

A Pilot Study of WRITE ON!, a Program of Mental Health Connecticut

BACKGROUND and PURPOSE

Mental Health Connecticut has been hosting a nine-week writing workshop, Write On!, for aspiring writers ages 18 to 29 years who are diagnosed with mental health conditions and/or a substance use disorder, or who have experienced trauma. Young people are specifically targeted as this is often the life stage that people first experience symptoms of a mental health condition. Young adulthood is a significant transition that can be stressful in and of itself. With the onset of a mental health condition, or experience of a traumatic event, there is added confusion, ongoing stress, and trauma. It requires readjustment in day-to-day functioning, and forces a young person to grapple with who they are and what the mental health condition means for their life.

By using writing as a means for healing and developing self-awareness, the aim is to reduce internalized stigma, prevent a cascade of negative events, and ultimately improve chances for long-term well-being and recovery. In addition, with support and training from a team at SeaTea Improv Hartford Theater, participants share their experiences at a public forum. The intent is twofold: build skill and confidence

in sharing their story, and increase community awareness of mental health conditions as well as potentially reduce discriminatory practices and interactions.

Anecdotal data collected by the program in 2016 and 2017 indicated that participants found the workshop to be ‘therapeutic,’ ‘important,’ and ‘empowering;’ preliminary data suggested they were able to better manage their emotions, were more willing to seek support and receive feedback when they needed it, and overall were more confident and comfortable with themselves. Further, an alumni group meets periodically to continue receiving therapeutic support and feedback on their writing. In this paper, we report on results from a pilot study of the program, a first step in building evidence of effectiveness.

The purpose of the pilot study was to explore the effectiveness of the Write On program in:

1. *Reducing the stigma typically associated with mental health conditions*
2. *Improving participants’ overall mental health*
3. *Raising mental health awareness in the community among the general public*

WRITE ON! DESCRIPTION AND COMPONENTS

- Nine-week workshop for young adults ages 18 to 29 years who are living with, or have experienced, a mental health condition and are in recovery.
- Uses writing and public speaking as a mechanism for increasing self-awareness, healing, and supporting recovery.
- Facilitated by a former journalist, a publisher and high school English teacher with lived experience.
- Meet weekly during which time participants work on a story based on their own experiences.
- Typical class sessions incorporate: writing exercises; use of media (articles, video, testimonials); and group discussions on different approaches/strategies for writing about personal experience and story telling.
- Homework assignments and review in class. For example, ‘write at least a little something every day.’
- Individual guidance from the facilitator, and feedback from other participants on their writing ‘piece’.
- Training from SeaTea Improv specialists on how to tell their story (piece) on stage (final weeks).
- Present/perform story in front of friends, family and other community members at SeaTea Improv Theater.

Within the medical profession, psychiatry typically treats mental health conditions similar to physical diseases (Frank et al., 1991; Jacob, 2015; Taylor & Floyd, 2004). Problems with emotional and psychological functioning are understood to have a physiological basis. Diseases of the brain are diagnosed and treated with medicine (Taylor & Floyd, 2004). The focus is on eliminating or reducing symptoms. Inherent in this model is that the 'patient' has limited ability or insight to understand their condition/circumstances and has only to passively accept the 'authority' of the professional (Taylor & Floyd, 2004). For the significant portion of people with a mental health condition who have persistent symptoms, there is often little expectation beyond mere survival (Frank et al., 1991; Jacob, 2015). Opposition to and re-examination of the medical model has led to a new approach in recent decades, referred to as the recovery model (Jacob & Patel, 2014; Turner, 2004).

Recovering from a mental health condition is seen as a journey with ups and downs, progress and setbacks.

The concept of recovery shifts treatment to a much more holistic view that focuses on all of the person rather than just symptom resolution. A key principle is that while a person with a mental health condition has unique challenges, like everyone else, they can lead a meaningful life. The goals of treatment are to provide support for developing resilience (i.e., managing emotional distress), and fostering abilities, interests and aspirations for moving forward (Boney & Stickley, 2008; Davidson, 2005; Ramon et al., 2007). Even if unable to fully control symptoms, individuals can still stay in control of their life when given meaningful support. Recovery from a mental health condition is seen as a journey with ups and downs, progress and setbacks. It calls for hope, commitment, and inclusion (Lyon, 2019; MHA; NAMI).

The biggest barriers to the recovery process are people's expectations and attitudes. Although the recovery model as described is increasingly applied in the mental health field, many health settings continue to impose limitations on people living with mental health conditions, rather than empowering them. Moreover, people with mental health conditions are often a target of public stigma including negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Corrigan & Kleinlein, 2005; Switaj et al., 2017). As a result of experiencing and/or perceiving negative reactions and biases, many individuals living with mental health conditions internalize these views.

Interventions targeting self-stigmatizing beliefs can potentially break the chain of negative events. The Write On! Workshop, hosted by Mental Health Connecticut, is one such intervention.

Self-stigma among people with mental health conditions is characterized by negative feelings and ongoing struggles with identity, belonging and competence (Livingston & Boyd, 2010). Not surprisingly, those who have high internalized stigma tend to have lower self-esteem, are more depressed and have higher symptom severity. For an individual living with a mental health condition, self-stigma can become the more significant stressor (Boyd et al., 2014). Beyond symptoms associated with a given psychiatric condition, self-stigma makes it difficult to adjust to the changes and feel hopeful enough to take needed steps for improving their situation (Antonovsky, 1987). In other words, self-stigma undermines the recovery process. Interventions targeting self-stigmatizing beliefs can potentially break the chain of negative events (Barry et al., 2017; Borrás et al., 2009; Mittal et al., 2012). Write On!, hosted by Mental Health Connecticut, is one such intervention.

STUDY METHODS and MEASURES

The evaluation of Write On! was conducted from April through September 2019. At the start of the workshop, we described the purpose of the study and invited attendees to participate. *All attendees consented/volunteered to participate in the evaluation which involved completing surveys, one-to-one phone interviews and attending a focus group. Attendees at the community forum (the audience) were asked to complete a survey and a feedback questionnaire on the event.* See description of surveys and the participant interview protocol in side bars, and data collection time points in the below table.

MEASURE	DATA COLLECTION TIME POINTS
Self-Report Surveys	Pre and post participation and at 3 months following end of workshop
Interviews and Focus Group	One-to-one phone interviews mid-way through workshop; focus group at post participation; 3 month phone interviews following workshop
Audience Survey & Questionnaire	Prior to the start and at the end of the community forum /storytelling at SeaTea Improv

While the self-report surveys are on constructs relevant to the study, interview data offer an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and perspectives on how the Write On! workshop effects change (Shakouri, 2014). Demographic data (age, sex, mental health diagnosis, medications, therapy services) were also collected for descriptive purposes.

Reduction of self-stigma and improvement in mental health were assessed with 1) quantitative data (i.e., self-report surveys on self-stigma, recovery, empowerment, emotion regulation, and coping skills) and 2) qualitative data (see interview protocol on workshop process and effects). Raising mental health awareness among the audience was assessed with a survey measure on discrimination/devaluation beliefs about people with mental health/illness (see side bar), and an audience questionnaire asking about the impact of the forum on their understanding of mental illness, and what was most interesting/useful to them.

SELF-REPORT SURVEYS

Self-Stigma: The internalized stigma of mental illness (ISMI) (Ritsher et al., 2003) measures feelings of alienation, discrimination, and being stereotyped, social withdrawal, and stigma resistance.

Recovery Stage: The Recovery Assessment Scale – Domains and Stages (RAS-DS) (Hancock et al., 2015) measures perception of living a good and positive life even in the presence of symptoms: 'Seek help,' 'Look forward,' 'Mastering illness,' 'Connecting/Belonging'

Empowerment: The Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al., 1997) measures personal empowerment, i.e., self-efficacy-self-esteem, power-powerlessness, community activism, righteous anger, and optimism-control.

Emotion Regulation: The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scales (DERS) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) assess multiple aspects of emotion regulation/dysregulation.

Coping Skills: Items on the Cope Inventory (Carver et al., 1989) measure use of instrumental social support, and emotional social support.

Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination—General Public: The Devaluation-Discrimination Scale (DDS) (Link et al., 1987) measures the extent to which people (i.e., the general public) believe that individuals with mental illness or who have received psychiatric treatment are discriminated against or devalued.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Can you walk me through your experience with the Write On program thus far?

2. How is information presented?

3. Can you describe a typical session?

4. What are your views of the instructor and her/his understanding of the program?

5. Can you describe your role in the program and its importance?

6. How does participation promote positive change?

7. What do you feel are the most important aspects of the program?

8. How will you apply the skills and concepts from the program in your personal life or recovery?

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

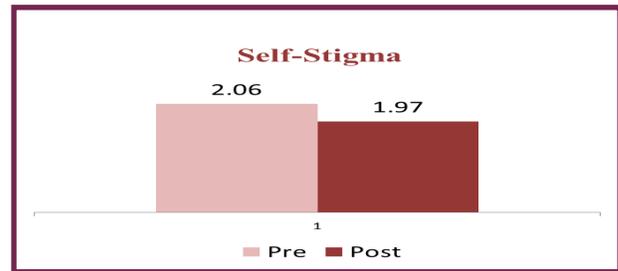
Program and Participant Demographic Data: At the start of the evaluation there were ten participants (N =10); however two participants dropped out of the program and one was excluded from the quantitative analyses due to incomplete surveys.

- The average age of the participants was 24 years.
- Five of the participants self-identified as female, four as male, and one as Two Spirit.
- All but two of the participants were taking psychotropic medication.
- All of the participants were seeing a therapist.

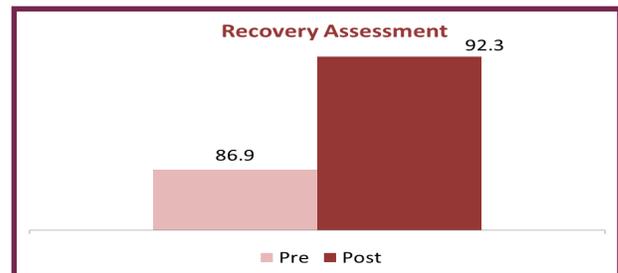
Self-Report Surveys:

Due to low response rate at the third time point (n=4), analysis of survey data was conducted from pre to post participation only. On average, self-reported ratings indicated that participants experienced a decline in self-stigma (improved self-acceptance) and in particular, a positive shift in their recovery (increased meaning and purpose in their life). However, there was very little change in self-reported ratings on sense of empowerment; moreover, there was a decline in self-reported ratings on ability to regulate emotions and coping skills (see charts).

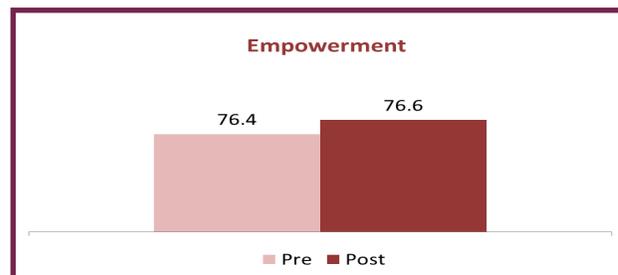
There are several explanations for mixed survey results: The goal of the Write On! is explicitly focused on decreasing self-stigma, breaking the associated chain of negative events (i.e., more self-acceptance and hope) and improving public perception of people living with mental illnesses. Emotion regulation and coping skills are abilities that develop over time, and require more intentional intervention. Lastly, given the small sample size, average rating scores on emotion regulation and coping skills are highly influenced by individual variability (i.e., stages of recovery). Whereas the Recovery Assessment Scale (examines perception of living a positive life even in the presence of mental illness symptoms) is specifically designed to distinguish differences in recovery stages, and measure change over time for individuals who are less or more recovered at baseline.



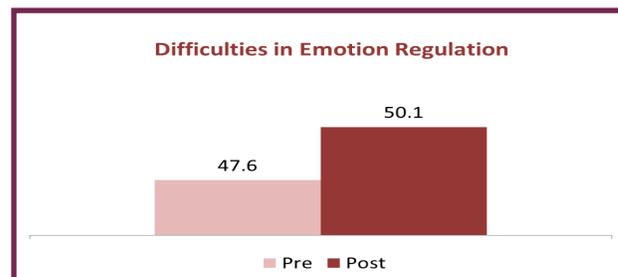
Higher scores indicate more internalized stigma.



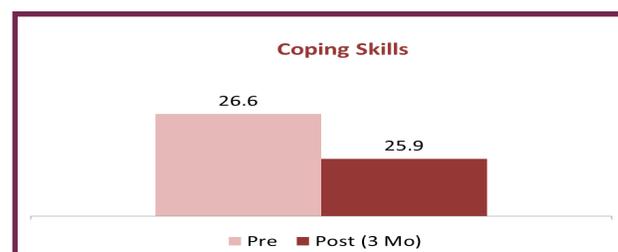
Higher scores indicate more hope and self-determination.



Higher scores indicate more sense of empowerment.



Lower scores indicate better management of emotions.



Higher scores indicate better coping skills.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS (Continued)

Interview and Focus Group Data: Interview data were transcribed electronically. We examined the qualitative data for emerging patterns or themes relevant to intended outcomes (i.e., reduce self-stigma and improve mental health, and raise mental health awareness). The data were organized by common themes. All findings had a collective voice, either moderate or strong. The journey that many of the participants have gone through, for better or worse, were implicitly and explicitly discussed throughout discussions. The table on the following page (p. 6) identifies the major themes that emerged and the patterns of change participants described as a result of participating in Write On!. We used excerpts from interviews to illustrate.

Participants discussed how the program created an atmosphere of social support and inclusion in which they were able to gain new understandings, confidence in writing and speaking about living with a mental illness (majority for the first time), and increased sense of personal control overall (e.g., “owning” their story). Relatedly, they discussed experiencing a change in self-stigma (no longer feeling shame), feeling increased hope (implicit and explicit), and having the interest and the strength to advocate for themselves, and fight the stigma surrounding mental illness (see table on p. 7).

For the majority of the participants, public speaking on their personal experiences was the first time they “came out” about living with a mental health condition. The table on page 7 pairs the magnitude of this experience for the storytellers (discussed in interviews and in the focus group) with the effects it had on the audience (i.e., written feedback in response to ‘What aspects did you find the most interesting or useful?’). As the excerpts illustrate, it was momentous for the young people to share their story, and importantly, they felt heard. Moreover, members of the audience were profoundly moved by the storytellers’ ‘honesty’ and ‘bravery.’ Audience use of language/constructs common to recovery (e.g., ‘each person’s journey’) indicate increased awareness of mental health illness.

Analysis of Audience Survey Data: Over 60% of attendees at SeaTea Improv reported that the event affected the way they think about mental illness ‘a lot’ and that they ‘learned a lot’ (i.e., something new); 33% reported that the event affected the way they think about mental illness ‘a little’ and that they ‘learned a little’ (something new). See tables below and also qualitative feedback on page 7. Additionally, audience average ratings on their perceptions of people living with mental health conditions were already positive pre performance; nonetheless, ratings post performance indicated there was an increased positive shift in views (below chart).

Did the event affect the way you think about mental illness?

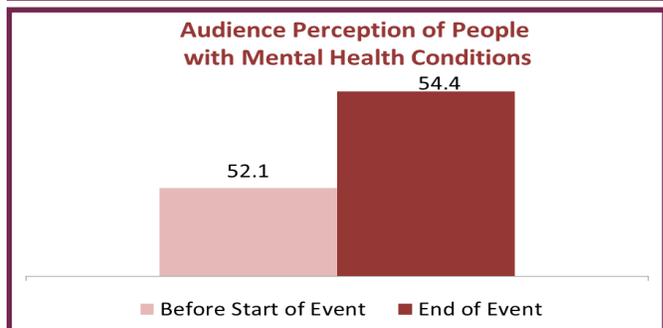
Response	#	%
No, not at all	1	5.6
A little	6	33.3
A lot	11	61.1
TOTAL	18	100

Did you learn something new today?

Response	#	%
No, nothing	1	5.6
I learned a little	6	33.3
I learned a lot	11	61.1
TOTAL	18	100

What is your overall assessment of the event?

Response	#	%
Somewhat excellent	1	5.6
Excellent	17	94.4
TOTAL	18	100



Higher scores indicate improved perception.

From Self-Stigma and Shame (Pre)

To Empowerment and Hope (Post)

Confusion

"I've been struggling since I was a child. You don't have a story to tell until you go through hell for a few years...For me, it was coming of age in the mental health industry. I transitioned through this stage [young adulthood] with a mental illness. I had so many challenges, wondering, 'What am I doing?'"

Self-Understanding

"Writing about people's different mental health stories can be very challenging and very hard but getting positive feedback on your story has a lot of power behind it...[by] writing it and sharing it, I think of things differently now, and just saying it out loud helps bring it to light, and also helps bring it closure."

Social Isolation

"When people get a label it detaches you from everyone."

"Sometimes I felt 'I'm the only one going through this.'"

Peer Support

"You recognize that you are not alone, and although everyone's story is different, in a way there are many common feelings along the way-feelings that someone else might have experienced even though your stories might be completely different."

Shame

"Writing a personal narrative for the first time: It made me think I had more to put out there than I thought I did; I used to think 'my life is just a sad story, no one wants to hear it.'"

Empowerment

"It got me past trying to fight stigma alone and just write... It's built more confidence for me, especially for someone interested in writing, I wasn't interested in personal narrative but now I find it more interesting. They say you should write what you know; [participating in program has] given me confidence to include more of myself in my writing; also, in a personal sense, it helped me step back and think of things more clearly, and put it on paper and named it. As a result of this new confidence, it has kind of elevated my whole mood, feeling confident, feeling good about sharing something, and about my work."

No Narrative

"I was kind of unsure about my piece having as much weight to it as other people's."

Has a Narrative

"I feel the confidence that I will gain more control of things as I continue writing...When I do find time, I try to write down as much as I can...I find my voice."

Stuck

"Struggling with mental health you don't always think about your future, you kind of felt like you'll be stuck where you are, you won't ever come out."

Hope

"I think it [participating in Write On] has made more comfortable, more open about fact that I have a mental illness. I am a lot less reticent to share that I have a mental illness than I was in the past. It's a little bit freeing, I can just go off and talk about it, that's been the biggest impact in the long run... It's important because you can more easily talk to people rather than bottle up what you are feeling, which can be harmful, more freely share if I am feeling anxious."

Uninspired

"I spent a year and a half after my last psychotic episode...I was over medicated and I was sort of in a Zombie state and I lost a lot of my creative juices."

Inspired, Pursuit of Goals

"Usually every time I leave a class, I definitely feel some kind of form of inspiration, different stories of other people. I get in tuned with my own creative sense, it is like an outlet, I look at writing as a form of therapy...the workshop has been the boost I needed to get me out of the rut I was in."

Self-Stigma

"...But I did write something once and my group liked it. They liked how I wrote it and the flow of it...It's difficult to write about things that happened to me or are happening to me. Sometimes I don't remember them because I try to push away all the bad memories...Now I'm ready to let the truth fly..."

Finding Voice

"Participating in the program helped me be more transparent with people – about my mental illness and how it affects me... I am more transparent with potential friends and friends...I was a little apprehensive at first because what if they were just like, 'yeah, let's not be with this person'...but I told them anyways [about living with a mental illness]. I was a little tense because it could go either way, but it turned out positive...Now I'm just a bit more social if you could put it that way...[Write On] was the first time that I really shared some of the parts [of my story/life] that I held closer to my chest. Participating in Write On gave me the confidence to share [personal stories] with people that I didn't even know until that day."

Participants' experience sharing their story at a public forum	What the audience found to be the most interesting or useful aspects of the event
<p><i>"I never articulated my story to my parents in that way, so it was a good thing to be able to present it for the first time while they were in the room... I kind of wanted to own it. That was important."</i></p> <p><i>"I did not share anything of what I was writing [for event] to my parents at all... They knew pretty much everything, but not everything so much."</i></p> <p><i>"I really want to help expand the view of mental illness: borderline, bipolar, schizophrenia...and inspire others in that cause..."</i></p> <p><i>"I want to get rid of that one-sided story: People see those with mental illness as dangerous and scary, but they're just ordinary people."</i></p> <p><i>"I had to put myself out there, it made me feel powerful. When I started reading and got into my story, it felt right."</i></p> <p><i>"It was one voice at a time; No chatter or side discussions, really respectful. It helped that it was an intimate setting. We can hear the cheering and applauding. It wasn't a vanity thing, it was more 'I'm heard. They empathize with me.'"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That recovery is a process and the goal is to live with it vs. "cure" it. • Even though I feel that I'm empathetic/sympathetic and somewhat knowledgeable about mental illness, I did learn more about people's struggles. • Genuine writings, the honesty and courage of the speakers. • The young adult perspective. • The elegance with which each writer shared, and imparted their LIVES with mental illness. Their voices and personal sharing resonates to the humanness in all of us. • When speakers were emotional and vulnerable. And speaking about taboo or difficult subjects. • I love how creative and different everyone's pieces were. I really enjoyed hearing each person's journey. • I love hearing people's personal stories and journeys! Bravo! • The bravery and courage of the participants sharing their stories. • The courage of the participants was amazing. Their honesty will help educate others. • The openness of the presenters to speak publicly. BRAVERY!!! • The safe space it provided people to share their stories.

DIGGING DEEPER: UNDERSTANDING HOW WRITE ON! CREATES CHANGE

<p>Virtually all participants gave very similar description and details on how the program operated, and identified similar themes on aspects of the program that created positive change. The fact that participants described the same process in separate interviews suggests that the model is intentional and well delivered. In the below paragraphs we describe the program components and processes for creating change in the words of the participants (i.e., interview data). Interview data also show that participants had a high capacity to reflect on their internal thought processes and experiences.</p>	<p>cool way to represent that we have all these worries but possibly they do not exist anymore."</p> <p>Once everyone symbolically rid themselves of their worries, attention turned to writing. There were homework assignments given each week. Participants took turns sharing something they wrote (i.e., assignment from prior week) and alternatively critiquing others' work. "We give each other positive feedback and things to improve on. We talk about why we wrote about what we wrote." During group feedback, individuals would also receive one-to-one guidance from the instructor (in another room) on the piece they planned to share at the public event.</p>
<p align="center">Program Components</p> <p>Each session began with an exercise designed to let go of any worries: "Class usually started by having us fill out an index card - things that we want to let go. She [instructor] puts them in a box and has promised to burn them in a bonfire at the end of the program...I think it is a</p>	<p>Following the "mix of one-to-one and group feedback," the instructor would present a writing prompt, or exercise (e.g., 'write about a person, thing, or quality that you care about'), that would "expand our horizons for what to write about when we don't have anything to write about." "Sometimes she gives us examples from someone</p>

else and we get a feel for different writing styles.” Writing prompts and stories shared through Ted Talks and by prior Write On! participants (shared by instructor) would “get you thinking about different kinds of things to write about, [including] different analogies for mental illness.”

In the final weeks, writing focuses on completing personal stories, and participants received coaching from SeaTea Improv specialists on public storytelling.

Below are five themes that emerged from interviews on how the program facilitates change.

1. An Intimate, Safe and Respectful Environment

Program participants emphasized two structural components of the program important for “creating intimacy”: the size of the group (e.g., 5-10 participants) and that everyone was at the same developmental or life stage (i.e., young adulthood). Additionally, the program ritual of putting aside worries at the beginning of each session was categorically liked by all and appeared to be effective in its intent: “We were ensured that it was private and no one will see it...frees you to write whatever you want on it. There were some days that I was bothered by something at work, not feeling great about myself, some negative inner thinking, and I was able to ‘put it away.’”

In one way or another, the group critique was new for everyone. For some it was the first time they shared or learned from others’ writing, for many it was the first time they shared or learned from others’ personal stories, and for some it was both. Remarkably, everyone experienced the peer feedback as supportive. “[The instructor] set it up so we lead with the positive;” “[The instructor] gave us some guidelines...be a friendly critique instead of a harsh critique...We aren’t judged, we are critiqued.” “We are all learning and we are all learning together so we are peers.”

“What I’ve taken away the most is the realization that anything you write is good enough. It gave me a sense of contentment.”

“The first time I wrote a personal piece, I was hesitant to share it with the group but the group let me know that if you can’t do it, that’s fine. I wound up sharing it and I felt so much better after that. The fact that there wasn’t pressure...it was my decision...I think it is why I felt better once I shared it.” Another participant discussed in their interview “It’s therapeutic in itself just putting thoughts on paper, so I appreciate initial reactions for whatever it is...”

“People are usually grateful to have any feedback. It gives you confidence...a sense of security that you can write, a sense of acceptance about being who you are.”

2. Getting to the Writing

Participants described how the program format, group critique, and one-to-one guidance helped to “break down the elements” of writing, promoted discipline in writing, and improved the practice, skill, and “power” of their writing:

“She gave us thought provoking questions, understanding that sometimes you don’t have things to write and sometimes you do...” “We made weekly commitments...to write three minutes every day, or three times a week, or just a few words everyday.”

“Someone who read something that I had written told me that it would be interesting to see where that would go if I kept right on writing...I’ve been thinking about it.”

“What I’ve learned about my writing from class?...I find myself wanting to write poetry rather than anything else.”

“I usually write about my day, what I did, and what I felt about it. Instead, I thought about a topic and started from there; once I shared it with the group, I found I was digging deeper and found more meaning behind it.”

“I came up with a completely new piece after talking to [instructor], I started from scratch. I’m still glad I wrote the original piece and someday might use it and be comfortable sharing it with others...In the first piece I was telling a specific story about a specific time in my life – In this newer story it is more like an analogue about living with a mental illness and what it’s like...more general.”

“I had ninety first drafts. I couldn’t finish it. I broke down in trying to write it, it was a bit too painful...I had to get away from it; In the end I went with ‘he’ instead of ‘me’ or ‘I.’ It was still personal but also distant [enough] from myself.”

“I learned that I was using a passive voice versus a strong one. By replacing the word ‘you’ with ‘I’ I gain more power. For my piece I had a second sentence with ‘but’ – The [instructor] suggested that I get rid of the ‘but’ and it will have stronger impact. To me it means that it gets the point across more directly and firmly, there is more power behind it. ‘This ‘happened,’ not ‘kind of’ – It’s power. I applied it to other areas of my life: I say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, rather than responding in a quiet, passive voice.”

“[Instructor] shared ted talk videos, and we discussed power posing, how to feel it in our body language, feel in control, boost our confidence. The first half we did a lot more writing in class, but now towards the end, our writing is very individualized – narrowing down about what we are writing. We do it in a google document and she edits, then we talk one-to-one about our piece, focusing and narrowing down on our final project.”

“It’s like you’re going to write it down and that’s going to be the way. Because that’s going to allow you to analyze and reflect and edit how you feel. And really get to the bottom of it in a way where you’re the one who’s doing it.”

DIGGING DEEPER (CONTINUED)

3. Reflecting On and Sharing What's Happened

“The most important aspect of the program was the acceptance of the topics we are writing about.” “What makes this program different from other programs is that there is someone [instructor] who understands where we are coming from, and the people there also understand where each are coming from and don't judge.” “I have been wanting to share my story and [participating in Write On!] has given me the opportunity to start, to overcome some of the internalized guilt, and build confidence and acceptance.” “[Write On!] has helped me to let out and let go of some bits and pieces of me that have been kept hidden...I journal just to get things out but then I hide it. This [Write On!] is writing and sharing it. I think of things differently now. It kind of blossomed into a cool way of thinking about things and writing about things for me.”

4. Unique But Not Alone

One participant reflected, “There were pieces of betrayal that you hear from everyone's writing.” Similarly, another participant shared, “Although everyone's story is different, there are many common feelings along the way.” And yet another person stated, “I feel like we all have experiences with mental illness but we all come at it from a different place. It helped me to open up to what other people were going through...It's a writing group but it's also therapeutic. I see what others are struggling with and it puts my own issues into perspective...I'm not alone.” One participant summed it up with: *“Why be apprehensive when you have your own community?”*

5. Goal-oriented: “Ending the Silence”

Participants had high praise for the coaching they received at SeaTea Improv: “nonjudgmental,” “very caring,” “really good critics.” “Hearing everyone's presentation, delivering it, and getting through it brought it altogether” For some participants, telling their story at a public event was what inspired their writing. “We were not just writing about it for ourselves but for the audience.” “It's about the larger picture, stopping the stigma, the hush-hush behind mental illness.” “I went through this, this is my reality; this is personal.” “It takes away some of the shame. I am changing the world.” “I can do this. I can end the silence.” “If I'm honest, it should work.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

By using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate the impact of Write On!, findings from this pilot study suggest that Write On! effectively uses writing and storytelling to 1) reduce self-stigma and empower participants (i.e., increased self-acceptance and confidence); 2) improve mental health by facilitating the recovery process (i.e., increased self-exploration, sense of connection, skill development, purpose, and hope); and 3) raise mental health awareness in the community among the general public (e.g., “[*Personal storytelling was*] extremely moving, inspiring and informative on a deep level.”)

Language and constructs central to the recovery model were a major theme in interviews and feedback from the audience. Critical to the recovery process was having a safe environment and connection with others that made it possible for participants to explore self-stigma beliefs, write and talk about what they experienced, and gain new perspectives for moving forward. Public storytelling as the end goal gave the young adults an even larger perspective and purpose, and turned out to be a key driver in both focusing and inspiring their self-reflection and writing.

“I think Write On! would ‘turn the dial’ regardless of where you are in the journey...For anyone struggling with mental illness, it is a good starting point, if you are already open, it's a good way to continue.”

The expectations and process of Write On! are different from that of therapy or psychiatric treatment, which tend to be a private experience focused on symptom reduction. However, Write On! is a highly complementary approach to other treatment with its emphasis on addressing self-stigma and promoting interests, skills and advocacy for moving forward. Lastly, as one participant highlighted, Write On! “is not for everyone.” Participants had the interest and capacity for self-reflection, writing, and storytelling.

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