

The Power of Letter Writing in Therapy - A Game Changer

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Letter writing has lost its favor amongst people in general. Many people communicate by e-mailing, texting, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, speaking by phone, or other forms of social media. Communication by letter writing is viewed as antiquated. Once upon a time, this was how we communicated and there was a lot of joy in going to the mailbox and receiving letters from your loved ones. There was a lot of compassion put into constructing a letter to your loved ones. Now, we live in a society where everything and everybody wants things done instantaneously. If you would ask most people why they do not write letters you would get a variety of comments. At the top of the list is: "it is too time consuming", "who has stamps", and "who has time to sit down and compose a letter". What people are failing to realize is that the same amount of time it takes to communicate in others forms of communication is similar to that of letter writing. Letter writing has become a lost art among the general populace; however, those of us who understand and appreciate the power of letter writing are keeping it alive.

On a personal note, I receive great joy in sitting down to compose a letter to send to my friends and family members. The responses are always overwhelmingly positive. They really enjoy the fact that I took the time to write a personal letter using my own handwriting. I will be the first to admit my penmanship is not the best and requires a great deal to comprehend. Nevertheless, it stirs the souls of my loved ones, making them feel exceptionally special and puts a smile on their faces. It gives me great joy knowing that they have been encouraged by the words I have written.

Experiencing firsthand how letter writing can be so powerful in my own personal life has moved me to use it in my professional life as well. I actually started a project in my graduate Group Dynamics course where I have the students to compose two kinds of letters. The first letter they write is a love letter to themselves. The second one they write is a letter of forgiveness. This letter can be to themselves or to someone in their lives that they have been withholding forgiveness and they want to release that negative energy. I have been conducting this project for approximately two years. The students have found this exercise to be a powerful healing technique which allows them to tap into their innermost emotions, pains and hurts. Overall, I have received wonderful comments about how powerful the exercise was and to keep this activity for the class. I enjoy seeing the students who are becoming future professional counselors get in touch with their own pain, hurts, and emotional baggage. Additionally, to be able to work through the process in the small classroom group setting where there is no judgement is very beneficial. Having witnessed, both in my personal and professional life, how extremely powerful letter writing can be, lead me to pen this article.

Letter writing as part of therapy is not a new technique. It has been around for some time now. Letter writing allows the client to express feelings they might not otherwise express in talk therapy. There are people who are more comfortable with speaking about how they feel, while there are those who will be shy and feel embarrassed. So, allowing them to discuss it on paper provides a catharsis of feelings and emotions you would not otherwise obtain from the client during talk therapy. With some people, suggesting to them to write might lead them to clam up. They may say to themselves, "I am not comfortable with my writing". You can assure them by telling them there

will be no judgement on how you write or even what you write. Of course, I would caution you to make them aware that they cannot use profanity to express themselves. The power of writing a letter is not only therapeutic for the person who is writing the message but for the person who will receive the message. You have probably heard the saying that there is “power in words”. Well, that rings true in therapeutic letter writing as well. The power of letter writing is limitless. A lot of what we communicate is not always what we say but more so in what we do not say; therefore, when clients are given the opportunity to freely express their thoughts on paper, it can be quite liberating. It’s like the person has been set free and is no longer in bondage or enslaved to the thoughts they have been carrying in their hearts and heads. I have witnessed many people weep uncontrollably for the first time in their lives. Some are shredding tears for the inner child that was abused, abandoned, and neglected by people they trusted. It is through the power of communication that we are able to set people free from years of emotional baggage that they have been carrying around all their lives.

Writing can be a bit intimidating and overwhelming for many people. Put your client at ease by letting them know that they do not have to be a writer to participate in therapeutic writing. Reassure them that they will not be graded on their grammar. Once they get this out of their heads, they are now ready to take the journey without any trepidation. Sure, they might continue to experience some degree of hesitation, and if so, you may request that they record their message(s).

Three types of writings to engage your clients:

- **Free Style Writing** - Writing freely what is on your mind. The person literally does a brain dump; what comes up is what they will write. There is no censoring or structure as to what is being communicated on paper.
- **Poetry Style Writing** – Writing that is poetic in nature where the client gets in touch with their emotions. They can write about images, which gives voice to their pain in an abstract manner. They can also construct poems, raps, or songs. The goal is to allow the client to make sense out of their own struggles in a style that resonate with their soul.
- **Letter Writing** – The client will compose a letter in which they want to express their feelings. The letter can be where they speak about some unfinished business they might have with others. These letters are usually not sent to the person. The client is given the opportunity to express their truths about a situation(s).

Tips for Letter Writing

- Creates a Space for People to Tell Their Own Stories
- Organizes No Nonsense Thoughts
- Releases Emotional Baggage
- Unlimited Availability
- Very Inexpensive (a pad and pen)
- A Personal Therapy Session

Benefits of Letter Writing

- Love Letter to Yourself
- Love Letter to Your Loved Ones
- Forgiveness Letter to Yourself
- Forgiveness Letter to Others
- A Letter of Release
- Good Bye Letter
- Letter of Empathy

- Letter of Gratitude
- Letter of Healing
- I Need to Make a Change Letter
- No More Shame Letter
- Therapist Letter to Client
- Grief Letter
- Couples Letter
- Campaign Letter
- I Am Committed Letter

There might be other types of letters you want to add to the list. These are a few examples of letters I have found helpful.

Examples of Letter Writing Exercises and Sentence Completion:

- **Objects** – Have the person to bring an object that reminds them of a situation or person and allow them to express their emotions.
- **Photographs** – You will write about what was actually occurring in the photograph, what were your feelings, what impact does the picture have on you now and why or what you would like to say to the people in the photograph?
- **Sentence Completions** – These are used to give people a jumpstart with their writing. Examples are:
 - Things I like about me
 - Things I do not like about myself
 - Things that worry me the most
 - I am the happiest when _____.
 - If I could change some things about my life it would be _____.
 - I have trouble sleeping when _____.
 - I wish I could _____.
 - Things I hope for myself and others are _____.
- **Ideas for letter writing when someone loses a loved one** – Having people to express what they are feeling when they lose someone is extremely thought provoking. People are left many times with several things they wished they could have told their love ones prior to them departing this life.
- **Examples of sentence completions:**
 - Now that you are gone I feel _____.
 - My best memory of you was when _____.
 - I really wish that _____.
 - If I had the opportunity to do this over again, I would _____.
 - Sometimes I think about when _____.
 - I wish I would have told you _____.
 - What I miss the most about you is _____.
 - When I think about _____ I feel _____.
- **Letter writing for couples** – After the wedding, couples are busy trying to establish their lives. Unfortunately, communication is one of the first things that begin to crumble in a relationship. Letter writing among couples allows the lines of communication to stay open. It is an excellent way to keep the excitement and fire in a relationship. The goal of letter writing with couples is to bring them closer together and allow them to have a better understanding of how the other person is feeling. There are times when one of the partners would love to communicate how she or he is feeling without being interrupted, devalued or made to feel like what they are saying is not an adequate account of what has taken place in their lives.

Couples techniques:

- A Love Letter describing how you feel about the person
- A letter communicating how you feel accepted and loved by your partner
- A celebration letter about how much you appreciate the relationship
- A metaphor, sport, poem, or song that describes your relationship
- A letter indicating the hopes and dreams you have for the relationship
- Fill in the blank “If I was living the best version of myself as your partner, I would_____. Here are some things I can do differently _____. Here are some things I would keep _____. I would love to hear your thoughts. “
- I love you best when _____, I love you least when_____.
- Forgiveness Letter.

They should share their letters with their spouses. It is important that couples create an atmosphere in their relationship where they can openly discuss their feelings. There might be times when they do not feel comfortable with this being the right time. Never force the person to share their letter(s) until they are ready. You want to make sure the time is right and the time is ripe. Otherwise, this can do more harm than good. Honestly, if couples never feel the time is right for them to discuss their feelings with their spouse then you certainly want to examine why they are having these sort of feelings. Communication is the bedrock of any relationship. Therefore, spouses not being able to communicate their feelings with their loved ones might mean there are some other underlining issues that needs to be addressed.

In conclusion not everyone will be on board with the power of writing letters. You want to make sure the persons you are working with feels comfortable with the therapeutic letter writing technique. Be sure to explain to your clients that they do not have to send the letter. They will discover that this is a very effective technique which allows them to deal with their emotions in very non-threatening manner. Make sure you create a safe non-judgmental environment that is warm and full of empathy. Allow the person to expression their emotions in ways that are most comfortable for them. It can be in the form of a poem, poetry, spoken word, etc. Allow people to have the freedom to unleash their emotions in ways that will be liberating for them. Journal writing is a way that people can get their emotions out on paper. They can set aside a designated time each day for writing what is on their heart and in their mind. I like to tell people to put a time and date on what they are writing. This allows them, when they revisit their writing, to be able to see how they once felt and how they are feeling now. Explain to them not to hold any emotions back when they are writing. The mantra I use is “release, relax, let go and let it all hang out”.

Do keep in mind that letter writing is not a genie in a bottle that you can tell all your feelings to and you will instantaneously feel better. Sometimes there have been times when people expressed themselves and their burdens were immediately eradicated; however, for many of us, this is not a destination but a journey. You will discover that there is power in letter writing the same as when people watch a movie or read a book and they start to feel better because it brings clarity to their situation(s).

There are some limitations to letter writing: (1) People who suffer from cognitive or intellectual disabilities will find it difficult to complete this task (2) Research has indicated having people to relive traumatic past experiences can be extremely detrimental to the person (3) Not all people will benefit from positively composing letters and (4) Some people will not be comfortable with putting their emotions on paper. Be mindful of these limitations and use the power of letter writing accordingly. You will discover letter writing is indeed an excellent tool to have in your tool kit.

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

Recommended Reading List

1. The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing by Gillie Bolton
2. Journal to the Self by Kathleen Adams
3. The New Diary by Tristine Rainer
4. The Healing Power of Writing: A Therapist's Guide to Using Journaling with Clients by Susan Borkin
5. Love yourself like your life depends on it by Kamal Ravikant
6. Jolly M. "What I never wanted to tell you: Therapeutic letter writing in cultural context". *Journal of Medical Humanities* 32 (2011): 47-59.
7. Wright JK. "Writing Therapy in brief workplace counseling". *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research* 5.2 (2005): 111-119.
8. Rekindling Desire, 2nd edition by B. McCarthy and E. McCarthy

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