



THERAPY: A SNEAK PEEK INSIDE Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW

The Journaling Jew

Sometimes, clients walk into my office and cannot speak.

The words are locked in their throats, their stories buried inside.

They want to be in therapy, they know they need to be in therapy, but while they are in therapy, they find themselves blocked from using therapy to help them with whatever brought them into my room to begin with.

There are so many methods therapists use to help clients find their voices. The standard talk therapy obviously is not going to work, so what will?

In my room, there is a sand tray with miniatures. I have a dollhouse with figurines and furniture; scrapbook materials and drawing utensils; modeling clay, and arts and crafts. Do any of these help clients talk? Most certainly, although the talking may not be verbal, but is done through these other mediums of expression.

But sometimes, the best type of medium is the written word. Clients who find themselves unable to utter a single word somehow find that in writing, the words flow. And as someone who loves to write, whose writing is my own form of therapy, I encourage my silent — and not-so-silent — clients to journal away.

But I had no idea that *journal writing therapy* is a **real** therapy modality. Like EMDR, or somatic work, or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Journal Writing Therapy is not writing in a journal, the same way CBT is not thinking and behaving. It may sound the same, but one is writing in a journal, or journaling; and the other is a specific therapy modality called journal writing therapy. What do you think of that?

Want to hear more?

Here's a definition of journal writing therapy I found in my research. "Journal writing therapy is the therapeutic use of journaling exercises and prompts to bring about awareness and improved mental-health conditions as a result of inner and outer conflicts. It is the purposeful and intentional use of reflective writing to further mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and wellness."

Here are some of the studied uses of journal therapy: for post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsiveness, grief and loss, issues related to chronic illness, eating disorders, interpersonal and relationship issues, communication skills issues, and low self-esteem. The researched effects of therapeutic writing are decreased distress and psychological arousal, improved mood, immune system, and memory; an increased ability to cope with stressors and greater awareness and acceptance of self.

There is even a Therapeutic Writing Institute (TWI) that provides a 2-3 year training in journal writing therapy! Anybody can join this institute, but only licensed therapists can go on to an advanced study in therapeutic writing. Sounds very, very tempting to me.

The training courses address different genres of therapeutic writing such as memoirs, poetry, and visual journaling (for all my former high school writing students, let's give each other a high five for the therapeutic writing we did without even knowing about therapy!).

This model of therapy started in 1966 by Ira Progoff, a psychotherapist who created the Intensive Journal Method

while at a university. A series of books published in the 1970s, followed by journal workshops led by other pioneering psychotherapists in this field, attracted attention for its design on self-discovery.

The nice thing is that in the 1990s, some research studies on writing as positively impacting on mental and physical health following trauma or general emotional problems garnered wider support for the integration of this method in other, mainstream therapies. Therapeutic writing schools like TWI evolved, and as in most adjunct models of therapy, professionals with advanced degrees in counseling seek to learn by entering a credentialed or independent-study program.

So, great. It's a real therapy, this writing thing. But how is it really different from journal writing except that they call it journal writing *therapy*?

First of all, there is a three-fold goal in using this modality, which is specifically to increase self-awareness and insight, promote change and growth, and develop a sense of self.

The method used, which is again specific to this therapy, is to begin a session with a writing exercise that will set an intention for the session, use it as a form of communication between client and therapist (facilitating the communication that, because of its layer of protection through writing rather than verbalization, is easier for the client to do), and assign writing homework to be processed in the following session.

To achieve the objectives of journal writing therapy, creative assignments facilitate the therapy. Samples of these writing exercises may be journaling by using a personal photograph and responding to a series of questions the therapist will assign, questions like, "What would you like to say to each person in this picture?" or, "What do the objects in this picture say to you?"

Another can be letter-writing. Writing a letter to a deceased loved one, or to someone who has wronged them, or even to a part of themselves.

Sentence stems is the technique of giving a client an open-ended question that needs to be addressed, like, "The thing that makes me the happiest/saddest/most worried/scared is..."

List of 100 is another popular technique in which the client is directed to list a hundred items related to a theme/topic the therapist or client chooses; and the inevitable emerging patterns or repetition is processed in session.

And yet another is the Dialogue, in which the client writes a dialogue between different parts or aspects of himself, or even different ages that dwell inside him. A dialogue can also be between a person's present and future self, or a past and present self.

It's about writing freely, honestly, and returning to the writing that is so effective.

Of course journal writing therapy has its limitations, as does any other modality. People with cognitive limitations are unable to use writing as a tool for self-awareness. Some people find writing exacerbates their symptoms. And still others find that several methodologies in therapy are needed to address their issues.

I don't know about you, but according to this, the amount of writing I do a week should have therapized me already into the most perfectly healthy human being. It ain't working yet, so I guess in two weeks we will meet again in my column. Write away! ●

Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW and motivational speaker, maintains a private practice in Brooklyn. Mindy's book "Therapy, Shmerapy" is now in bookstores. She welcomes your comments, questions, and even complaints, criticism and kvetches. For consultation and speaking engagements, Mindy can be contacted at mindyblumenfeld@binahmagazine.com.

Mindy will be alternating her therapy column with responding to readers' questions. Feel free to email her a question; keep your questions concise — up to 150 words. She will select some questions and respond on these pages.