The Use of Line Poetry as a Therapeutic Technique in Sexual Assault Survivors Support Groups

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This brief report focuses on the use of line poetry as a therapeutic technique in a support group for survivors of sexual assault. Line poetry, a group activity in which members contribute lines to a collective poem, was found to be helpful in developing a bond among members, validating feelings, and in offering a powerful outlet for self-expression.

KEY WORDS: survivors; sexual assault; support groups; line poetry; therapeutic technique.

For four semesters, I have been facilitating support groups for sexual assault survivors. While the hour and a half of group can be intense, emotional, and emotionally draining, it is also extremely rewarding. I have observed and experienced the essence of surviving, resilience, and inner strength. Each member’s determination to overcome the varying emotions of the assault continually amazes me.

As a facilitator, I try to create a safe place, a container, for the members to pour their emotions and experiences. Periodically, I bring an activity to group, but usually the members choose what to discuss or what to do. Line poetry is one activity that I facilitate each semester because it emphasizes the connection that each member has to another, and because it always creates a response of wonderment. Line poetry is a group activity in which each member of the group contributes lines to a collective poem. The women in group find it to be one of the most meaningful experiences of the support group (For other cooperative group activities, see Kagan, 1989).

Writing to express emotion requires quiet moments of reflection and an effort to make meaning of an intense experience. Many times, the lines that members write convey thoughts that they had not shared or that they never realized before.

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The “powerlessness which many clients bring to the therapeutic environment not only needs situating in their actual histories and circumstances, it also needs to be engaged” (Gersie, 1997, p. 6). Line poetry not only engages the group members, but it validates their experiences through the sharing of thought, emotion, and content. Because members are engaging in a process of expressing their experience, they continue to explore their own complex emotions, and they receive recognition from others that their words are heard and acknowledged. The repetition of similar themes and emotions also facilitates an honest discourse with one another. This repetition lies at the “heart of therapeutic discourse and resoundingly confirms the essence of the social interaction as a search for insight or self-understanding” (Ferrara, 1994, p. 108).

The members who attend group come because they are searching for understanding of self, of the experience, and of how to cope with the trauma. The act of joining the group also indicates each member’s desire to grow and learn; “combined, this may help the person to ward off a sense of overwhelming despair or helplessness, gradually learning how to contain and/or to discharge the painful emotions effectively” (Gersie, 1997, p. 81).

The phenomenon of line poetry is that each person responds to only one line, and surprisingly, the outcome most often makes sense. Each person starts with a blank sheet of paper. I usually give a theme, such as the healing process or being a survivor. Though Wordsworth believed that poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (cited in Stillinger, 1965, p. 448), it does not always have to be spontaneous to be powerful. Many people become blocked when the topic is open, so giving a theme might be helpful in the beginning.

PROCEDURE

Writing Process

After each member receives a sheet of paper, preferably lined, I divide members into groups of three or four. Then I ask each member to write one line about the theme on her own sheet of paper. I usually give about two or three minutes to complete the line.

Reading and Responding

Next, I ask the members to pass the paper counter-clockwise. Each person reads the first line and composes a second line. Once members have responded, I ask them to cover the first line of the poem by folding the paper in a fan-like shape so that only the second line is exposed. Members pass the papers again, and respond to the second line. After writing a third line, they fold over the second line, so only the most recent line is showing, and then pass the paper again. The