



WRITING FOR RECOVERY -- WRITING EXERCISES AND IDEAS:

To Incorporate Into Personal Recovery Plans and Use In Writing Groups

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Download PDF of this manual:
@ www.ashlandmhrb.org/writingforrecovery

DESCRIPTION

This manual (which is available by using the following link: www.ashlandmhrb.org/writingforrecovery) offers ideas and exercises for using writing as a therapeutic tool for promoting recovery.

Creative writing can be built into individual recovery plans as well as incorporated into well-designed writing groups. The introduction will walk you through (1) the benefits of writing, (2) the history of the “writing for recovery” initiative -- grounded in peer support -- developed by the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB), and (3) what has “worked” in a writing group, under the auspices of Catholic Charities, Pathways Peer Support, Ashland. You’ll be challenged to think about larger issues – approaches to encourage collaboration, cooperation, and cohesiveness; advocacy; gratitude; the power of sharing your story; and more.

When developing a writing group – grounded in peer support -- that is therapeutic in nature, there is a need to promote an interactive group process in which safety, trust, confidentiality, and respect are preserved. Participants are provided with opportunities to listen and be heard by others who “get it” and empathize, to reveal vulnerability in a safe place. They can be informed about how to “find their voices,” to create and describe their life stories or their stories of recovery. Writers can be encouraged to share their stories if they are ready to do so, while being surrounded by peers who care and are empathetic. (Please refer to Appendix I, pp. 128-129).

So what does this type of initiative, grounded in peer support, make possible?

- Promoting personal recovery, transformation and transcendence
- Promoting recovery of others
- Increased quality of life
- Maximization of resilience, development of healthy “connections”
- Self-empowerment, increased awareness by others about the potential for recovery
- Advocacy – using the power of the pen to make a difference, to have a strong consumer voice

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INTRODUCTION

Research reveals that creative writing is beneficial for recovery and healing, for promoting overall well-being, for reducing stress, and for expressing thoughts and feelings about significant life challenges, trauma, and mental health issues. By engaging in creative writing and sharing creations with others, who are providing peer support, progress in recovery will “happen,” improving quality of life, maximizing resilience, and promoting self-empowerment and social connectedness. Also, this sharing (e.g., addressing what has proven to be successful in your efforts to remain well) can make a difference in the lives of others who are struggling in their journeys toward recovery.

History of the “Creative Writing for Recovery” (CWR) Initiative and Writing Groups

Conversations between Steve Stone (Executive Director), David Ross (Associate Director) and me (Board member) commenced in 2014 about creating and implementing a CWR initiative, under the auspices of the MHRB. A grant proposal was submitted to the Margaret Clark Morgan Foundation (MCMF) in 2015, emphasizing the use of creative writing as a therapeutic tool for recovery. The MCMF awarded funding, with a grant period from January-December 2016.

The project commenced with a half-day, recovery-focused seminar in April 2016, presented by Dr. JoAnn Streeter Shade. Shade discussed the benefits and process of creative writing for recovery, and provided practicum experiences. A series of eight intensive writing clinics took place in May/June 2016, co-facilitated by Dr. Shade and Dr. Judy McLaughlin. The MHRB provided funding for a spin-off to the project; specifically, a writing group that met monthly, with sessions starting in October 2016, facilitated by Dr. Shade. The writing group transitioned to being under the auspices of the Catholic Charities Services, Pathways Peer Support Program in July 2018, facilitated by me, a peer with lived experiences who shares my story openly.

The Pathways writing group is grounded in trust, confidentiality, respect, and a trauma-informed care philosophy. Objectives are (1) to use creative writing to promote recovery, healing, and personal well-being; (2) to develop and improve writing skills; (3) to learn about the editing process and how to provide

constructive feedback; (4) to share works of written art with others in the group, when ready to do so; and (5) to engage in a social process in which supportive relationships are forged, to promote the development of social connections via open dialogues and via writing. Assignments and exercises are suggested. There is incredible value in building group writing exercises into the sessions, along with providing opportunities to share works. Writers are encouraged to “just write.” Over time, writing group participants have become more comfortable with writing, with sharing their works, and with providing feedback to others. Along the way, the writing group has become more cohesive, and has engaged in cooperative and collaborative writing.

Benefits to this type of initiative are extensive, and have been delineated in the description provided at the beginning of this manual. First and foremost, personal recovery and recovery of others are promoted.

Spin-Offs to the CWR Initiative

In addition to the continued implementation of a writing group, several spin-off projects were sustained and maintained, made possible:

- Most recently, under the auspices of the MHRB, an anthology of written works of art along with illustrations, was published. The anthology is entitled, *TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES* (Spore, D., et al., (Eds.). (2019)). It can be accessed by using the following link: www.ashlandmhrb.org/tapestryofourlives.
- Writers were provided with opportunities to share their works and “stories” at conferences as well.
- Seminars and presentations at conferences occurred, addressing writing for recovery, legacy writing, and journaling.
- Additional writing-focused efforts focused on aging-related issues, creating articles for the Senior Living section of a local newspaper, and publishing profiles about seniors who make a difference, who contribute to the Ashland County community.
- A comprehensive legacy writing initiative was launched, one that continues to expand, and to be associated with networking and collaborating with other agencies and organizations.

SECTION 1

STARTING WITH JOURNALING

Journaling is beneficial for maximizing resilience, reducing stress and promoting mental health. Journaling is empowering; the writer is actively engaged in self-care, making time for himself/herself, taking a break. Journaling helps you to maintain a sense of balance in your life. It provides you with the opportunity to reveal your thoughts and feelings; reflect on experiences – including traumas from the past – and challenges being faced at the present time. Journaling is relaxing; it is a simple process, you can't fail. It is a healthy outlet for expressing feelings, including anger. It can be as simple as just writing quick notes about what your day has been like, how you have felt, what activities you have engaged in. You can keep track of what you have done to remain well. Blending art, lyrics, and words can be enjoyable and result in a permanent "memento," one revealing your creativity, insights, hopes, and dreams.

In short, when engaging in journaling: *JUST WRITE!!!*

Below you will find 100 prompts to complete, when engaging in journaling, particularly if you're a bit "stuck" about what to write about. They may trigger ideas for you. As you will quickly notice, the prompts are short in length, opening the door for you to spread your wings when you write!

1. Today, I plan to....
2. I feel....
3. I am grateful for....
4. I believe....
5. I wish I was able to....
6. My greatest challenge is....
7. I forgive....
8. I find the following to be most meaningful for me....
9. If I could do anything today (if anything was in reach and possible), I would....
10. I love to....
11. I am....

12. I am loved....

13. I hope....

14. I remain well by....

15. I care....

16. I am grounded by....

17. I admire....

18. I am strengthened by....

19. I need....

20. I want....

21. My greatest accomplishment(s) is/are....

22. Peer support....

23. Pathways to recovery.....

24. I am surrounded by....

25. I would like to change....

26. My recovery....

27. My recovery journey....

28. I remember....

29. I am afraid....

30. I am not afraid...

31. The best thing(s) in my life is/are....

32. Today....

33. Today has been....

34. Yesterday....

35. I would....

36. If I could change one thing....

37. A turning point....

38. I enjoy....

39. My friend(s)....

40. I am frustrated....

41. I have learned....

42.I admire....

43.I let go....

44.In the past year....

45.I laughed when....

46.I am amused by....

47.I would like to....

48.I changed....

49.I find....

50.I tried....

51.I did not know....

52.I have never told anyone....

53.I made the biggest difference....

54.Sometimes....

55.My family....

56.If applicable, my therapist....

57. I wish he/she understood....

58. I heard....

59. I listened....

60. I support others

61. My favorite color is....

62. You....

63. I saw....

64. When I look around me....

65. Beauty....

66. I love to look at....

67. My favorite....

68. I love to go....

69. I wish I could travel to....

70. I loved going to....

71. If applicable, my pet....

72.I relax....

73.If....

74.I wish you'd remember....

75.I would like you to know....

76.The future....

77.The past....

78.When....

79.I expected....

80.I did not expect....

81.I help by....

82.On a daily basis....

83.Love....

84.My....

85.When I go for a walk....

86.Exercise....

87.My diet is....

88.I knew....

89.My greatest weakness....

90.Change....

91.I was surprised....

92.I will....

93.The most beautiful....

94.The world....

95.(City where dwell)....

96.I advocate by....

97.My life....

98.The best....

99.Happiness....

100. I will never forget....

Just Write.

SECTION 2

BOOSTING YOUR CREATIVITY

This section provides creative writing exercises and assignments that may stimulate ideas and unleash your creativity. The exercises encourage you to think in terms of all senses, imagery, descriptive language, emotions, and more. These are just suggestions.....



1. Write about a time or experience that you most treasure. Use descriptors that capture how you felt, what you saw, what you heard, what you smelled, what you felt or touched, and perhaps even what you tasted.

2. Describe the following images and write about how they make you feel:







3. Describe what you would do to make a day very special, beautiful and/or inspiring – if anything was possible.

4. Write a short piece about what you like to do, what activities are enjoyable, what brings a sense of meaning and purpose to your life....

5. Write about a family event that was enjoyable, meaningful, or funny.....

6. Write about what makes you feel particularly happy, calm, and empowered...

- HAPPY –

- CALM –

- EMPOWERED –

7. Think about the next season that is approaching. When it is finally here, what will you see, hear, feel or touch, smell, or taste?



8. If you were granted three wishes that would definitely come true, what would you wish for?



9. Write about your family holiday moments, your holiday traditions....

10. Describe one room in your home, noting how it makes you feel, indicating what you would change to make it more pleasing to you....

11. Think about the fairy tale that you loved most as a child. Make yourself the hero or heroine, and write about a new adventure....

12. Write about something that happened when you were a teenager that was embarrassing, absurd, or amusing.

13. Identify someone in your life who has been a source of inspiration, a mentor. What have you learned from him or her? How has he or she made a difference in your life?

14. Write about your favorite things to do during the different seasons, starting with the summer....

15.If you had the power to change one thing in your life, locally, or nationally, what would you focus on and why?

16.If you could change one thing from your past or live something over, what would it be?

17. List your goals now, for the future. What would you like to be doing one year from now?

18. Write a list of 20 things that you like about yourself:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

19. Write a list of 20 of your personal strengths:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

20. Write a paragraph or two, starting with the words "I believe" or "In my opinion."

21. Assignment: We provide support in person, one-on-one, in groups, and over the phone. Let's think about what is possible to do in writing, even just a simple message saying "Hi, I'm thinking of you, how are you doing?" A written message can be held on to, be referred to over and over again.

Create a written message (a poem, a letter, a prayer) to someone who is struggling (use imagination here, do not identify any names if you have someone specific in mind), bringing her or him hope and comfort. It is OK to start with writing a series of bullet points. Think about what you'd want to hear, what you would find to be helpful in your efforts to remain well.

22. Give thought to what you'd like to write about in a short story or an essay, about what you'd like to share when composing your "story." But for now, create a few opening statements to a work, using your imagination, off the top of your head. The idea is to start off with a line that draws attention and captures the reader, that lays the groundwork for what is about to be focused on. Here are a few examples:

- Starting with the distressing sound of a gentle beat, words emerged beneath the haunting melody.
- I arrived at the emergency room by squad, and found myself surrounded by loud noises, harsh voices, glaring lights, and a constant barrage of questions.
- She heard the words, "you have cancer," and time stopped.



23. Most of us have read and thought about the Serenity Prayer. To remind you: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can’t change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Write about what the words mean to you, the underlying message. Write about what you find to be most challenging at this time, what may serve as barriers for making progress and making changes to improve the situation. Think about what you can change, and what you cannot change.

24. Write a bucket list of ten things you would most like to do before the end of your life. Spread your wings and dream, don't just write about what is definitely possible.

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

h.

i.

k.

25. Assignment: You just received a gift certificate from a close, trusted friend or family member, indicating that the following will be done on whatever day you specify, the day of your choice.

- To those who are "caregivers" – your loved one(s) will be cared for throughout the entire day.
- Laundry and housework will be done.
- Dishes will be washed and put away.
- Your yard will be mowed.

- Any errands needing to be done, will be done.
- Your pet(s) will be cared for, lovingly.

What would you do to relax, to care for yourself, to take a breather, to make the day special? Start with writing about what is possible, within reach...

Then write about would you would do if you could do absolutely anything to make the most of this day....

SECTION 3

STIMULATING THE WRITING PROCESS: FOCUSING ON RECOVERY-RELATED THEMES

As noted in the introduction, there are a plethora of benefits associated with creative writing, with using writing as a therapeutic tool for promoting recovery. This section offers exercises and assignments to draw attention to recovery-related themes or topics. This can be as simple as thinking about “What does recovery mean to YOU?” Thinking and writing about questions posed or responding to prompts will lay the groundwork for what we’ll be working on later in this manual – sharing your story.



1. List ten responses: What can promote recovery?

List ten responses: What can serve as barriers to making progress in your recovery journey?

Promote Recovery

Barriers

a.

a.

b.

b.

c.

c.

d.

d.

e.

e.

f.

f.

g.

g.

h.

h.

i.

i.

j.

j.

2. List or write about what you do to remain well, or about what someone could do when experiencing tremendous stress or having difficulties with moving forward toward recovery.

3. Describe what peer support means to you. It is OK to just create a list of adjectives. Feel free to write a paragraph or two if you would like to.

4. Think about what recovery “looks like” or how it could be described. Please list one-to-three-word descriptors:

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

h.

i.

j.

5. Write about what you have learned from experiences faced in the past year, using any style of writing you feel comfortable with. Have you changed, and in what way?

6. Describe challenge(s) or negative experience(s) that you have faced, indicate the immediate ramifications for you and your life. Then write about how you have benefitted or grown from dealing with all of this, if you feel you have. Has any of this proven to be a GIFT?

7. You have faced challenges in your recovery journey. What has made the biggest difference in making progress?

8. Envision yourself as a superhero or superheroine fighting against Depression – describe yourself and Depression, write a short story about the battle. Decide who/what will win. Or will your story end with a cliffhanger?

9. If stigma has affected you and your life, describe what you have experienced, and how you have dealt with it. Indicate what messages you would send to others about dealing with stigma. How would you go about challenging myths and misconceptions about mental illness?



10. What are the cornerstones to developing a strong peer support program?
What is needed for it to be effective and safe?

11. Write about who in your life has made the biggest difference in making progress in your recovery journey or in dealing with significant life challenges.

12. Your life struggles may resemble fractured, broken, jagged pieces. If you were to combine them into a whole, what would the entity look like? For example, if you were to combine the pieces and create a piece of jewelry, what would it look like (colors, design) and who would you share it with as a memento of your progress in recovering?

13. "What accomplishments in your recovery journey are you most proud of?"
(Ridgway et al., 2002):

14. What types of “successes” would YOU consider celebrating in your recovery journey, wherever you are in your journey, and how would you do so? Or think about someone else: What would you want him/her to celebrate, and in what ways?



CELEBRATE RECOVERY

15. Describe recovery using all five senses, using your imagination, using metaphors or similes rather than simply listing adjectives. I have provided an example below.

What it looks like: RECOVERY is a phoenix rising from ashes that can only be defined as traumas that one experienced and fought.

What it tastes like: RECOVERY is smooth and sweet like a piece of Dove chocolate.

What it feels like: RECOVERY is warm and soft to the touch as I am embraced by a cozy and colorful memory quilt.

What it smells like: RECOVERY is being surrounded by the fresh scent of grass cut recently.

What it sounds like: RECOVERY is a lilting soft melody – with a gentle beat – that is no longer haunting in nature.

Now describe “being ill” using all five senses, applying what you have learned with your work on describing recovery.

16. Assignment: Provide up to four index cards to all participants. On the lined side: write about what recovery or recovered means to him/her, provide tips you would give for someone to remain well, and/or briefly describe his/her recovery journey. On the blank side: create a drawing, sketch, use markers, colored pencils, crayons or pens, glittery stuff, or anything else to reveal what “recovery,” “recovered,” “wellness,” or what his/her “journey” looks like.

Start by jotting down thoughts or bullet points about what would be written on the lined side(s) of index card(s).

17. Write about how you feel when sad or depressed:

EXAMPLE:

Depression is penetrating deep inside me, making me feel sad, extremely tired, anxious, and hopeless even when my mind seems to be totally blank. Anger is simmering close to the surface, displaying itself by irritability that seems to be increasing with every breath I take. I want to block out all thoughts from touching me. I feel brittle and stiff simultaneously. I feel as if I will snap into a million pieces, if just enough more stress is applied. I want everything to stand still so that I can stop feeling and catch my breath.

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18. Write about indicators of progress (even small – baby steps) in your journey toward recovery. Frame it in your mind as “a new beginning”

SECTION 4

ROUND ROBIN STORY

A “standard” writing exercise in writing groups is to have writers compose a short story by writing one line at a time. Someone starts the story, passes a sheet of paper on to the next person, she/he writes a line, and on and on, until someone wraps up the story and writes “The End.” The final result may not be cohesive, may not even make sense. However, the major issue is that it provides the opportunity for writers to cooperate, to read what others have written or shared, and to begin to collaborate. It is one way to build cohesiveness in a writing group, can trigger laughter and conversations, building connections along the way.



EXAMPLE:

COOPERATIVE/COLLABORATIVE WRITING DEVELOPING A “SHORT” STORY “WRITING FOR RECOVERY” WRITING GROUP 10/25/2018

One sentence was written by a group member to start a story. Subsequently, one-by-one, a writer wrote a sentence or two, until the story was finished, as determined by the entire group.

On a beautiful, sunny, and cool Saturday afternoon, I sat silently next to a pine tree stump feeling peace while I contemplated my past, my present moments, and my future.

Pondering, it all became overwhelming – slamming my fist down on the stump. My mind yells – out loud – silently – too much, too much.

The sense of peace has disappeared particularly as I think about memories from the past. Some are there to torture me, some to remind me of my shortcomings, of a few good times that sometimes seemed to have been too few.

I slump down as I remember my home and the fear of returning there today, as I feel safer here in the woods.

As the dark descends, I crouch down and close in from the cold, shivering. It’s still safer outdoors when the only concerns I have are the mosquitoes, ants, and the cold, dark blackness of night.

I force myself to stand, realizing that I cannot succumb to this darkness that is taking over. I must stop this now.

Summoning strength from within, from above, praying to God for supernatural strength for light in the darkness, trying to remember that I have been here before but I refuse to stay. Darkness and hopelessness will not win.

My eyes begin to focus on a deer I see and hear pitter-pattering within the woods, bouncing around and full of life. Yes, I remember there is hope to bounce about my life again.

The End.

SECTION 5

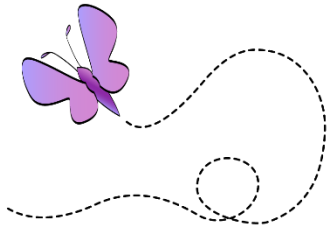
EXPRESSING YOURSELF THROUGH POETRY



Poetry can be used to express thoughts, feelings, and points of view. Poems can be highly structured (for example, using rhyme schemes), or free verse in form. For writers who are not yet ready to write essays or short stories, who feel more comfortable with creating lists, journaling privately, or writing bullet-points, developing poems can be a wonderful group exercise. I have found it important to gently suggest that all writers give it a try, even if it is only providing feedback or offering a few words that can be embedded into the poem. Sometimes it is easier for budding writers to express themselves verbally, to engage in “discussions and conversations.” Group exercises provide the opportunity to think, to share points of view, to gain group consensus about a topic that all want to address, to provide feedback, to learn how to structure work, and even how to edit along the way. This section addresses the development of (1) acrostic poems, (2) AlphaPoems, (3) poems framed by asking questions on lines; and (4) haiku and renga poems. Examples are provided.

Acrostic poems

Acrostic poems are created by using the first letter of a word sequentially. For example, we could create an acrostic poem using the word BUTTERFLY. We could consider adjectives that would describe what the image/word represents when we talk about RECOVERY. Let's start by simply writing adjectives and nouns line-by-line. Then we'll write sentence fragments or complete sentences. Acrostic poems can be written alone or with other writers as a team, perhaps helping to rephrase what has been suggested by others.



B _____

B _____

U _____

U _____

T _____

T _____

T _____

T _____

E _____

E _____

R _____

R _____

F _____

F _____

L _____

L _____

Y _____

Y _____

EXAMPLE OF ACROSTIC POEM FOCUSING ON RECOVERY

Becoming strong, resilient, open, and empowered
Understanding what came before, yesterday's struggles
Transformed in mental health recovery and through peer support
Transformed by facing challenges, trauma, mental health issues
Empowered by knowing what has been set in motion to stay well.
Rising to the challenge of sharing your story, and helping others
Flying as you embrace the power of who you have become
Loving all aspects of "you," recognizing the new, stronger "you"
Yearning to make a difference, to share what led to your recovery

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ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF A RECOVERY-RELATED ACROSTIC POEM

RECOVERY ACROSTIC POEM:

Reaching for the stars instead of being consumed by what happened long ago.
Empowered to face, confront, and overcome the challenges of today.
Comforted to know that I am surrounded by peers, friends, those who care.
Overcoming stigma faced when “uninformed others” simply label me “Bipolar.”
Valuing what I have learned during my journey toward recovery, transcendence.
Embracing aspects of who I was before I became ill, who I am becoming.
Ready to take the next steps toward a brighter tomorrow, being recovered.
Yearning to make a difference as I challenge the status quo, share my story.

Diana Spore
(August 2018)



A beautiful way to connect with someone is to develop an acrostic poem about him/her. Many of us are not aware of our strengths, what makes us unique, what we have to offer. An objective “outsider” who knows someone well can capture the essence of this individual. This can serve as a gift, one that can be held on to forever, that can even be framed or placed in one’s album or art journal. During dark days, one can pull out this gift, hold it in one’s heart, and remember.... Three examples, written by me, are provided. All individuals who were written about provided permission to share these poems with you.

AN ACROSTIC POEM ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE – CELIA

Compassionate and caring, gently encouraging her peers

Ever ready with a beautiful smile and a gracious “hello”

Loved by others who are captured by her laughter, her positive attitude

Independent and strong, guided by a strong faith in God

Actively engaged in peer support, in promoting mental health recovery

AN ACROSTIC POEM – DERRICK

Demonstrates a strong faith in God and belief in the power of love.

Ever ready to hold out a helping hand to someone in need.

Reliable and responsive, an active listener, someone who “hears.”

Respectful with a quiet demeanor, yet who can speak out loudly.

Interested, eager to learn, willing to share his thoughts when ready.

Courageously shares his story, one of strength and tenacity.

Knowledgeable and skilled, willing to share his expertise.

AN ACROSTIC POEM – REBECCA

Ready to advocate for those facing mental health challenges.

Eager to make a difference through her writing and public speaking.

Believes that recovery is possible, and is willing to help others find their way.

Ever ready to put herself on the line, with expressing her thoughts.

Courageous in speaking out for what she believes in strongly.

Confident in expressing views about not stigmatizing those with “labels.”

Advocate par excellence!

AlphaPoem

Group assignment: Create an AlphaPoem, going a step beyond the development of an acrostic poem.

- Basic information:
 - Each line starts with letters of the alphabet, in alphabetical order.
 - It's similar to an acrostic poem. However, the intent with AlphaPoems is to have lines flow into each other, to create an eloquent poem that does not appear to have had creativity restricted by an imposed structure.
 - While the goal is to start each line with a specific letter, some letters can be incredibly difficult to start a line with. Therefore, one should feel free to use a "phonetic" or sound-like approach. For example, for the letter X, you can use a word that begins with a letter other than X, but that – in combination – sound like X (e.g., eXhale, eXist).
 - One can use this type of poem to address recovery-related issues and more. The sky is the limit for topics that one could focus on.

Let's Write An AlphaPoem (see examples – pp. 64-65):

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

O

P

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EXAMPLES OF AlphaPoems (Recovery-Focused)

Example #1

Awakening after a time filled with emotional pain, despair, prescribed-drug-related stupor
Blessed to have found that tomorrow will be better, that I will rise to the
Challenges of what I face in the days, months, years ahead
Dedicated to building coping mechanisms, a strong support network
Energized to find meaningful activities and work, to make a difference.
Finished with listening to people who are toxic for me, who don't understand
Greeting almost each day with hope, with higher expectations of what is possible.
Hesitant at times to reach out for support from others when I need it, yet...
Independently confronting what has held me back from recovering.
Joy has once again become part of my life, not mania, not insanity, but joy for a reason.
Keeping my eyes on the end goals – empowerment, employment, recovery, resilience
Letting go of some behavioral styles that haven't worked, of thoughts that have made me worse.
Meeting peers who understand what I have lived through, “get it,” and provide healthy support.
Never wanting to retreat back to what I was when ill, to be in a psychiatric ward again.
Open to ideas about how I can continue healing and growing, how I might approach things
differently.
Preparing for change – willingly and defiantly.
Quietly writing for healing and recovery, and then loudly expressing my thoughts, beliefs.
Realizing that recovery is not linear in nature, that there may be some barriers heading my way.
Standing firmly – nevertheless – because I have awakened -- and have risen like a phoenix.
Telling others about and writing my story; despite the risks, it is worth it if I only reach one
person and make a difference along the way.
Understanding that there may be dark days ahead, that depression and suicidal ideation may
rear their heads once more but
Victory WILL transpire because I have changed, due to a combination of factors, including
medication optimization, therapy, peer support, love, and writing for healing.
Writing this poem has helped me to clarify my thinking, to once again feel ready to reach for the
stars.
EXcited to know that the person I am now incorporates the best, strongest parts of me from the
past.
Yearning to continue growing, to helping others find their way toward a brighter tomorrow.
Zapped in the past by a psychiatric diagnosis that no longer has precedence in my life, is only a
set of words that no longer cause me pain, instead cause me to challenge the status quo.

Example #2

After a period of despair, Depression, suicidal ideation and one unrecognized attempt, I Began to see that mental health recovery was truly possible. While tomorrow could bring Challenges, difficult challenges, I would be able to face them.

Despair was no longer inevitable. Treatment – along with love and peer support – worked! Even dark memories of yesterday didn't override the promise of a brighter tomorrow. Following new objectives, drawing on goals from yesterday, became energizing. Growth and change were possible, part of healing and recovering..

Helping others find their way to new beginnings became part of my recovery plan. Independence started to become a reality, no longer relying on those who were toxic to me. Just because they misunderstood me, treated me with cruelty rather than with Kindness and support, didn't mean that I had to "buy into" what they were telling me. Love and support could come from others, who were not family members by "blood."

Magically, almost magically, support from others brought strength, resilience, empowerment. Never having to stand still again, when someone is abusive to me, trying to block out ugliness. Openness to connecting with others has become possible, though I still don't want to be touched.

Powerlessness – the feeling -- is no longer overwhelming, complicating the picture when interacting with toxic family members.

Quietly writing out my thoughts and feelings, creating letters that I do not plan to send help me Reach a greater sense of peace, of calmness, and attain more acute clarity of thinking Sensing that my beliefs are becoming increasingly on target, trusting my instincts once more. Tension is no longer a fixture in how I feel, as I embrace and trust the "me" I am becoming. Understanding that there will be new challenges, that I may become ill again, expecting Victory nonetheless, because I have found different ways to handle things, to fight, to Walk away if necessary from people or encounters that cause me too much pain, battles that cannot be fought on that day.

Expecting people to treat me better, with respect, and to accept no less. Yesterday is over, learning from mistakes and pain is important, but yesterday cannot hurt me forever, reaching a

Zenith -- representing empowerment and recovery -- is possible, probable, and should be expected.

Poem – Posing Questions

Next, have participants engage in the following exercise, individually and/or as a group:

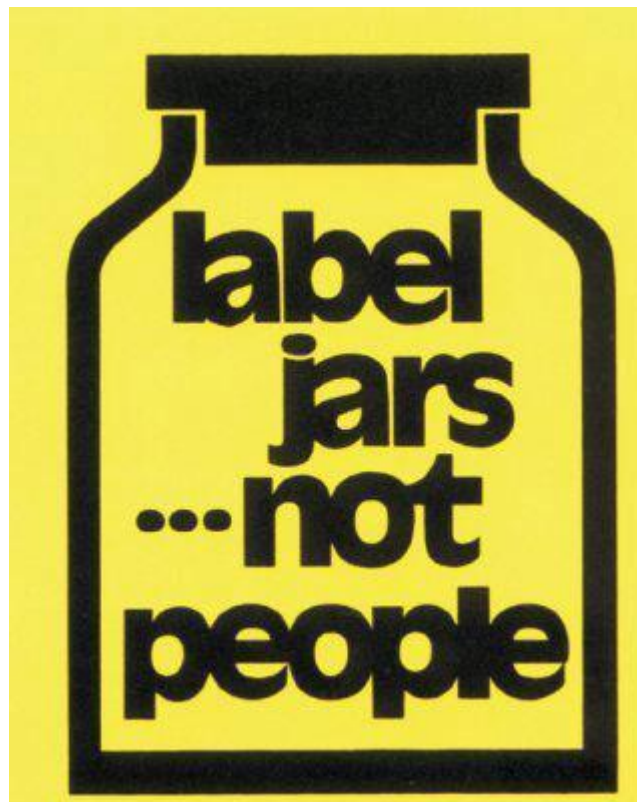
- Write a poem with all lines – except the last one or two lines – being questions. For this initial exercise, let's frame it with what questions you would ask of yourself, of God, or of someone else such as a peer, therapist, health care provider – close to the beginning of your journey, when you weren't "well." Consider starting questions with the words: WHY, WHEN, HOW, WHO, WHERE....

AN EXAMPLE OF THIS TYPE OF POEM:

WHEN WILL THEY SEE THE REAL ME?

Why can't they see beyond my diagnostic label?
When will they see that I am more than "Bipolar?"
How can I send the message that I am me, just like the "normals?"
Why can't I fit in and be accepted?
Where can I go and be treated with respect, understanding, and awareness?
Will I ever be seen as someone who has been traumatized, not as being "mentally ill?"
How can I get through that none of this is my fault, and that I am just like "them?"
When will they see that my "symptoms" are not because of some brain dysfunction?
I am me, I am loved by God, I am more than just a label, I am me.

Diana Spore



Haiku and Renga Poems

Additional poetry types can be focused on by individuals as well as by a group. Let's take a look at haiku and renga poems.

A haiku poem is a three-line poem with a 5/7/5 syllable line pattern. It is a highly structured format, short in length.

First, it is important to define what a syllable is, and to provide examples. In short, a syllable is part of a word with one vowel sound, and is spoken as if it is one "word." It is pronounced as one unit. For example, life is one syllable, and living is two syllables. Sometimes I find it difficult to be sure how syllables are split up – a quick way to double-check is by pulling out the dictionary.

As an assignment, one could start off by discussing whether or not there is a distinction between aloneness/solitude versus isolation/loneliness, laying the groundwork for discussing what is needed to maintain social connections and healthy relationships.

A renga is a set or series of poems.

AN EXAMPLE:

Welcomed solitude
Serenity, sense of peace
Embrace the stillness

Desired aloneness
Not linked with isolation
God is by my side

Consideration could be given to adding a third haiku to the renga poem (e.g., is there any value to feeling lonely while being alone; is loneliness always a negative experience)? Are both types of experiences needed to embrace the light and to become more resilient? And, of course, there is no maximum number of haikus to include in a renga poem.

Section 6

DIALOGUE: THE PROCESS THAT PEER SUPPORTERS MIGHT ENGAGE IN

Creating scenarios that offer the opportunity to engage in a dialogue exercise can be beneficial for peer supporters working with other peer supporters. Likewise, provision of scenarios and a framework for engaging in the process can be beneficial when peer supporters are implementing a well-designed writing group that is therapeutic in nature.

Peer supporters face the challenge of hearing stories, of making the decision as to how best to provide support while not telling others what they should do. Peer supporters engage in a process in which others have the right to make decisions that empower them to chart their own pathways to recovery. By developing scenarios, peer supporters can address how best to proceed, what types of interactions are appropriate and beneficial, and what types of interactions are inappropriate and create a power differential that is not really helpful to those who are struggling.



Below you will find very basic examples of scenarios (limited to six options, with writers deciding which one they would like to start with). The objective is to lay the groundwork for writing dialogues that would be beneficial, and those that would violate the rights of peers and would not prove to be beneficial to them. Scenarios could be extensive and detailed; however, for this exercise, the opening statements are designed – intentionally – to be brief and to offer the opportunity for writers to chart the direction of possible interactions.

DIALOGUE EXERCISE

Option 1:

Sandra: Bonnie, you look sad today. What happened?

Bonnie:

Option 2:

Sandra: I had a really rough night, and I'm not sure what to do.

Bonnie:

Option 3:

Sandra: You seem very quiet today. Is everything OK? Do you want to talk?

Bonnie:

Option 4:

Sandra: I had another argument with Mom last night. I don't think she understands how much all of this stresses me out. I am beginning to wonder if I should move out, but have no idea how I could pull it off financially. What do you think I should do?

Bonnie:

Option 5:

Sandra: You won't believe what happened yesterday.

Bonnie:

Option 6:

Sandra: I am afraid to tell anyone that I thought about hurting myself last night. I know that I wouldn't do it. However, I am afraid that I'll be locked up. I'm afraid to tell the truth if I am asked about whether or not I am experiencing suicidal ideation.

Bonnie:

Section 7

REFLECTING ON QUOTES

Writing group facilitators can use a variety of “stimuli” to trigger the creative writing process, to encourage participants to engage in conversations and share their perspectives, to work cooperatively and collaboratively in creating works of written art. Likewise, these “stimuli” can be used when writing individually.

In this section, a set of quotes is provided, ones that writers can think about and share their reactions, can create works triggered by their reflections. In addition to quotes, stimuli include photographs (see Section 8), poems, music, and art work. For example, participants could listen to melodies. They could be asked to write about how the music makes them feel, to describe the scene behind the background music, and to actually create lyrics. Certain songs could be played -- such as “I will survive,” Gloria Gaynor -- and trigger conversations. With regard to this suggestion, participants could be asked to write about in what ways they are “survivors.”



Please read the following quote, and write about what it means to you. What message does it send about the course of one's life?

“You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

C. S. Lewis

Please read the following quote, and write about what it means to you. How can you relate it to your life experiences, and the future that you are working toward?

“Without the rain there would be no rainbow.”

-Gilbert Chesterson

Please read the following quote and reflect on what it means to you. Do you think that this perspective will make a difference in the life of an individual who is facing significant life challenges at this time?

“Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.”

-William James

How does the following quote make you feel? Do you find it helpful? Do you “buy” into the meaning of what Albert Einstein wrote? Also, do you believe that the challenges and difficulties we face may prove to be gifts?

“In the middle of a difficulty lies opportunity.”

- Albert Einstein

Please reflect on the following quote – do you find it to be inspirational, difficult to agree with? How does it make you feel about what might lie ahead in your future, despite what you may be dealing with now?

“Change your thoughts and you can change your world.”

- Norman Vincent Peale

EXERCISE:

First, write about what the following quote means to you: “Without the dark, we’d never see the stars” (Stephanie Meyer).

GROUP EXERCISE:

As a group, write a poem using the quote as first line.

Created by “Writing for Recovery” writing group participants, Pathways Peer Support (minor changes to quote):

Without the dark, you would never see the stars.

With the struggles of the day, you would not know the comfort of the night.

Without them both, you would not appreciate the beauty so bright.

If there is contrast and balance, everything works out right.

The dark, the stars, the light will ever embrace you tight.

SECTION 8

REFLECTING ON PHOTOGRAPHS

As noted in Section 7, there is value in using different stimuli to trigger ideas about what can be focused on when engaging in creative writing. In the last section, we focused on quotes. In section 2, readers were provided with a few images and were asked to write about how they made them feel.

In this section, the stimuli are photographs. When viewing photographs, writers can think about and prepare to write about characters and settings. They don't have to limit themselves to writing only about what they see "happening" in the photo. They can use their imaginations to write about the story "behind" the photo, what happened before and after the photo was taken. Writers can bring in photographs that are meaningful to them to a writing group session, share them with other participants. Thereafter, group participants can create works, grounded in what is revealed in the photograph. This type of collaborative work and sharing can promote social connectedness along the way.

This section offers examples of works created by viewing photos of older adults. This focus was linked with my expertise as a gerontologist, and with the group's movement toward engaging in legacy writing. Thus, these creations serve as a starting point for what is possible when using photos as stimuli.

“Writing for Recovery” writing group participants were provided with a series of photos/images of older adults. They were asked to work as a group to develop acrostic poems, describing the character, and reflecting on what he/she might be thinking or feeling. An acrostic poem is created by using the first letter of a word sequentially. The group discussed the photo, and identified a word that reflected the compilation of comments made by individuals about what they saw, what they imagined (even in terms of what the underlying story might be).



RELATIONSHIP

- R Respect for each other
- E Envy for lost responsibilities
- L Love and kindness remain
- A Acceptance of the relationship as it is currently
- T Tuning out anything awkward, unpleasant to get through the moment
- I Internal conflicts on both sides
- O Open to different possibilities
- N Now caring for me who cared for you
- S Switching caregiver roles
- H Holding on to integrity and patience
- I investing ourselves in the relationship
- P Parent-to-parent circle of life

“Writing for Recovery” Writing Group (12/27/2018)



SHOCK

- S Select a facility that provides person-centered, trauma-informed care
- H Have activities, outings, classes
- O Overcoming fears and adjusting to a new world
- C Considering what options you have and how fast to proceed
- K Keeping love, kindness, and patience in your heart

“Writing for Recovery” Writing Group (12/27/2018)



INTIMACY

- I** Into the eyes I look
- N** Not knowing the person before me
- T** The changes in me we could not have foreseen
- I** Imagining what used to be or is
- M** Memories lost
- A** Acting as if nothing has changed
- C** Can work for their benefit briefly
- Y** Yearning for what used to be, the lost times

“Writing for Recovery” Writing Group (12/27/2018)

Additional photos are provided below. Unleash your creativity!!!







SECTION 9

REFLECTING ON ART WORK

Thus far, I have focused on using quotes and photographs to serve as stimuli for creating works of written art, for engaging in dialogues with peers and a facilitator, and for forging social connections along the way.

In this section, the stimulus is an intriguing work of art, created by a participant at Pathways Peer Support, Ashland, Elizabeth (Liz) Krivich.



BLOSSOM



ASSIGNMENT: Please write a short essay or poem about what Liz Krivich's art work means to you, how it makes you feel, and/or what you see as its underlying message.

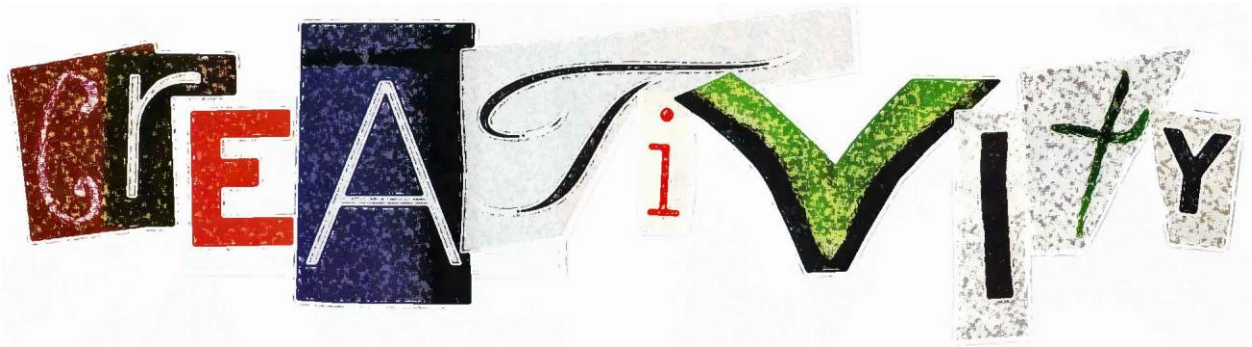
AN EXAMPLE:

I peer above my arms crossed before me, protecting me, shielding me.
Enmeshed in tendrils underlying the ground in a flower pot, holding me tight.
My lips are hidden from view, my words silenced – for the moment.
But as my eyes widen – with a bit of shock and amazement –
I realize that I am not locked in place; rather, I have become a beautiful
Work of live art, thriving and growing, rising to the sky, greeting the sun.
My pathways to recovery are reflected in distinctly diverse interlocked
petals and leaves
Cascading patterns of red mixed with green, with darkness and light.
While I still feel some sense of fear, I find myself becoming stronger,
more resilient
While once I had envisioned myself mystically as a plant almost buried in
a flower pot,
I believe that I am just about ready to lower my arms, open my mouth
and sing.....
God, as exemplified by beauty, shields me and graces me from above.....

Diana Spore

SECTION 10

BACK TO POETRY



- **Pantoum Poems**
- **Sensory Poems**

PANTOUM POEMS

WRITING PANTOUM POEMS PROVIDE WRITER(S) WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT, AND TO EMPHASIZE – LITERALLY – CERTAIN THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BELIEFS. AT FIRST GLANCE, THEY APPEAR TO BE COMPLEX TO DEVELOP. HOWEVER, WHEN ENGAGING IN A GROUP PROCESS, PARTICIPANTS HAVE REVEALED INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM, WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TO BE CREATIVE WITHIN A STRUCTURED FORMAT.

A PANTOUM POEM IS COMPRISED OF 16 LINES WITH ONLY EIGHT LINES BEING DIFFERENT. OTHER LINES ARE REPEATED AS SHOWN IN THE EXAMPLE ON THE NEXT PAGE. NOTE THE SEQUENCE – REFER TO NUMBERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE LINES. THE SEQUENCE IS: line 1, line 2, line 3, line 4, repeat line 2, line 5, repeat line 4, line 6, repeat line 5, line 7, repeat line 6, line 8, repeat line 7, repeat line 3, line 8, repeat line 1. THE FIRST AND LAST LINES ARE EXACTLY THE SAME.

AN EXAMPLE OF A PANTOUM POEM

1 Who will be able to respond to the silent signs of suicidal ideation
2 Even professionals can be blind to what is being revealed
3 When they make recommendations that will rip you apart
4 Where to live, even in filth and disarray, who and what to give away
2 Even professionals can be blind to what is being revealed
5 As they tell someone in incredible pain what must be done and when
4 Where to live, even in filth and disarray, who and what to give away
6 As they make assumptions about what are readily available resources
5 As they tell someone in incredible pain what must be done and when
7 Missing the deadly silence, slump of your body, tear-filled eyes
6 As they make assumptions about what are readily available resources
8 To start a new life in an ugly location, almost totally alone
7 Missing the deadly silence, slump of your body, tear-filled eyes
3 When they make recommendations that will rip you apart
8 To start a new life in an ugly location, almost totally alone
1 Who will be able to respond to the silent signs of suicidal ideation

Diana Spore

AS A GROUP EXERCISE, REACH CONSENSUS ABOUT A TOPIC AND DEVELOP A PANTOUM POEM.

1	_____
2	_____
3	_____
4	_____
2	_____
5	_____
4	_____
6	_____
5	_____
7	_____
6	_____
8	_____
7	_____
3	_____
8	_____
1	_____



***A PANTOUM POEM CREATED BY WRITING GROUP PARTICIPANTS, PATHWAYS
(7/25/2019)***

- 1 Through our pets' eyes, we are the world.
- 2 Loving, comforting companions; special gifts from God.
- 3 Always patiently waiting by the door until we return.
- 4 Excited to be with us at every moment.
- 2 Loving, comforting companions; special gifts from God.
- 5 Always up for energetic and playful romps.
- 4 Excited to be with us at every moment.
- 6 Healing our souls with each kiss on our cheeks.
- 5 Always up for energetic and playful romps.
- 7 No matter what the day brings, unconditional love awaits.
- 6 Healing our souls with each kiss on our cheeks.
- 8 As the day comes to a close, our pets nestle by our sides.
- 7 No matter what the day brings, unconditional love awaits.
- 3 Always patiently waiting by the door until we return.
- 8 As the day comes to a close, our pets nestle by our sides.
- 1 Through our pets' eyes, we are the world.

SENSORY POEMS – EMOTIONS

ASSIGNMENT:

Develop a poem about an emotion – what you are feeling now or what you have felt recently. Use descriptive language, use metaphors and similes, ground your creation in all senses (what you see, taste, feel, hear, and smell). Don't limit yourself to only writing about what may be viewed as "negative" emotions – depression, anger, hatred, and pain. What do emotions that are perceived to be more acceptable and positive (e.g., happiness) look like, taste like, feel like, sound like, and smell like?

EXAMPLE:

Touched by Fire or Madness?

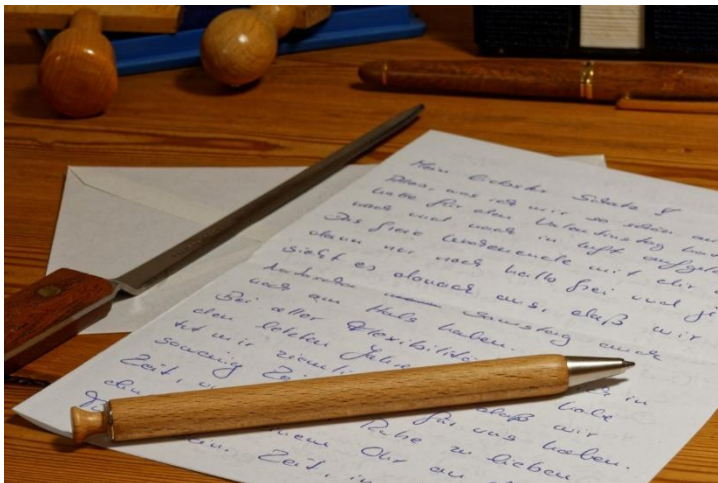
*Red blurs my eyes as I find myself exploding with anger
I am touched by fire, literally feeling the heat within and without
I hear crackling noises around me, as I become one with the blaze
I actually taste and smell chili powder mixed with hot pepper as I breathe
I try to force myself to take a deep breath, to stop and think rather than just feel
The world is taking on a distorted perspective, almost becoming hazy
Am I hallucinating again?
Or am I merely becoming one with the anger that I have the right to feel?
Am I touched by fire or by madness?
Red*

Diana Spore

SECTION 11

LETTER WRITING

Writing letters is another way to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas, to share your “words” with others. It provides the opportunity to write creatively, to express yourself openly. Your message can be written from the heart, can offer the reader the opportunity to understand what you are feeling and going through. For some of us, including me, it may be easier to express yourself in writing rather than orally. You will make the judgment call as to how much you wish to revise it if you intend to send it, or if this creation is meant to be for your eyes only and to be tossed away and destroyed.



LETTER WRITING EXERCISE --

Please write a letter that you want to hold on to and revise AND/OR one that you do not plan to send and want to throw away.

Some ideas:

- Write a letter to YOURSELF, at a point in the past in which you were struggling or ill.
- Write a letter to your mental health diagnostic label, if you have received one in the past.
- Write a letter to someone who has stigmatized or angered you in the past – a letter that you do not intend to mail or to keep.
- Write a letter to someone who has made a major difference in your recovery, in your efforts to remain well.
- Write a letter to a specific physical illness, a part of your body for which you have pain, a site of illness... Then write a letter back to yourself (adapted from McAdoo, 2013)
- Write a letter providing support to someone.
- ????????

EXAMPLE:

Dear Diana-From-Long-Ago,

Based on what you have experienced, you may view yourself almost like a stranger. How could this other “you” have emerged? Who was that person who heard sounds from appliances that were turned off, who heard her computer speak words shown on her screen, who was surrounded by perceived room distortions, who heard voices, who believed she was in contact with the FBI, who believed she was a psychic’s psychic. Who was that stranger who had to leave her base of operations, ran from hotels to hotels, always keeping one step ahead of those searching for her? Who was the stranger who was missing for days on ends, who literally ran through one section of Providence? Who was that stranger who felt electricity surging through her body, who found that she could speak by blinking her eyes? Who was this stranger who could create waterfalls on hoods of cars with the power in her eyes? Who was this stranger who would one day not know her name or be able to speak?

That stranger was you in disguise and, throughout all, you remained safe.

What I know: everything I experienced and learned so long ago influences the decisions I make now about the amount of stress I will subject myself to, about what boundaries I need to set with those who are toxic for me, and about when I have to say “no” or “that is not OK.”

Hold on to the following words, from the one you are now, the one who did not die over 20 years ago. After all that I lived through, I have become stronger, more resilient, more hopeful, more competent, more empowered than was the case before, during, or immediately after my severe psychotic break. Keep holding on.... you’ll once more find a sense of direction, new dreams and plans, a passion that makes life worth living. And yes, you’ll be happy again, as you find ways to stay well, as you make healthier connections, and as you engage in activities that are meaningful and make a difference. You will get better, and haunting memories, that seem to be like spider webs in your mind, will gradually fade and will no longer torture you. You will be free.

Diana-of-Today

Diana Spore

SECTION 12

GRATITUDE

Gratitude journaling promotes positivity, focusing on what is “right” in one’s life and what one has to be grateful for (even when it may feel like it is minor). It allows one to reflect on what “resources” one can draw upon when traversing the recovery journey. Along with positivity, gratitude journaling has been linked with increased self-esteem, decreased stress, and improved health.

Gratitude journaling can be as simple as writing a sentence fragment (basically a bullet-point) on a daily basis. You could address the “gifts” you have found with regard to facing and overcoming significant life challenges. You can write what are basically “thank you” letters that you may actually send or that you do not intend to send. “Letters” of appreciation can even be one- or two-liners, and meant for your eyes only. You can write about memories in which gratitude is central to what you experienced.



Let's lay the groundwork for gratitude journaling by completing a few exercises – as individuals or as a group.

1. Start by completing the following exercise: List who or what you are grateful for in your life, even if may appear to be “small,” almost insignificant to others. Please write 26 responses:

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

h.

i.

j.

k.

l.

m.

n.

o.

p.

q.

r.

s.

t.

u.

v.

w.

x.

y.

z.

2. When you look back at your life, what are you most grateful that you were able to do?

3. What do you value and cherish the most in your life?

4. Write an acrostic poem using the word "gratitude."

AN EXAMPLE:

Gracious peers offer support and guidance.
Recovery gratification requires self-reflection, too.
Appreciation for what we have, not what we think we need.
Tribute to a set of programs that direct us down a solid path.
I have a gratitude list which I review and add to daily.
Thanks must be from the heart and given in a meaningful way.
Understanding gratefulness and putting it into action results in being blessed.
Distractions from satisfaction have consequences of unhappiness.
Energize your soul and mind with the grace of thanksgiving.

Susan B.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE:

Grateful to those who are part of Pathways Peer Support -- administration, staff, and participants
Respect, confidentiality, and a recovery-focused orientation are reflected in programming.
Able to express my thoughts and feelings openly, without fearing that I'll be hurt.
Thankful for moments shared, for sincere discussions, for checking in with each other.
Individuality is recognized and promoted, rather than having peers viewed only as part of an entity.
Thoughtful interactions take place in a safe space, where I am free to share the real me.
Understanding and empathy, peer involvement in designing groups and offering ideas for the future
Developing social connections and a sense of community are key components of the program
Enveloped by support, recovery of self and others is promoted, reaching for a brighter tomorrow.

Diana Spore

5. Write a poem or a short essay about what you're grateful for.

An Example:

GRATEFUL

I'm grateful for the tears I've shed.
All the ones kept deep inside,
They've helped me to release all the sorrow I've tried to hide.

I'm grateful that you listen.
It helps me to let go....
Of all the harried thoughts inside.
That refuse to let me grow.

I'm grateful for your tender heart.
It gives me new hope to see.
That I am of worth and value;
It brings forth new life in me.

I'm grateful you try to understand all the mysteries within me.
Your thoughtful heart ... Your tender words ... fall soft and gingerly.
Like fresh fallen snow; my heart is blanketed with your love so deep.
It makes me feel safe and heard;
A love, I surely will keep!

8/29/2019 Stacey

ANOTHER EXAMPLE:

GRATEFUL

I am grateful for changes
Although it tears my life apart
I've become a wiser person
I've learned to have a kinder heart

I'm grateful for a thoughtful pause
When life is challenging
It helps me to get my mind straight
It clears things up for me

I'm grateful for the tears I've shed
On a cold and broken night
It helps me to appreciate
The beauty of the light

I'm grateful for frustration
That makes me determined to succeed
I am grateful for a tender heart
That reaches out to those in need

I'm grateful for honesty
It steadies my wandering soul
It keeps my world in balance
It keeps my values whole

I'm grateful for quiet moments
And laughter and good friends
I'm grateful for great memories
That I can hold on to the end

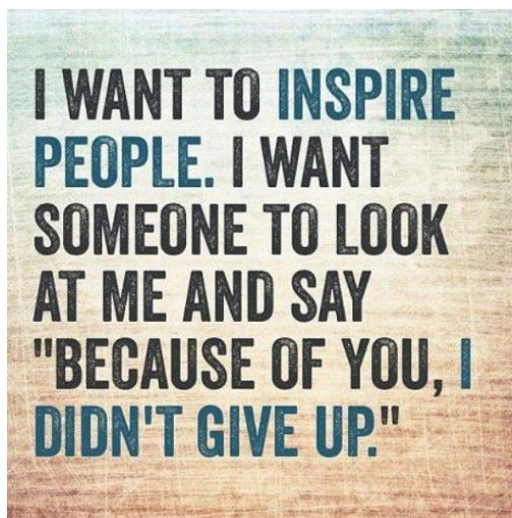
par 8/20/2019
Revised 8/30/2019

SECTION 13

SHARING YOUR STORY

Sharing your story can promote recovery of self and others, and can better inform professionals about what it means for an individual to be struggling with the recovery journey, to be in recovery, and to be recovered. Personal narrative and sharing your recovery story can be used as a mechanism for advocacy and empowerment. Sharing your story can bring hope and inspiration to others since you are a “survivor,” and provide information – based on lived experiences – about what has worked in your efforts to remain well.

PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY: A STRENGTHS RECOVERY SELF-HELP WORKBOOK by Priscilla Ridgway et al, 2002, is a must-read for peer supporters and individuals in recovery. The authors identify some of the reasons why sharing your story is so important. By sharing our stories, we can make it clear that recovery is possible, that we are survivors. We can send the message that we made it through a dark tunnel, and bring hope to others. We make a difference; bring meaning and purpose to our lives; maintain social connectedness; and heal. Also, by sharing our “success” stories, we can reveal that we have faced and overcome challenges, that we have thrived not just survived.



WRITE AND SHARE YOUR STORY: INSPIRE OTHERS

1. What is the value of “sharing your story” and letting others know what has worked for you in your recovery journey? If you decided to share parts of your story – transformative or pivotal time periods in your life – how would you go about it (e.g., targeted audience, written versus oral format)?

2. What are the benefits and risks of “sharing your story?”

3. How might sharing your story about lived experiences and writing empower you as well as others who read about and/or listen to your ideas, beliefs, and recommendations?



4. What “snapshot” do you hold in your mind about your recovery journey; one that captures that special moment or moments when you underwent a transition, a transformation, and knew that your life was going in a positive direction?

5. What major lessons have you “walked away” with when hearing what others have written about their “stories,” or who shared them orally?

6. What lessons do you think you could share about life challenges faced and overcome, ones that could make a difference in the lives of others in similar situations?

7. What strengths have you developed as you have traversed your recovery journey?

8. What barriers have you encountered as you have faced the challenges of your life – at the beginning, in the early stages of recovery, and where you are now in your journey? How has facing your challenges affected your life overall?

9. Describe your recovery journey, you may even wish to start out by drawing a diagram. What does it look like:

- Linear? Circular? Multidirectional? Hierarchical?
- Inclusion of roadblocks or detours?
- Does it have an end point – are you still recovering or have you recovered?

If you are still traversing the road to recovery, what might the rest of your journey look like? What do you anticipate?

10. Marinella (2017) provides prompts that can be used as springboards toward sharing your story. Responding to them may help to lay the groundwork for asking yourself what you would like to include when writing your “story.” I have included a few of her suggested prompts to help stimulate your thinking.

- “I knew I was faced with a challenge....”

- “The secret I harbor....”

- “The scars I hide are....”

- “I am faced with the unknown because...”

- “I believe I have turned it around by...”

- “My hopes are...”

- “My dreams are...”

11. What is one story from your life that shaped your recovery journey (pivotal, transformative)?

12. When you decide what you wish to focus on when writing your “story,” before or after your work is completed, create a title using no more than five words. Capture the essence, do it succinctly, and attract a reader’s attention at the outset. Unleash your creativity!!!!

SECTION 14

ADVOCACY

This section addresses advocacy writing, what exercises can be done individually as well as in teams and in a larger group, at the outset and at the point when one is ready to write position papers and white papers. Questions arise about what needs to be in place before one engages in advocacy writing, to have a strong consumer voice.

Let's start with what may need to be in place and what might be part of an advocacy initiative. What is needed to familiarize consumers with issues at a personal, local, and national level? For example, would it be helpful to bring in experts to discuss issues and respond to questions? Would it be helpful to provide education about how to engage in research activities, to have reading groups where certain advocacy-focused books are discussed, to familiarize consumers with vetted websites, to address consumer rights since that awareness is the linchpin for being able to advocate for self and others? Would it be helpful to offer suggestions about how to write letters to editors and to politicians, how to write a blog, how to frame their work so that multiple perspectives can be provided (almost like a controlled debate), and how to make an argument grounded in research and knowledge about what is the "popular" or "scientific" "position" at the moment?



Certain exercises can trigger a dialogue about advocacy:

1. What does advocacy mean to you? What types of activities can be engaged in to serve as an advocate?

2. With regard to the exercise above, as a group, participants can simply write a list (basically bullet-point format). Or they could go a step beyond, and frame it as a short essay or poem (e.g., an acrostic poem, using the word ADVOCACY).

3. What social issues – in general – are of concern to you?

4. Are there any mental health issues, concerns about the current mental health system or about services that you have received – that are significant or troubling to you? If yes, jot them down. It may be helpful to provide a few examples to open a dialogue – seclusion and restraint; diagnostic labeling; the right to chart one's own recovery plan in terms of medication use and service provision.

Coming from a different direction, are there approaches or programs that you have found to be particularly helpful and beneficial, ones that you feel more people need to know about? Jot down your thoughts. Here again, it might be helpful to provide a few examples – peer support, Open Dialogue, approaches for “treating” first-episode psychosis, medication optimization.

5. How would you go about informing the community about mental health issues?

6. How best do you think you could serve as an advocate, draw on lived experiences, and speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves?

Writing is a powerful mechanism for advocacy. You can share your writings with peers, with small groups at meetings or events, with larger groups at conferences, in letters-to-the-editor and guest columns in newspapers, in blogs and anthologies, in articles published in mental health-oriented or generic magazines, scientific journals, and books. You can address major issues facing consumers in our mental health system, have your work grounded in solid research findings and based on lived experiences that make what you write “real” for readers.

As writing skills are refined, increasingly powerful words are used that draw in readers and hold their attention, and your voice is reflected – your words can make a difference by promoting awareness, by educating, by challenging them to think from different angles simultaneously, by confronting incorrect assumptions and myths, and by advocating for change.

At the outset, some consumers may be interested in writing about issues, focusing only on what they have learned from personal lived experiences. An example is provided on the next page.

REFLECTIONS ABOUT STIGMA

Stigma = “A perceived negative attribute that causes someone to devalue or think less of the whole person” (Kristalyn Salters-Pedneault, Ph.D.).

I wanted to start with the traditional definition of what stigma is before I gave you mine and my experiences with it.

My definition of stigma is just a bully on an ego trip.

Before I even started school, my family took great glee in pointing out how different I was.

In school, the teachers tried to be nice, but I could hear whispers sometimes about “something not being quite right with her.” The children were both verbally and physically hurtful because I didn’t fit in.

As an adult, I vowed to work to make my life about me and only me. I excluded those that brought pain with them.

What I once read in a book has stuck with me. It said that when we are young, we are powerless, but as adults, we have the power.

I always tell the peers that I work with, that as long as you know who and what you are, then it never matters what anyone else says or does and to always remember you have every right to be here, be alive, and take care of yourself.

Rebecca

(Presented at the 11th Annual Pat Risser RSVP
Conference, October 3, 2018, Ashland, OH)

At some point, consumers may wish to write white papers – perhaps working collaboratively as teams, drawing on others’ strengths and expertise.

A draft of a preliminary white paper -- one that I created as an example which could be shared, discussed, and critiqued by writing group participants -- is provided below:

6/2/2019

Shared decision-making (SDM) – between the mental health consumer and prescribing physician – about the use of psychotropic medications should be the norm, helping to ensure quality of care and quality of life. As will be discussed below, there is a consumer-versus-clinician power differential associated with and distinction between (1) consent to treatment, (2) informed consent, and (3) SDM. SDM promotes empowerment of mental health consumers, their active participation in developing plans for the course of psychiatric care, taking into account their preferences and personal choices.

Consent to Treatment

At the outset, a mental health consumer is required to sign a “consent to treatment.” In effect, the signer is agreeing to be a *recipient* of care by a physician/psychiatrist/agency/hospital only, not a partner in making decisions about his course of treatment. This requirement applies to all types of patients, before they have their first visit with a health care provider and receive any form of medical care.

Informed Consent

Engagement in “informed consent” retains a power differential, an inequality. However, the consumer is or should be informed about risks (e.g., side effects) and benefits associated with use of specific psychotropic agents. Ideally, however, he/she should know more before agreeing to be compliant, should be able to make a well-informed choice about a medication protocol that may affect his/her life, not just health, on a short-term as well as long-term basis. Research reveals certain side effects that will have long-term ramifications (e.g., use of certain antipsychotics resulting in tardive dyskinesia). However, research studies are not designed to “follow” psychotropic drug users over a long period of time, blocking us from fully knowing what the long-term outcomes may be – positive or negative.

Questions needing to be addressed about whether or not consent has truly been “informed:” Did the consumer comprehend or understand the issues that were addressed, did he know what questions to ask? For example, if drugs that could be addictive were prescribed, refilled many times: Was the consumer informed that these agents are meant for short term use only, the rationale for continuing to take them, the ramifications for having to deal with potential addiction and withdrawal symptoms? Was an advocate (e.g., family member) present

– if desired, if needed – to provide support, to translate what was being discussed into nontechnical language, to ask questions, to demand answers?

At this time, it is more likely that mental health consumers will learn about risks through critical discussions with pharmacists, through reading information provided by pharmacies when prescribed drugs are picked up. With regard to the latter, consumers may not understand the language that is being used on informational materials (not designed to reach those with lower reading “comprehension” levels).

Shared Decision-Making (SDM)

SDM opens the door for individuals in recovery to be active participants in discussions about psychotropic drug use rather than being passive, compliant medication users, and to be empowered by acting on personal choice when decisions are made about the course of treatment. SDM becomes a reality via an open dialogue between partners – physician and patient/consumer. Medication optimization principles should be discussed, with the physician drawing upon his expertise about medications and medication use. The consumer is an expert as well. Her personal strengths, educational background, experiences, knowledge about her symptomatology and what types of treatment have or have not worked in the past, coping skills, and strength of her support system should be taken into account.

When engaging in SDM, a treatment plan should be developed between partners, ideally using a long-term perspective. Being prescribed a psychotropic drug is not a one-shot deal. For many of us, we undergo a process in which multiple drug are prescribed, in which the protocol is changed quickly and repeatedly until we find one that “works” best at that time. We have the right to know about alternatives to medications or what could be combined with psychotropic drug use in the overarching treatment plan. To truly optimize medication use (including titration, discontinuation, non-use), such discussions must take place.

Personal Perspective Based on Lived Experiences

Mental health consumers are characterized by heterogeneity. I am merely a sample size of 1. The following comments are limited to what I have discovered based on my “lived experiences.” I am highly educated, have engaged in postdoctoral research about psychotropic drug use, and read medical/pharmacological journals with ease. Nevertheless, in the past, I have found myself being provided with information that does not align with the most current research or that is inaccurate/limited, with clinical staff frequently “telling” me what the next steps will be in my course of treatment rather than “listening” and “discussing.” In light of my past, one that included a severe psychotic break, I can understand why certain inaccurate assumptions may be made about my knowledge base.

For over 20 years, I have received psychiatric care, treatment that has included psychotropic drug use. During that time period, conversations with only ONE psychiatrist have

not focused on what he believes is best for me (which would leave the traditional power differential intact). Rather, after an interactive process, he asks me what I want to and have decided to do. I am fortunate because SDM became a reality. I have established a solid partnership with my psychiatrist.

Closing Comments

The process of SDM should be tailored for the individual consumer. SDM should be the norm not the exception. It goes steps beyond “consent to treat” and “informed consent” in terms of being empowered, of being a decision-maker not merely a listener, of acting on personal choice about one’s care. Implementation necessitates that psychiatrists and primary care physicians move away from traditional approaches in which decisions about care are physician-directed rather than being collaborative in nature. Medical schools will need to train students in the process of SDM with mental health consumers, to challenge reliance on the medical model, and to promote the philosophy that mental health recovery is possible and should be expected (even by those with serious mental illnesses).

Diana Spore

CONCLUSION

This manual provides writing exercises and ideas that could be incorporated into personal recovery plans and used in writing groups. As noted in the description at the beginning of this manual, the “writing for recovery” program is grounded in peer support.

Suggestions can be used to design writing groups, to guide the creative writing process, and to stimulate ideas about what writers might consider addressing.

The manual provides a starting point for the development and implementation of an effective writing group, grounded in trust, respect, and confidentiality.

- When designing this type of program, a facilitator should give thought to whether or not there should be ground rules, if participants should demonstrate that they’re willing to write, share their works, and provide feedback (and what timeframe is acceptable?).
- Likewise, consideration should be given to whether or not a group should eventually be “closed;” participants may wish to share extremely private information.
- What should be expected from those who “visit” and check out this type of writing group?
- What is the maximum number of participants that should comprise a flexible writing group if there is only one facilitator?
- Will it work to design projects that could be worked on by teams of writers, who are willing to commit time and energy, who are willing to listen and collaborate?
- Should theme-related groups be designed and implemented, or should different topics and themes be dealt with naturally, implemented as part of a flexible, standard writing group using a curriculum for which the order of assignments/exercises being suggested may not even seem to “make sense” at the outset? Note: a facilitator must guide the process, drawing on

what he/she knows about varying writing skills and interests among participants.

This manual goes a step beyond merely providing exercises to guide the creative writing process. It addresses the following: sharing your story, gratitude, and advocacy, for example. Engaging in group exercises and sharing works in a “safe” writing group can promote social connectedness. Writing an acrostic poem about someone else can be a gift to him/her, helping to forge a “connection.”

Let’s talk about future directions for this type of initiative. Writers should be guided and provided with opportunities to publish, if they wish to. The MHRB made it possible for writers and an illustrator to publish their works in an anthology, entitled *Tapestry of Our Lives* (Spore, D., et al. (Eds.), 2019). Possible outlets for publication should not be limited to self-publication, in my opinion. How can we make it possible for works to be published and/or shared by writers who have unique lived experiences, who want to make a difference, who hope to serve as strong advocates? What types of activities and education need to be in place, and what types of resources will need to be committed in order to expand an initiative, and to promote recovery?

So what could be done next?

- Consider the development of a larger initiative, grounded in the vision that all forms of creative expressions promote recovery. Give thought to starting off with a basic keynote address of interest to multiple “stakeholders,” followed by a series of programs that provide the opportunity to engage in practicum experiences, to create mementoes.
- Give thought to how an educational initiative could be implemented, even a lunch series that would be of interest to writers, to participants of peer support programs, and to professionals.
- Consider having a conference, drawing on expertise from agencies and peer support programs in multiple counties in Ohio, addressing creative expressions, followed by breakouts with practicum experiences.
- Consider developing a “model” of an effective program in one peer support program, one that bridges writing with other forms of creative expressions. Ideally, the model developed could be replicated or at least trigger ideas for

how another peer support program might implement this type of initiative. So what can be barriers to making this suggestion a reality? The bottom line is that collaboration takes a lot of work. Implementing a solid initiative can be adversely affected or blocked by an unwillingness to collaborate, by having different “agendas,” by territorialism, and by refusal to find a shared vision.

It is our hope that readers will find the exercises and assignments provided here to be useful. Creative writing has a plethora of benefits, and can be built into personal recovery plans. Ideas suggested in this manual can be incorporated into therapeutic writing group sessions as well.

Thank you for being part of our journey to promote creative writing for recovery of self and others.



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

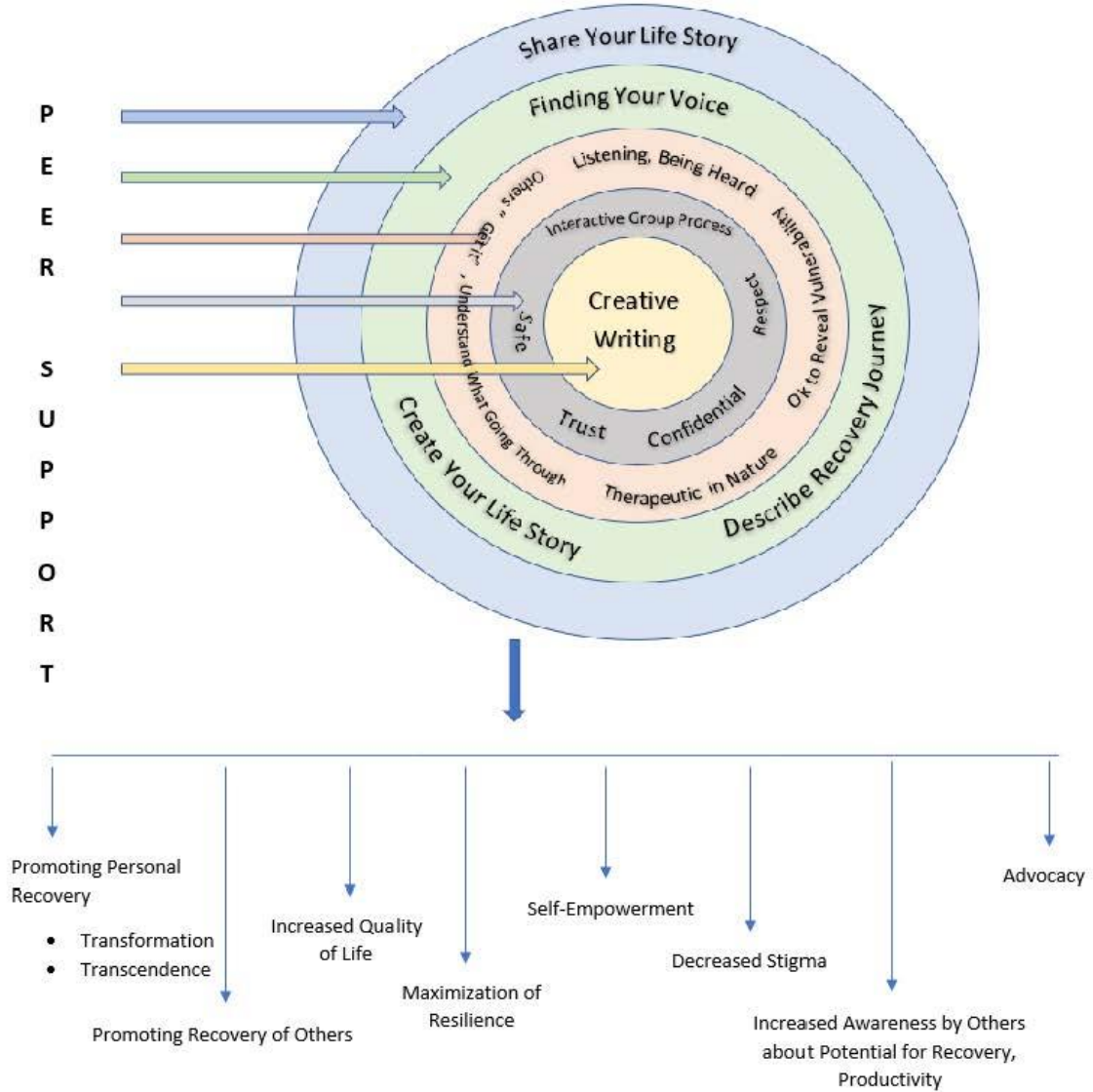
Diana Spore, Ph.D. is an advocate for individuals facing mental health challenges, a writer/editor, and a mental health consumer in recovery. Spore received her Master's degree in Gerontological Studies from Miami University, and earned a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in aging, from the Pennsylvania State University. She completed postdoctoral training at Brown University. Spore's areas of expertise include medication optimization, mental health recovery, mental health and aging, long-term care, psychotropic and inappropriate drug use among older adults, and caregiving. She is a former Board member of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB). Spore was editor-in-chief of *TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES*, an anthology that was created under the auspices of the MHRB. She served as Project Lead for a "Writing for Recovery" initiative (MHRB) and engaged in all aspects of the project (including grant writing, design and evaluation of the program), which has resulted in sustained spin-off efforts. Currently, she is a consultant at the MHRB, writing articles for a local newspaper about topics of interest to seniors. Spore is serving as a facilitator of a "writing for recovery" group, which is under the auspices of Catholic Charities Services, Pathways Peer Support Program. She has expertise in addressing the process and benefits of different forms of writing for recovery, self-empowerment, emotional well-being, and healing. Spore has presented at and co-facilitated workshops on writing for recovery, journaling for caregivers, and legacy writing.

APPENDIX I

KEY ELEMENTS OF A “WRITING FOR RECOVERY” GROUP, GROUNDED IN PEER SUPPORT:

MULTILAYERED PROCESS AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

Key Elements of a “Writing for Recovery” Group, Grounded in Peer Support:
Multilayered Process and Potential Outcomes



APPENDIX II

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES – WRITING FOR RECOVERY

The listed resources will be of interest to individuals who want to learn about writing as a therapeutic tool for recovery as well as to explore the process and benefits of written expressions. Examples of works of written art by individuals in recovery are sprinkled throughout these recommended readings. Resources that may be primarily of interest to professionals and to those who wish to develop therapeutic writing groups or design writing workshops are provided on the website for the MHRB (www.ashlandmhrb.org).

Bolton, G. (2011). **Write Yourself: Creative Writing and Personal Development.** London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bolton, G. (2014). **The Writer's Key: Introducing Creative Solutions for Life.** London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

DeSalvo, L. (1999). **Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives.** Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Marinella, S. (2017). **The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness, or Loss.** Norvato, CA: New World Library.

McAdoo, P. (2013). **Writing for Wellbeing.** Dublin: Currach Press.

Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County. (2019). **Leaving a Legacy: Exercises to Guide You Through the Creative Writing Process.** Ashland, Ohio: Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County.

Pennebaker, J.W. (2013). **Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval.** Wheat Ridge, CO: Center for Journal Therapy, Inc. (2004 edition was published by New Harbinger Publications).

Pennebaker, J.W., & Evans, J.F. (2014). **Expressive Writing: Words that Heal.** Enumclaw, WA: Idyll Harbor, Inc.

Pennebaker, J.W., & Smyth, J.M. (2016). **Opening Up by Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain (Third Edition).** New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Ridgway, P., McDiarmid, D., Davidson, L. et al. (2002). **Pathways to Recovery: A Strengths Recovery Self-Help Workbook.** Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas School of Social Welfare.

Schaefer, E.M. (2008). **Writing Through the Darkness: Easing Your Depression with Paper and Pen.** Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, an imprint of Ten Speed Press.

Shade, J.S. (2016). **Let it Flow!: Writing for Wellness.** Ashland, Ohio: Gracednotes Ministries.

Spore, D., Kinney, A., Switzer, D., Mowry, P., Bradley-Thomas, K., Duggan, C. (Eds.). (2019). **Tapestry of Our Lives.** Ashland, Ohio: Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County.



CELEBRATE WRITING FOR RECOVERY.

UNLEASH YOUR CREATIVITY.

INSPIRE AND BE INSPIRED.

JUST WRITE!!!!