HEROINES

Methodological guide

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HEROINES

INTRODUCTION

This guide explains firstly, the **ideas** that are central to the HEROINES training workshops and curricula. It explains the trauma informed approach to writing therapy, general concepts of therapeutic writing and poetry therapy outlining the benefits of using these approaches.

Secondly, the guide gives information for the **facilitators** of the workshops including: the types of people suited to this work; the skills and abilities that are helpful for facilitators to develop; how they might take care of themselves, be supported and prepare effectively for the workshops.

Thirdly, the guide discusses **group** work. It includes theoretical ideas behind group development with suggestions for supporting the participants to develop personally, and how to effectively use the tools offered through therapeutic writing to increase self-awareness, confidence and social skills.

Finally, the guide includes information on planning and **organising the writing sessions** in conjunction with the detailed curriculum ideas (in a separate Curriculum folder). This section includes information on supporting participants who are unable or prefer not to write, how writing enables participants to express inner feelings and to explore alternative solutions to issues through facilitated therapeutic writing.

WRITING THERAPY

Writing therapy is a general term used to describe all kinds of expressive writing that encourages wellness, particularly psychological wellbeing. It can be part of a therapeutic intervention and specifically designed to tackle a particular issue, e.g. loss of a child or partner, which can be used within a therapy session to provide a focus for exploring feelings that are difficult to vocalise. More frequently, writing therapy takes place in groups, partly for reasons of economy, but also for other more important reasons such as overcoming isolation, providing opportunities to form links and to extend contacts between participants. Here, the issues arising might be broader, or they might be personal issues raised by the participants that are shared in an empathetic way so they might resonate with the experiences of others in the group.

GUIDELINES FOR A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

The target group of the HEROINES are women who have experienced traumatic happenings in their lives. Therefore, in facilitating HEROINES-groups, we recommend that all the facilitators implement Trauma-Informed care practices.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery. The aim is to avoid practices that may re-traumatize the participants. The approach is based on five principles: safety, choice,

collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment. Facilitators implementing Trauma-informed care recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life.

The intention of HEROINES is not to treat symptoms or issues related to abuse or any other form of trauma, but rather to provide support services in a way that is accessible and appropriate to those who may have experienced trauma. Therefore, it follows the guidelines of Trauma-Informed practices. This approach diminishes the possibility for triggering or exacerbating trauma symptoms and re-traumatizing individuals.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA–INFORMED PRACTICES

Trauma-informed care follows five guiding principles that serve as a framework for service providers: safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment. Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of a participant is the first important step to providing Trauma-Informed care. Next, the participant needs to know that the facilitators are trustworthy. Trustworthiness can be evident in the establishment and consistency of boundaries and the clarity of what is expected with regard to exercises. Additionally, the greater choice participants are given and the more control they have over their group experience through a collaborative effort with the facilitators, the more likely they will participate in the group and the more effective the group process may be. Finally, focusing on a participant's strengths and empowering them to build on those strengths while developing stronger coping skills provides a healthy foundation for participants to fall back on if they stop visiting the group because of an illness or some other reason.

Sandra Bloom´s Sanctuary Model

Bloom´s Sanctuary Model is based on the idea that to adequately talk about safety in the community context, we need to understand four levels of safety: physical safety, psychological safety, social safety, and moral safety. We must feel safe to be able to learn and grow. For people who have been the victims of violence and abuse this is all the more important. People who have been injured by violence are keenly attuned to any and all threats in the environment. Although it is always possible, they will react to perceived threats, we want to ensure real threats do not exist.

Physical safety

Without physical safety, other forms of safety are difficult to achieve. This means an environment that is free of threats to our physical well being, including sexual aggression and suicidality. People who have been physically violated are often likely to need help managing their aggression and may be easily provoked to aggression because of chronic hyperarousal. They are likely to expect other people to be violent toward them so they need positive, nonviolent experiences with caregivers and may have to be "deconditioned" to violence in an environment that repeatedly responds to provocation with nonviolent behaviour. Physical safety alone does not constitute a safe environment for growth. Likewise, breaches in physical safety generally do not occur until the other forms of safety have already been violated.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to the ability to be safe with oneself, to have the ability to self-protect against any destructive impulses coming from within oneself or deriving from other people, and to keep oneself out of harm's way. Losing this ability is one of the most shattering losses that occurs as a result of traumatic experience and it manifests as an inability to protect one's boundaries from trespass by other people. Common threats to psychological safety are sarcasm, put-downs, outbursts, public humiliation or blaming. People who have been psychologically unsafe while growing up are particularly vulnerable to psychological torments. They need to be respected for their ability to manage these adverse situations in the past, but they also need to recognise the need for change. They will benefit from an environment that teaches and models a different way of thinking about and being in the world. An environment that is psychologically safe encourages self-protection, attention and focus, self-knowledge, self-efficacy, consistency, initiative, curiosity, humour and creativity.

Social safety

Social safety describes the sense of feeling safe with other people. How many of us have ever felt truly safe in a social setting, one in which we felt secure, cared for, trusted, free to express our deepest thoughts and feelings without censure, unafraid of being abandoned or misjudged, unfettered by the constant pressure of interpersonal competition and yet stimulated to be thoughtful, solve problems, be creative, and be spontaneous? Yet this is the kind of setting that human beings need to maximize their emotional and intellectual functioning in an integrated way.

Interpersonal relationships continue to pose enormous challenges for victims of childhood adversity whether they are participants, staff, or managers. Victims of trauma (particularly interpersonal trauma) have serious difficulties in their ability and willingness to trust other people. Experience has taught them that people are dangerous and betraying. Creating a safe social environment requires a shift in perspective away from viewing only the individual, towards viewing the individual-in-context. In doing so, the entire community serves as a model of "organisation as therapist" so that all of the chaotic, impulsive, and painful feelings of the members can be safely contained and defused. Boundaries are clear, firm, but flexible. It is also the social milieu that provides our participants and ourselves with the very necessary "reality confrontation".

Moral Safety

A morally safe environment is one where you are able to do your work with a sense of integrity because your sense of what is right is supported by the institution within which you work and the people who directly supervise you. Of course, what is right is likely to be perceived differently depending on who you are. So, like the rest of what we describe as Sanctuary, discovering moral safety is a process that is constantly unfolding. It is an attempt to reduce the hypocrisy that is present, both explicitly and implicitly, in our social systems. This is a fundamentally important quest for patients who are victims of abusive power because their internal ethical systems are likely to have become confused and contradictory.

Repetitive experience of injustice can make a person unable to act justly and more likely to seek revenge. A morally safe environment engages in an on-going struggle with the issues of honesty and integrity. It means looking at the ways in which our culture reinforces the messages conveyed by the institutions within which we are socialised (that is, the way our society (not just our organizations) is organised around unresolved traumatic experience) and decide what we are going to do within this moral universe.

TRAUMA-INFORMED WRITING PRACTICES

The first step in Trauma-informed care is to ensure that the physical and emotional safety of an individual is addressed to avoid re-traumatisation. Re-traumatisation is any situation or environment that resembles an individual's trauma literally or symbolically, which then triggers difficult feelings and reactions associated with the original trauma. Re-traumatisation may also occur when interfacing with individuals who have historical, inter-generational and/or cultural trauma experiences. To avoid re-traumatisation, the facilitators are recommended to follow the following instructions:Guiar un grupo de personas traumatizadas no significa que el trabajo tenga que estar centrado en el trauma.

♦ Guiding a group of traumatised people does not mean that work should be trauma-focused

♦ Be sensitive throughout the work: the participant always decides when she is ready to write, read, or participate in the discussion. Do not press

♦ Create a space, with security and trust, where trauma can be processed by each participant at their own depth and pace

♦ Metaphor and storytelling are important tools for regulating distance

♦ In autobiographical assignments, avoid focusing only on a specific age or strict chronological progression - let the participant choose the moments he or she wants to write about

♦ Offer alternatives: for example, not just one poem or one character as material but a choice of them

♦ Routines and fairness are important. Make sure everyone's voice is heard

♦ Don't put pressure on producing, reading or sharing texts, and don't let other group members do so either

♦ Remember lightness and (right) humor (e.g. irony and sarcasm or mocking a public figure are not always therapeutic types of humour)

♦ If a participant doesn't want to write, offer alternative ways of working (music, movement, drawing, photography ...) instead

♦ Seek to influence the atmosphere: promote listening via collective assignments, give people turns, bring lightness, humour, and surprises (e.g., new types of tasks, new

material) framed by routines (e.g., repeated motto, starting and ending rounds, coffee break) to the sessions.

Therapeutic writing in a guided group setting is a safe form to process trauma. Unloading words onto paper is often cathartic in itself, but further processing of the written burst of emotion contributes to the therapeutic effect. For example, when a complete account of a traumatic event is processed by distancing it using a metaphor, it is possible to integrate and accept it into one's own history. This saves psychic energy and makes it easier to face potential triggers of the trauma. (Lindquist, 2009, 81.).

Encouraging metaphoric expression through writing tasks, material and discussion is highly recommended, and the curricula guides the facilitators in this task by offering a variety of visual material, poems and exercises. Metaphors make the writing process safer in many ways: they distance and condense painful memories; the opacity and disclosure of metaphors can be controlled flexibly; they are able to describe phenomena for which words do not (yet) exist; metaphors are experiential, expressive and impressive – they allow editing and facilitate different ways to express or interpret.

Managing Trauma Experiences Raised During a Therapeutic Writing Session

If a participant shares a traumatic memory, always be receptive to it so that the participant feels heard. However, you shouldn't focus too much on the trauma, but you may ask if this would be the kind of thing the participant would like to write more about, and perhaps offer the participant the opportunity to send their text to you for reading or discussing at any subsequent sessions. Accept the possible negative answer! If the group starts a discussion about the traumatic event, make sure that is okay for the one who shared her trauma. When an exercise has triggered a traumatic memory, provide an opportunity to distance from the experience by means of a poem, story, or metaphor without underlining the trauma in the next exercise.

Always be prepared to change the session schedule or task instructions as needed and have alternative exercises and material available. If one task seems to trigger traumatic reactions, increase the use of metaphors for protection in the next task. That can be done by using metaphorical poems, picture cards or by offering soothing words as material. One suitable writing task is the following:

Describe the feeling you are experiencing with a metaphor, then describe the kind of feeling you would like to experience with a metaphor. Write a haiku poem where you connect these two metaphors. A haiku is a traditional Japanese poetry form that is written in three short lines that do not rhyme. It often features an image that shows the essence of a moment in time (rather than a description).

Listening to music, relaxation techniques, mindfulness exercises and calm movement can help in grounding. Sometimes it might be a good idea to delay or bring forward the coffee break. Preferably, use soothing and positive cards as the picture cards for the ending round.

The Role of Facilitator within Trauma-Informed Work

The Facilitator's Wellbeing

In Trauma-Informed care, one of the key ideas is to recognise that not only participants, but also health care staff have traumatic backgrounds. Therefore, it is essential to become familiar with your own trauma reactions that the poetry therapy tasks and materials may potentially trigger. It is a good idea to do poetry therapy exercises yourself, especially when there is an acute crisis in your life. Consider your life history when choosing material or exercises. The facilitator must have a positive attitude toward the material he or she is using and believe in its therapeutic efficacy. Always practice the exercises you plan to take to the group. However, do not delve into the exercises as your guide, but to optimise your alertness, it may be a good idea to write down words or phrases that keep coming to mind if they interfere with your concentration or cause anxiety. After the session, go through the feelings and thoughts the work has caused by writing and find out if there is a possibility for accessing work supervision. The best option would be to be able to use therapeutic writing as a method of work supervision.

Requirements for the Facilitator with Participants who Experience Psychosis

It is a good idea for the group counsellor to be familiar with psychosis work, either through work experience or training. Training in the social and healthcare fields is not necessary for a group instructor who has completed a poetry therapy training, but in this case, it is recommended that facilitators lead the group in cooperation with, for example, a mental health nurse. The facilitator must have access to personal supervision and his or her own life situation must be balanced. It helps if the facilitator has had psychotherapy or poetry therapy themselves.

It is paramount for the facilitator to adopt an encouraging and empathetic approach. People with chronic psychoses need a lot of encouragement to, for example, dare to read aloud the texts they write. This is not an end in itself, but reading to others is often perceived as an important experience of growth and often has successful outcomes. Often, embarking on writing requires active encouragement from the facilitator. Indeed, it is good to repeat the basic principle of therapeutic writing: texts don't have to be "good"; it is enough to take a pen in your hand and deal with your feelings and thoughts by writing. Group members need positive feedback, but giving the right kind of feedback is challenging. Rather than praising the written quality of the texts, the responses should focus feedback on the presentation of the text, the open handling of emotions, and the insights gained through writing.

The facilitator must be vigilant in the group and address, for example, conflicts between participants caused by delusions. It is common for people diagnosed with schizophrenia, for example, to inadvertently injure others. It is often difficult for them to judge what kind of things it is polite to say about another person. For example, one of the participants may comment on another's weight, skin colour, sexual orientation, or disability without realising that the comment may offend. It is recommended to have two instructors in the group. This makes it possible, for example, to take notes and give equal attention to all participants.

CARE OF THE CREATIVE WRITING FACILITATOR

In Buddhist practices it is recommended that one attends to oneself, before turning our attention to other people; so too in Therapeutic Writing. If, as a facilitator, you are grounded, rested and nurtured, then you will be more centred to support other people. In turn, if you are supported by others, then you are better positioned to provide support.

SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT

It is vital for facilitators to have supervision for therapeutic work with others. Supervision supports practitioners to gain perspective both on their role and practice. These reflective sessions provide an opportunity to explore motives and choices in practice and to notice when workshop experience has touched on your personal history. It is possible to encounter 'transference' in a therapeutic relationship, which psychotherapist David Richo (2008) helpfully describes as 'when the past is present'. Having a space to inspect these moments, which can be confusing and even mystifying, allows facilitators to work with more clarity and understanding of themselves and their participants.

In between supervision sessions, checking in with your 'internal supervisor' is a useful process following a session. These are your personal process notes, so be careful not to identify any participants on paper. You might ask yourself:

♦ What went well today?

♦ What went less well?

♦ Any significant comments?

♦ Any action I need to take?

♦ What do I need to do for myself now?

In a facilitator role, keep asking yourself if you feel adequately supported and consider the range of support to which you have access. This could be from a range of sources, such as line managers, colleagues, literature, exercise, nature, counselling, family and friends.

SELF CARE

A by-product of living in an economically-driven part of the world seems to be a culture of productivity and a boom/ bust relationship with work/rewards and punishment/pleasure in relation to our bodies. Finding a more natural and rhythmic pattern, which is sustainable can be a challenge. Sturdy roots need an environment in which to grow, and so a sense of ground is

necessary. The poem 'Start Close In'[1] by David Whyte is a useful reminder, it begins:

'Start close in

don't take the second step

or the third,

start with the first

thing

close in,

the step

you don't want to take.'

A useful check-in can be to ask what is the first step for me? It could be stretching, breathing deeply, meditating, walking, or even the ritual of a coffee, or a shower; it could be touching something solid, looking out of the window, smelling food or flowers, tasting the air, or listening to the world outside the window.

Beyond the formality of supervision, having a support network is important. Gather a supportive circle around you with a range of activities and people with which/whom you can make contact to feel both reflected and recognised as a person, as well as a practitioner and a professional. Make this an active exercise during this project to look at your support and barriers to receiving support. These barriers may be psychological (e.g. I'm not deserving/ I can't ask), financial (e.g. I can't afford it), practical (e.g. I don't have time), sociological (e.g. Will others trust me as a professional if I'm vulnerable?). There may also be internal drivers (Kahler, 1975) that make this feel difficult: Be Perfect, Be Strong, Hurry Up, Please Others, Try Hard.

Another exercise that can be useful in terms of detecting your changes over the course of a workshop is to write a haiku (or three short lines) prior to the session and one after the session; it can be an interesting way to see what has changed for you, and what you may have picked up in terms of transference from the participants. Here's an example of a haiku:

Coffee cup, my notebook

morning light keen to reflect

like birdsong, our songs

Grounding yourself during and after sessions is important. Small helpful physical adjustments can be surprisingly supportive, such as having two feet on the ground, breathing into your belly,

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1   Available at http:www.davidwhyte.com

and raising your chest - pride in your practice will support you. You can write in preparation for these adjustments by completing the following stems:

When my feet are on the ground I feel...

When I breathe into my belly I feel...

When I raise my chest I feel...

SHARING FACILITATOR WRITING

Gauging when to share your own writing is delicate. It is important for facilitators to demonstrate that they are also willing to write and share, to support the process of reducing the power dynamic between facilitator and participants.

However, it is important that the facilitator also remains 'in role' so that participants don't feel they are 1) abandoned by the facilitator 2) feel they have to look after the facilitator. This doesn't mean that the facilitator can't show emotion - being congruent with laughter and tears is important.

PERSONAL THERAPY

If you are triggered by issues raised in the sessions, you may consider some personal therapy sessions to look after yourself and process material that has arisen. Increasing awareness will help you to untangle any transferences you are experiencing from what is happening in the room.

INSURANCE

As a facilitator it is important to check that you are insured by the organisation with whom you are working. Are you covered for personal liability and professional liability and malpractice? Personal liability would normally cover you for any accidents or loss of equipment. Professional liability and malpractice would normally cover you for breach of professional duty, malpractice, professional indemnity, Good Samaritans Act and first aid (in the UK – you will need to check what applies in your own country/organisation).

FIRST AIDS

There should be a trained first-aider on site when you are working in-person with other people. Check who the first aider is and the procedures surrounding first aid. For example, you may have to help to complete an accident or injury report.

RECORD KEEPING

You need to be careful with what data you decide to keep on participants. Your organisation should have a Data Protection Policy and you need to understand what your organisation has decided to do with data and know about which data you will have access to, or need to keep. There should be a secure storage protocol around participant data, such as locked boxes, computer virus protection and password protected documents.

Things to consider:

♦ Data can be any personal information from a first name to other personal information participants may have shared

♦ We recommend that you keep any notes taken on sessions to a minimum and use initials to help you remember important information that you don't want to forget

♦ Keep your own 'process notes' - your reflections on the sessions - separate from participant names and do not include information that could be linked directly to individuals. Avoid opinion and 'diagnosis'

Tips:

♦ Don't leave any personal data where it can be viewed by others, such as registers

♦ Don't ask for the personal details of participants directly, unless this is part of your role

♦ Don't store phone numbers of participants in your phone without permission from your line managers AND the individual

GROUPS AND GROUP PARTICIPANTS

GROUP GUIDELINES

Promotion of Yalom's Groupwork Factors (1985): *universality, altruism, distillation of hope, imparting information, corrective recapitulation of the primary family, experience, development of socialising techniques, imitative behaviour, cohesiveness, existential factors and catharsis* will support a useful and healthy group culture.

It is essential to establish some group guidelines with the group. With a long project like HEROINES, there is time to devote to the agreement of these guidelines in the first session, which should invite participants to suggest what they would find useful and supportive. Group guidelines should be revisited periodically, and particularly when issues arise that may impact on the safe space that the group endeavours to create.

CARE

As a basic set of guidance, we recommend including the following, under the acronym CARE – facilitators and groups might want to create their own acronyms, this is a poetic form (the acrostic poem):

C   (Circle of) Confidentiality

Confidentiality is to be encouraged between group members regarding stories shared within the group experience. Suggestions can be that individuals can share their own experience of being in the group with other people and their own writing, but not the content of anyone else's personal stories or writing. However, from a facilitator perspective confidentiality is not so straightforward, so it is worth talking in terms of a 'circle of confidentiality' which includes your supervisor, and any colleagues that you may need to share information with about the group. You may also have chosen to take doctor's details for each participant, who you can contact if you are concerned about a person's wellbeing. Check which laws in your country require you to break confidentiality if someone is at risk of harm or of harming others, or has committed particular crimes

A   Attention

Attention to self: Encourage group members to become aware of the signs in their body which could indicate they are leaving their 'window of tolerance' (Dezelec, 2013; Ogden, 2006), for example increased heart-rate, sweating, flight (e.g. desire to leave the room/building), fight (e.g. aggressive feelings towards self, objects or others), freeze responses (e.g. dissociation), or fawning (e.g. pleasing, giving up their sense of identity). Understanding these responses can be very helpful in supporting participants to stay with what they can manage 'for today', and may indicate areas where individuals may need extra support or care taken around particularly triggering topics.

Attention to others: writing and sharing one's own thoughts and feelings can make individuals feel vulnerable. Being witnessed, first by the page (if writing) and then by others is an important aspect of validating the words, whatever the content. An environment that promotes attention to the sharer, wherever possible will promote cohesion and trust among group members. Sometimes it can be helpful to have a group discussion on what might feel like the opposite of attention, such as looking at a phone, looking out of a window, talking over others, poor timekeeping, or taking frequent breaks outside scheduled breaks.

R   Respect

Respect for oneself and one's writing: Therapeutic writing does not concern itself with grammar or spelling and often in a therapeutic writing group there is no sharing of the written words on paper between individuals; this promotes freedom of expression and resistance of the inner-critic. It is important to discuss the inner-critic, which may arise from internalised feelings of criticism from other life experiences; an idea of what writing 'should' look like, taken from the world of literature and publishing; or can arise from general feelings of shame, the roots of which may not be clear. Promoting value around each individual's creativity, however small the contribution, is important. Writing can be both surprising and revealing, so discussion around having respect for whatever is revealed on the page can be useful; likewise, the option not to share writing content, but to discuss the writing process instead.

Respect for others: A writing group can bring participants from varied backgrounds

together, highlighting differences in *Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Spirituality (Burnham, 2012)*. The facilitator's ability to hold difference within a room is important and will model this behaviour for participants. Lack of respect needs to be reflected upon with the group and useful resources around difference, such as highlighting the dangers of generalisation (Adichie, 2009), and thinking hierarchically or linearly (Jun, 2018) can support in a discussion. Actively bringing in differences, as opposed to 'flattening' them can encourage expression and feelings of safety. Respect for these guidelines is part of the respect agreement between individuals. We are aiming to attain an environment where Rogers' Core Conditions (1956/1992) are present: (a) congruence, (b) unconditional positive regard, and (c) empathic understanding. The facilitator can foster this environment by embodying these principles.

E

Empathy

Writing and voicing poems can bring forward emotions, as can the simplicity of belonging to a group that feels safe and empathic. Empathy can be modelled by the facilitator and actively encouraged between group members. It can be useful for facilitators (and participants) to understand the Drama and Durable triangle (Karpman, 1968; Quinby, 2013) to guide participants to respond with limits, experience their potency, and to be appropriately vulnerable. Supporting the group to work durably together will encourage honesty, expression and constructive use of power, as opposed to being tempted to inhabit the roles of victim, persecutor or rescuer.

GROUP MODELS

As above, considering CARE guidelines and ways to consider what might help a group to develop, notably Yalom's Group work factors (1985) give attention to the elements that the facilitator can encourage. However well a group is established and nurtured, most groups and therefore connections and friendships within them can undergo changes that can be challenging.

There are many models of group development and they could be applied to all groups, a common one being Tuckman's Five Stages of Group Development (1965) whereby he describes group stages as Forming - Storming – Norming – Performing – Adjourning (representing Orientation – Power Struggle – Cooperation and Integration – Synergy – Closure).

Not all groups go through these stages and not necessarily in this order. Some groups revisit some stages such as 'Forming' as participants become familiar with each other and re-group, or indeed 'Storming' where clashes re-emerge even after being originally dealt with.

The purpose of including this information is not to suggest that as facilitators you await these stage developments, but that if and when they do occur, you recognise each stage as indicative of the group's growth.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in poetry therapy need to be able to function successfully. They cannot participate if psychotic symptoms require a low-stimulation environment or make it impossible, for example, to work quietly and listen to others. Participant applications should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. The symptoms of a person diagnosed with schizophrenia might appear in a strongly written text - if, for example, the text is an uncontrolled flow of consciousness or strongly psychotic in content. In this case, individual therapy may work better.

Also, participants with perfectionism or performance pressures may experience therapeutic writing as an additional burden in their lives instead of a means of rehabilitation. For some participants, however, therapeutic writing may be the key to relieving performance pressures if the instructor is able to properly emphasize the basic purpose of the activity as exploration through the writing process. Other members of the group have an important role to play here. An encouraging and permissive atmosphere facilitates the release of psychological pressures. People with chronic psychosis also find it difficult to build trust with other people; they need more time to feel part of a group.

LIVE EXPERIENCE MATTERS

Therapeutic writing is grounded in an experiential approach whereby the individual participant's own experience is of paramount importance. This relates to the participant's life experience and experience of the writing process.

Lived experience can be both a research approach within the broader range of phenomenological methods and a core principle in honouring the actual experiences of an individual. This is not only a way of valorising the individual's unique background, choices available, and made and felt experiences, but of acknowledging the multiplicity of stories that emerge from a group. Elsewhere in this guide, reference is made to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) discussion of 'the danger of a single story', specifically, the homogeneity of historical and personal accounts of the same event. It is frequently said that historical accounts reside with and emerge from, those in power. In personal accounts of the same experiences it is much more complex. The validity of the account often resides with those who hold professional roles, such as medical roles, and have access to dissemination processes such as learned publications and media that form standardised opinions and become the source of accepted knowledge.

Homogenous accounts have been challenged from all angles -from suffragette and political independence movements, Black Power and Queer Rights demands and in everyday lived experiences. The role models in our HEROINES project have demonstrated that their experiences do not tally with the received accounts and they have become known for taking risks to speak and act out demands for their experiences to be acknowledged and validated.

In groups of any kind, there can also be a dominant viewpoint that does not serve the purpose of everyone in the group or indeed, reflect their experience. However, a writing group is a powerful way of participating in telling one's own story and changing the dominant narrative.

Barthes (1977) stated that writing is always more self-revelatory than the writer can control. The act itself reveals ideas and viewpoints beyond the words written. This makes it particularly important for the facilitator to allow all voices to be heard and to be careful in voicing their own opinions. Likewise, it can be difficult to facilitate a group where sensitive political, religious, social opinions are invited. This is where the curriculum we have devised can offer support as well as direction for a session. The exercises in the sessions range from gentle introductory writing sessions aimed at encouraging a vulnerable participant not to be overwhelmed by a writing task to more 'risky' writing. Throughout the curriculum the writing exercises are structured quite tightly. This can help to contain the writing, the writers, their ideas and feelings. Restricting writing time to short bursts (up to 15 minutes) can help to hold safety.

As above, it is important that every group member feel supported by a secure framework that enables the expression of difficult or painful feelings. Likewise, as the course proceeds and participants are invited to share their writing, they must also be given the option to defer or stay silent. If a participant's experience, possibly trauma, is disregarded or contradicted, the writing group can fall into difficulties. Most difficult is that one participant's lived experience may be in conflict with that of another participant, yet both are valid. As facilitator, you will have to demonstrate this validation and encouragement. At its best this can generate insight into and respect of individual's and the other's experience.

Therapeutic writing can help participants whose lived experiences are in conflict with the outside world, to build a positive identity, feel empowered by the act of writing and through the emergent writing, and to find meaning and purpose. Furthermore, the basis of the HEROINES project lies in looking at role models who have found courage in different ways, to establish their own truths and be acknowledged.

In the sections on the facilitator role in this guide, attention is given to the importance of the workshop facilitator completing the writing exercises in the curriculum. This approach offers the facilitator the opportunity to experience the way in which the writing takes place and to identify potential issues in the exercise and also to experience how the writing takes place, sometimes with surprising outcomes. As discussed above, that experience is not always shared by others but it can open the facilitator's eyes to further, different interpretations.

WRITING SAFELY IN THE GROUP

The group should be set up as a so-called closed group, to which no new participants will be admitted after the first or second session. Clear rules must be established for the group from the outset. The group leader and members undertake to remain silent on matters dealt with by other participants in the group. Members must be respected, that is, speaking one at a time; written texts must not be criticised; no name-calling or mocking others. The group must listen to what is read aloud. It is important to attend sessions regularly and participants should inform the facilitator of any possible absence. It can be useful to emphasise that members are cared about and thought about within the group and so unexplained absence has an effect on other group members. Any group member may leave during the session and return, as long as it does not disturb the group; it is important to make

sure that members know this.

Writing is voluntary; no demands should be placed on any group member. The supervisor must have a clinical sensitivity when choosing writing assignments. If a task arouses great opposition in the participants, it can be modified to make writing easier. It is worth relying on participants' intuition. If someone is not willing to share something, they often have a good reason for it.

Flexibility in the duration of sessions is important. At the first sessions, participants may get excited and this can be draining, so it's a good idea to make the first writing and sharing sessions a little shorter than usual. It is also advisable to reserve time towards the end, as there may be painful issues that could improve through discussion.

CONNECTIONS AND FRIENDSHIPS

All therapeutic groups will establish ground rules. These may differ within groups and are covered in the *Group Guidelines* above. Some of the issues surrounding how the group interacts are covered by matters such as confidentiality and by the facilitator using skills to best develop a group of equals.

Some therapeutic groups, including therapeutic writing groups, establish a rule of no communication between members outside the group meetings. However, one of the main purposes of the HEROINES project is to foster connections and reduce isolation so the groups are intended to allow friendships to flourish.

It is a matter of striking a balance between risking that some participants might develop friendships outside the group forming 'cliques' that can make other participants feel uncomfortable, or rigidly adhering to a 'non-communication' situation that feels unnaturally forced.

One way around this can be the use of a general group communication system whereby everyone (who wishes) sends and receives messages to and from all the others. In this way, participants may choose whether to respond, or not, but are always aware of the conversations taking place outside the group. This can be a useful way to share writing too, of course, but needs to be discussed within the group before sharing takes place.

Seating arrangements in the room (in face-to-face meetings) also need to be considered from this angle. Participants tend to gravitate towards the same seat in regular group meetings. You may consider this useful in building connections and/or you might suggest the participants swop places from time to time.

PROCESSING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Writing our feelings and responses is a powerful way of releasing emotions and exploring 'hidden' feelings. It is generally true that whatever the nature of the writing under discussion or the prompt used, the dominant feeling will emerge. So, even in the most benign of writing prompts e.g. 'Today the room feels ...', someone might write that the room feels cold and unfriendly, another will comment that it feels a safe and encouraging place to be, yet another might write 'I don't want to be here'. Of course, the room hasn't changed but the individuals within the room

may be experiencing feelings and emotions that find expression in their writing.

Relationships with others affect one's self-perception and feelings about being in the world yet speaking these feelings out loud can be difficult for a person who might fear damaging another's feelings or threatening outcomes for themselves. Sometimes, a small problem with another person inside or outside the group, can become a major issue when spoken. Counselling can help to devise strategies for safely dealing with these matters and writing therapy can provide a very safe space to do so.

ANONIMIZING OTHERS

In writing our lives, referencing the lives of others emerges naturally. There are various strategies that could be used to protect identities – simply using an initial to represent the person or to use an initial appearing before or after in the alphabet of the 'real' initial of the person. Anne Frank devised names for some of those she wrote about, presumably in case her diary was found by another person; Anne Lister writing of lesbian love in the late eighteenth century used a code to hide the most personal contents of her diaries. Examples of both of these writers' work is in the 'Resources' folder online and their biographies are included in the Role Models of this project.

Particularly with (non-send or other) letter-writing it is important to anonymise in case the letter is ever found by accident, so think carefully with participants about their choices.

FICTIONALIZING

Many writers use their personal experiences as the basis for fictional writing and in this way, often develop events in a way they did not actually happen by changing the gender or name of a person in the story or the location or setting. However, presenting an inexperienced writing group with an exercise on fictionalising is challenging. There are methods that can be used to allow the participant to explore real events that are not so demanding. For example, asking the group to retell an event when they were experiencing difficulties such as anger, fear, pain from another point of view (e.g. a person who is older, younger, different gender, race, different time in history or from another country). This can allow the writing of honest accounts that can relieve the writer by sharing that experience with others in the group, or by writing it on the page.

The same kind of exercise is often used to explore the experiences of others' – stepping in someone else's shoes to carefully experience their world can support in understanding other people's behaviour.

As facilitator, it is worth noting that libel laws exist in most countries for the protection of individuals from defamation in print. I would not suggest that participants are given this information as a reason against writing personal experiences. However, many people are aware of difficulties that can arise in this area and sometimes raise it in groups, so it is worth being clear on the issue.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality has been mentioned in *Group Guidelines* and elsewhere in this guide and becomes most important when protecting the identity of the participant/writers and the people about whom they may be writing. This is especially important in a small community where sometimes participants can 'guess' the subject of the writing even if they are anonymised. For this reason, confidentiality cannot be overstressed.

SESSION ORGANISATION AND PREPARATION

Sessions are best held once (or twice) a week, helping to support the emergence of a weekly rhythm. The optimal duration of the session is about 1.5 - 2 hours depending on the participants' ability to cope. It may be necessary to take a break in the middle of a session. Sessions of more than two hours are usually too heavy for mental health rehabilitators.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning and preparing for a session are a good way to begin the process of becoming grounded as facilitators so that we can best support others.

When publicising a group, it is important to emphasize that the purpose of a therapeutic writing group is not to produce quality texts, to hone each other's writing or obtain feedback. It is also worth clarifying that you do not need to be a talented or experienced writer to participate in the group; it is enough to be able to scratch a recognizable word on paper. Some group participants have included a person who couldn't write on his own and dictated to a personal assistant. Often, those who come to a therapeutic writing group have misconceptions about the goals and purpose of the group. They may assume that the group can evaluate texts for publication and help develop their skills. In the first session participants may say that they do not have the necessary writing skills and have only come under the guidance or pressure of a caregiver or other authority. These misconceptions are easy to correct and participants usually continue even though the group does not match their original expectations.

FACILITATOR PARTICIPATION

As mentioned above, the question of whether the facilitator also participates in the writing exercises is one for debate. Some facilitators consider their contribution in the writing exercises alongside the participants, is essential for developing a sense of solidarity and for experiencing the response to the exercise for themselves. Others might consider that giving their whole focus to the group dynamic and its processes is more important than writing at the same time as the participants. Whichever approach suits you and your group may differ. However, experiencing the writing exercise is important for the facilitator and might be best completed sometime before the sessions, leaving the facilitator to concentrate on the group in the room. The pre-prepared writing can be used in the session if this feels appropriate.

In HEROINES, we are implementing 'therapeutic writing'. This means that participants

discuss original texts and also write their own. As mentioned above, in addition to reading and writing, the group can use movement and dramatization, watch clips from movies or TV shows, draw, paint, photograph, do chores, play or listen to music. In this way, the methods of other creative therapies may be combined, though always prioritising the wording of feelings and thoughts experienced in the session.

NON-PARTICIPATION AND MOTIVATION

In writing sessions when the prompt is suggested, some participants will start writing straight away. Although as facilitators, we are aware that the participant's pressing issues will often take precedence in the focus of the writing taking place, others might be unable to write on a particular day or around a specific issue.

In these situations, the facilitator might suggest some of the alternatives given such as using each other/ facilitators as scribes, drawing, using clay or play materials to sculpt in response to the topic under discussion rather than writing. Using simple materials e.g. magazines, paper and coloured markers, for art-making and collage work can be effective ways of exploring ideas and the participants may prefer to work that way in a session. The participants could be invited to write descriptions of the non-written work they have produced e.g. artwork and can be given the option to share this.

There may also be members of the group who are able only to be silent. While in conventional education groups this can be interpreted as a sign of aggression or disruption, in therapeutic writing groups, it can indicate that deep, restorative work is taking place but that the participant has not yet been able to access words to express themselves.

PREPARATION

Preparation for the sessions in these ways requires some investment of time and space to concentrate on the issues and to consider how the session might develop. This is useful for awareness but it is also important not to become too involved in projecting problems or difficulties you may have previously experienced, upon an unknown group dynamic. It may be a more valuable preparation to try the exercise yourself before you use it in a writing session. For example, in Week 15, it is suggested that the facilitator tries writing a poem in a particular form (pantoum) in advance of the session. This is a particularly good suggestion for this session as it focuses on the arrangement of lines in a poem and working through it beforehand will make it easier to explain clearly to the participant group and highlight areas of possible confusion.

There are practical matters that need attention such as familiarising oneself with the location of the group. If it is somewhere you haven't worked in before, you will need to be aware of facilities outside the room e.g. bathrooms, first aid area and staff as well as the room and its layout. Also, if you are practicing social distancing during the groups, this will affect the layout and possibly how the group works. For example, in the curriculum, there are certain sessions where it is suggested that the group divide into pairs for an exercise and you might need to adapt that for your circumstances.

In a face-to-face writing group, it is welcoming to provide a notebook and pen/pencils for

participants to use exclusively for their own writing. It can be a simple but important gesture that demonstrates some attention and value given to their attendance and their identity as writers. Participants choose to keep this with them as they return to each session but it is helpful to offer a secure and confidential storage place for those for whom this is not a safe or positive option.

Alternatives to writing materials need to be made available. Newspapers. Magazines, basic art materials for drawing and painting, modelling clay fabric pieces and coloured papers can be reassuring for the participants who cannot write on a particular day and prefer to express themselves in non-writing ways.

SPACES

Therapeutic writing in closed groups such as those in the HEROINES project require facilitation for general housekeeping responsibilities and also to create a safe space into which the participants might write. As forms of therapy differ, so do approaches to the spaces used for writing. Some therapists try to keep this neutral with minimal influence upon the participants, but shared workshop spaces often mean that it is more usual to see evidence of artwork and notices in the room. If this is the case, it might be possible to give the room a sense of belonging to the therapeutic writing group while they are there – maybe adding some flowers or branches to a vase or arranging coloured papers and markers around the table for participants to use if they wish. Some suggest that the facilitator's clothing and actual presence indicate that the group has been focussed upon and given advance consideration. Even if no-one uses the papers or remarks on the flowers, it suggests that some efforts have been made especially for the group.

MATERIALS

Facilitators may, at their discretion, add new/alternative written material to group sessions. However, it is a good idea to follow some basic principles when choosing materials. It should be noted in particular that the material discussed, especially just before the end of the session, should be positive and encouraging. In general, positive material is a safer choice than pessimistic texts describing sad events or painful feelings. Not all material needs to be optimistic, though. A gloomy or sad text or image can allow participants to deal with distressing and difficult issues, especially by displacing them to not-so-difficult topics. When choosing texts describing negative issues, however, one must always carefully consider what participants are willing to accept. For example, texts dealing with incest, suicide, or other themes that evoke particularly strong emotions are too heavy for most groups.

One of the goals of therapeutic writing is to provide experiences of success. Therefore, it is good for the material to be easy enough to understand. For example, text that requires the comprehension of some intertextual reference in order to open up is not suitable for therapeutic use. Foreign words, academic concepts, difficult sentence structures, and themes or details in the texts that are foreign to one's own sphere of life also do not contribute to the experience of success. The text should evoke an experience of familiarity.

Poetry often works better than prose as material when working with participants with

psychosis. Rhythm, repetition, opening and ending chords, metaphors, and other features of the visual language are already therapeutic in themselves. The language of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia often resembles the language of poetry; it can have a lot of repetition, metaphor, overtones and rhymes. Often these features of poetic language are seen in prose written by people with a schizophrenia diagnosis, and sometimes observed in their spoken language. Indeed, people with a schizophrenia diagnosis may find that poems speak to them more effectively than prose. Poems are also suitable in length for a group whose participants have difficulty concentrating. Song lyrics are also excellent materials for poetry therapy. People with a schizophrenia diagnosis especially enjoy reading the lyrics they are familiar with.

If the facilitator is not familiar with the participants, it is a good idea to consult a health professional who knows them when choosing the material. People with a schizophrenia diagnosis and other psychoses tend to treat things like money, religion, or a particular ideology in an unusually black-and-white or passionate way. It makes sense to avoid materials dealing with these types of topics.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING LOCAL CREATIVE MATERIAL FOR HEROINES SESSIONS

As above, you may find that creative material proposed in the curriculum does not translate well, or is not suitable for your group. There is flexibility in these resources and the exercises, so you may want to source suitable material yourself.

Creative material can be of any kind that will engage the group. Here are some examples:

Poems, Songs, Stories (including Traditional Tales, Fragments), Film, Graphic Novels, Non-Fiction (Biography, Diaries, Extracts from Speeches, Letters), Oral Stories and Performance Poems, Drama (Plays and other scripts), Informational Texts (such as Reviews, Definitions, News Reports).

Consider your group carefully, bearing in mind the Trauma-Informed approach. Consider the suggested exercise and find a similar text that your group will relate to. Think about how it might compliment the exercise or title for the day.

Consider the following when making your choices:

♦ Length of the document – it needs to look accessible on first glance and not overwhelming

♦ Avoid difficult vocabulary - or take the time to discuss any more challenging words when first presenting the piece, without it feeling like school. You can do this by saying: 'When I was looking at this piece, I found myself unsure of the exact definition of 'x' – so I looked it up and it means 'z' – but it may mean something else to you

♦ Frame how you will make the presentation of the material; it is useful if you can remain impartial in your own view of the piece and invite comments. However, you may need to say if you think it may be triggering or provocative – this demonstrates care and sensitivity from you as practitioner

Particular considerations for more lyrical/narrative writing

♦ Metaphor can be a useful point to discuss emotions more obliquely and encourage metaphors from the group

♦ Ambiguity can be useful, so that there are 'gaps' in the text to which readers can bring themselves and individual interpretations

♦ If a piece, such as a traditional tale, has a moral, then ensure that this is open for discussion, such as the life-circumstances/motives of the characters. Try not to be moralistic

♦ Sensory content can be useful to support embodied engagement with the piece – drawing on taste, smell, touch, sound, sight

♦ Avoid pieces which are too simple, or too hopeful, or in which the author seems to have it all 'tied up', or too easy a solution to challenge. However, glimmers of hope need to be present

You will know your group, so consider aspects, brought to our attention by the Social Graces:

Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Spirituality (Burnham, 2012)

NON-LITERARY RESOURCES

In building your own 'Resources' file, you might include visual materials that can be used for the starting and closing rounds. On top of those, many kinds of images, both drawings, painted images and photos as well as objects or colorful fabrics are great materials. There are card sets designed for creative activity and therapy, such as the Saga, 1001, Habitat, Mythos or Important Things in Life -series. In addition, it is good to use humorous cards, such as memory game cards depicting the characters of cartoons or movies. Humorous cards work especially well at the beginning of a group and, for example, when the group needs more humour and joy to lighten the mood. The good thing about memory game cards is that there are always two of a kind. Choosing the same card with another participant creates positive feelings of sharing and understanding and a shared experience.

Visual material also works as a stimulus: it often brings natural humor and savor to the conversations and makes them more relaxed. It also refreshes memories and redirects the stream of thought. The use of visual material is therefore highly recommended, especially at the beginning of the group process, when the participants are still weighing their commitment to the group.

STRUCTURE OF THE SESSIONS

The curriculum session outlines have all been designed with the concept of a warm-up exercise, a writing exercise designed to focus around the issues for that week, discussion of the issues and the HEROINE role models and a Closing Round. The structure is designed to give participants a gentle start to the session, have the opportunity to write and to discuss how the issues were demonstrated by the role model and then to close the session in a short private

writing space.

The patterning of the sessions can be reassuring to participants who will become aware of the opportunities to share and to keep private their writing. The structure serves as a container in which to 'hold' the group, its issues and its work.

It is recommended that the sessions be conducted in such a way that they always have the same structure. In the HEROINES, the group sessions structure is planned to the following (timings are suggested for a 90 minute session):

1. Starting Round (10-15mins)

2. Task (Writing and sharing 20-25mins)

3. Pause (5-10 mins)

4. Second Task (Writing and sharing 20-25mins)

5. Closing Round (10-15 mins)

Starting and closing rounds work as predictable rituals that bring safety. A repetitive structure helps to focus, relieves tension and creates a sense of safety. It also prevents conflicts from arising. Participants with mental health challenges often find it difficult to concentrate for long, so a break in the middle of a session helps them cope with these demands. A break is also an informal and appropriately short social situation where it is natural to chat with other members of the group. Often participants find the breaks relaxing and essential parts of the sessions.

It is a good idea to decide on the groups each time for the final round, where everyone has their own opportunity to speak. Sometimes, important issues for example, another participant's previous infringing or making hurtful comments are often mentioned during the ending round. So, it is good to leave plenty of time for the final rounds, but on the other hand, it doesn't make sense to artificially prolong them when the group has nothing to say. In this case, you should end the session a little earlier.

SESSION PLANS

The curriculum session plans are available via the HEROINES website. The curriculum plans are intended to outline the ways we believe the sessions will best work to develop the ideas of themes and the role models that best exemplify those themes. As facilitators, you will need to become familiar with the session plans before that particular session. If there is something that you feel uncomfortable with, make a note to yourself on the session plan. Sometimes, we anticipate potential difficulties in a session, only to find this runs smoothly and vice versa!

Each curriculum session plan has a section **'Resources for facilitators'** that aims to list the items needed to facilitate that session, for example flip chart or laptop You may decide to add to these if you prefer to use a wider selection of items such as art materials. Many facilitators prefer to have these available as an alternative in case of a group participant not feeling able to write in a session and prefers to express themselves visually.

This same section also lists the resources suggested for use in the session e.g. poem, pictures or film. These are available in the online file **'Resources'** for you to print out or translate into your own language. You might instead become familiar with this text or refer to **'Appendix to the Curriculum'** for information on the reason for selecting a particular poem. You could then choose a text on the same theme from your own culture and language that could be used more appropriately with the group.

Also included in the 'Resources' section is background reading material that is useful for preparing to facilitate the session. These are readings that we have found useful in our own work that relate to the theme or issues that may emerge in the session.

The curriculum session plan also has a section **'Notes for facilitators'** where we have given references to specific sections included in this Methodological Guide e.g. Group Guidelines. Included here are also brief pointers to some issues that might arise while using the material in each session. For example, in the session for Week 9 there is a note suggesting "Before the session, go through the Group Guidelines from the *Methodological Guide* about collaborative reading and writing".

THERAPEUTIC WRITING TASKS

One function of the poetry therapy assignments is to encourage interaction. If talking is difficult, it is possible to communicate with other members of the group initially by writing. Group writing is particularly well supported by the task of group members writing follow-up text. In this sort of exercise, the first member of the group writes one sentence or verse on paper and then passes the paper to the next, who adds another and passes it on. Listening to the texts read by other members of the group has proven particularly challenging for people with a schizophrenia diagnosis. It is often a good idea to include some kind of interaction in each session, for example, asking questions about the text that is being read each time.

If participants have a clear handwriting, it is possible to have another member of the group read the written text. It is also possible to type up the texts of the previous session, in between sessions, and give copies to everyone for discussion. In this case, however, the opportunity to receive immediate feedback on the written text is lost. The most optimal option would be to copy the written texts immediately for other members of the group to see. Unclear handwriting can make it difficult to read the texts, but still concrete written text makes it easier to focus on listening. Sometimes a bad handwriting sample can even improve the ability of the participant to concentrate as they focus on their words.

The task should not be too complicated. It is better to give tasks that clearly have several different parts. The first part of the task is done first and only when it is completed will the instructor give instructions for the second part. Instructions can also be given in writing on paper if group members find it difficult to focus on listening.

It is a good idea to plan the therapeutic writing process in advance so that at least the themes and goals of the sessions are defined. At the beginning of the process, time must be set aside for grouping and getting to know each other, and at the end, preparations must be made in time to prepare for the separation and its associated feelings. Good themes for the sessions include personal needs, desires and goals; accepting and managing the past; finding personal

boundaries and wishes; naming and dealing with emotions; important relationships; awareness skills; perceiving different sensations, memories, resources; stress management.

OBJECTIVES OF THE GROUP PROCESS IN WRITING

Group therapeutic writing has many advantages over individual therapy. In a group, it is possible to practice social skills and face challenging situations in a safe environment. This contributes to the improvement of social skills. The facilitator can promote the practice of social skills through appropriate interactive assignments. Group members provide each other with a reflection, express alternative responses and opinions, and can provide important peer support to each other.

The emphasis of a closed therapeutic group such as HEROINES might be rather on how the group itself negotiates the space and uses it for the session. The role of the facilitator would be to stay aware of all the group members, noting if there are individual difficulties or disturbances between more than one of the participants and being alert for issues such as physical distress, where assistance might be needed.

COLLABORATIVE WRITTING

Collaborative writing is an approach to writing where more than one person (or a group) combine their efforts to produce a piece of writing. There are many reasons for doing this in a therapeutic writing group. Collaborative writing can help to build group identification and bonding between participants and develop the capacity to co-operate if the group is working on a joint project as all participants would have to agree on the aims and division of tasks required to complete the work. Here, good communication between members is essential and this might have to be promoted by the facilitator by introducing the idea and repeating agreements (possibly printing these off for reference by each member). The advantages are that the group could produce a more complex and varied final piece than one written by a single person. Collaborative writing also allows the participant to express their views without having to be identified as being entirely accountable for them. In this way, a group member might choose to be more expressive or bold in their writing, knowing that they are identified as a member of a writing group rather than as a named individual. It is a way of becoming more visible as a writer while enjoying the protection of being in the group. It can help the participant to develop confidence in their own voice and in their writing.

For the purposes of the HEROINES workshops, a joint writing project might take place towards the end of the programme but collaborative writing skills can be developed earlier through active facilitation to produce group writing. There are a number of techniques that can be used here that allow the individuals to write while the facilitator 'combines' the work.

The HEROINES curriculum plans include sessions that can be used for collaborative writing skills. For example:

Week 4: Lou Reed lyrics 'Perfect Day' can be a gentle introduction to collaborative writing.

Each group participant is invited to list the components of their 'perfect day' and this forms a poem that is particular to them. The facilitator can develop this into a collaborative writing exercise by asking each participant to choose one line to contribute to a group poem and write this up as a collaborative poem that includes everyone's idea of a perfect day. Although the ideas are different, they are all likely to be positive and pleasing.

Week 5: Sujata Bhatt poem 'What is worth knowing?' invites participants to list ideas, beliefs, folklore, personal knowledge that is important to them in the form of one-sentence lines. The participant then has a list of lines that form a non-rhyming poem that is particular to them. The facilitator develops this into a collaborative writing exercise by asking each participant to choose one line to contribute to a group poem and write this up as a collaborative poem, as in Session 4. However, by representing views of all the participants and including views that some group members may not share and heated discussions could arise.

Session 24: Fiona Hamilton's 'Luggage' poem used here encourages the participant to let go of issues and feelings that they are carrying from the past and choosing what they want to take into the future. As with the previous session examples, a group poem could be made using one line to 'leave behind' and another to 'take' chosen by each participant, producing a group response to what could be collectively dropped and kept.

Collaborative writing can lead to some tricky discussions if the facilitators encourage this, especially over political or religious beliefs. However, it is also a useful way to explain how social groups are different, have different priorities and values. As well as encouraging tolerance of others in this way, a collaborative writing poem generated through individual's inputs can be looked at simply as a writing example that demonstrates the importance that both highly complex and simple issues can play in our lives.

In addition to the learning experience of collaborative writing, there is a creativity learning outcome. It can be a useful way of showing how a poem can be built, how it can be changed by a line that has a different tone or perspective (e.g. lines of personal details in the middle of lines of general, social ideas). Participants might also reflect on the impact of certain words being added and how the collaborative poem differs in language, meaning, tone and feeling from their individual ones.

It is not only the sessions involving poems that can be used for collaborative writing. It can be used in reflective sessions to show how participants have different experiences of the same event.

In Week 7 Closing round suggests asking the participants to reflect upon the day by writing a series of sentences, starting with the following:

"It was …

I heard …

She said …

I ate/drank ...

We discussed;

I felt ...

We did ...

I thought ...

Now... ".

The exercise invites participants to share these reflections and impressions or to share one in particular but it can also be used by the facilitator to take a line from everyone (if there are more lines than participants, go around again) in order to have a collaborative response to the day. Sometimes the results can be surprising. As in the previous examples, one or two lines can change the overall tone and effect.

The group participants will become aware of how their chosen words appear alongside others and can also develop awareness of both the power of the group (the effect of a group being greater than the sum of its parts) and of how individual contributions can change a bigger piece of work.

COLLABORATIVE READING

Collaborative reading is the sharing of reading by the whole group. In therapeutic writing groups, participants might be invited to share their own work or part of it, by reading it out to the group but in general it is an open invitation to allow for sharing but not expecting it. This should be made clear to the participants.

There are some clear reasons for this. Some participants will be unable to share their personal writing and pressure to do so could affect the therapeutic benefit of the writing activity which is paramount. Others may have literacy issues, dyslexia or feel uncomfortable reading their own or any other writing out loud. Sometime, a participant has some writing they would like to share but not to read out so it is helpful if the facilitator offers to do this when issuing a general invitation to read/share. If this does happen, it can yield surprising results. Having work read out by another person can be empowering and validating. However, it is a practice that the facilitator will negotiate through their knowledge and skills of group work.

The HEROINES sessions are writing sessions, focussed around issues that affect all women and using examples that are identifiable and resonate with some aspects of the participants' personal experience. Some proponents of writing therapy not only consider it valuable in emotional expression (Bolton, 1999; Flint, 2004; Pennebaker, 2004) but it is also private until the writer wishes (if ever) to share it. The strength of therapeutic writing is that the act of writing itself in the therapeutic setting of preparation and holding creates a change in the person, the moment of poiesis where the combination of creativity and psychology combine in an alchemical manner to capture something that did not previously exist.

PURPOSE AND EVALUATION OF THE GROUP

It is useful to discuss with your colleagues the purpose of your particular group beyond the general points of reducing social isolation and increasing support networks and ways to use writing as a therapeutic tool for personal development.

Part of the pre-planning would include if there are plans to monitor the effectiveness of the group in some way? If so, how would you use this?

Facilitators can observe and make notes after each session that will form a useful record and can be used in supervision sessions and to indicate areas of concern for yourself and/or participants.

Often, simple verbal feedback and clearly written evaluation forms that offer the participant the opportunity to comment on their own feelings/ changes/ skills that have developed through the course of the sessions.

Sometimes, however, the feedback can hide actual changes. For example, you might have a participant who states that they have become bored with the writing group and have developed an interest in another area that will become their future focus such as art or gardening. It may be clear that such changes would not have been made without the support and growth of participating in the writing group. In your particular group, the input of your co-facilitators and other health care workers' observations on changes is invaluable to make a sound assessment of the group's effectiveness.

Other ways of evaluation can be undertaken informally by the participants themselves. For example, the participants could be asked to name three things that they have enjoyed about the group and an equal number of things they would like to have changed. Similarly, an affirmation of the participants' experience would be to ask each person to look through their own work and select a piece that they like best and to talk / write about them. The final sessions are the points in the course where this occurs quite naturally and where the self-selection of pieces as contributions to the anthology forms part of the sessions.

Feedback forms have been provided for formal feedback and evaluation (see Appendix Forms 1 and 2). This can be invaluable in marking individual and group development and for future course development.

Feedback Form 1 is intended to give the facilitators the opportunity to give their views and feelings after each session. These are particularly useful for the facilitator to be aware of early difficulties, make minor adjustments and changes to the programme or to make special **arrangements for the participant in a forthcoming session.**

Feedback Form 2 is aimed at receiving wider feedback from the participants. It should be used after the first, second and third quarter of the process, and again in the end so that a total of four completed forms from each person are completed. As indicated on Form 2, the first question need only be answered after the first quarter).

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Feedback form 1

Feedback form for heroines group facilitators (after each session)

Your own thoughts and feelings after the session?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Cooperation among facilitators

_____

_____

_____

_____

Comments on the group process

_____

_____

_____

Functionality of the chosen material

Sugerencias para preparar el programa de sesión de grupo, las directrices o el material

Feedback form 2

Questionnaire for HEROINES group participants (4 times during the project after each quarter)

1. Start (this need only be completed after First Quarter)

a) I received the necessary information about the group's activities, meeting times, goals and working principles from the start

O Yes

O No

b) What is your feedback regarding the first session and the beginning of the group (information, practical arrangements, etc.)?

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Expectactions

Has the group met your expectations and needs?

O Yes

O No

What do you think about the themes discussed in the group and their relation to your own life?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Working methods

d) The group involved writing...

O Too much

O Quite much

O Enough

O A littel

O Not enough

(Check one option)

e) Discussions took up... (time)

O Too much

O Quite much

O Enough

O A littel

O Not enough

(Check one option)

f) ¿Cuál es tu opinión sobre las tareas? ¿Qué pensamientos provocaron?

_____

_____

_____

_____

How did the sharing and common discussion of writings go?

_____

_____

_____

_____

g) Written and other material used in the group.

What is your feedback about the material? What thoughts did the texts, images, etc. evoke?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Practicals arrangements

a)) What is your feedback regarding the meeting space?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b) What do you think about the total duration of the group (8 months / 32 sessions)?

O Far too short

O A little too short

O suitable

O a little too long

O way too long

c) The weekly gathering time was...

O Far too short

O A little too short

O suitable

O a little too long

O way too long

Has the frequency of meetings (once a week) been right for you? Would you prefer a longer evening or a theme day instead of a weekly gathering?

○ I like the weekly gatherings

○ I would sometimes prefer a longer meeting or a theme day

5. Group activities

How has the group's cooperation been? What has been good or rewarding, what has felt awkward? Has there been room in the group for your feelings? Have you been heard?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What feedback would you give the instructors?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

HEROINES

Other feedback and wishes

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 1: self care guidance for participants

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

Creative and Reflective Writing has the power to evoke personal material and often focuses directly into what is personal and important to the writer. The suggestions below are made to support you during and after your writing sessions.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

♦ · Your body is a very accurate gauge to how you are experiencing the world, although culturally we are often not encouraged to 'tune in' to ourselves. Mindful practices, such as meditation or yoga can be excellent ways to become 'closer' to ourselves, but so can simply sitting still and not placing any demands on being active. Noticing our breath and gently slowing it down and breathing into our bellies is calming to the nervous system. Putting your feet on the floor is grounding, and even stamping can be helpful to connect with the earth and one's own territory.

♦ · Before writing it is useful to have an image of a 'place where I feel calm', or a place where you can imagine feeling calm, such as a beach, or a woodland. When you are writing, if you start to feel overwhelmed – stop writing – and take yourself to this image.

♦ · When you are writing, a question to ask yourself is whether you feel able to write the piece now? Be gentle with yourself.

♦ · You won't be alone in feeling a range of emotions, both when you write and when you listen to other people's writing; this is perfectly normal and each session can feel like a roller-coaster, as you listen to yourself and others. Think carefully about what you do immediately following the session, try and take a small space for yourself, even if that is connecting with a friend to tell them how you are, or making a drink before you resume your normal activities.

♦ · If you know you have a specific area of sensitivity, it is helpful to share this with the facilitators and the group. This won't mean that they won't discuss that topic, but they can be considerate to you by warning you about upcoming content and check in with you that you are okay.

♦ · Consider what you do with your writing. We encourage you to keep it in a journal or folder, so that it has a special place. If, however, this poses any risk to your safety, talk to the facilitator about what you do with your writing from the group.

♦ · Remember that your writing is for you, and only you can write your words. In the same way that other people's writing is unique and interesting to you, your writing will have the same interest to others. Try to be gentle with your words and respect them like fledgling birds.

Appendix 2: suggestions for the on-line implementation of pilot courses

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

This period of covid-19 pandemic was and still is very challenging for our society (HEROINES project was implemented during 2020-2021).

It is more challenging for vulnerable people, for people who live in remote areas and thus lack opportunities for communication and/or creative activities, which are supportive in dealing with the stress and fear.

The group of participants expected that this pilot course could add to the interaction and communication they needed during this period. However, due to strict restrictions in Greece and especially in Lamia, we had to implement the course on-line.

This proved to be a very challenging task and we want to share with you some tips/ suggestions for the on-line implementation.

We think this will be very useful not only in period of pandemic, but also for groups of people that have severe restriction in movement, i.e. people with physical or mental disabilities, immunosuppressed people or people living abroad but need to communicate in maternal language, etc.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

♦ · One difficulty we faced was how to give equal time to the participants so that they could all express themselves during the session. We dealt with this by giving time to each one to speak, depending on the order that they appeared on the screen, so that a random series of speakers is followed and it is not considered that there is a bias of the facilitators. Also by using some techniques where women can choose their turn randomly as they chose their favorite color, the ball, etc.

♦ · Probably the most difficult of all was how to bond the members of the team, and we achieved this mainly through varied exercises on the internet for bonding the members of the team and effective communication between team members (such as the team survival suitcase).

♦ · It is also important that in the online program there can be no breaks in which to achieve relaxation and communication between members of the team and this was addressed by using relaxation techniques (photos, music, closed screen for a while).

♦ · One difficulty we encountered was how to handle a conflict between participants in a session. This is much easier to solve in face to face meetings, where each one

could address the other or the facilitators individually. We solved the problem by us the facilitators being available for the participants outside the sessions (and indeed they contacted us) and on the day of the conflict the session took longer time to give the necessary "space" for all participants to express themselves. After that, the bonds of the team became stronger. Also, after this session, additional exercises outside the material of the program to bond the group were integrated in the meetings.

♦ · It was necessary to adapt some exercises, especially those that required craft materials and not simple writing and to have a preparation from the previous meeting for some meetings so that the participants have some materials with them.

♦ · Problems are also created when we ask the participants to fill in and send us questionnaires etc. either due to inability to access technical equipment, or due to protection of personal data. Our opinion is that there should be some flexibility and less requirements given the circumstances (women are from rural areas). A good idea is to use google forms which are easy to complete and identify.

♦ · We also noticed that they liked to enter the "rooms" (meetings between less people but within the same online meeting), so it is good to use this technique as it relieves and gives a sense of privacy, of sharing between members and better acquaintance of them.

♦ · We noticed that, due to the online conduct of the program, more sensitivity was needed in the development of sensitive issues such as religious beliefs as women were only known online and there was not enough time to get to know each other better as would be done during breaks or before the start or end of the group if it was done face to face.

♦ · Since there was no face to face acquaintance or previous acquaintance with women, and the majority had psychosocial difficulties affecting their daily lives, it was often difficult to understand online the feelings and thoughts that could be motivated in the exercises. We dealt with this by giving women the opportunity to communicate with us outside the program and as it turned out, sometimes their exercises motivated a lot of emotions and thoughts. In fact, two participants told us that through the program they entered a process of redefinition of themselves and asked for individual treatment. They were referred appropriately.

♦ · We encourage facilitators to keep returning to the Group Guidelines for support of both individuals and the group.

Vasia Tzanetou

Evie Mylonaki

APPENDIX 3: ideas for discussing the benefits of therapeutic writing with participants

Introductory thoughts

Therapeutic writing has a number of functions:

♦ On a personal level it encourages improved psychological transformation, with the experience of 'inner freedom, greater psychic flexibility, a clearer and stronger sense of personal identity and an increased freedom to engage in creative pursuits' *(Hunt, 2000)*.

♦ On a social level therapeutic writing has the capacity to visualise more resilient societies and a cooperative wellbeing for people and the planet, including addressing inequalities, linear and hierarchical thinking, micro-aggressions, and widening perspectives to re-imagine the world and its future.

♦ On a physical level, improvements in a number of physiological functions have been researched.

Specific suggestions:

1. **Psychological Health:** Therapeutic writing helps:

♦ To make subjective experience objective, which means internal thoughts become externalized and less bound up with the identity of the individual.

♦ To evoke the historical present, which means that the past can be explored in the present and new solutions can be found to 'old' issues.

♦ To integrate life experiences by 'coming to terms', 'giving attention', and 'taking care' with stories that have remained unheard, silenced, or have not received adequate attention.

♦ To manage solitude, so that one feels a sense of company with one's own thoughts and also other people's responses, if one chooses to share their work.

♦ To remind that the self is in relationship with the 'other', which can be as simple as the page, but can also extend to other people's experiences and writing.

2. **What do you think is happening?**

Sometimes participants are curious about the 'magic' of therapeutic writing, but there are many psychological processes, or illusory effects, at work which can be considered:

♦ Reality testing: We can try scenarios and responses out on paper before taking

them back into our lives. In a group, opinions can be sought regarding social responses to choices and beliefs.

♦ The paper or piece of creativity can be seen as occurring in 'potential space' where participants feel safe enough to use their imaginations and experiment.

♦ When flow occurs (meaning that the challenge of the task and the time to complete the task are near enough in balance) a sense of achievement and empowerment is produced. A by-product of flow is that one's sense of time can change, sometimes providing escape or respite, and sometimes an engagement with a present, past or future moment.

2.   **Essential Factors:** By their nature, therapeutic writing groups can provide factors that are supportive and reparative to individuals via:

♦ A warm relationship with facilitators and other group members.

♦ Creative forms in which to express oneself, like pouring one's thoughts into a container.

♦ Space that is reserved for individual participants and the group, whether this is turn-taking or "time-out" of other worries.

♦ Encouraging risk taking and evoking personal courage.

3.   **Writing as a Way of Becoming:** Writing can support us to become more congruent and authentic, shedding many societal expectations and narratives: The well-known Irish writer, Colm Tóibín said: "I write with a sort of grim determination to deal with things that are hidden and difficult... But we cannot walk away from ourselves. Who else is there to become?" (The Guardian, 2009).

4.   **Physical Health** has been proven to improve using therapeutic writing, here are some examples from James Pennebaker and Robert Smyth's *Opening up by Writing it Down* and other papers:

Keeping secrets is physical work: We expend effort to restrain or hold back thoughts, immediately affecting our body, by increasing heart rates and perspiration. Over time this can be a cumulative stressor, leading to stress-related illnesses, such as high blood pressure.

♦ The manifestation of events that aren't turned into language can lead to anxiety, rumination, disturbing dreams and other thought disturbances.

♦ Writing reduces PTSD symptoms, whether you write about trauma, or more everyday matters.

♦ Illness length and visits to the doctor are reduced (Pennebaker and Beall, 2006).

♦ Improvement in immune system function (Pennebaker et al, 1988).

♦ Liver function is improved (Francis and Pennebaker, 1992).

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Methodological guide