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WRITE YOURSELF

EXPERIENCES OF A THERAPEUTIC WRITING GROUP FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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About this briefing

Previous research has demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing for survivors of sexual abuse (Wright, 2004, 2012, 2016). However, there is little research on the benefits of facilitated writing groups led by organisations such as charities or counselling agencies, and a lack of practice guidelines.

This briefing summarises experiences from a pilot writing group for survivors of abuse. It highlights key issues that emerged and shares learning to inform future therapeutic writing programmes.

About the pilot

The pilot writing group, *Write Yourself*, was facilitated by Safeline, a Warwickshire-based charity that provides support to survivors of sexual abuse and their families. The writing sessions consisted of structured exercises and discussion, often based around a particular theme or feeling. Seven women took part in the group, which ran for two hours a week over a 10 week period.

Recommendations for practice

Women taking part in *Write Yourself* raised some important issues that provide useful learning for future implementation of therapeutic writing groups:

- Receiving one-to-one therapy alongside a writing group is necessary to enable women to further explore issues raised through the writing experience.
- The group environment should feel safe and supportive. Facilitators need to be understanding and aware of the dynamics that can be generated in a survivors' group.
- Facilitators should be independent therapists and not already counselling participants outside of the group.
- Participants should be given sufficient information about what to expect from such a group, and made aware that the experience could trigger new issues.
- The 10 week pilot was considered 'too short' for a therapeutic writing group.

University of Warwick researchers interviewed participants during and after this time to understand whether they had found the experience beneficial.

The majority of women had used writing in different ways before joining the group, although for most this was not for therapeutic purposes and they described their previous experiences as a 'struggle'.

Key findings

Motivation and expectations

Women taking part in the group had been silent about their experiences for decades before seeking any support. They described how they had used silence as a coping strategy and to protect others from knowledge of the abuse. Survivors also remained silent because they were aware of the social stigma often associated with abuse, because they had not been listened to previously, or because they had been threatened not to say anything by their abusers.

Women had different reasons for deciding to join the *Write Yourself* group. For some it was an opportunity to reduce social isolation, while for others it was a chance to learn about new ways of dealing with their experiences or to break the pattern they had experienced of being silenced. Many of the women said they would have liked more information about what to expect from the group.

Group environment and activities

Being in a supportive environment, with people who shared common experiences, was of great importance to the women. They reported that it made sharing easier, although they were sometimes unsure about how much to share and it took a few weeks to adapt.

"...you realise when you're in a group you're not on your own...it's not just you trying to sort things out."

Women commented positively on the structure of *Write Yourself* and the group exercises. They preferred activities in small groups and pairs rather than the larger group work, and valued the non-directive approach of the facilitators. Some techniques learnt in the group proved to be of particular benefit, such as the six-minute writing challenge which has a time-limit to prevent it feeling overwhelming.

"It encourages you to ask the questions that find the answers that you yourself want...with the reflective writing we're doing there is no right or wrong and...that permission gives you a freedom."

Impact on self

All but one woman spoke positively about *Write Yourself* but also talked about how challenging it had been. The experience led to significant changes for most participants at an individual level. Several women

Further information

This briefing is based on: Wright, J. and Thiara, R. (2017) *Write Yourself: A creative writing group for therapeutic purposes. Report of the pilot project.*

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reported that it gave them new insights into their feelings or responses to certain situations, or raised issues they had not explored before.

"It's certainly helped me as far as my therapy's concerned with my counsellor, it's broken a couple of barriers that we just couldn't..."

"...the exercises and the reflections and the way to investigate yourself was a different way of doing it and that works better for me."

After the group ended, women reported feeling more confident and stronger to make their own decisions as a result of starting to deal with the issues that came up during the process. Most women said they were making greater use of writing, with several saying it had become 'easier'. One woman was using writing to process feelings and make decisions in her daily life. Another was writing about her feelings on a daily basis, and a third had even had a letter published in *The Guardian*.

"I wish I'd had it possibly when I was almost at the peak of my crisis...it would have given me means to explore what was going on and yeah possibly offered understandings to me that I didn't have at the time..."

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