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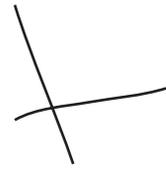
**Reflective  
Writing**

*in Counselling  
and Psychotherapy*

**2ND EDITION**

**SAGE**

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



# 1

## PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

### INTRODUCTION

Like jazz musicians, counsellors and psychotherapists improvise. *Reflective Writing in Counselling and Psychotherapy* does not provide navigation equipment with precise instructions or a musical score, but each chapter offers writing activities to improve your own sense of direction and ability to improvise. The exercises introduce the links between self-awareness and being able to tell your story in different ways in counselling and psychotherapy and expressive and reflective writing.

### Who is this book for? Introducing Philip, Anita and Jo

The book has been written for practitioners, supervisors, teachers and students in counselling and psychotherapy. You may be an experienced practitioner who is looking for new ways to continue personal and professional development using writing; you may be new to counselling, coaching or psychotherapy and have started initial training; you may be involved in some further study for continuing professional development. At some stage you have been asked to keep a reflective journal and would like to know more about how to do that writing most successfully and enjoyably. We follow three fictional characters through the chapters that follow; all are in various stages of therapeutic training in the UK.

**PHILIP** I can understand why we have to keep a personal journal during this course, but I don't really know how. I've decided I'm going to join a person-centred group for the personal

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therapy requirement. I went out and bought a new writing book for this reflective journal, small enough to fit into a pocket, with white paper and no lines.

**ANITA** Sitting there in the lecture theatre I thought to myself, 'No way'. Keep a personal journal? Me? I don't think so. They are also encouraging us to go to the student counselling service. I know it's free, and I know it would give me an experience of sitting in the client's seat – but what would I talk about?

**JO** Hmmm, keeping this journal is a bit like blogging, except I don't write it on the Internet. I asked if I could use online counselling for the personal therapy requirement on the course but they said no. I'll find out if there is a narrative therapist or somebody solution focused I could go and see locally. Writing this personal journal feels exposing – like a snail coming out of its shell, I feel too pale and vulnerable and want to protect my privacy.

What motivates us to work as counsellors and psychotherapists? During introductory and open evenings for new students at one course I taught on, I would always ask that question and emphasise some of the downsides – that it's very hard work, intellectually and emotionally, is guaranteed to disturb your equilibrium and shake your relationships, plus there is no guarantee of paid work at the end of training.

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### ■ TRY THIS

#### Why do I work as a therapist – what do people say about me?

##### Listing personal qualities and values

Finding somewhere you feel comfortable to write, and allowing yourself no more than 10 minutes, start to write a list of those personal qualities, experiences or values that brought you into training and working in counselling and psychotherapy. If it's easier, write what other people have said about you.

An example:

Peter is:  
Warm and approachable  
Creative  
Helping others is important to him  
The peacemaker in family of origin

By writing a list in this exercise, you have already started preparing for this journey. Where did you decide to write? Did you use paper, pencils, the Internet, a digital platform? There is no wrong or right way to do this self-writing in practical terms, only the way that suits you best.

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**PHILIP** I can listen. That’s what people say about me. I’ve struggled at times and maybe it’s those hard times that have made me able to listen to people, all sorts of people, and understand a bit better what they’re going through.

**ANITA** I wanted to do something connected with health. It wasn’t going to be taking care of people physically – I’m too squeamish for that. Psychology interested me and led on to this course.

**JO** There are so many reasons for me wanting to train to be a therapist , and I’m not sure where to start. Some days I’m not even sure I’ve done the right thing. It’s hard going with all the academic learning and then the personal journal writing and the group work. We have to do personal therapy too. It feels like I’m being dismantled somehow – hard to keep going.

## PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Personal and professional awareness or development are defined by John and Julia McLeod as follows:

The definition that has informed our own work is: therapist personal development consists of an enduring, career-long, commitment to engage in cycles of collaborative reflection on both life experience and practice, leading to new ways of understanding and active experimentation with new ways of being with others, for the purpose of being able to be as useful as possible to the clients, patients or service users with whom one works. The key ideas here are (a) it is never over; (b) it is something that needs the active involvement of other people; (c) it is not merely concerned with insight and awareness, but with being able to do things differently; (d) it is not necessarily about coming to terms with personal problems ... (McLeod & McLeod, 2014: 10)

The personal and the professional go together; they are often linked in the counselling and psychotherapy literature and it can sometimes be a pointless exercise to attempt to disentangle one from the other (Rose, 2017). It seems certain that personal and professional development

continue throughout a career in counselling and psychotherapy (Rose, 2012). Decades ago, Hazel Johns suggested that personal development never ends for therapists:

Personal development is not an event but a process, life-long and career-long: it must and will happen incidentally before and after any training course, through all aspects of life and work. (Johns, 1996: xii)

Since then, professional bodies in the psychological therapies have considered what might define personal development competence. For example, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and other professional bodies have referred to self-awareness as one necessary criterion for professional accreditation, but have not yet provided more specific detail about what self-awareness is or how it might be measured (Bond, 2015). The need to be aware of social justice and how to build therapeutic relationships across diversity is emphasised, acknowledging the ongoing critique of counselling and psychotherapy as white and middle class (Feltham et al., 2017; Watson, 2006). In the USA, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) states that the presence of self-awareness is a prerequisite for counsellor fitness to practise, yet also leaves aside exactly what is meant by self-awareness and how it might be assessed. The need to demonstrate how you have developed personally and professionally and the role of writing in that process is considered in more depth in later chapters.

In this book professional development and the kind of writing we provide practice for is hard to separate from personal development. We cover a terrain, akin to writing for reflective practice, where you might not be certain where the path you're taking will lead, and where your assumptions will be challenged (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Keeping a reflective journal is one way of noticing how your experience changes, how your values and the background you come from play a part in your ability to create and maintain therapeutic relationships:

To be an effective therapist, it is necessary to develop a way of being with people that is genuinely grounded in one's own personal experience, values and cultural context. Over and over again, research studies have found that what makes the difference to clients are the personal qualities of the counsellor, and his or her capacity to form an accepting and facilitative relationship. (McLeod, 2010: 6)

Whether the terminology in your particular counsellor education or practice refers to self-awareness or personal development, the centrality of knowing yourself in order to develop effective therapeutic alliances makes sense. Personal development could include 'a unique pattern of moral, emotional, sexual, social and intellectual concerns', allowing the practitioner or trainee to 'identify her own strengths, limitations and oddities' (Johns, 1996: 59). You may be working in a personal development group as part of your practice or involved in personal therapy, so this self-writing may only be part of that journey of self-exploration. Although there

is little conclusive evidence for the effectiveness of personal therapy and therapy groups for the personal development of trainees in counselling and psychotherapy, research continues (Norcross, 2005). What's certain is the role of the therapeutic relationship in making a difference to clients, and again, there is more on this in later chapters.

When asked for the advantages and disadvantages of writing compared to personal therapy or personal development groups, some counselling students on an integrative programme used words such as:

... reflection, time/space, a means of clarifying thinking, expressing and identifying feelings, confidential, honest, freedom of expression. (Daniels & Feltham, 2004)

In the same study, one student said:

Writing enables me to articulate in a non-vocal way material what I wouldn't dare express in any other way. (2004: 184)

There is increasing evidence for the professional and personal benefits of expressive and reflective writing across disciplines (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). There is also a long tradition of self-therapy in various schools of the psychological therapies, such as Karen Horney's pioneering work in self-analysis (Horney, 1942), or the increasing use of self-practice and self-reflection in cognitive behavioural therapy training (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001).

## CONFIDENTIALITY, AND SAFEGUARDING YOUR PERSONAL WRITING

It is your responsibility to ensure that your writing remains private until you choose to communicate about it with others. Whether you use encryption in a digital environment, or make sure that your writing is not left where others could read your thoughts and feelings, you must decide now how you are going to store this writing in a way that is comfortable for you.

You will write differently, and tend to censor your thinking/writing, if you write for an audience, or even suspect that someone else might read this raw material. In some initial counsellor and therapist education programmes, autobiographical writing is required. Who is to read that writing and, if it is to be assessed, by whom and according to whose criteria, are essential pieces of negotiation. These questions also bring up important ethical points:

We were asked to write our life story and hand it in by the following week. It was my first experience of counsellor education. I knew why I wanted to retrain as a therapist and it

had taken a huge amount of effort to get into this particular programme. Refusing to do the first 'homework' we were given seemed downright daring. I sat for hours and finally wrote a letter to the tutor, a man I had never met, explaining why I didn't want to write my autobiography and 'hand it in' to a stranger who was responsible for assessment. At different stages of my therapeutic development and training this same process has been repeated. I need to know who's going to read my writing and why. (Jeannie Wright)

I still have a copy of the letter I wrote to the tutor in my initial training. How did writing that letter contribute to my personal development? It is an example of reflective writing, and in re-reading I ask various questions. What did the refusal to write an autobiographical piece for a stranger say about me? The tutor on that first counsellor education programme would have learned that I am wary (still am), not always compliant and liable to question instructions. I can't remember now if that was an insight I gained from that whole exercise, but reflecting on it now is useful and reminds me about some important personal characteristics that emerge from time to time. That's exactly why we are asking you to start writing straight away. You then have a record you can look back over and learn from. Like birds peck for worms, if there is no soil, there is nothing to find. You need to create the soil and then see what inhabits it.

You are in charge of the 'self-writing' you are encouraged to do in this book. You choose how to use the writing and who can read it. That means finding a safe way to store your writing.

This kind of autobiographical and reflective writing works best without a critic or judge looking over your shoulder, even if that critic is part of you.

## THE WRITING

### What to write about

If you are ready to start writing, you could choose from any of these suggested themes (Clarke, 2000). They are based on *The New Diary* (Rainer, 1978) a classic in the journal-writing literature. The journal is a place for many purposes:

- To communicate with and advise yourself – how have you overcome personal prejudices, for example?
- To clarify your beliefs or goals – in what ways has past history and family of origin experience impacted on your current thinking?
- To make and evaluate decisions.
- To indulge yourself.
- To reflect upon your dreams and disappointments.

- To work through difficult situations.
- To rehearse future behaviour.
- To focus on immediate events and experiences – how far are you able to give and receive personal feedback in an acceptable way, e.g. to clients, course members and staff?
- To work towards clarity and order.
- To exercise responsibility for yourself.
- To reflect upon and further enjoy various pleasures.
- To be simply free and creative.
- To examine things you find hard to raise with others.
- To respond to and apply psychological and counselling theory.

### What kind of writing is this?

It makes sense to me, to map a journey in expression through writing, when I was young I read somewhere about writing people a letter when (you) wanted to tell them something but were too afraid to say it, not necessarily to send, in fact they all ended up in the bin, but I always felt better after ‘getting it out on paper’, so to speak. (‘Jenny’ in Tan, 2008: 13)

Autobiographical and professional development or reflective writing clearly calls for a more personal style from the academic or formal kind expected for college and university assignments; for a start it uses the first person, ‘I’. It is also possible to throw this writing away; you are in charge of what happens to it. When asked about the benefits of journal writing, even though some therapists are sceptical to start with, most find great value in it:

Seeing them (my feelings) on paper also helps me to understand them.

Looking back and seeing how I’ve grown.

Insight and understanding. (Daniels & Feltham, 2004: 184)

Or as a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) student commented about their journal:

Mine was initially about the course content and about clients and my own feelings and anxieties. And more about inner beliefs and now it’s become more philosophical but in a positive sense really. (Sutton et al., 2007: 395)

Re-reading is an important part of this kind of writing in order to reflect further on what you have written about. Here’s an example of ‘raw’ journal writing from Anita which started out as a list, merely describing a day without exploration or more meaningful observations:

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When it's sunny I find it easier to get out of bed. I have a full day, with three counselling appointments before lunch, two after lunch, and then I go to supervision. All of the morning clients showed up, but there was a gap in the afternoon, with no notification, so I caught up on notes.

This writing tells us little about Anita's day that we couldn't have found out from reading her office diary. It is not reflective. There is little exploration of her emotional or evaluative sense of each of her counselling sessions or her agenda for supervision. When she re-read it, she went further:

After 22 days without seeing the sun, finally this morning there it was. I notice how my mood changes immediately and I'm ready to go into work much earlier than usual. I decided to walk to the office – part of the self-care strategy I've discussed with my supervisor. I'm looking forward to seeing him today, particularly to work on my risk assessment and guiding formulation with B. I should see B this afternoon if she turns up. I think the grey weather in the winter affects her depression too. I shall be disappointed if she doesn't attend today.

This writing takes about five minutes, even the second version where Anita is much more reflective.

## Making time

Students on a CBT diploma training course reported various ideas about how often and how much to write:

I try to do at least half an hour each week at work on the computer, now I'm a bit wary because I'm already up to 8000 words.

I try to do it every week.

I seem to do it either when I've had a really, really good session and I'm very, very happy and had a good supervision or I'm really, really cheesed off. (Sutton et al., 2007: 394)

In this kind of self-writing, it can be useful to create specific spaces, even rituals, so that the usual everyday busy-ness isn't allowed to crowd out the writing. You might be a morning journal writer, preferring to stay in bed and write before starting the day. You might choose to add a writing space on to supervision appointments, leaving time before and after each session to write in your journal. Like any other kind of activity which we've been told is 'good' for us, we need to know what will help motivate us (see Write! 1.2 at the end of this chapter).

## Time alone

Apart from writing enabling you to keep a record of self-discoveries and changes, it also makes time for solitude: time for yourself. For some, this may feel uncomfortable. Being alone is different from feeling lonely. Solitary time is essential for creativity; we're not suggesting you have to work alone all the time. You are responsible for your own learning and know your own learning styles better than anybody else. What is likely to work for you? For some people, writing in the morning before they've got up and started the day is most helpful:

Well, I'm sitting up in bed and I've probably done the first, the kind of opening routine I do which says, how are you? Then, how did you sleep? How was yesterday? – Possibly following up something like that, how did it go? Or how did you feel with that? (Wright, 2009b: 237)

For others, keeping a notebook always with them so as to catch thoughts and feelings on paper at any time becomes habitual and essential (see Write! 1.3 at the end of this chapter).

Research into expressive, therapeutic writing using randomised controlled trials and other 'scientific' methods is largely associated with cognitive and behavioural approaches.

In addition to the physiological and psychological benefits which emerged from such research into expressive writing, the very act of writing has been shown to improve communication and relationship with others:

The cognitive changes themselves now allow the individuals to begin to think about and use their social world differently. They talk more; they connect with others differently. They are now better able to take advantage of social support. And with these cognitive and social changes, many of their unhealthy behaviors abate. As recent data suggest, expressive writing promotes sleep, enhanced immune function, reduced alcohol consumption, etc. (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007: 38)

Communicating with yourself, using expressive and reflective writing, can offer physiological as well as psychological benefits (Bolton & Wright, 2004). It may be that you are not particularly drawn to words and writing. You may be more visual and find yourself drawing, painting or using photography and other non-verbal ways of expressing yourself.

## PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY AND DEVELOPING YOUR MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

A further theoretical framework we draw from is multiple intelligences (Chen et al., 2009; Gardner, 2006). The two intelligences that are valued most highly in most Western educational systems are skill in language, or linguistic intelligence, and skill in logical-mathematical

operations. Here's a student on a cognitive behavioural psychotherapy training programme talking about her experience of writing a journal (on her course called a 'learning log') and dyslexia:

... you know the difficulties I was having on the course and the intelligence and dyslexia and all those kinds of things which came to me. I was writing about them and some conversations I'd had with the tutor and it was almost (laughs) this is going to sound really sad, but knowing that the tutor was going to read it, I was almost winning my argument through my learning log ... (Wright, 2005)

This student's difficulties with reading and writing did not prevent her succeeding in therapy training. Grammar, spelling or school rules which have created such obstacles for many who struggle with writing are irrelevant in personal journal writing. The kind of activities we are suggesting you develop in this book hinge less on linguistic intelligence, and could involve other ways of expressing yourself as well, such as photography, collage or music.

All of us could fulfil our potential more depending on our motivation and the resources available to us. Whether or not you agree with Gardner's theories, which come from a particular view of psychology and human development, you can probably think of examples of how these intelligences can be developed through your work. Gardner's theories make two claims: firstly, that all human beings possess these intelligences; secondly, that no two human beings possess exactly the same profile of strengths and weaknesses (Chen et al., 2009).

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## ACTIVITY

### Writing and 'mindfulness'

Start by clearing a space where you can 'be' rather than following the driven or 'doing' mode as Jon Kabat-Zinn and Mindfulness practitioners call it (Kabat-Zinn, 2005: 6). You might need to turn off telephones and make sure you won't be interrupted. In later chapters we will ask you to follow guided meditations, but the point of this short exercise is to slow your thoughts down using writing.

- Where are you right now?
  - Describe the place you are in.
  - Are you inside or outside?
  - Is it warm, cold, stuffy or airy?
  - What are some of the colours you can see?

- Now close your eyes and allow yourself to relax, letting go of any tension. Focus on the sounds where you are.
- When you're ready, open your eyes and write down what you can hear.

Many of the exercises we will ask you to take part in will benefit from this kind of mindful observation and reflection before writing.

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## CONCLUSION

There is no right or wrong way to write a reflective journal. The writing is for you and not to be read by others until you're ready. You must take responsibility for deciding where to keep this writing so that you can control who accesses it.

The practicalities of self-writing include: making time alone; choosing paper, a screen or digital platform for writing – a way that suits you; ignoring critics; including all of the school rules about spelling and grammar. As well as writing you could choose to draw, photograph, speak and then record those words in writing.

The words we use to describe ourselves may be slippery and elusive but we can observe changes in how we think, feel and behave by keeping a personal journal. The next chapter explores the rationale for writing a reflective journal – why should I write?

## WRITE!

Each chapter in this book will end with ways to try out some writing. Don't just think it, ink it.

### 1.1 Choose your materials

What are you going to write on?

List the possibilities.

What is your preferred medium for writing?

This could range from recycled paper journals, a tablet or phone, the backs of envelopes, to digital platforms, a voice recognition option.

### 1.2 When to write: writing routines

Think of a time when you started a new, beneficial activity. Perhaps it was joining a gym, cycling to work or meditating.

What helped you build this new activity into your daily routine?

How were other people involved, if at all?

How did you find it easier to make time and how were you derailed (if you were)?

### **1.3 How will you start writing?**

It may be that you have been writing your autobiography or keeping a reflective journal for a long time. If that is the case, continue from where you left off. If you are still unsure about where to begin, you might want to go to Chapter 4, 'Starting Out: How to Write Reflectively'.