

Psychotherapy Guidebook

POETRY THERAPY

Jack J. Leedy
Sherry Reiter

Poetry Therapy

Jack J. Leedy and Sherry Reiter

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Poetry Therapy

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DEFINITION

Poetry Therapy is a therapeutic process in which poetry is used for the purpose of personal growth and emotional healing.

HISTORY

Despite its recent recognition, Poetry Therapy is hardly a novel or new method of healing. It is believed that shamans and witch doctors of prehistoric times used rhythmic chants to control environmental upheaval and heal the sick of their tribe. Documented evidence proves its use as early as the fourth millennium B.C., when Egyptian chants were written on papyrus and then ingested by the patient so that the power of the words would have immediate effect. The Bible fleetingly mentions the use of poetry and music by David to soothe the savage breast of King Saul about 1,000 B.C.

Considering the historical link between poetry and healing, it is not surprising that the ancient Greeks worshipped Apollo, the dual god of medicine and poetry. About 330 B.C., Aristotle, in *Poetics*, introduced the

theory of catharsis, which became of monumental importance in the fields of therapy and art. The first official poetry therapist on record dates to the first century A.D., when a Roman physician by the name of Soranus treated the mentally disturbed by having his patients enact scripts in poetic form.

During the centuries that followed, poetry was used by individuals primarily for aesthetic purposes; recognition of the healing properties of poetry lay dormant till the twentieth century. Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, became fascinated with the similarities of dreams and poetry, as links to the unconscious. In 1959, the first formal Poetry Therapy program was instituted in the Psychiatric Division of Cumberland Hospital, Brooklyn, New York, by Dr. Jack Leedy, and the late poet Eli Greifer.

Ten years later, the Association for Poetry Therapy was founded. One of its major goals is the maintenance of standards in the training and certification of poetry therapists. The Association serves as a link and information source for about four hundred poetry therapists, including educators, mental health professionals, and recreation leaders who use Poetry Therapy in their work. In recent years, other centers for Poetry Therapy have sprung up across the country to train poetry therapists and serve the public.

TECHNIQUE

Ideally, Poetry Therapy is used as an ancillary group therapy in conjunction with individual sessions. It is suggested that co-therapists of opposite sex conduct the session to encourage maximum manifestation of transference. The current training of poetry therapists who are knowledgeable in the fields of poetry, as well as psychology, is an encouragement to those psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists who are hesitant to implement such a technique by themselves. The poetry therapist is, in one client's terms, "not one of us or one of them," but serves as a stepping-stone or link between doctor and peer.

When a person identifies with the pain or joy of the poet, emotions that may have been previously repressed are released. The poet, whether alive or long dead, is a kindred spirit whose written expression reassures the client that he is not alone. By examining the thoughts and feelings in the poem rather than the patient directly, the client remains unthreatened and retains the objectivity necessary for gaining new perspectives.

Whether the therapist brings in written material or the clients themselves write on a given theme, poetry becomes the vehicle for a dynamic group or individual session. After sharing written material, discussion of feelings and associations follow. With the release of "emotional clutter," new insight and understanding is attained.

It is the responsibility of the poetry therapist to choose his material carefully, encouraging maximum identification and participation. The “isoprinciple,” choosing a poem because its mood is identical to that of the client, is one effective guideline. Rhythm, meter, rhyme, and other poetic devices all contribute to the emotional affect of the poem, and must be taken into consideration.

Poetry utilizes the same mechanisms as dreams — symbolism, condensation, and displacement. These disguises allow the client to comfortably express what might otherwise be inappropriate or unacceptable to society. The contents and form of a poem may be examined, just as a dream is. Frequently the poem is more reliable, since its written form is complete and intact. Like the psychiatric symptom, poetry provides valuable information for the therapist, and simultaneously serves to bind and reduce anxiety.

APPLICATIONS

As an added dimension to the total treatment plan, different forms of Poetry Therapy are used in almost all types of emotional as well as physical disorders, with all age groups. Successful groups are currently being conducted in hospitals, schools, mental health clinics, methadone treatment centers, prisons, recreation centers, and geriatric homes. It has been proven

effective with neurotics, psycho-tics, retardates, drug addicts, alcoholics, and the suicidal.

Methods and techniques will necessarily vary according to the particular population. When a group has limited verbal ability, as in a retarded or preschool population, poems may be acted out or spoken, rather than written. Or a group may dictate to the group leader, which is a technique popular with adolescents in six hundred schools.

Poetry Therapy enables the client to honestly communicate what he may not be able to express in any other form. For this reason, Poetry Therapy is often successful when other therapies have failed.