

Paré, D.A.(2013). Writing therapeutic notes to young persons.

Type of Contribution: Handout/Homework

Objective

The tradition of written correspondence between therapist and client I will share here was first introduced by White and Epston (1990), who demonstrated ways of harnessing the written word in defiant opposition to the pathology-focused documentation too common in our field. As physical documents, letters and notes have a number of features that set them apart from spoken words and grant them unique advantages for paying tribute to clients, among other useful intentions. Letters can be touched and felt, carried about, re-visited. They are the product of some degree of labour—which conveys commitment and care on the part of their authors (Moules, 2003). They are crafted creations which maximize the chances of choosing just the right words to serve the purpose at hand.

That purpose may vary widely. Therapeutic notes have been used in a variety of contexts and for a range of reasons. Because of their flexibility of content and form, they can be employed at different stages in the work with clients to suit purposes matching the issues at hand (Freed et. al. , 2010). Letters and notes offer an extension of the face-to-face encounter (Green and Lambert, 2013), a sort of value-added practice that increases the frequency of contact between practitioners and clients/patients (Bailey, Yager, & Jenson, 2002). Majchrzak Rombach (2003) uses letters to keep her clients abreast of her thinking in the course of their work together, and to celebrate their wisdom and expertise. Kindsvatter and colleagues

(2009) have employed personalized notes to re-engage a family member whose participation in therapy sessions is intermittent. Notes and letters can provide summaries of sessions to solidify new learnings or to mark and celebrate positive turns (Gergen, 2006)—what White and Epston (1990) referred to as “thickening” of preferred developments—through word craft. They can serve as a useful closing ritual, a means of commending families at the end of a course of therapeutic work (Moules, 2002; Wright et al., 1996).

Although originally identified with narrative family therapy, written notes can be adapted as a useful addition to therapeutic work associated with a range of theoretical models (Kindsvatter et. al., 2009). Rather than supporting a particular therapeutic intervention, they provide a verbal means of nurturing the therapeutic relationship, which has been repeatedly shown to be critical to helpful outcomes (Lambert, 2004; Wampold, 2010). Rodgers (2009) argues that conventional therapeutic boundaries promote professional “elitism” and letters can be used to promote mutuality and enhance intimacy in the therapeutic relationship.

Moules (2003) reminds us that the physical acts associated with writing a letter, addressing an envelope and posting the correspondence are themselves acts of relationship. The words they contain “will slip off the pages and be breathed into the lives, relationships, hearts, and cells of those who read them.” (p. 48).

A note from a therapist to a young persons simultaneously functions as a handout and homework. Letters are handouts in that they are highly individualised documents tailored to the unique context of the young person’s life and situation. Letters are also homework: they encourage young persons to build on successes,

and invite them to reflect on where they might be headed if these favourable developments continue.

Rationale for Use

In my own practice, the decision to employ therapeutic letters hinges on a range of considerations, a central one being the suitability of what I want to convey in a medium that leaves a permanent record in its wake. Without the back and forth of face-to-face dialogue, a letter does not offer the chance for correcting “misreadings” on the part of the recipient. I therefore favour messages that are clear and unambiguous, and which lean towards an acknowledgment of what is working, rather than an interpretation or analysis of problems. I write notes to acknowledge clients in the face of the challenges they are up against, and to document the brave steps they take in spite of them. In this respect, the written word can serve as a “counter-narrative” (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; White and Epston, 1990) to a deficit-focused view that a person may carry in times of struggle.

My use of letters with young persons is similar in most ways to how I proceed with adults. I may write a note to highlight some welcome development, such as a child’s act of risk-taking in the face of a debilitating fear. Or a letter might document the reaching out for social connection by a youth mired in loneliness and isolation. When caught up in what White and Epston (1990) coined “problem saturated stories”, it is easy for young persons to overlook or downplay these developments. And in the flow of face-to-face dialogue, some words of acknowledgment or questions designed to fortify the turns of event may have fleeting impact. On the strength of the special legitimacy we often grant to the

printed word, a letter instils an event with an “official’ quality and encourages further constructive reflection and dialogue.

With young persons in particular, a written document provides a vehicle for circulating alternate accounts of identities (Batha, 2003).` With client permission, notes documenting welcome developments can be shared with parents, teachers or school administrators. This practice offers a couple of key advantages: 1. It fortifies a preferred account of a young person’s identity by distributing it among a community of witnesses; 2. It prepares recipients of the note to orient to the young person differently—to look for and expect favorable events rather than being braced for a litany of bad news.

Instructions

Because you may want to write a note on the spur of the moment, it’s best to have previously solicited consent to send correspondence to a home address, or via email, if that is your chosen medium. Both vehicles have their pros and cons (Moules, 2009) and both are at risk for breeching confidentiality when, for instance, more than one person may have access to a letter or note. E-mails can’t match the physicality of mailed letters, especially considering the precipitous decline of paper mail, but of course email is instantaneous and efficient.

The packaging of a therapeutic note can vary widely, depending on the audience. Younger children are captivated by presentation. If composed on a computer, a large type size in a casual font style like ‘Comic’ and the insertion of clip art or “wallpaper” backdrops makes the text more appealing. Hand-written notes provide the opportunity to doodle or add drawings to illustrate your points. If the

intention is to commend a child for an accomplishment, flamboyantly formal language (*Let it be hereby declared...*) on a printed certificate can mark a favorable turn of events as a key milestone (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; White & Epston, 1990). The writing should match the reader's developmental level. With younger children, externalizing language provides playful possibilities—descriptions of personified problems being foiled by resourceful children.

In my experience, therapeutic notes can sometimes fall into the category “good idea, no time” in the midst of a busy practice. The remedy for this dilemma is to keep letters short, and to write them relatively quickly. Brevity, in this case, is an asset: it focuses the content, increases the chances the recipient may re-visit the note, and it reduces the potential for problematic ambiguity associated with longer text. As is the case for process notes, it's best to compose a letter shortly after a session, when details of the exchange and particular words and gestures are most vivid. In my experience, this can be done very quickly when adhering to some form of self-imposed structure which reduces the chances of meandering into sidebars, and more importantly, ensures that the message is affirming and productive. The template offered below is not intended to be exclusionary; there are infinite possibilities for exchanges of this sort, and readers are encouraged to tap their own creativity. However, the framework to follow may be helpful in initiating the practice, and provides an example of a structure that supports swift composition.

1. An opening sentence that contextualizes the writing of the note. This could include a reference to previous discussion of notes (*you may remember I mentioned I sometimes send notes along following sessions...*), or a comment

- on what inspired the present communication (*our emotional conversation today moved me to write a few more words...*).
2. Reference to some highly particular development in the young person's life. As mentioned earlier, this could be a favorable turn of events, though one that may have been downplayed or overlooked by the young person or their family. Framing this event in relation to the challenges at hand negates the need for lavishing praise ("cheerleading"), because the description alone speaks to the momentous quality of the development. *I was struck today by how you managed to tell the Impatience Monster to settle down, even though he has that tricky habit of sneaking up on you.* It's important to make this section as concrete and specific as possible, because your reporting of the "facts" constitutes strong support for a counter narrative—that is, an identity description or meaning that offers hopeful alternatives to those that are currently dominating.
 3. Questions for reflection, offered in a tentative tone. This is where a note deliberately invites active engagement by the reader. It's one thing to receive acknowledgment of a preferred development, and another to reflect on that development in order to learn from it and build upon it. *This got me wondering how you managed to do that, despite the fears you described? Were there steps you took to prepare yourself? Did you tell yourself anything to fortify you? Who might have predicted that you would pull this off, and what might they tell me about you that would help explain why they aren't surprised?* In addition to "thickening" the development itself, questions like

these can also be directed towards the future as a way to bridge favorable developments across time. *Where do you imagine you will be a year from now if these initiatives continue?*

4. A closing sentence which anticipates further exploration of the events described. *I look forward to learning more about these and any developments when we meet again at 10 AM on Tuesday. All the best...*

Vignette

A couple I will call Leona and Gordon were worried about their seven-year-old son Tyler's angry outbursts. The outbursts were a problem at school where Tyler was having falling outs with classmates, and were occurring at home as well in the form of arguments or hitting matches between Tyler and his five-year-old sister Morgan. All four family members were present, and we spent some time exploring the various contexts of Tyler's situation, as well as speculating about past events that may have contributed to the current rein of the outbursts. Was Tyler being excluded at school, for instance, or experiencing academic challenges? Had there been any precipitating events that helped to make sense of the outbursts? Nothing plausible came up. I decided it would be helpful to separate Tyler from the problem linguistically by "externalizing" it (Epston & White 1992; Hoffman & Kress, 2008; White & Epston, 1990). Collectively we decided that *Fighting* was a good word for what I have so far been calling the "outbursts", and we began to look at *Fighting's* effects on Tyler, and on the family.

We discovered that the frequency of *Fighting* was leading Leona and Gordon to the conclusion that their parenting was inadequate—a sentiment that was

affecting how they received Tyler's outbursts. In short, these incidents were now laden with a good deal more meaning than might originally have been attached to them. The issue had grown beyond *Fighting's* negative repercussions for Tyler's classmates or his sister. It had become emblematic of what was suspected to be a deeper and darker—though as yet inexplicable—problem on Tyler's behalf. And that problem was being linked to a hypothesis of poor parenting.

As mentioned earlier, I shy away from analysis and interpretation in therapeutic letters because of the risk they may be taken up in unhelpful ways not intended by me. What I did not mention is that in addition, I *generally* try to temper the impulse to spend a great deal of time seeking “explanations” for problems, especially when exceptions to the problem are already ready-at-hand (Paré, 2013). And so my curiosity turned to evidence of Tyler's—indeed, the whole family's—ability to defy this story of deep-rooted problems caused by inadequate parenting. The conversation drifted into accounts of how they had successfully defied *Fighting's* inclination to encourage mutual blame, excessive worry, destructive critique and so on.

This change in tack rendered visible some favorable developments that seemed worthy of documenting. After one of our family sessions, I wrote up a letter to the family in lieu of taking process notes. The letter was intended to foreground a counter-narrative to the problem-saturated account of *Fighting* that was clearly emerging from our talks together. You will notice that because the letter is addressed to all four family members, it gives individual members a chance to not

only to be acknowledged in their own efforts, but also to witness the supportive efforts of others.

Dear Tyler, Morgan, Leona, and Gordon,

I was thinking about our last meeting and I thought I'd send you a note. What struck me was the way all of you seem to really value having peaceful time together as a family. I feel I've shared some of that time with you in our meetings. When we get together, you take turns talking and listening, and everyone gets a chance to say what's on their mind. I notice that in your family, it's okay to say what's bothering you because someone will listen.

The other thing I remember from our last meeting was learning about how Tyler and Morgan kept Fighting out of the way for almost a whole weekend. Remember we talked about whether you guys locked Fighting in the closet, or maybe pushed it out the door? Or maybe you shrank Fighting, so it was so small it got lost behind the bookshelf or under a couch pillow.

Your dad said it was 'exceptional'. Do you remember that big word? 'Exceptional' means 'really amazing'. Did you realise how proud your mom and dad were of you for the way you did that?

Gordon and Leona, what could you tell me about Tyler and Morgan that would help explain how they were able to do that? What special skills do these two have that made them able to push Fighting out the door?

Tyler and Morgan, can you pay attention to how you manage to keep fighting away or shrink it or whatever, and tell me all about it when you come in next time? You might have to take notes.

Where do you all imagine your family is headed as these positive changes continue? I'll be really curious to hear back from you all next time we meet. See you in a while, David

Perhaps because the letter does more than merely commend members, but invites them to reflect on what they've been up to and where it might lead, the family reported they had read it over repeatedly after receiving it. This active engagement around preferred developments helps to consolidate them, while the projection into a hopeful future has the potential to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The brief note provided a shared reference point for recent successes on behalf of Tyler, his sister, and his parents. In its wake, Fighting gradually diminished, and Leona and Gordon rediscovered faith in their abilities as parents.

Suggestions for Follow-Up

Letters are useful bridges between sessions. Subsequent to sending one, a face-to-face meeting may open with an inquiry about the letter and a further “unpacking” of reflections on its content. *What stood out? Did anything miss the mark? What further thoughts do you have?* The experience of receiving the letter may also be a primer for clients who’d like to experiment with letters themselves. Letters of acknowledgment among family members itemizing admired qualities or gratitude for support can reinforce mutual good will in ways sometimes difficult to

achieve through to face-to-face dialogue. Among other possibilities: 1. A letter from a young person to the problem, “breaking off the relationship” 2. A “letter from the future” (Paré, 2013), written by a young person at a hypothetical time when things are going well, to their present self, detailing the steps taken and choices made in the course of moving past current challenges.

Contraindications

Because letters are read in their composer’s absence, it’s important to consider the possibility of misreadings. For this reason, problem-focused texts are a higher risk for the possibility they will fortify or compound problems rather than relieve them. The language level should match the recipients’ abilities and letters are not advised for clients with reading challenges. Care should be taken to consider the risk of breeches in confidentiality—for instance with clients who prefer not to disclose to their families or housemates that they are meeting with a therapist. In these cases, an addressed envelope, or a note sent to a shared email address, could be enough to provoke a conflict.

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Recommended Readings for Clients

Resources for Materials