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Sarah Foster

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**THE WRITING PATH TO HEALING: AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY ON WRITTEN
EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Sarah Foster

May 2017

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Sarah Foster
(digital signature)

05/08/17

The Writing Path to Healing: An Individual Study on Written Emotional Disclosure

Sarah Foster

The University of Mary Washington

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to provide writing prompts as an intervention method for adolescents who have experienced family violence and have been placed in the safe environment of family-style orphan care. The paper provides a literature review of writing as healing, also known as written emotional disclosure, in therapeutic contexts. Writing prompts are then presented designed for adolescents who have experienced complex trauma in the form of family violence. Each prompt has a specific purpose, but all prompts share a focus on empowering the adolescents to consider their identity, rise above hardships, and engage their past through reflective writing and narrative pieces. After each prompt, a description of their intended purpose in the healing process is given, along with research that supports their construction, followed by recommendations for the facilitator. The literature in the discipline shows that in order for trauma victims to walk confidently into the future, they must face the past. As writing is a noninvasive form of processing, these writing prompts are tools to help the adolescents own their stories and begin to integrate their past into the overarching narrative of their lives.

My Journey with Writing as Healing

For as long as I can remember, writing and storytelling have been the methods by which I have expressed my own creativity and made sense of my life. From telling stories around the family dinner table, to journal and letter writing in my early childhood, to creating outlandish fictional stories as a coping mechanism for the proverbial early adolescent boredom, to articulating my thoughts and beliefs in more structured academic contexts in high school and college – writing and storytelling have been my life lines. My earliest memory of writing as a form of healing in my life came when my grandfather died unexpectedly, and I wrote him a letter of goodbyes and gratitude to place in his casket before he was buried. I had so much I wanted to say, and writing allowed me to externalize the heaviness of grief that would have buried me otherwise. As I transitioned into high school and faced increasing bouts of anxiety, writing came to my aid once again as a way to process my emotions, tell the truth about what I was experiencing, and then reframe my experience as a season and not as my identity. I quite literally rediscovered my identity through the creative process.

Moreover, when I boarded a plane at the age of eighteen to volunteer for six weeks at an orphanage in Guatemala, I packed the tools I knew best: copious watercolors, pencils, journals, and face paints were prioritized over clothing. During the weeks that followed, the children who sat and colored, painted, and wrote beside me captured my heart. I came to life as I facilitated a space for the children to create and express themselves. As I encouraged the creativity they rarely could explore in an institutionalized setting, I felt my heart compelled to love them. I also discovered that the children grew in joy and felt empowered in those facilitated spaces of creative exploration. Upon my return to the United States, I was thrilled when a dear friend who happened

to be an art therapist told me I could pursue holistic healing through creativity as a profession. My passion for expressive arts therapy was born.

At first, I was determined to major in expressive arts therapy at Lesley University in Boston—the only university on the east coast with an undergraduate program of its kind. My back-up plan was to major in psychology, which I assumed would equip me to pursue a master's degree in expressive arts therapy. However, when I visited Lesley University in the fall of my senior year of high school, the advisors with whom I met encouraged me to pursue an undergraduate degree in one of the modes of therapy I hoped to utilize in my future expressive arts therapy profession. I knew that I wanted to use art, music, writing, and possibly dance—so the quest began to discover which of these I wanted to study first. While my first instinct was to lean toward art or music, I slowly began to rediscover my passion for writing during my time at community college, which drew my heart toward getting my undergraduate degree in that artistic form of expression.

While studying at JMU during my junior year in the school of Writing Rhetoric and Technical Communication (WRTC), I worked closely with Dr. Cathryn Molloy who has done research in the field of writing as healing. I spent the spring semester of my junior year researching and exploring written emotional disclosure while working on a proposal for a senior honors project centered around the topic. Dr. Molloy encouraged me to do a creative project—generating writing as healing prompts for a specific population. When I transferred to UMW for my senior year, I was thrilled when Dr. Warren Rochelle agreed to help me finish the project I had begun through an individual study.

While I initially outlined a project designed specifically for the orphaned children who originally stole my heart, I have decided to focus my project even further by narrowing my target population group to adolescent orphaned children who have experienced family violence. My hope

is that this project lays the groundwork for the creation of a writing as healing workbook for adolescent orphans to be implemented by the house parents who are caring for children at Safe Haven Village—a family-style (as opposed to institutional) orphan care non-profit ministry in Guatemala.

The purpose of this project is to provide writing prompts as an intervention method for adolescents who have experienced one or more forms of family violence and have been placed in the safe environment of family-style orphan care. These writing prompts were created to help adolescents tell their stories and rise above their experiences. Each prompt has a specific purpose, but all prompts share a focus on empowering the adolescents to consider their identity, rise above hardships, and engage their past through reflective writing and narrative pieces. The literature in the discipline shows that in order for trauma victims to walk confidently into the future, they must face the past. As writing is a noninvasive form of processing, these writing prompts will hopefully help the adolescents own their stories and begin to integrate their past into the overarching narrative of their lives.

Background and Rationale for Writing as Healing

Pennebaker's seminal 1986 research study, "Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease," laid the groundwork for understanding the value of written emotional disclosure (WED). Paramount to Pennebaker's findings was the identification of inhibition (never disclosing past trauma to others) as a key cause of adverse somatic symptoms. Specifically, the presence of "undisclosed trauma [doubles] the risk of illness" (King and Holden, 1998, p. 359). Conversely, Pennebaker's research proved that disinhibition, particularly in the form of WED, has a significant positive impact on those somatic symptoms in the long-term, even if the content is upsetting and uncomfortable. Some of these long-term

positive effects include “general enhancement in immune function” (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 9), alleviated symptoms in numerous chronic illnesses (including asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, AIDS, IBS, cancer, high blood pressure, and lupus), and physiological signs (“lower muscle tension in their face . . . drops in hand skin conductance . . . lower blood pressure and heart rates”) of reduced stress overall (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 10). Studies show that WED also improves long-term psychological well-being and can even positively impact behavior in work and school environments due to increased working memory capacity and anger management (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, pp. 11-12). Finally, WED positively influences interpersonal interactions as “writing seemed to make people more socially comfortable – better listeners, talkers, indeed better friends and partners” (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 12). Most importantly, while feeling discomfort emotionally and physically is expected at the time of initially writing about past trauma, these negative responses become less significant after repeated exposure – an effect commonly attributed to habituation (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 12).

Pennebaker’s continued research demonstrated that while transference to another individual is not necessary for these positive results, simply writing about trauma in an open format such as journal writing is not as effective (King and Holden, 1998, p. 359). Writing within the construct of guided prompts that aim at integrating thoughts (the cognitive) and feelings (the emotive) yields the best results. Pennebaker (2000) states that “traditional research on catharsis or the venting of emotions has failed to support the clinical value of emotional expression in the absence of cognitive processing” (p. 8). Because constructing cohesive narratives requires the use of both our thoughts and feelings, integrated stories of the past helps create a sense of a unified self (King and Holden, 1998, p. 361). More recent research shows that

those participants who created a story with increasing amounts of causal and insight words benefitted the most (Pennebaker, 2000, p. 10). Furthermore, the integration of the past trauma into story form allows for reflection on lessons learned and implications for the future (King and Holden, 1998, p. 361). The past trauma – often with many fragmented causes and effects – is “organized into a more coherent whole” (Pennebaker, 2000, p. 12).

Participants with a range of personalities, from a range of educational, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, have demonstrated marked benefits through engaging in WED (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 14). However, even with this broad success, Pennebaker notes that writing should never be a substitute for necessary behavioral and environmental change (King and Holden, 1998, p. 361). Furthermore, the recency of the trauma is the most notable qualification for the benefit of WED. Writing directly following the trauma has not proven beneficial (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 14). Pennebaker found that the best timing for intervention is around three to eleven weeks after the trauma, the inhibition stage (King and Holden, 1998, p. 360-361).

Both the audience and the space are important aspects for effective WED. In Wendy Ryden’s (2010) article “From Purgation to Recognition,” Ryden critiques Pennebaker’s method as purgation, expression without an audience. Ryden argues for the presence of an ethical and empathetic audience, one that helps construct the meaning of the narrative, an argument consistent with both the rhetorical space of narrative and the history of psychotherapy. Preliminary research has been conducted in this direction, with findings that suggest that while “one mechanism [written emotional disclosure] . . . reduces intrusions and avoidance independent of the social context . . . a second mechanism . . . may involve social or interpersonal factors and lead to reduced emotional and physical problems” (Radcliffe et. al

2010, p. 10). Though there were limitations to this study (such as disclosing to researchers previously unknown to the participants and disclosure specifically directed by the researcher), Radcliffe and her colleagues (2010) found that “only shared disclosure led to reduced depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and physical symptoms, whereas private disclosure did not” (p. 10). These findings support Ryden’s argument for an empathetic audience. Even Pennebaker noted in his own self-critique that, “Telling a story implies that there are other people who can listen to it” (Pennebaker 2000, p. 14). Confessions require witnesses, and “witnessing implies empathy with an end toward connection” (Ryden, 2010, p. 250). This kind of truth-telling and intimacy cultivates a sacred space, a space to be honored. Indeed, both Pennebaker and Ryden agree that the writing experience is most effective in a safe place that produces uninhibited self-disclosure. Ryden says that this safe place is essential for the necessary vulnerability that works as a catalyst for the writing as healing process.

While Pennebaker’s research supports the numerous positive effects of WED, other research also points to plausible causes for its success. Most of us know intuitively that creating meaning from past experiences would be beneficial as knowledge and meaning making are tied to our humanness. If we are designed to desire understanding, then WED and “the act of constructing stories . . . [are] natural human process[es] that [help] individuals understand their experiences and themselves” (Pennebaker, 2000, p. 3). In a support of this theory, Pennebaker found that the participants who began his study with a pre-existing “coherent story that explained some past experience did not benefit from writing” (Pennebaker, 2000, p. 10). Park and Blumberg (2002) tested this meaning-making hypothesis in an experiment that found that the cognitive processing elicited through WED resulted in marked positive changes in participants’ views of stressful situations and reduced distress regarding the situation. These adaptive changes

included “increases in understanding, resolution/acceptance, and congruency in the narratives across the 4 days of writing . . . [which led to] lessened appraisals of current stressfulness and uncontrollability” (p. 613). Their study supports the hypothesis that WED – specifically creating coherent narratives – is effective because it helps individuals regain a sense of their own agency in the act of creating meaning out of past traumatic events. Undoubtedly, perceived control in the process of meaning making contributes to the overall well-being of trauma victims who engage in WED (Andersson & Conley, 2008, p. 145).

The process of engaging emotions is undoubtedly another reason why WED has proven effective. Park and Blumberg (2002) note the unaccounted influence of emotions in their study, stating “the sequence of cognitive and emotional processing and reappraisal are complex and likely to be mutually influential” (p. 613). Conversely, someone who finds expressing emotion uncomfortable might not experience the same benefits as those who more easily identify and express emotion. Niles et al. (2014) found in his recent study “The Moderating Role of Emotional Expressivity” that “Expressive writing produced an anxiety improvement in participants relatively high on emotional expressiveness, whereas participants low on expressiveness showed increases in anxiety following expressive writing” (p. 13). This is an important qualification, one that confirms that the participant’s emotional quotient (EQ) could directly correlate with the positive and negative impact of WED. I do not believe this finding discounts WED, though, or relegates WED’s usefulness to only those who have a pre-existing high EQ. We are inherently emotional beings and would all benefit from engaging with our emotions more often. What the study conducted by Niles et al. (2014) does confirm, though, is that emotional expressivity might alter the way that WED is implemented. Perhaps those low on expressiveness would benefit by beginning to write about more concrete events and descriptions

before engaging in more abstract, emotional topics. Furthermore, Pennebaker's "Flip-Out Rule," that qualifies Pennebaker's paradigm with the caveat that "If you feel that you will flip out by writing, don't write" (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, p. 30), helps those who are self-aware of their discomfort regarding emotions and also points to a greater need for professional moderation for individuals who are less self-aware and at greater risk. Finally, constructing writing prompts that elicit more positive-emotion words and a balanced amount of negative-emotion words (Pennebaker, 2000; Niles et al. 2016), along with prompts that elicit "more frequent self-affirmation statements and greater level of detail in describing the event (an indicator of exposure)" (Niles et al., 2016, p. 270) could potentially lessen the degree of anxiety experienced by individuals low on expressiveness.

The research of social worker Brené Brown further confirms that integrating traumatic experiences into a cohesive narrative creates emotional resiliency. Brown's research data found that individuals who have faced trauma but found the strength to rise above their circumstances engaged in the honest process of looking at their past, owning their story, and daring to write a new ending. Interestingly, Brown attributes this to our biological wiring to create meaning and to find pleasure in storytelling: "Neuroeconomist Paul Zak has found that hearing a story – a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end – causes our brains to release cortisol and oxytocin. These chemicals trigger the uniquely human abilities to connect, empathize, and make meaning. Story is literally in our DNA" (p. 6). She goes on to cite neuroscientist Antonio Damasio who "reminds us, humans are not either thinking machines or feeling machines, but rather feeling machines that think" (pp. 7-8). While Brown's research and methods focus on our need to engage our emotions, she does not fail to combine the cognitive with the affective or discount the need for behavioral changes, noting that "recognizing emotion means developing awareness

about how our thinking, feeling (including our physiology), and our behavior are connected” (p. 48). Brown builds on Pennebaker’s work for her own purposes, noting that “the most effective way to foster awareness is by writing down our stories” (p. 85). Brown says, “the irony is that we attempt to disown our difficult stories to appear more whole or more acceptable, but our wholeness – even our wholeheartedness actually depends on the integration of our experiences, including our falls” (p. 43). She goes on to explain that “when we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don’t go away; instead they own us, they define us” (p. 50). Even though agency is regained through writing our own stories, Brown emphasizes the important role of vulnerability, which she defines as “the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome” (p. 4). It is in fact the mediating role of vulnerability and honesty that allows for those who have faced difficult circumstances to cross “the delta – between what we make up about our experiences and the truth we discover through the process of rumbling . . . where the meaning and wisdom of this experience live” (p. 94). Brown essentially extrapolates and builds upon the research of WED for the context of social work, underlining the empowerment of writing about trauma.

It’s important to note that WED is simply one tool of many that helps those who have experienced trauma process their past. Other therapeutic interventions have proven equally effective. Furthermore, there are studies that show that the way WED helps participants engage in mindfulness and decrease experiential avoidance might account for its effectiveness (Moore et al., 2009, p. 985).

Based on this research and my own experiences, I further conclude that the tension between public and private writing, between the communal and personal spaces, is an important consideration when discussing WED. Many people associate writing with inherently public

spaces, such as writing for academia or writing for careers. Moreover, the policing of writing in academic and work environments causes many to associate fear and anxiety with the writing process. For the purposes of WED, the facilitator/therapist should discern possible anxiety about writing and address writing fears. As proven through the research cited above, writing can be a positive means to express creativity, to find our voice, and to reify our own individuality. These affirmative outcomes would ultimately be hindered, though, if the writing process itself is attached with uncomfortable memories and emotions. These memories and emotions should be gently addressed from the beginning, and the participant should be assured that any writing in the therapeutic context will not be graded or judged. Their writing for the purposes of WED resembles much more the act of journal writing than writing for academic classes.

Reflection and My Method

I approach WED with several assumptions based on my own experiences and internal beliefs. I identify as a Protestant Christian, and while I would never impose my beliefs on future clients, I acknowledge that my method of WED is firmly based in a Judeo-Christian context. Within this context, I believe that every human individual has the capacity for creativity because I believe we are made in the image of a creative God. I believe that storytelling is in our DNA, a belief both grounded in research and in my understanding of Jesus as the Word of God as well as in a God who tells stories and created us to tell stories. I also believe that within every human individual lies the capacity for healing. Our personalities nor our circumstances have the power to dictate a state of permanent brokenness. We all have the ability to rise strong after difficult and traumatic experiences. I am in no way discounting numerous debilitating factors that could hinder this ability from actualizing. Rather, I believe that given the right tools and the right social support, everyone has the capacity to find meaning, hope, and purpose in their present lives.

I also believe that every individual is designed for relationships; we all have an inherent need for community and connection. This belief is grounded in my Christian belief that humans were designed for love and relationship and is also supported by psychological theories I find compelling, such as John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory, George Mead's interaction theory, and D.W. Winnicott's object relation psychology. Within this framework, I have conceptualized the purpose of this project with the assumption that family units are not designed to break or be a site for trauma. On the other hand, I find evidence in my own experience and in research that connection—the vulnerable, authentic experience of being seen, known, and loved—facilitates healing. As stated earlier, the right tools must be combined with social supports for an experience of empowerment that is sustainable and remains over time.

“Healing” and “wholeness” are problematic words to use broadly because they come imbedded with meaning that differs person to person. Furthermore, wholeness is often elusive and seemingly impossible after certain traumatic experiences. Depending on the degree of trauma experienced, scars often remain for a lifetime. Furthermore, abuse, neglect, and other forms of enacted trauma have unavoidable consequences physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I do not pretend that such consequences can be overcome quickly or completely. Rather, I believe the goal of WED and other therapeutic methods is to move individuals past a victim mindset to a survivor mindset, and hopefully from a survivor to a thriver. WED has the potential to move individuals who have experienced a loss of agency and voice to a place of expression, creativity, and empowerment, reclaiming their identity that may have died in the moment of trauma. Empowerment here refers to regained agency and imagination that allows individuals who have experienced trauma to dare to see the beauty in their humanness, even the beauty in their brokenness, and to envision themselves in a brighter future, one that is not defined by their

past. I believe that WED has the potential to allow these individuals to reorient their sense of self in such a way that their identity is no longer tied to the moment of trauma. WED can help us own our stories, find peace with our past, and reclaim hope for the future.

Finally, I firmly believe that trauma and suffering should not be stigmatized. Along with the benefits of increased knowledge that have come with the rise of psychology and trauma studies in the last century is the danger of relegating trauma to definable and narrow pathological conditions and explanations. The reality is that suffering and brokenness are a part of life, and “trauma” is a spectrum of experiences. Most people have either directly or indirectly experienced some form of trauma, and, therefore, trauma victims should never be “Othered.” This is exactly why I find writing as a tool for healing and connection to be so powerful. Extending the tools for storytelling and meaning making to individuals who have experienced trauma should come with two essential messages: I see your suffering, and you are not alone. The research shows that those who rise strong are those who have experienced this kind of true, empathetic connection and engaged with the right tools to find some meaning in their past and hope for the future.

Background and Context for Prompts

The following writing prompts were created as an intervention method for orphaned adolescents [using the generous age range of 10-25 (APA, 2002, p. 4), including the upper age range as trauma often impairs emotional age]. Specifically, these prompts target adolescents who have experienced complex trauma [“the experience of multiple, chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of an interpersonal nature and early life onset” (Bath, 2008, p. 17)] in the form of family violence. I envision these prompts being useful to caregivers after the adolescents have been placed in a safe environment, such as family-style orphan care. WED provides support specifically for adolescents facing interpersonal conflict.

Not surprisingly, adolescents who experience interpersonal conflict often respond with negative emotions, maladaptive coping patterns, and increased interpersonal conflict. The work of Vashchenko et al. (2007) with adolescents found that narrative writing as an intervention method resulted in increased conciliatory strategies in the presence of interpersonal conflict, strategies like restructuring and acceptance, and a decrease in nonconciliatory strategies such as withdrawal, acting out, and distraction (p. 253).

The age of the intended population group coupled with the risks of complex trauma necessitate the presence of an adult to act as both facilitator of the writing process and as witness to the traumatic events the child may express. Here I rely on Wendy Ryden's dialogic model of WED that includes an empathetic audience "configured as an ethical community whose role is to bear witness to the words of suffering or other human experience articulated by the writer" (248). While Pennebaker's univocal model undoubtedly paved the way for WED to find a viable presence in the field of psychology and writing studies, I believe Ryden's understanding of audience is more conducive for the population I am targeting. By requiring a facilitator who both guides the writing process and works with the adolescent to aid the process of integration and constructing meaning, I hope to avoid the dangers of WED found in Unterhitzberger and Rosner's (2014) study with adolescent orphans in Rwanda, a study that implemented unstructured writing with no feedback and resulted in no conclusive benefits. The setting of implementing the writing prompts should more closely resemble Wallik and Kazemek's (2008) work implementing written personal stories with "at risk" or "delinquent" youth in which the use of a safe place of "nonjudgmental acceptance" and an audience who listens "carefully without interruption," giving feedback through "rapt attention, facial gestures, inviting postures" and helping co-create the stories, proved highly effective and beneficial for the children (p. 56).

Writing Prompts

Prompt 1: Describe your most recent birthday party. Where was your party? What did the decorations look like? What foods did you eat? Who was there? What was your favorite part of the party? Did you play games? Try to describe your emotions before, during, and after your party. Write a story about your most recent birthday party including as much detail as possible.

Prompt 2: Describe your favorite place. Where is this place? How often do you visit this place? What does it look like? What do you like to do in this place? Write a story about your favorite memory in your favorite place, including as much information as possible.

Prompt 3: Describe your home. Where is your home? How long have you lived in your home? What does your home look like? What is your favorite room in your home? Write a story about your favorite memory in your home including as much detail as possible.

Prompt 4: Describe your childhood home. Where was your childhood home? How long did you live there? What did your home look like? When did you leave your childhood home and why? Write a story about what you liked and/or what you disliked about your childhood home, including as many positive and negative memories as you can think of right now.

Prompt 5: Describe your favorite person. When did you meet this person? How did you meet this person? What is your relationship to this person? How have they positively impacted your life? How do you spend time with this person? What do you like most about this person? Write a story about your favorite memory with this person.

Prompt 6: Write a story about a conflict you have experienced with someone else. Describe your relationship with this person. Describe what caused the conflict. What were you feeling during that conflict? How do you feel now while remembering the event? What do you think the other person was feeling? How do you think the other person feels now? How could the conflict have been avoided?

Prompt 7: Create a gratitude list. List as many things as you would like that you are thankful for right now. You can write anything – concrete or abstract, big or small, past or present. Write a story about one of the items on your list.

Notes for the Facilitator

Prompt 1 is designed to help adolescents think about their identity as they talk about their birthday, and to also think about social supports as the prompt encourages them to write about who was present at their birthday party celebrating their life. Although the prompt asks them to briefly engage with their emotions, most of the questions focus on external, concrete descriptions. Prompt 2 continues with an external, concrete question. However, the rationale behind this prompt is a bit more nuanced. One research study shows that when adolescents talk about their favorite place, they often begin to discuss their interests, talents, and favorite activities because it is often in this place that they feel the freedom to express themselves (Wellik & Kazemek, 2008, p. 57-58). Therefore, this prompt was created with the hope of eliciting a more introspective response. Prompt 3 again continues with asking adolescents to create external and concrete descriptions with the hope that their descriptions of their present home will affirm a sense of safety and the presence of social supports. After these prompts focused on identity,

social supports, and safety, Prompt 4 is more abstract and emotional as it asks the adolescent to engage in possible past trauma at the site of their childhood home. Prompt 5 should be implemented directly following Prompt 4 to reaffirm social supports and a sense of safety. Prompt 6 then returns to possible past trauma as it asks the adolescent to describe past interpersonal conflict. This prompt was created to help them engage with their emotions, to exercise Theory of Mind and think about what the other person involved was feeling, and also to hopefully elicit conciliatory strategies as it asks them how the conflict could have been avoided. Finally, Prompt 7 can be implemented in any stage, before or after any prompt. It was designed with the intent of aiding the writing process when the adolescent feels overwhelmed with either the writing process itself or the emotional content of their narrative. It can either jumpstart the writing process or serve as a way to engage in positive mindfulness after writing about past trauma.

There are a number of different ways that a facilitator can help the adolescent(s) if they experience anxiety or do not know how to begin writing their narratives. Andersson and Conley (2013) found that using the third person instead of the first person helps individuals take on different perspectives, aids in the writing process, and has proven beneficial for the processing of trauma (p. 47). The facilitator could also draw upon the narrative intervention method called the mutual storytelling technique as conceptualized in the special education field. Stiles and Kottman (1990) present a case study of a seven-year old client who worked through suicidal thoughts empowered by the mutual storytelling technique. First, the child is encouraged to tell a story. The counselor analyzes the metaphors and then retells the story with healthier behaviors, more positive themes, and a more hopeful conclusion (p. 2). In an alternative version, called the mutual storytelling writing game, the facilitator would begin a sentence according to the prompt

and have the adolescent complete the sentence. This exchange would continue until the end of the narrative (Scorzelli & Gold, 1999, p. 3). In this conception of the game, “the counselor places no restrictions on what the child can say. Based on the child's preference or limitations (i.e., learning disability), the counselor can either write down the responses of the child or let the child write his or her own responses (Scorzelli & Gold, 1999, p. 3). The mutual storytelling technique can be implemented one-on-one between the adolescent and the facilitator or in a group therapy session. The strength of the technique lies in its focus on the importance of community and audience as a part of the WED task. While helping adolescents to process their past trauma in a way that empowers them into a more hopeful future should be the primary goal of a facilitator, the role of community cannot be discounted. Adolescents will arguably never achieve the end goal without the help and security of social supports. The mutual storytelling technique is, therefore, a great way for facilitators to foster connection throughout the writing process.

Conclusion

My hope in creating these prompts is to send a message of empowerment to the adolescents who find themselves in a therapeutic context that implements WED. This project is for those who have been broken and bruised, those who believe they are defined by their past and have resigned to a life without hope for the future. May writing find its way into the lives of those isolated in fear and shame as a method of processing the trauma of the past and of externalizing the truth about the physical and emotional reality of the experience. My research and experience leads me to believe that this process of truth-telling opens the door for redemption to find a place in our lives – the redemption of our identities as individuals who are more than our past traumas.

"I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

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