

Part Two

An anthology of poems for discussion

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Here I share an anthology of my own poetry to use as starting points. Of course, you can use any poem that feels pertinent to the therapeutic situation and the ideas shared in Part One and in response to the poems in Part Two should act as guidance to help you use any poem as a starting point for discussion.

The poems are borne of my own experience, either as I battle with my own mental health or as I take on the experiences of others during my work in the field of mental health. My poems should be viewed as a starting point – they do not represent right or wrong, but merely the grounds for discussion. Some are painful, some may be considered triggering and some may contain points of view that you or your client disagree with. None of these things need present a problem with careful handling, but for these reasons, I would advise against using a poem in a therapeutic situation unless you have had a little time to read and consider it first and to think through some of the thoughts, feelings and experiences it may provoke during a discussion.

The poems in this section are loosely categorized, though you will see some overlap. Each poem is provided in full and is accompanied with suggested discussion starters and extension activities. All the poems in this section

are downloadable. You can use these directly, or you can use them to inspire your own discussions and activities. If you would like to look beyond the poems shared here, there are many poetry websites and anthologies you could draw on. Or, of course, you may choose to write your own poems – or encourage your clients to do so. Some clients will be happy for you to share their poems anonymously with your other clients. This can prove very powerful for both the poet and the reader.

The rest of this section is devoted to sharing and exploring poems which are split by topic. The final topic explored is 'support'. Many of the poems in the 'support' section touch on topics listed earlier but I have split out the poems of support separately as they can be useful in a range of situations and can help us to begin to really understand what is and isn't helpful to our client in terms of support.

— *Panic Attack*

Gripped with panic,
Heart beats fast.
Cannot manage,
'Till it's passed.
Can't control
The urge to cry.
Feel like
I'm going to die.
Breathing shallow,
Pounding head.
Skin is sallow,
Feet of lead.

Take control.

Take control.

Mustn't let the panic roll.

Holding tight
And breathing deep
Fear takes flight,
Calm feelings seep
Back into my
Weary mind
And shaking body.
I'm fine.

I'm fine.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- What do you think might have triggered these feelings?
- How does the subject feel – what are the physical sensations? What are the accompanying emotions?
- What might help the panic to pass?
- Do you think other people can tell how the subject feels?
- How could a friend or passerby help? What would be unhelpful?
- Is there anything the subject could do to reduce the likelihood or impact of a future attack?

Extension activities

- How could you depict feelings of panic using shape or colour – can you draw or paint them?
- Do you think music could be a useful way of calming? Create a calming play list and talk about the songs you've chosen.
- Write a list of things that people who care about you could do to help you when you feel like this. Who could you usefully share it with?

— *Ruled by Anxiety*

I can't get a thought in edgeways
When my head is full of fear,
Anxiety wreaks havoc
And my other thoughts aren't clear.
The part of me that's strong and sane
Is sitting in a well,
It tries to shout advice to me
I think, it's hard to tell
Because it sounds so distant
And its words are all obscured
By the nasty mumbo jumbo
That I'm trying to ignore.
Eventually I break and cave
And anxious thoughts run free.
And when they do,
For a short time
I wish I wasn't me.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- It sounds like the subject has two opposing voices in their head – is that something you can identify with?
- Why does the subject say 'I wish I wasn't me' in the last line?
- What do you suppose makes the subject 'break and cave'?
- What does it feel like when 'anxious thoughts run free'?
- What are the possible sources of the anxious thoughts the subject is experiencing?

Extension activities

- 'I can't get a thought in edgeways | When my head is full of fear' – use this as the starting point for your own poem.
- Write a list of ways that the subject could try to overcome the thoughts of fear filling their head.
- Discuss the pros and cons of the subject giving in to the fear in their head.

Depression

— *The Tree Who Couldn't*

It's summer, yet my leaves don't grow.
There is no leafy green on show.
There are no buds
That promise life,
No branches
Growing to the light.

I'm sitting dormant, sad and weak,
I look dark and dull and bleak.
At first you stop
To see what's wrong,
But that care ends
Before too long.

I sit, forgotten, in plain sight,
Amongst the trees whose boughs are bright
With blossoms, leaves
And birds who sing,
Whilst I stand bare,
A broken thing.

I wither, shying from the light,
I look more dull when days are bright.
The hot sun shines,
Reminding me
That I should grow,
Like other trees.

But sometimes it is hard to grow,
And put your leaves and flowers on show.
So I withdraw,
My branches bare,
Whilst brighter trees
Receive your care.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- What is the poem about?
- Can you imagine the tree? How does it look?
- What feelings does this poem evoke for you?
- The poem alludes to bright days being harder than dull days – can you understand or identify with this?
- Do you think the analogy of the tree works? What might work better?

Extension activities

- Write a poem using a different analogy to tell a similar story.
- Draw, paint or describe the tree in the poem.
- Create a playlist that represents the different emotions explored in the poem. Consider why you've chosen each song and what it means to you.

— *Boy Anorexic*

For weeks or months,
They didn't know,
Just quite what could be wrong.
If he'd been a girl, of course,
It wouldn't take so long.
To come to a conclusion
About why he seemed to shrink,
But as a boy, this illness
Was the last thing that they'd think
To test for – no one asked him,
Why he seemed to fade away,
They just took bloods and poked him,
Could be viral? They would say.
And all the time he starved himself,
And dark thoughts ruled his mind.
This half-life he was living
Made him feel deaf and blind
To the world that lived around him,
Folks that didn't know his name.
His name was anorexia,
Or at least that was his game.
A daily game that tortured him
And played him like a toy,
They didn't help,
They didn't know
It could happen to a boy.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- Why would no one suspect that the boy in the poem may be suffering with anorexia?
- Do you think there are differences between male and female people suffering with anorexia – what thoughts and behaviours do you think would be different and what would be the same?
- Do you suppose the boy knew what the problem was? How do you suppose he felt?
- How do you think everyone felt when they eventually worked it out?
- The poem talks about anorexia as a game – who is the player and who is being played? How might different people interpret these roles?

— Recovery

She'd fought and won.
That's what they said,
But what they couldn't know,
Was that each and every meal time,
Dealt another blow,
To a thin veneer she'd painted on,
In the hope that she could pass,
For someone who was coping,
With no more need to fast.

You couldn't tell by looking,
That she had a problem now,
She'd gained some weight,
And forced a smile
And made them all so proud.
They thought she'd got it beaten,
And so how could she say,
That despite the fact her clothes fit now
Her hurt was here to stay?

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- How does this poem make you feel?
- Do you think people really think that when our bodies look better our minds must be healed too? Why?
- Why does she force a smile?
- The poem says the girl has made everyone proud by gaining weight. How do you imagine she feels about this?
- The girl has chosen not to say anything about how she really feels; do you think this is the right choice?

Extension activities

- If the girl in the poem chose to be honest with someone about how she is feeling now who would be a good person to talk to? Think of as many different possibilities as you can then consider the pros and cons of each.
- How might this conversation go? Imagine, write or role play it. Consider the potential challenges and how these might be overcome.
- Write a poem, a piece of prose or a diary entry which explores how the girl really feels at the moment.