

WRITING THERAPY TO WRITER

An open letter from Peter Bates

Many day centres run creative writing groups as a therapeutic exercise. Sadly, few of the staff involved have thought through how participants could make the transition from writing for therapy to participating in the wider community as a person who loves reading or writing. One goal of such an approach would be that people who have used mental health services develop friendships with people in the wider community who have had no contact with mental health - and the reading or writing is a means to build this friendship. This letter aims to collect and invite further ideas about how that transition could be made.

Some dilemmas:

- A focus on getting published may exclude people who write for self-expression but are unable to deliver to the standard required by the media.
- Some writers want to generate material about mental illness or psychiatric services, but others have an interest in other subjects and feel that writing is an activity where they can leave their identity as a service user behind for a time.
- Non mental health tutors may lead creative writing or oral history sessions but be reluctant to suggest autobiographical work or other material out of fear that it will lead to inappropriate self-disclosure or distress some service users. The tutor may feel ill-equipped to deal with the person in this event.
- What is the overlap between mental health problems and getting lost in the memories, dreams and fantasy of creative writing? Or factual investigation and obsessive-compulsive problems? How do writers compensate for the loneliness?

Groups should think clearly about their purpose and balance, and the consequences of shifting the emphasis.

Has anyone in the therapeutic group ever attended a poetry reading? Is the group on a mailing list for poetry events? How would you find out where these events are to be found? Where are the creative writing groups in the community? What do these groups look like? I heard about a women's group in one community that met to discuss a book that they had all agreed to read. Strong friendships had formed, as well as providing some

shared interest in literature. How does one join? Has anyone from the therapeutic group ever visited the community-based group? Does the therapeutic group invite a guest speaker from the community group to give a reading or talk about their group? Could this be a mutual exchange of invitations?

What about writing for much smaller things, like the neighbourhood newsletter? Can I overlap my writing with another interest and take my writing into that activity as a gift to the other participants. For example, join a local neighbourhood watch committee or charity by volunteering to write minutes of the meetings. This could be a way into friendship.

Roz Goddard worked as the creative writing tutor at Smethwick FE college and ran some groups in day centres. From this position she was well placed to inform mental health service users about the opportunities in the college, and many writers made the transition from day centre to college. She also was a founder member of "Spouting Forth", a performance poetry group based in the community. A number of mental health service users joined the group, beginning as members of the audience and gradually moving into performance.

Mental Health Media (tel 0171 700 0100) run training courses to equip mental health service users to feed positive news stories to their local newspaper. Who is the contact? Does anyone else run similar courses? Are there agreed principles which guide contributors concerning the representation of mental health issues in the press? How do participants avoid being hurt by an abusive relationship with the media? Does writing to the letters page fit in here?

If a therapeutic group wants to create some materials which can be published in their own right, how do they go about it? Are there guide books about this? Can they contribute items to a community publication, rather than just do a mental health thing? How do you get to hear about writer's competitions?

Who are the famous writers, past and present, who have experienced mental health difficulties? Are their stories helpful?

Responses please to the NAWE office
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