

Traumatic Experiences can be Distanced by Narrative Means

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Abstract

This pilot study found out how distancing traumatic experiences through writing and narrative means can promote people's psychological well-being and help to let go of traumatic memories. Chose 12 writers of different ages from the contacts to the writing group based on the newspaper announcement. The selection criteria used were: a) the opportunity to commit to the group for its entire duration, b) previous experience as a writer and c) life-impairing trauma for which you wanted help. The meetings used writing, reading the written texts aloud and discussing the written texts. Received qualitative information about the improvement of the authors' well-being and the primary result was increased resources. The authors reported that their psychological and social well-being improved, their strong emotional outbursts and depression decreased and their social activity increased significantly after they started writing fiction about their trauma. They were satisfied that they had been chosen for the group and that they had dared to join. Distancing traumatic experiences through narrative means was feasible and gave promising results. Preliminary data on its effectiveness show that it would be good to conduct more similar studies. The qualitative data show that the writers liked the group writing exercises and the instructor's strong intervention. They accepted the methods used and committed to the group for its entire duration.

Keywords: Commitment • Writing • Fictional • Biography • Trauma

Introduction

This article on trauma fiction express how distancing traumatic experiences through narrative means can promote people's psychological well-being and help them let go of traumatic memories. The perspective used is user-oriented and focuses on statements related to the authors' well-being. The extensive research on which the article is based showed, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, that participants' psychological well-being improved after they transformed their autobiographical traumatic experiences into fictional stories and thus distanced them from themselves. The interviews revealed that writing had positively affected their psychological and social well-being in a variety of ways, including increased social activity, reductions in strong emotional outbursts and depression. Thematic writing and the strong intervention of the instructor were significant in terms of the results achieved by the participants, as well as reading the written texts aloud, discussions about the text and belonging to a group whose members remained constant throughout the study period.

Material and Methods

During September, 2020 and May, 2021, the participants wrote 196 texts on 13 themes, totaling 777 pages. The themes have been taken according to the wishes of the authors. The themes were: a) filming b) sickness story c) listening d) self-confidence e) own strengths f) hopefulness g) fulfilment of a wish h) slipping in time i) time extension j) contentment k) optimism l) the future and m) helper (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes of the texts, date of writing, number of texts, number of pages.

Themes	Date of writing	Number of texts	Number of pages
Filming	August, 2020	41 texts	124 pages
Sickness story	September, 2020	42 texts	211 pages
Listening	September, 2020	07 texts	13 pages
Self-confidence	October, 2020	11 texts	29 pages

Own strengths	November, 2020	08 texts	99 pages
Hopefulness	December, 2020	11 texts	29 pages
Fulfilment of a wish	January, 2021	10 texts	29 pages
Slipping in time	January, 2021	15 texts	79 pages
Time extension	February, 2021	08 texts	29 pages
Contentment	February, 2021	14 texts	32 pages
Optimism	March, 2021	07 texts	27 pages
The future	April, 2021	17 texts	58 pages
Helper	May, 2021	05 texts	18 pages

By narration, reading texts aloud and discussing texts, participants learn three areas of cognitive psychology: (a) how memory works, (b) using creativity and (c) problem solving [1]. These meetings involved distancing traumatic experiences through narrative means by writing autobiographical stories as fiction.

In fictional texts, all autobiographical material was distanced by writing all traumatic events as the experiences of another person. From the autobiographical text, all names of people and places were changed, i.e. everyone was given new identities. A lot of description and dialogue were added to the texts in such a way that it was no longer possible to recognize anyone or anything from the text [2].

As material, the fictional texts of the authors resemble the narration of the story and the material produced by writing the story. Awakening each storyteller increases resources. Finding our own words and understanding our own aspirations and feelings strengthens us. When we hear the text read by others, we get to listen, understand and accept other people and also learn from them [3]. Our optimism grows when, through a story, we take part in how someone else has faced difficult circumstances and managed. When reading your own story, you can feel that you are seen, heard and understood.

Participants

The participants were recruited through a newspaper advertisement. The participation criteria were a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress

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syndrome, previous experience as a writer, the ability to agree to the study, to participate in it and a commitment to attend the group for its duration. Each participant provided written informed consent.

Scores

After the writing group ended, I interviewed all twelve authors in the fall between 02 August, 2021 to 31 August, 2021. The shortest of the interviews lasted 52 minutes and the longest 94 minutes, i.e. the total duration of the interviews was 14 hours 27 minutes. I interviewed each author once and chose a semi-structured theme interview as the type of interview [4].

The interview questions were partly based on the themes given in the writing exercises and included not only the writing itself but also reading aloud, belonging to a writing group and the writers' psychological well-being. All themes were covered in each interview. The main questions of the interview were:

- How did you feel about the difficult issues of writing in such a group?
- How did you feel reading these texts aloud?
- How did you feel when your texts were discussed together?
- Has your writing increased or decreased outside of the group?
- Do you also go to another hobby group?
- Have you gotten any benefit from writing?
- Do you feel that you belong to this group of writers?
- Do you want to tell how you have been during this process?

The main purpose of the interview was to gather information about how the group members had experienced participating in the literary therapeutic growth group and writing about traumatic experiences. Not only did they answer my questions in the interview, they also dealt with other matters that were important to them, returned to their traumas, talked about their physical and mental illnesses, their dreams and goals for the future.

Several important meanings of belonging to a group and writing can be identified from the authors' final interviews. Based on these meanings, the answers were classified into 7 groups (a) hobby of writing (b) meaning of writing (c) meaning of reading aloud (d) social activities (e) daily chores (f) social interactions and (g) psychological well-being.

Hobby of writing

All the participants in this study were also interested in writing in their free time and they wanted to continue the texts they started in the group at home. Everyone claimed to write quite a bit between group meetings, more than just the auto fictions they started. It is noteworthy that before my research began, they did not write very often at home, although all of the subjects had previous writing experience. These new writing experiences seem to be correlated with health-related problems, especially concentration problems. So, it is clear that writing requires people to be able to concentrate and collect their thoughts. This conclusion supports previous research showing that reading is a difficult activity for those with illness-related symptoms such as fatigue and difficulty concentrating [5,6]. The interviews in this study suggest that writing about the trauma experience and focusing on writing during the meetings was initially difficult. Despite this, the participants in this study clearly valued writing and considered it very important in their lives.

One participant said that "I have gained new confidence to write about what I want" and another explained: "I don't show my writing to anyone because few things are so important to me."

One participant said that writing could be a healing activity for her and another described how she writes "to get myself going". The participants in the study also emphasized the thoughts and feelings that are usually considered insights in traditional literary therapy and they discussed embracing the realities of the texts and seeing themselves in contexts larger

than their own lives.

Results and Discussion

Meaning of writing

All participants expressed their appreciation for the texts written during the meetings. One participant said that he was particularly affected by the text he wrote, one day only and one moment at a time and he described in detail what this meant for him. Another participant said in particular that the text fragments written by others were important to him, because through them he realized how he can dare to write "with the blood of his heart" and still read his text to others. The answers of two participants show that the participants prefer short texts, which is at least partially explained by their similar thoughts about the possibility of texts to give insights and become better based on the comments given by others. However, the considerable amount of information from the interviews questions the assumption that the specific content or quality of the texts determines the therapeutic effect of the group. Most of the participants emphasized the importance of the short length of the texts, which made it possible to read them aloud and write another text in the same evening. The participants' difficulty concentrating due to their traumatic experiences meant that they were initially unable to write long texts at once, but short assignments worked better for them. Since the group meetings were every two weeks, it also seemed important to keep the texts short, especially since the participants clearly expressed their satisfaction at being able to continue the texts at home. This makes it clear that the instructor must take into account the participants' illnesses and their possible consequences when trying to release traumas through writing, while planning both the frequency of group meetings and the writing tasks. This has not been discussed much in previous studies.

Another thing that came up in the interviews, which raised the question of whether the quality of the writing should be the most important criterion in literary therapy when writing about the trauma experience, was the opportunity offered by the writing group to the participants to write about their trauma experience, which they had not previously written or even told anyone. Based on the interview, when it comes to writing, quality is not important, but the act of writing itself is, as well as the fact that the written text can be read aloud and discussed together with others. It is important to be heard next to your own text.

Meaning of louder reading

All participants experienced an increased desire to read and increased their reading as a result of participating in the writing group. As reading was a former interest of all participants, participation in the writing group can be argued to have revived an existing but dormant interest for various reasons. One participant said that after joining the research group, she had started to read more independently than before and that "it has felt really good to be able to read again". Interestingly, both she and the other participant were able to use literature occasionally in addition to writing as self-medication.

Reading has perhaps traditionally been considered a less creative endeavour than writing. This is mainly because while writing is considered active, reading is often considered a more passive and receptive endeavour. That's why the pleasure of reading is often understood as the pleasure of getting meaning from the text and this meaning is not built from pleasure. Thus, reading can recreate ourselves [7].

Social activities, interactions and daily responsibilities

The opportunity for social interaction offered by the writer's group is the third category that emerged from the interviews. It was clear to all participants in the study that it was important for their well-being to enter the social sphere and participate in social activities and the writing group was an important impetus. According to one participant, the level of social interaction in the writing group is much higher than just socializing with others in an open activity. The sense of group identity brought by the writing group was very important to the participants.

Another participant said, "I feel better if we can be a group." For her, as for the other participants, it was important that the group was stable, i.e. that the same people participated continuously. "It creates a group atmosphere, a feeling that we are together, we get to know each other in a different way," said one participant, reflecting on his participation in the writing group.

This research shows that the persistence of the group is important to users and that their views on this topic must be taken into account when determining the results of literature therapy. For most of my participants, the identity of the individual members of the group did not matter. However, one of the participants thought it was important that the meeting was always attended by the same people and the instructor, in order to preserve the feeling of the group. This attitude further reinforces the importance of the group as such in this context.

Psychological well-being

All participants felt that their participation in the writing group had a positive effect on their mental well-being. They emphasized three special features (a) the choice of topics for the texts to be written (b) the activities of the writing group and (c) the opportunities for social interaction provided by the writing group.

The writing group was obviously meaningful to the participants and participation had a positive effect on their perception of health and mental well-being. One of the participants said that she feels a little better, but that she can do more things than she did a few years ago. She suspected that writing might have had an effect on it. The other one said she always felt really good at the end of the group sessions, but the feeling faded if she didn't continue writing at home. In her own words, writing kept her alive and strong. However, the interview responses as a whole give a more complex and detailed picture of the participants' psychological well-being during the writing group. They show that participating in the group made everyone in the study feel better in the short term. All participants were able to rate the extent of psychological well-being they experienced while attending the writing group meetings. For everyone, it was a feeling that lasted from the evening until the next meeting.

One participant compared participating in a writing group to the psychological well-being she experienced when participating in an activity she enjoyed. "Instead of just being bored, I feel better."

Her statement supports previous literature therapy research showing its importance to physical health and psychological well-being. Enough traction to overcome her resistance to going outside in bad weather. However, the answers to the interview question about the participants' ability to perform everyday activities and tasks normally during the writing group meetings revealed a deeper and more permanent change. At the beginning of the study, two participants answered that writing has already helped them in the past and given them the strength to carry out everyday activities, but now as a result of this new group of writers and writings, their strength has been restored and they are able to do many different things during the week and that feeling and ability to function remains week after week. In this regard, a clear improvement in psychological well-being can be observed in eight of the twelve participants. These responses were nuanced in the interviews, with participants providing many examples of activities they felt they were able to perform better as a result of participating in the group and writing. These activities can be sorted into three categories: Writing, social activities and daily responsibilities.

The 12 participants who took part in my study, those who used their writing as a therapeutic tool have not continued their novels. However, would not consider this a negative development. Similarly, although one of the participants has not continued her novel, she now finds satisfaction in writing for her grandchildren and one participant has written poems to the extent that she has already published two self-published books.

This research shows that all therapeutic processes have the power to

change us and this change can include us going in other directions than we originally planned. It may be that when the changes brought about by writing bring us greater freedom and allow us to do things that were not possible for us before, we no longer need to write about ourselves. However, this does not mean that we will never write fiction again.

By writing fictional autobiography, we have the opportunity to create, both in our fictions and in ourselves, what Iris Murdoch has called "a house fit for free characters to live in" [8]. Some people learn to give their characters and narrators a life of their own, which opens up the possibility of creating more spontaneous and authentic fictions; others develop a more flexible relationship with their various parts, which opens up the possibility of greater inner freedom.

As the work has progressed, become more aware of the problems with my adopted approach and have some doubts about it. Applying psychodynamic theory to the written and spoken words of the people one works with involves considerable risk without the guarantees normally inherent in a therapeutic relationship. In particular, there is a possibility that the interpretations made may trigger crises that did not even exist at the time. Fortunate to select 12 participants for this study, all of whom are fairly stable and able to cope with the increased self-awareness that comes with writing and research and who had ways to find therapeutic support when needed.

Conclusion

Despite everything, valuable material has emerged from this research, which will help to open up the field of bibliotherapy in several new ways, drawing attention to many questions that require further work and especially emphasizing the possibilities of applying theory to practice. The therapeutic dimensions of autobiography in the context of creative writing and the potential use of fictional autobiography in therapy are two areas where further research is clearly needed. Future researchers will no doubt want to express these topics further, which is broader in terms of gender, class and ethnicity other than what is available and further consider the pros and cons of a psychodynamic approach.

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