

Creativity for Confidence

Creative Writing at Bedminster Family Practice

report by Claire Williamson

Bedminster Family Practice is a unique GP surgery, created with the arts in mind and with a history of partnerships with artists, not only in enhancing the surgery environment, but it was also one of the first 'Poetry Places' holding poetry workshops for patients, facilitated by Rose Flint.

The Target Group:

Patients who felt that their general confidence could be improved by engaging in Creativity, particularly, 35-60 years olds, who experience anxiety, depression or feel socially isolated.

The Main Aim:

The focus of 'Creativity for Confidence,' was on using the creative process to 'free-up' people who were feeling emotionally battered and to encourage them to share creative work and feelings in a safe environment.

Objectives:

- Encourage participants to share writing with other people, to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Create a nurturing and 'active listening' environment to promote confidence.
- Offer new and sustainable ways to strengthen inner resources.
- Provide intellectual stimulation and focus through creative goals.
- Open up opportunities for individuals to integrate life events.

Structure:

In order to provide a clear holding environment, I provided a structured timetable with dates and times of meetings.

Each week had a theme and each session had a similar structure, to promote a feeling of safety.

The group met for two hours on six Friday mornings, with a break for Good Friday. The theme was based around a watery journey.

Evaluation:

Evaluation of the sessions involved participants completing a MYCAW – Measure Yourself Concerns and Wellbeing form - pre and post course and a general follow-up questionnaire.

Creativity for Confidence Programme:

Week One - Harbour – Safety and Ground Rules; MYCAW; Icebreaking exercises; Providing a ‘picture’ of the workshop series; Finding a safe space in ourselves from which to create.

Poems – ‘Beach Morning’ by Fiona Hamilton (from Skinandi) and ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ by W B Yeats

Exercise – Imagining a place where we feel safe, or to which we would return that has special meaning

Week Two - Resources – Recap on Ground Rules; Naming Exercise; Thinking about resources we have and the choices we have made about what we have carried forward for ourselves in life.

Poems – ‘Luggage’ by Fiona Hamilton (from Skinandi)

Exercise – Listmaking from Luggage ‘Took with me... Left Behind...’ and Coat of Arms – Using Native American Animal cards to choose four animals to draw on a coat of arms and then reflect on chosen animals in writing.

Week Three - Leaving shore – Considering journeys we have made and risks we have taken.

Poems – ‘The Journey’ by Mary Oliver and ‘Ithaca’ by Constantine P Cavafy

Exercise – Taking a line from ‘The Journey’ write on the theme of risks and journeys.

Week Four - Exploring the Ocean Floor – Thinking about ourselves as unique individuals in relation to other people and a cultural landscape.

Poems – ‘Diving into the Wreck’ by Adrienne Rich and ‘When Someone Deeply Listens’ by John Fox

Exercise – Collage an animal/vegetable/mineral to represent yourself and to inhabit an archetypal group landscape; Writing reflecting on the relationship between your creation and other peoples and where you sit in the ‘landscape’

Week Five - Diving for Pearls – Considering the essence of ourselves, as opposed to a broad reading, or other people’s interpretations.

Poems - ‘Somebody Else’ by Jackie Kay and ‘A Ritual to Read to Each Other’ by William Stafford.

Exercises – Write a six line self portrait and Writing on reflection of ‘A Ritual to Read to Each Other’.

Week Six - Sharing our Treasure – Closing the group in a clear way and creating a booklet of poems to take away as a souvenir; Evaluation and MYCAW.

Poems – ‘Begin’ by Brendan Kennelly

Exercises – Typing up poems to share; Creating collage covers; A group poems with lines beginning ‘Begin...’

**Some Poems/Reflections
created as part of
Creativity for Confidence.**

Begin, Group Poem

Begin to noticing the beginning;
Spring takes hold to turn a season,
the waves in the body:
be wake and aware to the depths of despair,
so even if it is only a case of faltering onwards,
lurching into dark shadows of hideous nights
-make sure you do this, constantly, everyday.
Begin with the other; come into love.

Not as pretty as a butterfly,
I have reached my third nativity, my third creation.
My boots are as clean as a mirror, polished to a lustre sheen.
I hope my inner self is as clean.
I look at the sun and think, 'Wow!'
I think I'll have my Assam tea now.

Begin to new life
already in progress
that instead insists just to be
just to start.
I planned a future.
I plod on.
Begin with ending. Begin again.

Piece written after making our shapes and placing them on the landscape

High up.
Up high.
I'm hovering.
Looking down.
Head full of Spain.
This morning, a snarl.
Blood tongue.
My teeth are sharp.
Don't get too close.
For now, I'm happy to hover.
Look down.

Down
To where water moves
Mysterious
Full of oysters, shells
Whales, dolphins
Diving, leaping
In showers of sparkles
More stars there than in the sky
Neptune flicks his tail
Jellyfish –
Watch your step

Me, I have no step
Up here, I have skateboard wings
A glitterball body
Bats in my hair
I'm closest to mountains
The peak and air of them
The climb and breath
The simple, static thereness of them
One jump and I'm gone
Me above
Me below

Sara-Jane Arbury

A place where I feel safe, comfortable and happy

I'm in my bed looking at the clouds out of a skylight window.
Cocooned in softness, the duvet pulled up just under my nose
I'm breathing in gentleness, the sense that it's alright
Everything is alright
Above me, the clouds are blowing their own way
Through the blue, I'm drifting
Hot water bottle belly-full by my side
I'm small, the weight inside my skin
Held by a mattress, springs, foam, I wiggle my toes
Know my knees can bend
My arms can cradle
My fingers curl
I'm in my bed looking at the clouds out of a skylight window.

Sara-Jane Arbury

Seagull City

It's a view you can fall into.
Layers of roofs, flats, slopes.
So much concrete.
Somewhere a man is getting into a car.
Women are walking.
A child is trying her first cigarette.
Seagulls – the call of the clifftops
Circles the cathedral, the bridge, the hospital chimney.

Sara-Jane Arbury

Luggage

(after Fiona Hamilton)

took with me hill	left behind mountain
took with me endings	left behind signs
took with me precious	left behind charm
took with me toy	left behind ornament
took with me doors	left behind keys
took with me horizons	left behind pavements
took with me lumps	left behind youngster
took with me days	left behind time
took with me nephew	left behind boy
took with me blind alleys	left behind tracks
took with me cream	left behind tea
took with me Hola!	left behind tongue
took with me fluff	left behind hair
took with me certificate	left behind birth
took with me two	left behind one

Sara-Jane Arbury

Thunder, by Melissa

Lightening flash, savage rain, thunder
speaks of a vast and open universe.
Secured in this immensity by the very small,
I find the pebble, the beetle, the twig.

The storm sweeps away the worn out,
no longer relevant. Renewed, redressed,
The world begins again. Seasons pass but still
remains, the pebble, the beetle, the twig.

A String of Pearls, by Melissa

(Melissa made a number of personal observations under the image of the oyster and the pearl – this is an extract)

Prising open the hard shells of my independence and self-sufficiency, I find:
That I do not deal with my anger in an appropriate way and out of fear of being
thought a bad person, an inappropriate woman, not good, not kind and caring.

That although I appreciate the practical skills my parents passed to me, I do not need
to live entirely by their values. I can give equal value to the world of art, literature,
philosophy. I am still working to find the balance that is right for me.

Journey Two, by Enid

I knew what I had to do
Leave Anthony, leave Africa
Leave the wide-open spaces
Leave the sun and the stars
Leave the windmill, leave the candle-light
Paradoxically, I did this for me
Not for the children, not my parents
For me.

Rhythmically, relentlessly
The train moves on
Flanked by fields of sunflowers
Seen through a mist of anguish.

The airport a blur
The loudspeaker calls –
The telephone, ‘Are you sure? Are you sure?’
Boarding the aeroplane
Taking off. I turn to the children
A sudden calm
I’ve done it!

Mums and Me, by Adrian

When I was little; I was my Mother's and my Father's
Unlike my siblings, who, when small, had not known our Father.
I was much more of him than they. But. Still I remained my Mother's

In my mid-years, I became my Wife's
My children's and the child of greater worlds.
Then She died and I became three mothers,
My Mother, Hilary, and Me.

Feedback from Creativity for Confidence Participants

Adrian:

Found most useful – Working with a group with the critique and supportive insight of others. We may come from separate near-drownings, but we are all in the same life-boat.

The group has reminded me who I am and why I set out on this path in life. The two are symbiotic, but became separated prior to the course.

Thank you for helping me regain my confidence in my creativity. I had lost necessary arrogance... hope I haven't gone too far!

Sarah:

It has re-shown my abilities in sharing things.

Harry:

It has been worthwhile. It has improved my confidence. It has taught me a bit more about social skills.

Enid:

The most useful aspects – Creative writing. Working as a group – more enjoyable than useful.

The confidence to let the writing flow – the process rather than the product!

It has improved my confidence in just being 'creative'.

The stimulus and ideas from the brilliant teacher/facilitators.

S:

Everything has been enjoyable. Basically, the chance to meet and work with people who share this interest has been enriching. A wonderful variety of people and all working on the same themes – and very unlikely I would have met them otherwise. Everyone has been very kind and supportive.

I seem to be a very angry writer! But I think this is not necessarily a bad thing; as it is better to be angry on paper than elsewhere. I also really got the chance to 'go over the top' playing with words – in all sense of going over the top.

I think that seeing the 'infinite variety' of people and writing styles, it has become easier for me to read/share out my work. Yes, it may be dreadful in a lit-crit sense, but that doesn't matter. I see that now. Before, I was 'contaminated' by English Lit courses etc. in the world of Academia. Now I simply enjoy myself.

Melissa:

Most useful - Creative Writing and working as a group – sharing.

Breakthroughs – particularly about letting go of unhappiness.

Confidence – both personal and creative – feel safer in myself.

Claire is a great enabler.

MYCAW Results

Adrian:

Pre-course:

- Concerns –
- 1) Concentration 4 – towards bothers me greatly
 - 2) Fun – 5 towards bothers me greatly

Wellbeing – 3 in the middle between as good and as bad as it could be

- Post-course:
- 1) Concentration 2 – towards not bothering me at all
 - 2) Fun – 2 towards not bothering me at all

Wellbeing – 2 towards as good as it could be

Comments: Bad health has been diagnosed – less worry. Rebuilding works in garden – drastic good changes. Best friend emigrating. Concentration on other people's books reduced. Concentration on my own work increased.

Sarah:

- Concerns –
- 1) Fostering confidence to write – 5 towards bothers me greatly
 - 2) Gaining better experience at reading in groups - 4 towards bothers me greatly

Wellbeing – 5 towards as bad as it could be

- Post-course:
- 1) Fostering confidence to write – 3 in the middle
 - 2) Gaining better experience at reading in groups - 3 in the middle

Wellbeing – 3 in the middle between as good and as bad as it could be

Comments: What has been most important – the stimulus to be creative in a fostering environment that allows people to share their work.

Harry:

- Concerns –
- 1) The main one is ear trouble. I can be quite emotional. This can be mistaken for aggression. Please approach it - 4 towards it bothers me greatly
 - 2) When I write or draw, I do like honest feedback. I find it helpful to be politely confronted – 2 towards not bothering me at all

Wellbeing – 3 in the middle

- Post-course:
- 1) The main one is ear trouble. I can be quite emotional. This can be mistaken for aggression. Please approach it – 1 towards not bothering me at all
 - 2) When I write or draw, I do like honest feedback. I find it helpful to be politely confronted – 1 towards not bothering me at all

Wellbeing – 0 as good as it could be

Comments: Apart from the usual ear trouble; the little bursts of anger, I am fine. My physical disposition gives me pain, but emotionally, I am pretty much okay.

Enid:

Concerns – 1) A lack of confidence in my own creativity – 3 in the middle

Wellbeing – 2 towards as good as it could be

Post-course: 1) A lack of confidence in my own creativity – 2 towards not bothering me at all

Wellbeing – 1 towards as good as it could be

Comments: What has been most important for you - The attitude energy and skill of Claire. The stimulus and ideas to set us off. The atmosphere and group dynamics, brilliantly handled. The interest aroused in writing for myself.

S:

Concerns – 1) Difficult Environment (Deprived high-rise flats) – 6 Bothers me greatly!
2) Isolation - 5 towards bothers me greatly

Wellbeing – 3 in the middle

Post-course: 1) Difficult Environment (Deprived high-rise flats) – 5 Bothers me greatly!
2) Isolation - 3 in the middle

Wellbeing – 2 towards as good as it could be.

Comments: I have become involved in what could be the 'last gasp' attempts to save the remaining green spaces where I live. This is a goal I am working towards with other people. We are friends and I am improving my skills e.g. Writing strong and persuasive reports.

Reflecting on the group – meeting other people outside of my usual environment.

Melissa:

Concerns – 1) Feelings about the past – grief and anger – 5 towards bothers me greatly
2) Future health and depression and lack of energy – 4 towards bothers me greatly

Wellbeing – 2 towards as good as it could be

Post-course: 1) Feelings about the past – grief and anger – 2 towards not bothering me at all
2) Future health and depression and lack of energy – 3 in the middle.

Wellbeing – 1 towards as good as it could be

Comments: Enabling me to write with feeling – be more open in sharing with others – feeling more secure in who I am – no longer worried about producing finished pieces – understanding process. It is as though I have lived in a fog since some point in childhood – now it seems to have lifted – I have a clearer view.

Sara-Jane:

Concerns – 1) Regaining trust in my memory and cognitive abilities, so that I have confidence in my brain, once again (after brain operation) – 6 bothers me greatly.
2) To feel I am my own person and not in the control of medical predicaments/situations – 5 towards bothers me greatly.

Wellbeing – 2 towards as good and as bad as it could be

Post-course: 1) Regaining trust in my memory and cognitive abilities, so that I have confidence in my brain, once again (after brain operation) – 3 in the middle
2) To feel I am my own person and not in the control of medical predicaments/situations – 2 in the middle.

Wellbeing – 1 towards as good and as bad as it could be

Comments: Being given time and space to write (something I find difficult to manage myself), sharing work and ideas with people I didn't know, feeling part of a group and participating, creating pieces that I feel a sense of achievement doing. I have really enjoyed the sessions and would definitely come to more. Thank you!

Personal Reflections

Reflections on the Process:

I was very happy with the structure of the workshops and although I had nominated weekly themes in advance, poems and content were designed around the participants and the direction that the course took.

At some points I had concerns about group dynamics, as some participants were more vocal than others. These could be thought about and addressed as part of the course content, considering how we relate to one another and encouraging deep readings of one another.

I had some 'in passing' feedback from participants during the course that was valuable:

- One participant commented how a few of the poems were written by 'oppressed women' and I was able to reflect on how my own life experiences impact on poems that appeal to me. I was also careful to include poems by male authors.
- One participant commented on my ability to give, but also my need for privacy and this helped me to reflect on my own need for clear boundaries in a group. I made small self-disclosures during the course, but was also mindful of the importance of maintaining the group-leader position.

Set-up:

Lead time for this project was three months and although that sounds generous, a GP surgery is a difficult environment to get things going, especially when doctors and receptionists are so busy.

Efforts towards recruitment involved: Emails to individual doctors, a talk to all reception staff, flyers in the waiting room and on GP's desks.

Recruitment:

By a week before the start of the course, I had spoken to four potential participants. Along, with my main contact Dr Rice at the surgery, we agreed that we would invite participants in the over 60's group that I am already involved in teaching every few weeks. This boosted participant numbers to eleven. Two of the original potential members didn't turn up and one additional member joined in week two, leaving us with a total of eight participants. One participant was unable to come after the first session due to mobility issues and ill-health.

I believe that more personal contact and a creative workshop for GP staff would have been a worthwhile action.

Recommendations for Funding:

In future, a pilot course of this kind would benefit from additional funding for:

- Pilot Workshops with Centre Staff
- More set-up time to enable 1-1 contact with centre staff
- Evaluative Reporting – which took an additional two days

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