

A Journey of Hope and Discovery
Words for Wellbeing:
Creative Expression as Medical Therapy

Session companion, PHA 2008

Is it coincidence that Apollo is the Greek god of art *and* medicine? The connection between creative expression and physical wellbeing has long been observed, and has recently earned the attention of medical researchers and treating clinicians.

Writers – casual and serious – take up the craft for a variety of reasons, and to a number of ends. In the pulmonary hypertension community, patients’ stories, nurses’ anecdotes and families’ chronicles serve an important role; excited and intimate in turn, the experiences of these storytellers help heal those who tell them, and those who hear them.

In 2004, the Pulmonary Hypertension Association invited Dr. Lester Friedman to present on “Writing for Your Health.” In his talk, Dr. Friedman describes research that links creative expression – writing, drawing, sculpting, dance and so on – with reduced symptomology in some patients. He cites a 1994 study that showed subjects who wrote about stressful experiences for 20 minutes a day, three days a week, fared better than those who didn’t, and better than those who wrote on neutral subjects.

As patients and community members – as writers either reticent or verbose – how can we begin to benefit from these findings? How can we ensure that our creative expression works for us?

How does creative expression help us?

Thinking about creative expression as “medical therapy” begs the question: How does this help? How is expressing and sharing my experience helpful to me?

Dr. Friedman observes that “the expressing of self is the pathway to healing – not only of the body, but of the mind, the spirit and perhaps even the soul.” His interpretation of the research illuminating the benefits of creative expression is similar to another theory with which you may be familiar – narrative therapy. Narrative therapy holds that our identities and experiences are shaped by the accounts of our lives found in the stories we create about them. In other words, the way we think about, recall and describe our experiences to ourselves and to others influences how we perceive ourselves and those experiences.

The expressing of self is the pathway to healing – not only of the body, but of the mind, the spirit and perhaps even the soul.

Lester Friedman, Ph.D.

NOTES

The therapeutic goal of narrative therapy is to help patients reframe those stories in more positive, empowering ways. We've probably all used narrative therapy unknowingly – on our friends, if not on ourselves. How many of us have tried to coach a friend out of some sort of failure – maybe a bad break-up or an argument with a parent or spouse – by trying to help them snap out of their negative thinking and remember the other, more positive side of the story?

By writing and creating art about our health, or about the PH experience, patients will gradually gain perspective and understanding of that experience. We see this often in the PH community; patients who lose their jobs due to their health frequently become involved in the community in ways that allow them to use their skills and expertise. Rather than viewing their “retirement” as a loss, those patients choose to focus on the opportunities that opened up to fight passionately for something they believe in.

How Do I Start Writing?

Consider these prompts from Dr. Friedman if you find yourself unsure of how to begin writing. If you aren't much with a pen, try to address these issues in whatever creative expression suits you best!

1. When do you think your illness first took up occupancy inside you?
2. Who else is involved?
3. Does the illness remind you of (or is it similar to) anything that you've experienced in the past?
4. What are the worst things about it?
5. How is your life different since your illness?
6. Is there anything good you can say about your situation?
7. What have you learned? How have you changed?
8. Has your illness served any other purpose?

How does creative expression help others?

Dr. Friedman also emphasizes *sharing* in his presentation. Letting others experience our writing, drawings, dances, paintings and plays is an important component of the expressive process. Psychoeducation is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the exchange of experience between patients and calls for mutual support. Grounded in the observation that the better a patient understands his or her illness the better he or she can live with and cope with the illness, this practice aims to help patients understand and manage their illness, to reinforce their strengths, resources and

Start a journal and write for 20 minutes each day. Note your successes and frustrations, how you felt and what you did or did not do – or try to address one of the prompts to the left each week. Later, look back and see whether there are any patterns. How do you feel when you re-read previous entries?

What lies behind us
and what lies
before us are tiny
matters compared
to what lies
within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

NOTES

coping skills, and to expose patients and their families to similar stories from others, encouraging strength and fostering hope. When patients and families share these stories and information, the illness becomes destigmatized and treatment becomes easier to seek, and easier to handle. With this exchange of knowledge – facts, information, studies – and open communication of emotions – frustrations, worries, disappointments, successes – patients fare better.

PHA's newsletter, *Pathlight*, was created to serve this function in addition to sharing news and information. In *Pathlight* and *Persistent Voices*, patients are invited to share their stories and establish a kind of common ground for other patients, something that readers can relate to, empathize with and respond to both literally and emotionally.

Resources

Creative expression for physical wellbeing is a rich subject, and this guide only scratches the surfaces of a few ideas. Continue exploring how creative expression can benefit you, your family, your community and others in your situation. *For fun - or if you're not quite ready to address your illness - try your hand at expressing yourself on one of these topics.*

PHA Resources

Join or establish a **PH Support Group** in your area and find members who are interested in creative expression and sharing their art – be it words, theatre, sculpture. *★ Things in my life I love to write about*
★ Important moments in my life *★ Things I didn't know I loved*
★ Things in my life I hate *★ What's been given to me?*
★ Things I find hard to do *★ Things that are important to me*
guide with your group members to encourage everyone to explore creative expression as a way to improve their physical health. *Contact PHA's Director of Volunteer Services at 301-565-3004 x755.*

Share your writing with the entire PH community by submitting it for publication in ***Pathlight***, ***Persistent Voices***, or ***Our Journeys***. Your stories, poems and drawings could reach patients in print and on the web! *Contact PHA's Publications Manager for more information about Pathlight and Persistent Voices at 301-565-3004 x754 or PHA's Advocacy and Awareness Associate at 301-565-3004 x753 for information about Our Journeys.*

Take your story public and share it with your community through your local media. If you are a visual artist, try to arrange an exhibition at the local library or an art venue in your area and invite the media to cover the opening. Or, take your story right to your elected officials whenever you have the opportunity. *Contact PHA's Advocacy and Awareness Associate at 301-565-3004 x753 for information about media outreach and the Director of Advocacy and Awareness at 301-565-3004 x749 for information about getting in touch with your elected representatives.*

Share your story, photographs and artwork on **www.PHAssociation.org**, PHA's official website. With 390,000 visitors per month, your creativity is sure to reach other members of the community and make a difference in their PH experiences. *Contact PHA's webmaster at 301-565-3004 x759.*

NOTES

Other Resources

Dr. Friedman suggests the following resources – and don't forget to watch his presentation on the DVD *Writing for Your Health* (additional copies are available through PHA)!

Learn on the web!

- **Integrative Medicine:** www.integrativemedicine.org
- **Arts as a Healthy Force:** www.artshealing.org
- **Survivors Art Foundation:** www.survivorsartfoundation.org
- **Arts and Healing Network:** www.artheals.org
- **Society for the Arts in Healthcare:** www.SocietyArtsHealthcare.org

Visit the library!

- *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being;* Stephen J. Lepore and Joshua M. Smyth

And check out these writing resources!

- *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life;* Anne Lamott
- *Writing for Your Life: Discovering the Story of Your Life's Journey;* Deena Metzger

- *Writing in Flow: Keys to Enhanced Creativity;* Susan K. Perry

Gate C22

By Ellen Bass, from *The Human Line*. © Copper Canyon Press, 2007

At gate C22 in the Portland airport
a man in a broad-band leather hat kissed
a woman arriving from Orange County.
They kissed and kissed and kissed. Long after
the other passengers clicked the handles of their carry-ons
and wheeled briskly toward short-term parking,
the couple stood there, arms wrapped around each other
like he'd just staggered off a boat at Ellis Island,
like she'd been released at last from ICU, snapped
like out of a coma, survived bone cancer, made it down
from Annapurna in only the clothes she was wearing.

Neither of them was young. His beard was gray.
She carried a few extra pounds you could imagine
her saying she had to lose. But they kissed lavish
kisses like the ocean in the early morning,
the way it gathers and swells, sucking
each rock under, swallowing it
again and again. We were all watching –

The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention.

Flannery O'Connor
d. age 39 of lupus

Think about someone you noticed on your way to Conference – either at the airport, at the bus station, stuck in traffic on the highway... What was he or she wearing? What was he doing? What drew your attention to her? Did you interact, exchange words? What was the setting? Do you remember what you were feeling while you encountered this person? Did you feel differently afterward? Why do you think you remembered this person?

Try to remember the physical details of this person, and then if you can, delve a little bit deeper and try to recall the context of the experience.

NOTES
