

Perspective

Poetry and Mental Health

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Poetry like other forms of literature or art can enrich our lives. It can be used to find new meaning in our daily lives. The Australian poet Les Murray described poetry as “a zoo in which you keep your demons and angels” and Mich Imlan, the poetry editor of the Times Literary Supplement, said it is “a way of talking about things that frighten you [1] “. Poetry is not an antidepressant or antipsychotic or anxiolytic medication or cognitive behavioural therapy, but it can play a role in the therapeutic journey of a patient.

My interest in poetry is only recent. I learnt through poetry one can re-imagine the things we usually experience on daily basis. I found poetry to be an excellent medium to express our feelings and can feel cathartic. With poetry, one starts to see and interpret things differently. Through poetry, our use of five senses heightens when we read words that have an emotive content. Eventually, I started writing poems which I have continued to do since.

I found writing poetry a solacing, stimulating and creative exercise. It gave me a medium to express my views and emotions in a way that is nonjudgmental. I have been able to express my views, beliefs and emotions that would not have been possible through ordinary conversations. It has helped me to make sense of my thoughts, feelings, emotions, values and gave a new meaning to my life. Through poetry, one can express both personal and universal truths [2]. Writing poems has slowly given me a sense of accomplishment as well, as I have been able to share my poetry with others. I was eventually able to publish the first collection of my poems. “Gushing Fountain: A Collection of Poems”. Most importantly I was able to write about things that would have been otherwise impossible. Australian poet Peter Porter suggests. “Writing a poem is crucially about making something”. Word poetry is derived from the Greek verb Poiesis, which means to make [3]. That very approach gives a sense of accomplishment after writing a poem.

Writing poetry must be a natural process for people who are thoughtful and perceptive and who are observant of their inner and outer world. Poetry can help people to distract from their inner turmoil but for some, it may bring them closer to their inner self and help in self-reflection. Depending on the theme of the poem, poetry can be a stimulating as well as an emotive and or a comfortable experience.

People write poetry for personal, romantic, altruistic, educational and inspirational reasons. Poetry can be a means of philosophical

exploration. An examination of words, verses, metaphors in a poem can help us to understand the psychological landscape of the poet. It is a reflection of their emotional landscape, sensitivity, and insight. Even though poetry can be about a traumatic experience, it can provide an outlet to feelings surrounding the incident. While writing poetry one uses a lot of cognitive skills. It also involves the use of both conscious and subconscious parts of our mind. It can unlock different aspects of our self.

Encouraged by the first-hand experience of benefits of reading and writing poetry, I along with other colleagues, patients, and ex-patients in my organization, started a creative art project called “*Bird on a Wire*”. This project brought people together in a new and exhilarating way, cutting across the educational background and hierarchies at work and encouraging people to open up to each other. I found myself working on this project with a social worker, patients, ex-patients, careers, as well as people from financial and human resources departments.

As part of this project, we invited poems and artwork from our patients and staff members. Out of many submissions, we selected the best work for our upcoming book titled “*Bird on a Wire*” (In Press). Both patients and staff have been enthusiastic about contributing their pieces. Through a generous donation by a family of a patient, our book launch is scheduled for August 2016.

As a psychiatrist who reads and writes poetry and after my involvement in our creative project, I believe poetry like other forms of art can be used in mental health services with a benefit of expressing our views, emotions, experiences, thoughts and beliefs. Fiona Sampson [4] suggests poetry can be a way of

1. A celebration of individual voice, character and identity
2. A record of memory or experience
3. An opportunity to communicate
4. A chance to develop skills, thoughts and feelings

Depending upon nature and severity of the mental illness, ego strength, side effects of medication and vulnerability of our patients, poetry can be beneficial as a form of activity, occupying time in creative work, enhancing social inclusion, gaining a sense of accomplishment as well as creating new synapses in our brains. In group settings, poetry can promote mutual learning as well as sympathy, compassion, diversity and tolerance [2]. *Beyond Bedlam*, an anthology by Ken Smith and Mathew Sweeney reminds us, people have written out of their experiences of illness, distress, care or institutionalisation [4,5].

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