

Part One

Using poetry as a way in

Ideas, strategies and techniques

* * *

Using poetry as a therapeutic tool

Sometimes it can be helpful to have a ‘way in’ to start discussions about difficult topics. Perhaps you are working with someone who has experienced trauma or who is travelling the long road to mental health recovery and you need a point of reference to start your conversations. Poetry can offer that. There are several ways you can use poetry to support your clients’ difficult journeys – I’ve listed some in this part of the book to get you started and have included specific ideas with each poem shared in the anthology in Part Two to enable you to explore specific topics with someone in your care.

Poetry as a vehicle to discuss our feelings less directly

Poetry can be a great door opener during recovery discussions as it offers us the opportunity to talk about our feelings in the third person as we explore the feelings of the poet or the person the poem is about (I refer to this person as the ‘subject’ throughout this book). It often feels safer and easier to talk about someone else’s experiences and feelings rather than our own, even if there are

many parallels. Any sentence that starts with 'I' is a tough one when we're talking about sensitive issues.

Ideas for exploring this:

- Ask the person in recovery to choose a poem that strikes a chord with them. Explore how the poem makes them feel. Ask questions about how they thought the poet might have felt when they wrote it.
- When considering a specific poem, come back to it more than once; does it evoke different feelings on different days? A poem which elicits fear and hopelessness on one day may inspire hope on another. Think about why this might be and how different people, with different issues and different frames of mind, might interpret the same poem in different ways at different times.
- Think about why the poet wrote the poem. What message were they trying to convey and who to?
- Talk about the person the poem is about. Think about what their life feels like each day – what would they find easy and hard, how might they feel at different times? What thoughts rush through their head as they lay down to sleep or as they wake up in the morning?

Poetry as a means for reflection

Poetry can be a powerful way of reflecting on how things were, how things are and how we'd like them to be. We can explore our hopes and fears through other people's poetry more safely than by looking into our own minds and lives.

Ideas for exploring this:

- Discuss why the poem was written – what was its aim and what might have inspired its writing?
- Think about how writing the poem made the poet feel.
- Consider the poem within a broader context; think about what might have happened before the snapshot captured in the poem as well as considering what might have happened next.
- When thinking about what happened next, explore the different ways that things could turn out depending on different choices and responses of people within the poem.
- Explore whether the person in the poem has the power to change the way things are – and if so, how.

- Consider the tone of the poem, is it sad, happy, hopeful, despairing? Consider how differently the same situation might have been portrayed if the poet had been in a different frame of mind that day.

Poetry as a means of exploring what we could do next

This can be especially helpful if you're working with a client in recovery who is not yet fully ready to embrace the recovery process and is ambivalent about the idea of change. You can explore 'what might happen next' through the eyes of the poet.

Ideas for exploring this:

- Talk about what you imagine might have happened later that day, the next day, next week, next year.
- Consider what changes or support would be needed to change the path that is currently being taken.
- Think about the positive and negative influences that could change the path that is taken after the poem.
- Think about how things will look for the person in the poem if nothing changes – how will things be next week or next year and how will they be feeling?

Poetry as a way to show someone how we're feeling

When we are in the grip of a mental or emotional wellbeing difficulty it can be hard to express just how we're feeling. We can feel helpless as people may want to help but don't know how to as they just don't understand. Or we can feel that people are unhelpful or hurtful unintentionally because they don't understand enough about our condition to know how to be supportive and kind. We can use poetry to explore some of these feelings and to consider different approaches which may, or may not, be helpful.

Ideas for exploring this:

- Ask your client to find a poem that touches upon some of their experiences or feelings. Read the poem and take a moment to just let it sit with you both.
- Discuss where the similarities and differences lie between a poem they've chosen and their own feelings.

- Cross out the parts of the poem that don't match how they're feeling so well and highlight the bits that are a really good fit – take a look at what you're left with and see if there's anything clearly missing. Could this form the basis for a new poem?
- Encourage your client to share a pertinent poem with people who care for them such as family or friends. Suggest that without offering an explanation first, they explore the thoughts of the person they've shown it to. How does it make them feel? What do they think is happening? How could they usefully help the person in the poem? What would be unhelpful?

Poetry as a reassurance that we are not alone in how we feel

We can often feel very alone and like we are the only person in the world who has ever experienced the difficulties we are currently facing. Reading a variety of poems about other people who've been in a similar situation to us can help us to feel less alone with our thoughts and feelings. It can help if we try to bring the person in the poem to life to make them feel more real.

Ideas for exploring this:

- Bring the person in the poem to life by doing a role play. If it feels comfortable to do so, the person in recovery takes on the role of the person suffering in the poem. Explore how they feel and what has led up to this moment and what their hopes for the future are.
- Switch roles, so the therapist/supporter takes on the role of the sufferer portrayed in the poem. Answer questions about how you think the sufferer might be feeling and actively encourage debate from the person in recovery if they think you're wrong or if they can add to what you've suggested.
- Give the person in the poem a name, a gender, a back story, a family – make them feel real and use them every now and then during therapy sessions by discussing how they might feel about things or why they might find certain situations difficult. This can be a useful distancing tool to use any time the person in recovery feels unable to express thoughts and feelings about themselves.

Writing poetry as part of recovery

As well as reading other people's poetry, we can, of course, write our own. Writing poetry can be a surprisingly powerful way of expressing our thoughts and feelings. We might write just for ourselves, or in order to share with others. The simple

process of writing can be quite cathartic but once we feel comfortable sharing we often find that this is even more rewarding. This is explored in more depth in Part Three of this book but a few ideas to get you started are shared below.

Ideas for exploring this:

- If the person in recovery uses an especially poignant or relevant turn of phrase in your more general discussions, try to build it into a poem. You might take it as the title or first line, or you might simply incorporate the feeling it purveys within the poem.
- Take an existing poem and keep the lines that the person in recovery feels are most relevant to them and lose the rest. They could then write their own lines in to replace those that were less meaningful.
- Suggest the person in recovery adapts an existing poem that rhymes so that it no longer rhymes; think about how changing the rhyming structure impacts on the feelings that the poem stirs up. You can reverse this too by making a non-rhyming poem rhyme, though this is rather harder.
- They could write an additional verse or two for an existing poem, exploring what happens next. Alternatively, they could write an additional verse or two to precede the current poem which helps us to understand the potential back story.
- The person you are working with could write a poem about things that made them feel especially sad or angry. They could tear it up and discuss the feelings related to destroying it. Writing poetry that we intend to destroy can often help to free our imagination as we know that we are writing only for ourselves and our words will disappear soon.

Part Two

An anthology of poems for discussion

* * *

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.

Abuse and bullying

— Same Lyrics, Different Song

Stop!
She said.
She said it loud,
But still she wasn't heard.
Could she have said it louder,
Or have used a different word?
If she had said it differently,
Or used a different tone,
Would he have said goodbye to her,
Or nicely walked her home?
She wasn't sure,
But what she knew,
Was something had gone wrong,
As if she sang some lyrics,
But he heard a different song.
And now it was too late to change,
To go back and undo,
Now her feelings overwhelmed her
And she knew not what to do.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- What do you think happened?
- What did she expect to happen when she said 'Stop!'?
- What do you think she would expect to happen on another occasion if she said 'Stop'?
- What does the poet mean when she writes 'As if she sang some lyrics | But he heard a different song'?

- How do you think the subject of the poem feels?
- How do you think the person who didn't stop feels?
- Who do you imagine the poem to be about? What kind of people are they? What kind of relationship do the subjects of the poem have?
- Does the poem read differently if you switch the genders involved? Why?
- What do you think she did next?

Extension activities

- Imagine that a friend confided in you that this had happened to them. What would your advice be?
- Write a prose or poetry response to this poem, perhaps exploring what happens next or exploring the feelings involved.
- Explore whose responsibility it is to say stop and to physically stop in this situation. Consider it from both a legal and a moral point of view then explore what society expects, and consider whether this lines up with your discussion.

— Cyberbullied

As they teased her,
Poked,
And pointed,
Jeering from behind the safety
Of their computer screens,
She sat,
Silently crying.

Tears slowly worked their way down her face,
Their journey practiced and familiar.

Did they know how they hurt her?
She wondered.
Would they persist in this torture,
If they could see her tears?

It's easy, she thought, to be cruel,
When your computer shields you
From the pain you inflict.
But so hard to escape,
When you're the one it's aimed at.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- Do you think that it feels different being cyberbullied than being bullied face to face? Why?
- How do you think the bullies would react if they could see the subject's face?
- Why does the subject find it so hard to escape from her bullies?
- What do you think the subject should do next?
- Would retaliating help in the short, medium or long term?
- Is there any way the subject could use the online world to help her?

Extension activities

- Write a poem from the point of view of the bullies
- Discuss what a typical day might look like for the subject – from the moment she wakes up to the moment she goes to sleep.
- Consider ways in which you could help a friend in this situation.
- Imagine you are with a group of friends who are poking fun at another friend online. They think it's a bit of harmless fun – how should you react? What might make that difficult to do?

— *Iron Gaze*

His grip was like iron,
Though not a finger grazed her skin.
His gaze alone shackled her.
Each movement,
Each word,
...each thought,
Just for him.
What did he want to see?
How could she please him?
Or at least avoid his displeasure?
She hadn't known
That love could look this way.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- 'Not a finger grazed her skin' – do you think that this makes the relationship any less or more abusive?
- What do you imagine the subject's friends and family thought about this relationship?
- Why do you suppose she feels 'shackled by his gaze'? How can a look make us feel helpless?
- What do you think she had expected from this relationship?
- What do you think she should do next?

Extension activities

- Write a letter to the subject, sharing your concerns as a friend and exploring what she might do next.
- Write a poem or some prose which precedes this poem and explores how this relationship started and how things changed over time.
- Write a list of your imagined pros and cons of this relationship.

— *The End, Maybe*

He looked at her
With thinly veiled disgust.
She looked at him
With thinly veiled distrust.
What once worked
Was broken
And twisted and bent;
Where love
Was hatred
And time felt misspent.
She looked at him
And wished that she could leave.
He looked at her,
A look that could deceive.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- Do you think her time really was misspent? Why?
- Do you think she would change things if she could?
- How do you suppose the relationship got to this point, how do you imagine it started?
- What do you think the poet means by the last lines ‘He looked at her, | A look that could deceive’?
- Do you think she feels to blame for the turn this relationship has taken? Why?

Extension activities

- Change the feeling of this poem to reflect a positive relationship by replacing words throughout – consider which words you felt you needed to change and why.
- Consider the difference between love and hate and how love had turned to hatred here.
- Continue the poem to explore what you think the subject should do next.

— *Abused*

After the storm,
She was lovely and sweet.
But kindness
And smiles
Should not be a treat.
Kindness and smiles
Are what we deserve,
Each day
From our parents,
That kindness preserves
The life living in us,
The joy in our souls,
But nastiness, bitterness
Slowly unfolds
The hate we did not know
Was hiding so deep,
The hatred that kindness
And love work to keep
From taking us over,
From ruling our lives,
But hatred creeps in
When we feel
We're despised
By the people
We love, and who
Should love us back;
The abuse of that love's
A most vicious attack.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- What do you imagine the poet means by 'the storm'?
- How would the subject feel during a storm and why?
- What do you think the poem's subject expected of those around her?
- Do you think she felt responsible for the way she was treated? Should she feel responsible?
- Who could she look to for support, advice and guidance?

Extension activities

- Consider what a typical day would look like for the poem's subject – what parts of the day would be especially difficult and why?
- Consider the responsibilities of parents and their children. Think about how these are fulfilled, or not, for the people in this poem.
- Explore the feelings of the parent in the poem. How are they behaving and why? How do you think this makes them feel?

— *Frozen Out*

She felt lonely,
And alone,
Even when the room was full.
No one wanted to utter her name
For fear of falling foul
Of The Bully.
The Bully had picked her,
Singled her out
As The Victim.
She was special
She supposed,
But she did not feel special.
She felt the pain of redirected eyes,
Ceased conversations,
Games cut short.
There was no beating,
And no biting,
But this was worse...
She felt alone
When surrounded by those
She once called her friends.

Exploring this poem in a therapeutic setting

Questions

- What do you imagine a typical day felt like for the subject of the poem?
- What does the poet mean by 'lonely and alone' – can we feel lonely when we are not alone?
- Is it relevant that the people freezing the subject out were once her friends?
- In what way is the subject 'special'? Should she be grateful to be special in this way?
- Why do you think this is happening?
- How does the bully feel?

Extension activities

- Consider different types of bullying and whether one type is more or less bad than another – and where their similarities lie.

- Write a feelings map for the subject of the poem. Consider how she feels at different points in the day and what can be done to relieve difficult feelings and promote positive ones.
- Write a letter from the subject to her bullies saying all the things she wishes she could say but feels too afraid to say aloud.
- Write a list of sources of support that the subject could turn to in this situation.