

# Psychological Strategies

**Rachell N. Anderson, Richard R. Kopp, and Michael Maniacci,  
Column Editors**

This column focuses on counseling, clinical issues, and psychotherapy, including innovative strategies for aiding clients. Potential contributors are encouraged to submit manuscripts to Michael Maniacci, 444 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 2950, Chicago, IL 60611-3902.

## **The Healing Powers of Creativity: Using Poetry in Psychotherapy**

**Rachell N. Anderson**

The comprehensive personality theory developed by Alfred Adler depicting unity, uniqueness, creativity, and striving of individuals gives credence to the development of psychotherapeutic techniques and strategies that have similar qualities. To that end, poetry is a tool that may be used in psychotherapy to aid in emotional healing and personal growth. It can bring about insight, illuminate foggy issues, and bring a smile to the faces of people experiencing anger, depression, and anxiety. Poetry is often used to help people overcome a variety of emotional struggles, including (but not limited to) jealousy, traumatic experiences, and emotional pain associated with divisive issues such as racism (Hamer, 1995) and homophobia.

Poetry and psychotherapy are related. According to Leedy (1973), "poetry is one of the natural human resources for healing... that is available to everyone" (p. ix), and, like psychotherapy, it helps people to stir up, release, and calm down their feelings.

Similar to dreams, metaphors, symbolism, and other indirect approaches, poetry makes it possible for people to express emotions that may be difficult, risky, and otherwise deemed inappropriate by that person or by the larger society. Yet these feelings, when painful, are likely to grow if left unexpressed. Once these feelings are expressed, healing can occur (Leedy & Reiter, 1976).

When using a technique called “bibliotherapy,” psychotherapists direct clients to write about their experiences and to read what has been written by lay people who have had similar experiences. Additionally, writings of professionals who have written about the subject may also be assigned (Scalabassi, 1973). The reading and writing assignments connect to therapy when they are shared in therapy sessions and when therapists help their clients explore what use clients have made of the materials.

Whether reading works of others or writing their own, patients in psychotherapy may benefit from the aesthetic value, rhythm, universality, and cathartic characteristics that are contained in poetry. This article suggests how these characteristics are beneficial for helping patients to heal in psychotherapy.

### Aesthetic Value

Aesthetic value is the beauty contained within poems, the images they create, and the psychological effect that this beauty has on the reader. Part of the beauty of poetry comes from carefully crafted words, images used to create feelings, and movement formulated by rhythm. Often poetry creates beauty for beauty’s sake. Other times it is used to engender a beautiful mood or a soothing effect.

The aesthetic value of poetry has long been recognized, and its healing effects on our lives may be typified by this declaration from Wallace Stevens: “The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man’s happiness” (Gioia, 1991, p. 105). More importantly, poetry transports us out of our world of everyday cares and into the world of the poem, where we may engage in the deeper meanings of our lives. This movement may help clients face Mosak’s and Dreikurs’s fourth and fifth life tasks: getting along with ourselves and finding our places in the universe (Kopp, 1995). Therapists may also read poetry along with clients to establish shared meanings, empathy, and mutual respect as well as to emphasize that the clients’ beliefs are understood. For example, a client who is grieving may benefit from sharing the depth of Walt Whitman’s profound sense of loss at the death of President Lincoln:

When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d,  
 And the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night,  
 I mourn’d—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.  
 O ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
 Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
 And thought of him I love. (Whitman, 1900, p. 238)

Having shared this sense of loss, the therapist and the client may then discuss why Whitman chose lilacs and not daffodils or roses, what is meant by a

“drooping star,” why it is in the West, or how does one interpret the sad sense of recurrence. By discussing individual metaphors the therapist may discern part of a client’s lifestyle. Kopp (1995) describes many specific techniques for the mutual exploration of metaphors, and his techniques can be used to examine self-expressive verse.

## **Rhythm**

Poe-t-ry is a therapeutic art, and it—  
Is plain for every one to see  
It’s a universal language  
To help both you and me.

If we study it very closely  
And try real hard to see  
It carries a message very clear  
To help us to be free  
From turmoil, sickness, and bitter strife  
The victims, you and me.... (from Leedy, 1973, p. 4)

The passage above is the first two stanzas of verse written by a chronic hebephrenic patient who welcomed visitors in a correctional facility by writing them poems. The entire poem (too long for our purpose here) creates rhythm and reflects insight and striving toward normalcy.

Like the beat of the heart and the movement in breathing, there is rhythm to life. Many people respond to rhythms contained in the beat of drums; the cadence, time, and tempo of a musical performance; or the repetitive chant, melody, and croon of a well-sung song. Rhythm helps us to know that we are inextricably connected to nature, to the universe. The movement of clouds, the changing seasons, and the pain of a broken heart and its eventual healing are all rhythms of life.

The soothing value of poetry is not a novel idea. Leedy and Reiter (1980) reported that “shamans and witch doctors of prehistoric times (as early as fourth millennium B.C.) used rhythmic chants to control environmental upheavals and heal the sick of their tribe” (p. 490). According to the Bible, David used poetry and music to expel the savage beast in Saul (1 Samuel, 16:12–23). Cynthia Whissell (cited in Stocker, 1996) suggested that “the rhythm and pattern of a poem, whether it rhymes or not, has the soothing emotional effect—like rocking a baby.”

In poetry, this rhythm is accomplished with meter and rhyme. Meter is the patterned arrangements of syllables designed to give emphasis and create

rhythm in the poem, while rhyme refers to the juxtaposition of words with like terminal sounds.

The healing powers of the rhythm in poetry may further be exemplified by one's memory of a line or jingle that, when once it comes to mind, may be hummed and thought of for most of the day. Often the compulsive thinking about and humming of the song brings soothing feelings.

Both the reading and the writing of poetry bring pleasure, and pleasure is in itself valuable. Aside from the soothing quality, it is possible to understand meaning patients assign to experiences by the poems they write and read. Children appear to understand best how poetry gives meaning to experiences. They are likely to be the most prolific at reciting poems and setting experiences to rhyme (in other words, to be poets). While many lose this ability as the result of a discouraging environment, most of us have repeated words that added meaning to our first experience of having fallen in love with words from famous poems. Here is one example:

Roses are red.  
Violets are blue.  
Sugar is sweet,  
And so are you.

According to Johnson (1990), poetry arises out of a broad spectrum of human activity. Each of us may experience these activities differently. When some people are in pain or are having peak experiences, they are more observant and can better see the rhythm, rhyme, and meter contained within the essence of things and can more easily put them into words. As an example, the following verse describes my introspective discoveries about how I felt as I experienced my 55th birthday:

*Party, Party, Party*

I celebrated my birthday  
With a toast of Tanqueray  
Made to myself after a long hard day.

I celebrated the birthday before that  
In pretty much the same way.  
A pity party thrown after the husband,  
Then the children moved away.

But this year was different.  
Gathered all my friends around.

Had champagne and strawberries  
And spicy cake abound.

We listened to Oscar Peterson,  
Played Bid Whist and talked JIVE.  
Just what a woman needed  
When turning Fifty-Five. (Anderson, 1998, p. 51)

### **Universality**

Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) asserted that humans are social beings and that a complete life requires social interest. Throughout history, people have used poetry to connect and to contribute to the well-being of themselves and others. It has promoted general understanding among people of diverse cultures and generations, giving each person access to the work of many who have preceded them and promoting a sense of universality.

As in group psychotherapy, the therapist can use universality in poetry to connect and then to encourage a cognitive and an emotional shift, allowing each person to move from the collective understanding to a different, private understanding where healing can take place. Some poems are able to invoke the inner worlds of our shared humanness and thus to connect people to each other and to the author. Charles Tomlinson's poem "The Gossamers" (cited in Bedient, 1974) illustrates a universal connection and a quiet power of healing.

### **Catharsis**

Aristotle is credited with the development of the concept of catharsis. He encouraged people to purge themselves of pity or terror by watching a tragedy. Today we think of catharsis as relief of emotional tension or pain by discussion (bringing it into awareness) and insight. Catharsis can also occur as a result of reading and writing poetry. Reading and writing poetry can bring about both the awareness and the release of emotional tension. When people are feeling sad or frustrated, they tend to recycle painful thoughts and feelings as if they are broken records with the needles stuck on themselves. Some may fixate on the troubles they have had in their lives and believe that because they feel bad now they will always feel bad. Reading poetry interrupts those negative self-messages, takes the focus off ourselves, and gives us a chance to break the cycle.

Adler, Freud, and Jung have been credited with developing and refining psychological theories that brought talk therapy into being. These theories allowed practitioners to hear patients' stories and to discern the meaning that people attach to these experiences. In telling their stories, clients discovered that healing took place. Poetry, too, can be used to purge people of painful emotions and augment talk therapy. This approach is specifically relevant for Individual Psychology because Adler, unlike Freud and Jung, claimed that people live their lives according to fictions. Indeed, the lifestyle is the "guiding fiction" of the individual's line of movement through life. Because each of us creates our own lifestyles, we are all artists or poets of our own futures. My lifestyle is the "story of my life"; it is the poem that I live (Kopp, 1995).

When poetry is used in therapy, aesthetic value, rhythm, universality, and catharsis help connect people to the circumstances that require their attention. This focused attention promotes healing by demanding intentional decision making and action (Applewhite, 1996).

### **Therapeutic Interventions**

Once the therapeutic relationship is established, I use poetry in a variety of ways in psychotherapy, including to assess, to teach, to warn, and to cajole my clients toward improvement. Consistent with Adler's belief in holism and the indivisibility of humans and similar in character to Early Recollections and metaphors, clients' writings reveal their lifestyles and help the therapist to understand what they have learned about life and to connect to their present conflicts. The therapist can then use this information to set therapeutic goals and to construct treatment plans with these clients. Additionally, for clients who are inclined to write, poems become living legacies of their struggles and their progress.

Clients who enjoy poetry may read the works of others or write their own. However, participants in workshops I have conducted have found that putting pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard provides tactile stimulation that makes the experience extraordinary.

As with other tools in psychotherapy, clients find inspiration or catharsis differently than the therapist may envision, and there are often unintended results. One of my clients constantly became involved with abusing, alcoholic men. After one session where she declared that she had "loser lust," I wrote a poem for her. After reading the poem, she decided to memorize it and use it as a reminder of choices she must make on her own behalf. I used another poem successfully to encourage a recently wed and jealous husband to consider the purpose of his behavior and to decide whether the jealous behaviors were productive in light of his present situation and needs.

*When It Was Easy to Smile*

They touched, made love from night till morn  
Nude bodies trusting as the day they were born.

That's when it was easy to smile.

She took him to his highest peak.  
Loving was a language they liked to speak.

That's when it was easy to smile.

They'd spend the day together alone  
And wonder where the day had gone.

That's when it was easy to smile.

But then, one day, he feared she'd stray.  
He began to watch her night and day,  
Became suspicious of what she did.  
He thought she'd leave him. She did.

Now it is easy to cry. (Anderson, 1988, p. 34)

I have used another poem to teach women in abusive relationships how to empower themselves. The following poem I often use when people are struggling with insufficient or sexless marriages. It, like others, serves to acknowledge and to teach.

*Watching*

She looks down about knee level  
On every man she sees  
She's wondering about anatomy  
but not about their knees.  
In her mind, there is a fantasy  
Of rapture in his arms  
She can feel her body warmed  
By the glow of his charms.

Every night he falls asleep  
On the far side of the bed

He's too tired or disinterested  
To claim the gem for which he wed.

Shaking her head, trying to focus  
On this side of reality.  
She feels ashamed and embarrassed  
Condemned to internal tyranny.

This is the cost of being faithful  
To this sexless, worn-out man.  
She is looking, but not touching;  
True to her vows and wedding band. (Anderson, 1988, p. 1)

### **Writing Techniques and Therapeutic Use**

Like psychotherapy, poetry writing is a process with a beginning and an ending. Both parts of this process can elicit stories from which important material can be garnered. Deciding whether or not to introduce poetry into therapy depends on a variety of client variables, such as interest and intellect. Relationship variables are important. When the relationship has developed (usually after the third session), poetry may be introduced. If introduced too soon, its introduction may impede the development of trust. However, once bonded, psychotherapists and their patients might engage in this, among a variety of clinical interventions.

The creation of a poem begins with an idea, an issue, or a mood (e.g., somebody has done you wrong, you have heard some bad news, or you have just seen a beautiful sight) and continues with the crafting of these ideas into artistic writing that is shared with others for review and analysis. Psychotherapy follows a similar process. Both allow room for reflection, decision, and redirection after release of painful or confusing emotions.

To get the best therapeutic results from poetic work with clients, encourage them (a) to start where they are, with present thoughts and location; (b) to write about what they know, themselves, their first memories, dreams, goals, or their disappointments; (c) to use plain rather than fancy words; (d) to tell their truths and believe those truths are worth sharing; (e) to use the senses to stimulate richness—sounds, sight, touch, smell, and taste; and (f) to write to be understood. I prefer the direct rather than the obscure. These simple suggestions can get clients off to a good start.

Patients must be encouraged for their efforts. It is better for patients to write than it is for them to use correct form, rhyme, and meter. My poem below is an example of what can be done with an early memory.



*Summertime*

Once upon a time  
Where I came from,  
When it's summertime, the living is easy.  
Fish were jumping and  
The cotton was high.

We spent hours playing jacks on the back porch  
Cooled by the shade and gentle breeze.  
We jostled for position as we learned life's games.  
We watched animals mate and vegetables grow.  
Shared dreams and snuck the *True Confessions*  
Romance novels tucked in the Bible.

I waited for our prince to come. He didn't.  
But the heat from my imagination and from the atmosphere  
Ignited a creative fever,  
A search for knowledge to satisfy the hungry fires  
Someplace else.

When I return to my childhood home displaying my acquisitions,  
So many things have changed:  
The animals are gone;  
The porch has been enclosed to make more rooms;  
Air conditioning and television provide comfort and distraction;  
Fish are bought at the supermarkets;  
The cotton has gone to Japan.

Yet when I'm there  
I am aware of the sizzle  
Of the hungry fires of creative frenzy  
That come from no place else. (Anderson, 1998)

Using poetry in psychotherapy makes it possible for Adlerian therapists to understand more easily the social context, goals and purposes, and meanings clients attach to their experiences and to discern private logic and mistaken goals. With this information, the therapist can encourage patients to reconstruct these assumptions and design useful rather than useless ways of being in the world.

---

**References**


---

- Adler, A. (1982). *The patterns of life* (2nd ed.). Chicago: Alfred Adler Institute.
- Anderson, R. (1986). *Muses and graces and love: Poems about love and life*. Springfield, IL: Marriage and Family Life Education Center.
- Anderson, R. (1988). *Wives, mothers and other women: Poems about women and their relationships*. Springfield, IL: Marriage and Family Life Education Center.
- Anderson, R. (1998). *Blind spots and hindsight: Poems about love and life*. Springfield, IL: Marriage and Family Life Education Center.
- Anderson, R. (1998). *Summertime*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Ansbacher, H.H., & Ansbacher, R.R. (Eds.). (1964). *Superiority and social interest* (3rd rev. ed.). New York: Norton.
- Applewhite, J. (1996). The healing powers of poetry. *The Writer*, 109(4), 16.
- Bedient, C. (1974). *Eight contemporary poets*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gioia, D. (1991, May). Can poetry matter? *The Atlantic Monthly*, 267, 94–106.
- Hamer, F. (1995). *Call and response*. Oakland, CA: Alice James Books.
- Herink, R. (Ed.). (1980). *The psychotherapy handbook*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Johnson, D.M. (1990). *Word weaving: A creative approach to teaching and writing poetry*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kopp, R.R. (1995). *Metaphor therapy: Using client generated metaphors in psychotherapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Leedy, J. (1973). *Poetry the healer*. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott.
- Leedy, J., & Rieter, S. (1976). *Poetry therapy*. Cited in R. Herink (Ed.), *The psychotherapy handbook* (1980, pp. 490–492). New York: Meridian Books.
- Powers, R.L., & Griffith, J. (1987). *Understanding lifestyle: The psycho-clarity process*. Chicago: The Americas Institute of Adlerian Studies.
- Scalabassi, S. (1973). Literature as a therapeutic tool: A review of the literature on bibliotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 27, 70–77.
- Stocker, S. (1996). Well versed: Tap the self-healing power of poetry. *Prevention*, 48(5), 93.
- Whitman, W. (1900/1973). *Leaves of Grass*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Copyright of Journal of Individual Psychology is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.