover . . .', 'What bothers me about this is . . .', 'What seems hopeful about this is . . .', 'What I need is . . .', 'The next step I can take is . . .' Reread responses and reflect thoughts in free writing. Close with three feeling words. (adapted from Adams, 1998)
7. Hope Writing	Facilitator introduces writings about hope (i.e., Jevne & Miller, 1999). Group discussion of hope experiences. Free responses to various starters such as: Describe a very small experience of hope in your life. Does the hope have a smell, colour, shape? How has your hope changed over time? What increases your hope? What diminishes your hope? How might you know that you were getting more hope?
8. Alphabet Poetry	Writers run letters of the alphabet vertically down the left side of a blank page. Each letter becomes the beginning letter of a new line of an alphabet poem. Names of important people, or other meaningful words can be used instead of the alphabet as the beginning column of the poem.
9. Captured Moments	Members write a character sketch of someone special or of an experience upon which the writer would like to further reflect. Focus on the look, sound, smell of the place or the presence of the person. May choose free writing, mind mapping, lists or any other writing approach. (Adams, 1990; Progoff, 1992)
10. Dream Journals	Participants write a summary of the dream in present tense. Give the dream a title. Describe the main feeling of the dream. Finally, identify characters, symbols, actions in the dream. For each element they identify, they provide their best speculation about its meaning. Respond to the following questions: What might the dream be trying to tell you? How might you follow up on the intention of the dream? (Adams, 1998; Yalom, 2002)
11. Journaling Good-bye	Each member writes a short wish to every other member to be given as a gift at the close of the session. Debrief members' experiences of being part of the journaling group.

The simplicity of completing sentence starters is deceptive. Meaningful to many members of the group, responses to the sentence openers often reflected the participants' hope that journal writing could help them to connect in a meaningful way with important aspects of self. The following are samples of participants' responses.

[Writing] is . . . a way of allowing ourselves to express the inner self and see who we truly are . . . perhaps exposing the serious things in life and allowing [us] to view them from a humourous or less intense perspective

Writing is one more way to love myself. It is being totally honest.

Time Out

Time Out became a favourite approach to journaling throughout the group sessions. Setting strict and short time parameters for writing meets two important goals. First, it makes journaling possible even on days when lengthy writing is not possible. Hence, journal writing can become manageable even during days of long hospital waits or when struggling to overcome the side effects of cancer treatment. Second, the time limits encourage the writer to focus on issues of most priority. According to Progoff (1992), time limits on journaling "draw into the foreground of a person's situation those factors that are of truly primary significance . . . leav[ing] as little time and temptation as possible for a person to rationalize his [sic] life . . ." (p. 49).

Mind Mapping and Alternate Representation in Journaling

Learning about mind mapping or webs opened the door to entirely new ways of journaling for the group. No longer was prose considered the only legitimate format for depicting lived experience. Taken by the idea of creating webs of experience, participants explored other forms of journal representation such as, photographs, poems, drawings, and even doodles. Excited with these new alternatives, some group members launched additional journals of their own intended to focus on particular interests such as spirituality. Writing based on one participant's mind map illustrates her shifting priorities and approach to life,

I've made a decision: It is to do whatever is best for me . . . Usually I would always worry about what others would think . . . I had the strength to deal with all the mental and physical pain of a doctor telling me I wasn't going to get better . . . If I can handle death, I'm sure I can handle anything that is thrown at me.

Taming Invisible Dragons

Overwhelming circumstances and emotion occasionally stymied writing as participants timidly expressed fears of unleashing more than they could handle. Strong desires for self-exploration lay pooled in the fear of possible flooding emotions. The tension was clear. To address the participants' needs, techniques of diaphragmatic breathing, and self-hypnosis were used in this and subsequent sessions (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Borysenko, 1987).

Afflicted with an unanticipated fight for life and embedded in a medical system that can leave patients feeling tethered to medical specialists for sheer survival often engenders a sense of having lost control for cancer patients. The sequence of sentence stems in *Taming Invisible Dragons* (adapted from Adams, 1998) provides a systematic approach to managing difficult emotions and circumstances. It directly acknowledges current emotional experience and directs the clients' written narratives to include an active, problem solving dimension. Importantly, it also includes the explicitly hopeful assumption that there is a next step in healing and that this action is within the client's awareness and ability.

Hope Writing

In the course of group discussions, members shared the importance of their own hope in the face of feelings of loss of control and despair. Several participants suggested that the opportunity to explore hope through writing was important. Interestingly, this explicit request fit clearly with Yalom's (1998) assertion that the installation of hope is a therapeutic factor necessary in existentially oriented group counselling. Based on writings in hope research and practice (Edey & Jevne, 2003; Edey, Jevne, & Westra, 1999; Jevne & Miller, 1999), the group was introduced to hope as a factor that can be important in addressing issues with serious illness (Dubree & Volelpohl, 1980; Stanton, Danoff-Burg, & Huggins, 2002). Described as focussed on the possibility of a future good, hope was understood as individually defined and uniquely experienced (Jevne, 1993). As such, within group sessions participants were encouraged to discover, discuss, and write about their experiences with, and understandings, of hope. Mind mapping and time out writing were techniques implemented to explore participants' relationships with hope and to identify ways of intentionally seeking hopeful perspectives and behaviours.

Captured Moments

Serious illness holds the potential to cast a dominating narrative of loss, helplessness, pain, sadness, and/or anger over the whole of life. In specifically being given the opportunity to write about life experiences or people that held a cherished place in the heart, group members were reminded that illness could not rob life of all meaning. Narratives or experiences that ran contrary to current illness experience were remembered, reinforced, and explored for meanings that were important in coping with, and understanding the limits of, serious illness. In essence, clients were encouraged to consider the ways in which past experiences could be helpful in bringing coherence to their understanding of themselves and the world as they journeyed through the difficulties of illness. Breathing a realistic quality into captured memories was seen as an important facet of strengthening the power of these counter-illness narratives. Encouraging clients to provide detailed written descriptions of sensual information such as the sight, scent, and sounds of an experience, appeared to have a vivifying effect, drawing resource-filled memories into the present and making them available for discussion.

DISCUSSION

Existential issues such as identity, relationship, and learning to live life to the fullest in the face of very serious circumstances, formed a core focus of group work throughout our meetings. Further, these issues appeared to cut across journaling methods. There may be many reasons for this. First, many of the group members, regardless of disease site, were facing poor medical prognoses. In addition, the majority of group members were breast cancer patients who had engaged in existentially oriented supportive-expressive group treatment previously. Finally, aspects of each participants' writings suggested that cancer was considered a major life event worthy of meaning-making.

The healing factors in journaling writing are a matter of continued debate (Wright & Chung, 2001) and range from cognitive explanations with limited emphasis on the need for meaning-making (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997) to an emphasis on the healing power of the creative act and finding meaning (Bolton, 1998). Regardless, just how expressive writing in a group format is useful has yet to be systematically studied. Nevertheless, our experience suggests that group journal writing is fruitful in a number of ways. We limit the following discussion primarily to existential and constructivist approaches as they can be intimately linked to the notions of meaning-making and purpose – notions which were integral to the theoretical foundations of this group. To begin our discussion we explore the ways in which journaling appears to facilitate the discovery or construction of meaning during extreme transitions. We then examine the ways in which journaling may provide a means of sustaining relationship even beyond death.

Negotiating Narratives of Self and Meaning

Our group participants wrote about and discussed multiple losses including the loss of employment, physical losses, deaths of family members and friends, and alienation from family, all in relation to their cancer experience. With each loss, the context for self appeared to change and their understandings of themselves shifted. According to many, narrative is among the most common and powerful means we possess to give meaning to experience (Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Reflecting a constructivist approach to counselling, Neimeyer (2001) notes that, "human beings are viewed as (co)authors of their life stories, struggling to compose a meaningful account of important events of their lives and revising, editing, or even dramatically rewriting these when the presuppositions that sustain these accounts are challenged by unanticipated . . . events" (p. 263). From this perspective, loss presents a challenge to one's sense of narrative coherence and sense of identity (Neimeyer, 2001). As such, it becomes necessary to edit and reauthor aspects of one's life story in order to maintain a coherent narrative of self and situation through serious cancer losses.

Other theorists discuss the potentially shattering effects of extreme transitions such as cancer as well. Yalom (1998), an existentialist, calls this break in narrative

coherence a “boundary situation” – a circumstance when the client’s phenomenological or meaning world no longer remains the same. Feminist theorist, Heilbrun (1999), uses the potent metaphor of *liminality* to describe a transition imposed on one, the word ‘limen’ meaning threshold and representing movement from one place to another. Coming from various theoretical perspectives, Neimeyer, Yalom, and Heilbrun all note that periods of transition, such as cancer, carry with them the invitation for a shift in self understanding as the client moves from an earlier story of self to a story that includes the life altering experience of cancer, the client’s place in it, and its meaning.

Transitions through cancer can be profound and pervasive. These transitions can include vast changes in health, changes in relationships with family and friends, premature advances in the life cycle such as early menopause or retirement, and returning to reevaluate previously difficult life decisions. Writing, and sharing that writing through these periods of liminality and illness offer rich possibilities to explore and reconstruct new understandings especially during such periods of confusion. Pennebaker (1997) notes that many individuals choose only to write at times of extreme personal distress and he sees this as beneficial simply because putting experience into language can make it more understandable and manageable even without interpretation. Others see writing as a creative healing act. Rather than merely documenting experience, the activity provides the opportunity for discovery, changed meanings, and new interpretations of experience (Elbow, 1973/1998; Richardson, 2000). Proffoff (1992) asserts that journaling can provide a progressive and organic approach to working through the burdens of anxiety and self-doubt that can accompany making major life transitions.

A powerful example of making a major life transition and the potential that group writing has to reshape individual perspectives was provided by one group member who was absent from work during treatment and the long months of fatigue common after treatment. Her life took on new priorities following cancer treatment and a nagging sense that workplace stress played a role in her disease never left her. She agonized over whether she ought to follow her instinct to retire early. During our hope writing session, she was invited to use time out writing to explore her fears and her hopes for the future. She wrote,

I’m doing the right thing. I hope I’m doing the right thing. I AM doing the right thing. I’m sure I’m doing the right thing. Dear God, let it be the right thing. I really want it to be the right thing. It has to be the right thing. Oh well, I’ll survive even if it’s not the right thing.

This writing proved to be one example in the journaling group where the benefits of writing and group discussion appeared to coalesce in a powerful way. In the case cited above, we invited the client to read and twice reread her written excerpt aloud in the presence of the group. The group responded with short supportive statements after each rereading. As she read, her intonation lightened and her interpretation of the struggle appeared to shift. The decision plaguing her about early retirement appeared to lose its tyrannical grip on cognitions and emotion. By the third reading, she began to see some humour in her own dilemma.

While warmly laughing through this last reading, she stated that she most certainly knew that she would survive her decision to retire. Writing about and concretely staying with her fears and her hopes appeared to change her understanding of her dilemma.

Sustaining Relationships Beyond Death

Perhaps the most impactful transition is the ever present awareness that serious illness may usher in the transition between one's life and death. Having had cancer, even if in remission, is to live with the tangible reminder that life is impermanent. In the face of death, a therapeutic writing group for oncology patients offers the rich possibility of employing group dialogue to expand and clarify participants' understanding of death. In addition, group members' fears of leaving written work behind after death may become reframed and understood as a profound benefit.

During our very first group meeting, one of the strongest impediments to writing voiced by group members was a fear that their writing would be found and read by family members for whom it was not intended. It became clear that this sense of fear was heightened by concern that such a discovery by family members could follow the author's death and that no opportunity to debrief the outcome of such a finding would be possible. While group members worked through important practicalities of safe private journal storage, the knowledge that their written material may survive beyond themselves remained. It became clear that it was possible to leave a written narrative of self and experience behind.

The possibility of leaving a journal became a particularly hopeful prospect to some members of the group. One woman with a particularly poor prognosis, began a photojournal for each of her young children. She included favourite photos, messages to her children, descriptions of her story, and short aphorisms that she had taken as guides for living. Her journals became a tangible way of remaining with her children despite her threatened future. She took great pride in the journals and the ways in which she would continue to be present to her children through her writing.

Hence, writing holds the possibility of a type of existence beyond our corporeal being and this possibility should not be ignored as we attempt to understand the potentially beneficial effects of therapeutic writing with the seriously ill. Written narratives may become stories through which meaning and relationship are revisited and reconstructed as surviving family members choose to periodically reread their deceased loved one's writings. In this way, therapeutic writing may assist not only in adjusting to one's own death, it may present an opportunity for an existence beyond death that is comforting to both patients and their families.

FEEDBACK ON THE GROUP AND ONGOING WORK

Research identifying the specific benefits of writing needs to be undertaken. Informal anonymous questionnaires completed during the last journal group

meeting clearly suggest that our journaling approach was useful to its members. Indeed, group members sought a follow-up journaling group, though program resources did not permit one being offered at that time. In addition, focus group evaluation data gathered from the Arts in Medicine (AIM) program overall also revealed the journal writing group to be a beneficial component of the cancer care experience. Given participant response to this journal group, journaling groups similar to the one we have discussed continue to be offered periodically through the Department of Psychosocial and Spiritual Resources and the Cross Cancer Institute and formal program evaluations are now beginning to be routinely conducted with group members.

In addition to the descriptions and discussion already provided, two practice limitations warrant further mention as we reflect on our counselling with cancer patients. First, there is a clear need for further research into this apparently useful combination of journaling and group treatment. Second, screening for group membership and monitoring individual group members' reactions is important as some research suggests that expressive writing may exacerbate distress associated with PTSD (cf. Gidron, Peri, Connolly, & Shalev, 1996). Hence, supportive and responsive group leadership is especially important for cancer patients with PTSD who engage in expressive writing groups.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Because group writing with cancer patients has received no research attention, the expanse of research possibilities is almost limitless. Based on the materials we have presented, we suggest a number of potentially useful research directions. To begin, existential issues appeared to form a core content of the journaling group described. While we are confident in our clinical observations, this warrants systematic investigation. A number of questions arise out of this observation that could be capably investigated using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. To begin, a thematic analysis or content analysis of group members' journals may reveal common themes represented in journal group writing. Further, in delivering journal group counselling, it is important to learn whether some journaling methods tend to elicit certain focuses, e.g., emotional expression, problem solving, and exploration of meaning. Using videotaped data and observations from group sessions it would also be possible to identify common themes represented in group discussion and discover how they may relate to content found in group members' journals. That is, it may be possible to describe a dialectic between participant journal entries and the nature of group members' contributions to group discussion. Finally, group members' experience of journaling is a crucial factor in designing and implementing such treatment. It will be important to systematically learn from participants about their experiences of the group process and about which methods they found most useful and why. Naturally, in investigating any of these questions, it will be important to take various demographic differences into account such as age, and gender, disease type, stage of treatment, and stage of disease.

SUMMARY

Our experience with a therapeutic writing group for female cancer patients suggests its usefulness and interest to our clientele. Using the strong foundations of supportive-expressive group therapy, we began the group with explicit focus on developing safety around writing and sharing written work. Group writing exercises progressed from more structured approaches to those with less structure. In addition, several topics such as reluctance writing, hope writing, dream journals, and captured moments arose in response to group discussions. Because working through major life transitions and addressing issues related to death were key elements of journaling group work, there were obvious connections to existential group counselling. In addition, constructivist approaches that focus on narratives of self and co-construction of meaning hold interesting theoretical and practical implications when we consider journal writing and life threatening illnesses such as cancer. Further research on journaling groups such as the one described here as well as other possibilities for therapeutic writing groups is warranted.

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