

Paré, D.A. and Majchrzak Rombach, M.A. (in press) Therapeutic letters to young persons. In C.F. Sori and L. Hecker (Eds.) The Therapists' Notebook for Children and Adolescents. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.

A therapeutic letter to a child or adolescent, written by their therapist(s), is a specialised narrative tool that simultaneously functions as a handout and homework. Letters are handouts in the sense that the child or adolescent brings home a highly individualised document that affirms her/his knowledges, resources and breakthroughs (“unique outcomes”). Letters are also homework: they encourage young persons to try out more of what is working, and invite them to reflect on where they might be headed if these favourable developments continue. Typically, we compose therapeutic letters with a tentative tone to avoid making expert pronouncements which might devalue the ideas and experiences of those who consult us. We will say more about this important aspect of therapeutic letter writing below.

OBJECTIVE:

Therapeutic letters are intended to extend the work of therapy beyond the consulting room door by continuing the meaning-making that occurred in a therapeutic conversation. Suppose for instance, we have focused in a session on drawing out the resources of a young client, and co-discovered actions they have already performed to take charge of their life. A therapeutic letter written as a follow-up to the session might echo and amplify these victories, however small, by re-counting them on paper. The letter might encourage further actions, or it might simply highlight the changes and invite clients to make meaning of them in their lives. In addition, the letter might provide the chance for family members or other significant persons in the client’s life (a teacher or principle, for example) to bear witness to the positive developments. One way to depict the objective behind therapeutic letters, then, is to see them as tools for “thickening” preferred stories in the lives of clients.

RATIONALE FOR USE:

Therapeutic letter writing is associated with narrative and social constructionist therapy practices. Among the key ideas which inform us in these practices are the following:

- We all inhabit a world of meanings constructed through language in a social context
- These meanings tend to be organised into narratives that give coherence to our lives and identities
- Persons who consult us can be understood to be under the influence of dominant “problem-saturated” (White and Epston, 1990) narratives that obscure more helpful meanings in their lives
- Therapy can be understood as inviting forward and developing experiences and meanings currently obscured by problems.

Following on these ideas, therapeutic letters provide a powerful means of committing preferred stories to paper and rendering them more concrete or ‘real’ by drawing on the special legitimacy we often grant to the printed word. They also provide a vehicle for circulating what might be called ‘counter-narratives’. As more favourable accounts are witnessed and reflected back by a range of people important to persons, those preferred meanings take on more substance, and occupy greater space in their lives. A therapeutic letter is a tangible, written contribution to the reclamation of a young person’s identity.

INSTRUCTIONS

David Epston and Michael White (Epston, 1989a, 1989b, 1991; Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1990) may be credited with first experimenting with therapeutic letters. In the last decade they have taken a number of informal polls with clients to whom they have sent letters, and are typically told the letters are as helpful as anywhere between about three and ten therapy sessions. Therapeutic letters are now used in a variety of ways which incorporate the various styles and knowledges of therapists around the world.

I've (MAMR) developed one way of doing therapeutic letters from which my young clients seem to consistently benefit. More than anything else, the letters tend to thickly describe their knowledges and resources, because I often find problems have a way of blinding persons to their own knowledges and strengths, and because children in particular may underestimate themselves in the company of adults. But there are a wide variety of helpful ways to employ therapeutic letters, and one should not feel locked in by a set template. Each therapeutic situation is different, and therapists should feel free to be creative in responding to the uniqueness of their clients.

I frequently begin a therapeutic letter by thanking the young person for being courageous enough to share his/her story with me, a virtual stranger in their lives. I underline the wisdom of reaching out, and/or trusting a parent's wisdom, when one feels stuck. I then quickly remind the reader that these are merely some wonderings: that if my ideas don't fit for them, then I apologise in advance and invite them to make all the changes necessary to get the story straight. Of course, all this is done in the language appropriate to the developmental age of the client. As well, I take great care to use the words, metaphors, ideas of the child/adolescent in order to maximise a sense of fit with their ways of making meaning.

Having granted the client editorial power over the letter, I reflect on all the resources, strengths, and knowledges that I witnessed in the previous session(s). I draw up a giant list of assets which the young person may never have considered themselves to have. This can be very empowering. I find it especially empowering to notice those things the child or adolescent appears *already* to know—easily overlooked in a world where young people are frequently marginalized or discounted. Knowing what one knows, and *that* one knows, is a powerful starting point a powerful starting point for making better life decisions.

From here, the letters usually turn to speculation about where the young person might take the knowledges and assets identified. I wonder aloud what would happen if they chose a certain direction over another, pulling from information gathered in the session(s). What would be the effects of certain directions over others? On one's self? On one's parents? On one's siblings? On one's teachers, etc. I also ask identity questions: what impact, positive or negative, would that direction have on their sense of identity? I

invite the young person to consider their values in relation to certain possible actions. What kind of person do they want to be? What kind of a reputation do they want? I often close these letters by inviting the child or adolescent to keep me up to date on their important progress. This can be framed in playful language that matches their own, such as saying I'd love to hear of "any further home runs you've hit out of the park", or "all the lessons you learned from those muscle building mistakes".

Composing therapeutic letters is an efficient way of extending the work done in a session while also capturing details of the session for records. The difference, of course, is that the notes become a public document which highlights possibilities, rather than adhering to the field's time-honoured tradition of filing away a deficit-laden inventory in anticipation of some possible future practice review.

Letters to young persons provide a vehicle for playful meaning-making. If you compose them on a computer, you can select a large type size in a casual font style like 'Comic'. You might consider using the 'wallpaper' feature increasingly common with current software. Or you might insert clip-art. Hand-written letters provide the opportunity to doodle or add drawings to illustrate your points.

Therapeutic letter writing is the outgrowth of some determinedly non-pathologizing thinking. An air of optimism and excitement reflects the separation of person from problem. It should be clear that the therapist is on the 'client's side' against difficulties that may have been making a mess of their lives. It should also be clear that it is the young person who ultimately know best what is useful and meaningful to him or her. Therapeutic letters are offered not as pronouncements of professional truth, but as tentative reflections from a supportive observer who happens to have the advantage of not being under the blinding influence of the problem(s) at hand.

BRIEF VIGNETTE

The family I (DP) will call the "Grishams" came to see me when mom and dad (Leona and Gordon) were concerned about their seven-year-old son's anger. Tyler was having falling outs with other children at school, and was frequently getting into arguments or hitting matches with his five-year-old sister Morgan. After spending some time talking about and reflecting on Tyler's behaviour in various contexts, we did not

arrive at some *other* problem, some issue beyond these incidents such as academic frustration of social rejection, that appeared more deserving of attention. And so we decided that “Fighting” was a good word for the problem, and we began to look at Fighting’s effects on Tyler, and on the family. This separation of persons from problems is sometimes known as ‘externalisation’, and is a central feature of the work of White and Epston (1990). This separation of persons from problems is sometimes known as ‘externalisation’, and constitutes a central feature of narrative therapy. It rests on the assumption that *persons* are never the problem; the *problem* is the problem. When problems are externalised, they can be rendered more concretely, or personified (e.g. the “Temper Monster”)—a helpful and playful way of speaking with young persons about the difficulties they are facing.

It seemed apparent that Fighting had persuaded Leona and Gordon they must be doing something wrong as parents. This idea in turn seemed to be reflected back to Tyler, so that his outbursts were now laden with a good deal more meaning than he might originally have attached to them. They were viewed not merely for their negative impact on Tyler’s sister and classmates, but as evidence of some darker, deep-rooted problem likely derived from poor parenting practices.

Like every view of a clinical situation, this depiction of the Grishams’ situation is influenced by a body of ideas and practices. In this case, narrative ideas encouraged me to put some space between Tyler’s family and the pathologizing story of the outbursts as the ingrained evidence of poor parenting. I became curious about not only Tyler’s, but the whole family’s ability to defy this story by making meaning and acting in alternative ways.

After one of our conversations, I wrote up a letter to the family in lieu of taking process notes. The letter was designed to thicken an alternative story about the family that was beginning to emerge from our talks together. Because it is directed at the whole family, the letter promotes shared meaning making: Leona and Gordon get to witness their children’s progress, and the children are reminded of their parents’ support.

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.

You 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

As is often the case with therapeutic letters, the family reporter that they had read and re-read the letter after receiving it. Therapeutic letters make an emerging story tangible, and provide a shared reference point for successes—in this case, both Tyler's and his families, as Fighting became a less frequent visitor, and Leona and Gordon rediscovered faith in their abilities as parents.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FOLLOW UP

Therapeutic letters provide a bridge between sessions and a means to anchor new stories that promote personal agency. We sometimes begin a session by checking with a young persons and/or family about their response to a letter sent out following the previous meeting. *What stood out for them in the letter? What rang less true? Were there any further ideas that emerged from reflecting on the letter? Have they noticed ways in which the positive developments reported in the letter have continued in the*

ensuing days? We sometimes invite clients to respond to a letter by writing one of their own: to the problem, for instance, to update it on the resurrection of abilities and knowledges temporarily obscured by the problem's influence; or to other significant persons in the client's life, reporting on the favourable developments.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

Confidentiality is always a potential issue when we mail envelopes out with return addresses on them. As with any direct correspondence with clients, we check first to confirm that it's okay to send letters to a home address.

No therapeutic practices are inherently risk free; however, because narrative and social constructionist practice build largely on preferred developments, we find they offer relatively safe clinical possibilities. Nevertheless, therapeutic letter-writers should be mindful that their enthusiasm for noticing successes over certain identified problems does not divert attention from other, serious but unnamed difficulties (for instance, learning difficulties at school in Tyler's case). Thoughtful narrative practice attends closely to the obstacles life scatters in our way; therapeutic letters should acknowledge the scope of the very real challenges faced by young persons in a world largely controlled by adults.

We also find it's important that a letter to a child or family feels like the outgrowth of our collaboration with someone who consults us—the product of a team effort. If we jump to naming a problem unilaterally, without drawing on family metaphors and the young person's language, our letters may be received more as an imposed story than a summary of some shared developments. In writing therapeutic letters, we try to lead from behind.

READINGS AND RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONALS

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