Creating a Creative Writing Based Self-Reflexive Practice

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Who Am I?

• PGY2 in Family Medicine at Western University → Interest in Palliative Care
• Member of the team representing London, Ontario in the 2012 Canadian Festival of Spoken Word
• Previous Co-Director of the London Poetry Slam
• Previous facilitator of arts-based programming with marginalized women in London, ON
Disclosures/Conflicts

• None
Biases

• I’m a poet
Objectives

• To gain experience with introductory writing exercises for use in group settings (to help hospice palliative care teams work through emotionally complex experiences together)
• To develop confidence in using creating writing for self-care
• To learn practical steps for how to develop an independent self-reflective writing practice
• To further enrich communication and team work skills
Background

• Burn-out and compassion fatigue is common to both **individuals** and **teams** working with patients at end-of-life\(^1\)

• 62% of palliative care and hospice clinicians experienced burn-out (US data; n = 1357)

• During the 2014 AAHPM/HPNA Annual Assembly 3 focus groups on burnout highlighted the importance of **organizational support** for self-care modalities.\(^3\)

• “Palliative care professionals are highly trained in caring for others, but they may receive little to no training in caring for themselves”\(^4\)
Self-Care

“What if self-care is not so much about stress management and damage limitation as about finding ways of remembering and staying connected in the workplace to the wholeness that is already there?”

– M. Kearney and R. Weininger
Healing Connections

Four Domains of healing connections\(^5\)*:

1) *Within the individual*: meditation, **reflective writing**, dream work

2) *With others*: quality time with significant others, humor

3) *With the phenomenal world*: exercise, yoga, massage, nature, music

4) *With ultimate meaning*: spiritual and religious practice, **creative expression**

*from Mount et. al’s phenomenological study of meaning in the context of life-limiting illness, applied by Kearney and Weininger to whole-person self-care*
Core Beliefs

• Creative writing for self-care does not need to be: “good”, esthetically pleasing, or eloquent.

• You do not need to know how to write to explore your emotions and experience through creative writing.

• Creative writing for self-care should be:
  – Honest
  – Thoughtful
  – Helpful

• You do not need to arrive at a finished product
Overview

• **Technique:** Metaphorical Micro-Poems

• **Modifications:**
  – Independent vs. as a group
  – Theme vs. clinical encounter

• **Recommendations:** for adding creative writing to your team or individual self-care practice
Death

Colour? Purple, like spent clouds after the rain.

Taste? Thick, heavy paste, that won’t go away.

Smell? It smells like a heavy smoke cloud that makes it hard to breath.

Looks like? Wide open skies varying in colors darkness with light on the horizon

Sounds like? Nothing, we rarely hear such a noise, it seems to not even exist.
A Collaborative Poem on Death

Death is the color purple,
like spent clouds after rain,

It tastes like thick, heavy paste, that won’t go away
  It smells like a heavy smoke cloud that makes it hard to breathe.

Death looks like wide open skies varying in colors
  darkness with lightness on the horizon.

It sounds like nothing:
  we rarely hear such a noise,
  it seems not to even exist.
Group Practice

• Gather into groups of eight
• Each person starts with a unique card with a word at the top
• Each person chooses to answer one of the questions on the card (with a metaphor)
• The cards are then shuffled and redistributed
• The next person chooses to answer another question on the card (with a metaphor) + adds to any previous answers
• This cycle continues until all questions are answered
• The last person to receive the card reads the responses from top to bottom and makes edits as needed
Collaborative Metaphorical Micro-Poems

• Quick structured poems that can be written as a group
• Allow for the group to compare and contrast their experiences and feelings
• Can be used to lead a debrief or commemorate an important moment or patient experience
• Suited for interdisciplinary teams
• Can be used to collaborate with the patient
Independent

Metaphorical Micro-Poems

• Allow us dive into our emotions on a theme, clinical scenario, or person (often bypassing the cognitive details)

• Can act as an excellent tool to explore and document clinical experiences that were particularly meaningful, challenging, or confusing

• Short, simple – can be done daily and throughout the work day
My Own Example

**Moment:** The moment before I told her and her husband that her cancer had spread to her lungs

**Color:** Orange, like my mother’s favorite bathing suit

**Looked like:** My mother sitting in a two piece bikini, me wielding a water gun, her begging for me not to ruin her warm, glowing moment

**Sounded like:** Pleasant silence that didn’t deserve to be broken

**Tasted Like:** Dirt on the back of my palate and sweetness on the front.

**Felt Like:** Goose-pimples climbing your arms. Like the terror of ripping someone’s world wide open.

**Smelled Like:** Sweet sweat as a sign of my fear.
The moment before I told her that her cancer had spread to her lungs:

looked in some rudimentary way similar to a memory of my mother. Her, sitting pretty in a two piece orange bikini. Me, wielding a water hose, hardly big enough to hold it up. Her, begging me not to ruin her glowing moment, inviting me into her lap instead.

It wasn’t very different, that moment. The room sounded like pleasant silence that didn’t deserve to be broken. Tasted like dirt on the back of my palate, spoiling the sweetness on my tongue. And as sick as she was, she was radiant. Much like my mother.

Goose-pimples danced upon my arms, and I couldn’t help but feel like I just wanted to take refuge on the edge of her cozy bed – settle into her sweetness, share stories, and memories, and bond over simple conversations with hidden meanings. The smell of sweet sweat filled the room instead; a sign of my fear creeping back in, a sign of her disease, always present.

She took my hand, as her husband asked of her results. Pressed her palm into mine like hands pressed in prayer. As if inviting the coolness of water. As if asking to bath in the knowledge of her reality, and the evidence she needed to make peace with the finality of it all. As if to tell me, that unlike my mother, there was nothing that could take away her warmth.

Nothing that could end, this glowing moment.
Independent Practice

• Choose a clinical experience, or person to write about

• Answer the following questions:
  – Color?
  – Tastes like?
  – Smells like?
  – Sounds like?
  – Looks like?
  – Feels like?

• Choose to stop there, or turn your micro-poem in a macro-poem!
Developing Your Own Practice

• Carry a small journal with you
• Write when you feel moved to write (even if you can only jot down a few notes to come back to later)
• Ear-mark time each week to make it a habit
• Share your work if it makes you feel heard; keep your work for your eyes only if it feels too private
• Make sure you take breaks if the work becomes too intense
References


