A “CREATIVE WRITING FOR RECOVERY” INITIATIVE, GROUNDED IN PEER SUPPORT

Ohio Recovery Conference
Columbus, Ohio
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Speaker: Diana Spore

Accompanied by Individuals in Recovery Who Participate in a “Writing for Recovery” Writing Group, Pathways Peer Support, Ashland

Description of Breakout:

Objectives for this breakout are four-pronged:

1. To address the history and implementation of a “writing for recovery” program, grounded in peer support;
2. To suggest a curriculum or series of writing exercises, designed to reach individuals who demonstrate a wide range of writing skills and interests;
3. To identify approaches to encourage collaboration, cooperation, and cohesiveness among writing group participants;
4. To provide tools and ideas for making creative writing part of individual recovery plans and for using in writing groups that are therapeutic in nature.
Structure of the Breakout Session:

Welcome and Comments on Objectives of Breakout

Benefits of Creative Writing for Recovery

History of “Creative Writing for Recovery” Initiative, Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB)

Issues to Consider When Developing a Writing Group, Grounded in Peer Support

Curriculum, Exercises for Individual Writers and Groups
Specific Exercises to Give Participants a Sense of What is Possible

What Can Be Done to Expand this Type of Initiative?

Questions and Answers
SUMMARY AND KEY POINTS OF BREAKOUT

Diana Spore

Benefits of Creative Writing for Recovery

Research reveals that creative writing is beneficial for recovery and healing, for promoting overall well-being, for reducing stress, and for expressing thoughts and feelings about significant life challenges, trauma, and mental health issues. By engaging in creative writing and sharing creations with others, who are providing peer support, progress in recovery will “happen,” improving quality of life, maximizing resilience, and promoting self-empowerment.

History of Creative Writing for Recovery (CWR) Initiative

- Multi-year initiative commenced with informal conversations in 2014 between Steve Stone, David Ross, and me about submitting a grant proposal under the auspices of the MHRB, emphasizing the use of creative writing as a therapeutic tool for recovery.

- Grant proposal was submitted to the Margaret Clark Morgan Foundation (MCMF) in 2015, funding was awarded for the 2016 calendar year.
  - Grant project kicked off with a half-day recovery-focused seminar, presented by Dr. JoAnn Streeter Shade. Seminar was followed by a series of eight intensive writing clinics, co-facilitated by Dr. Shade and by Dr. Judy McLaughlin.
  - Spin-off to the project, with funding from the MHRB – monthly writing group, starting in October 2016, under the auspices of the MHRB, facilitated by Dr. Shade.
  - Writing group transitioned to being under the auspices of Catholic Charities Services’ Peer Support Program in July 2018, facilitated by me.

  - Multiple spin-offs to the initiative, since funding was awarded from MCMF, were sustained and expanded (e.g., legacy writing initiative).
  - Most recently, under the auspices of the MHRB, an anthology of written works and illustrations by individuals in recovery was published; the anthology is titled TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES (provided to you or accessible for free via provided link).
• Pathways Peer Support “Writing for Recovery” Group – objectives, foci, priorities, design

Issues to Consider When Developing a “Writing for Recovery” Group,
Grounded in Peer Support

• Prioritization of objectives
• Decisions regarding the extent to which and how best to incorporate writing instruction
• Expectations from participants? Ground rules?
• “Closed” versus open structure of a writing group; if the former, when should it be “closed?”
• What should be in place to ensure that writer or listener receives assistance from mental health professional if needed? Allowing participants to have “breathing space.”
• Maximum number of participants for writing group to function well, if there is only one facilitator?
• Writing exercises and assignments in a writing group – need to be flexible and to adapt to circumstances on a moment’s notice; promote cooperation, collaboration, and cohesiveness; forge social connections.

Curriculum, Exercises for Individuals and Groups
A Quick Look at a Few Specific Exercises

Please review the manual entitled:

WRITING FOR RECOVERY – WRITING EXERCISES AND IDEAS:
To Incorporate into Personal Recovery Plans and Use in Writing Groups

• Starting with journaling
• Boosting your creativity
• Stimulating the writing process, focusing on recovery-related themes
Exercises that can be done as a group, promoting social connectedness and peer support

- Round robin stories
- Different forms of poetry (including acrostic poems, AlphaPoems, pantoum poems, sensory poems, haiku and renga poems), writing based on dialogues, creating letters or works that provide support to each other

  EXAMPLE – writing poems with all lines – except for the last one or two lines – being questions. For example, refer to manual, p.67:

  ____________________________________________________________

  WHEN WILL THEY SEE THE REAL ME?

  Why can’t they see beyond my diagnostic label?
  Why will they see that I am more than “Bipolar?”
  How can I send the message that I am me, just like the “normals?”
  Why can’t I fit in and be accepted?
  Where can I go and be treated with respect, understanding, and awareness?
  Will I ever be seen as someone who has been traumatized, not as being “mentally ill?”
  How can I get through that none of this is my fault, and that I am just like “them?”
  When will they see that my “symptoms” are not because of some brain dysfunction?
  I am me, I am loved by God, I am more than just a label, I am me.

  DLS

  ____________________________________________________________

  Writers can reflect on quotes, music, photos, and art work (stimulating ideas) – sharing insights and creating written works of art

  EXAMPLE – reflect on art work on the next page (p. 6, manual - p. 87), created by Liz Krivich, who is a participant of Pathways Peer Support and
BLOSSOM – created by Liz Krivich
the writing group, and was an illustrator of the anthology. Give thought to what it means to you, and write a poem or essay about what you believe to be its underlying message. As part of a writing group session, we used the process of writing words on the board about perspectives, feelings, and insights, gave thought to creating titles of the work. We engaged in a discussion that would set the stage to write solo, as teams, or as an entire group about our reflections. On page 88 of the manual, I have provided my reflections on what Liz’s work meant to me.

- Additional foci and types of exercises – for example, creating your story, gratitude, and advocacy writing – are addressed.

- Resources are listed at the end of the manual (pp. 131-132)

**What Can Be Done to Expand this Type of Initiative????**

- Development of a larger initiative, focusing on all forms of creative expressions that are linked with promotion of recovery, kicked off with a conference followed by a series of programs that provide opportunities to engage in practicum experiences, to create lasting mementoes.

- Development of a “let’s do lunch” educational initiative

- Conference options

- Development of a “model” peer support organization program, bridging writing with other forms of creative expressions

- Creating opportunities for writers to publish, share works, and use the power of the pen

- And so much more!!!!!!
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diana Spore, Ph.D., is an advocate for individuals facing mental health challenges, a writer/editor, and a mental health consumer in recovery. Spore received her Master’s degree in Gerontological Studies from Miami University, and earned a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in aging, from the Pennsylvania State University. She completed postdoctoral training at Brown University. Diana’s areas of expertise include medication optimization, mental health recovery, mental health and aging, long-term care, psychotropic and inappropriate drug use among older adults, and caregiving. She is a former Board member of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB). Spore was Editor-in-Chief of TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES, an anthology that was created under the auspices of the MHRB. She served as Project Lead for a “Wring for Recovery” initiative (MHRB) and engaged in all aspects of the project (including grant writing, design and evaluation of the program), which has resulted in sustained spin-off efforts. Currently, she is a consultant at the MHRB, writing articles for a local newspaper about topics of interest to seniors. Spore is serving as a facilitator of a “writing for recovery” writing group, which is under the auspices of Catholic Charities’ Pathways Peer Support Program. She has expertise in addressing the process and benefits of different forms of writing for recovery, self-empowerment, emotional well-being, and healing. Spore has presented at and co-facilitated workshops on writing for recovery, journaling for caregivers, and legacy writing.