

**“THE SELF ON THE PAGE”: THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF WRITING**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article comprises a review of writing as therapy, a therapy practised by the client her- or himself as a means of achieving equilibrium on a psychological level - the self on the page<sup>1</sup>. In this sense it focuses on the therapeutic value of autobiographical writing - which is inherently a communication act. It underscores a substantial body of research which validates the notion that individuals can bring about physical and psychological change by writing about traumatic experiences. Writing in this manner vents the emotions associated with trauma, enables the individual to gain distance and insight, and could - ultimately - lead to the integration of such experiences and emotions. Therefore, it should be understood that writing in this way is a form of “self-help” therapy. However, some measure of support is advised for the individual wishing to practise writing as a form of personal therapy. In its treatment of the therapeutic value of writing, this article spans two broad themes: first, it posits a rationale for the therapeutic value of writing, and secondly, it explores the application of writing as therapy. In this process, a number of related aspects are reviewed, namely the therapeutic benefits, as well as the constraints related to this form of writing. On a more practical level, specific techniques and exercises are discussed briefly.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is on the therapeutic value of personal or autobiographical writing. In the main, it relates to the substantial body of work validating the therapeutic benefit of writing (cf. Pennebaker and others [Pennebaker 1991]). Hunt and Sampson (1998b: 10) get to the heart of the matter when referring to a steadily growing interest in “the practice of autobiography and creative writing as a means of gaining insight into oneself, of coping with difficult emotional or psychological problems, or as a way of dealing with difficult life experiences such as emotional traumas, illnesses, ageing, and death”.

Therefore, based on the premise that the practice of autobiographical writing is of and in itself therapeutic, writing of this nature may be described as “narrative self-therapy” (Jordaan 2007: 1) or “writing *as* therapy”, a therapy practised by the individual as a means of achieving psychic equilibrium (Roodt 2006: 123). However, it should be borne in mind that this type of writing, or writing therapy, “is not yet a stand-alone therapy like art therapy, music therapy or drama therapy” (Bolton, Field & Thompson 2006: 28). Writing in this context spans the disciplines of communication and psychology: Writing the self on the page constitutes intrapersonal communication (Steinberg 2007: 140), while the therapeutic value of writing embraces principles of psychology, albeit from a “self-help” perspective. Intrapersonal communication is understood to be one of the contexts of communication and, as human beings, we are engaged in intrapersonal communication on an ongoing basis, i.e. “communication within the self to the self” (Steinberg 2007: 140). (The concept of “the self” differs when compared from the perspectives of communication and psychology, although this is not the place to explicate this distinction; however, it is necessary to be cognisant of this.)

When the concept of writing for therapeutic benefit is situated within the framework of intrapersonal communication, one should take note of the elements in intrapersonal processing: decoding, integration, memory, schemata or perceptual sets, and decoding (Steinberg 2007: 148-149). It is the author’s opinion that writing in this sense dovetails with decoding, which may be viewed as the final organising part of the internal communication process (Steinberg 2007: 149). It is here, at this stage of the process, that meaningful, personal communication is produced. It is here, and on paper, that we make sense of, and ascribe personal meaning to the mental activity which combines “the pictures in our mind and the words in our head” (Steinberg 2007: 149). It should be understood that the use of writing as a technique in the context of psychotherapy — writing *in* therapy — is a subject all its own. This, then, is the juncture at which to single out the matter of the psychotherapeutic relationship. Such a relationship acts as a space within which the written material is explored and, more importantly, within which the individual is contained psychologically — compare the concept *temenos* from a Jungian perspective (Sharp 1991: 133). The reader should be aware of this crucial distinction; moreover, the individual embarking on the road of writing *as* therapy is advised to seek out some measure of support — cf. Bradshaw (1990: 151) who suggests enlisting a support person for this form of “self-help” therapy.

This discussion is an encapsulation of what is entailed in writing for personal development. Following a brief description, it focuses on two broad themes and a number of related aspects: First, it posits a rationale for the therapeutic value of writing, and secondly, it explores the application of writing as therapy.

From the discussion that follows, it will become clear that writing in this manner “is not only for the gifted, the educated, or the highly literate person” (Leavitt & Pill 1995: 137), although it does require a certain proclivity towards writing (Hunt 2000: 14; Wenz & McWhirter 1990: 40). Viewed from this perspective, this article argues that “writing as therapy” is a powerful form of personal therapy of a highly individualised nature. An important point emerges from this discussion, based on Largo-Marsh and Spates’s (2002: 581) belief that there is good reason to suggest that “writing for therapeutic benefit” might serve as a treatment in its own right when properly structured. This begs the question of how such a treatment should be structured and what it should comprise; a question which lies beyond the scope of this article. Secondly, the notion of writing as therapy could conceivably be extrapolated so as to include its practice on a group level (as evidenced by Wenz & McWhirter 1990: 40), thereby benefiting communities and society as a whole.

#### **WRITING AS THERAPY: A RATIONALE**

To understand the use of writing in the context of this article, it should be viewed in terms of Allport’s (1951: xvii) description of “personal documents” and conceptualised as autobiographically based — in the sense in which Hunt (2000: 12) uses the term. The emphasis is on writing as a process — of self-discovery, for instance — rather than on the product or outcome of writing, although the value of such outcomes is not discounted in any way.

It should be noted that a number of concepts are used interchangeably throughout this discussion: writing as therapy, writing for personal development, and autobiographical writing. Constructs such as writing therapy (Writing Therapy™ 2005) and writetherapy (Henderson 2005) provide important clues as to the manner in which writing as therapy is conceived of in commercial terms.

#### **The therapeutic benefits of writing**

The strongest case made for the therapeutic benefit of writing is the research conducted by Pennebaker and his colleagues and students over a 20 year period beginning in the late 1970s (Pennebaker 1991: 66). This is an important body of research regarding the therapeutic value of writing, and any discussion of this subject has to be cognisant of these views and findings. However, owing to the span of their work, it is impossible to do full justice to their treatment of the subject. Therefore, the main thrust of their work is summarised<sup>3</sup>.

During the course of his research, Pennebaker developed what is described as the “most thoroughly researched writing strategy” (Largo-Marsh & Spates 2002). Pennebaker (1991) describes the writing strategy employed in the research as follows: Student

volunteers were requested to keep journals (in notebooks), writing 15 minutes a day over four days. They were to write about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics. Additionally, those who wrote about traumas would either: (1) merely vent their emotions, (2) write down facts only or (3) combine both by writing about facts and emotions simultaneously.

Pennebaker (1990) initially developed an inhibition / confrontation approach or an inhibition model based on the following premises: Inhibition, or actively holding back or inhibiting thoughts and feelings can be hard work; in time, this effort gradually undermines the body's defences (Pennebaker 1990: 13), while excessive inhibition involves the risk of both major and minor diseases (Pennebaker 1990: 14). However, it was found that significant short and long term health benefits are derived from confronting innermost thoughts and feelings — whether by talking or writing (Pennebaker 1990: 14). More specifically, writing or talking leads to “profound” physical and psychological changes (Pennebaker 1990: 100).

The work of Pennebaker and his colleagues eventually questioned the “viability” of the initial inhibition model and, on reflecting on the issue of what accounts for the “powerful” effects of writing, the broader field of cognitive change was gradually entered into (Pennebaker & Francis 1996: 603). Bootzin (1997), for instance, provides a very succinct description of these two lines of research.

In the course of studying the Pennebaker material, research along similar lines materialised, either in an effort to replicate their findings or as an expansion of these; for example: Jamner, Schwartz and Leigh (1988); Greenberg and Stone (1992); Smyth (1998), who comes to the conclusion that written expression may “fill a very important niche”; Lepore (1997); and Largo-Marsh and Spates (2002: 581), who believe there is good reason to suggest that “writing for therapeutic benefit” might serve as a treatment in its own right when properly structured.

The value of the substantial body of work referred to lies in the fact that it provides evidence of the salutary effect of writing about emotional experiences (see similar findings by Hunt 2000; Hunt & Sampson 1998a). However, as Murray and Segal (1994: 403) indicate, there has — unfortunately — been essentially no research on the effectiveness of writing therapy “outside of the Pennebaker tradition”. A number of authors have pointed out specific benefits in relation to writing. Some of the main points can be summarised as follows:

- It has cathartic value to the extent that Milici (in Allport 1951: 42) uses the term “graphocatharsis”. Painful memories and emotions are expressed, thus leading to new insight and understanding (Jordan 2001: 68); see also Allan and Bertoia (2003: 3) in this regard.
- It becomes possible to articulate issues and to achieve distance and objectivity; also, repeated consideration is made possible through written material (Ryle 1983: 365).

- It fulfils the need for completion and the search for meaning (Pennebaker 1990: 100-106); it is a form of self-expression and relates to a basic human need (Pennebaker 1990: 110-112); one of its values lies in helping to “integrate and organise” our lives by, amongst other things, clearing the mind and resolving traumas that stand in the way of important (developmental) tasks (Pennebaker 1990: 198).
- In addition to enhancing the expression of feelings, it also develops cognitive skills such as balanced thinking (L’Abate 1992: 19).
- The written word is more enduring, less fleeting, and a more permanent reminder of painful thoughts and feelings (Leavitt & Pill 1995: 146).
- In view of the fact that writing allows for a “flow or stream of consciousness”, the opening or unfolding of images, ideas, and thoughts is often demonstrated (Allan & Bertioia 2003: 17).
- Through the process of writing, time for reflection on our “inner world” is created, with the opportunity to “work through or transform” difficult emotions and painful thoughts (Allan & Bertioia 2003: 18).

However, one has to consider the potentially negative effects of writing, as the following section of the discussion illustrates.

#### **Possible problems and constraints in the use of writing as therapy**

The overriding problem in using writing is pointed out by Hunt (2000: 14) when she states that her findings and conclusions regarding writing as a therapeutic tool “are not going to apply so readily to people who do not have such skills or the environment in which to develop them”. In other words, the use of writing in this manner will have a limited, rather than a universal, application. The reason for this will become clear in the discussion that follows. On the other hand, it should also be understood that writing is not the exclusive domain of the intellectually gifted or literary talented; a point made in the introduction (cf. Leavitt & Pill 1995: 137).

Stuart (1998: 149) points out that writing is “a process of social interaction”. The implication is that, in writing, we imagine our reader and we write *to* someone. Although this creates the possibility for writing, according to Stuart (1998: 149), it also constrains the writer. The constraint lies specifically in how the writer imagines his audience or in how audiences will “see” him, and this shapes the “presentations” of the self.

There are reasons for why, and also situations in which, the use of writing could present problems. For instance: “Writing apprehension” and “writing anxiety” (Allen and Grundy respectively in Wenz & McWhirter 1990: 37) are phenomena which are believed to affect many people in modern American culture (Wenz & McWhirter 1990: 37). Oaklander (1988: 95) expresses it as follows: “I think children are often reluctant

to write because the schools put primary emphasis on spelling, form, sentence structure, and even penmanship, thus stifling and choking off the child's creative flow." Although this author makes the point with regard to children, her observation is directly related to the origin of problems experienced by many adults in expressing themselves, or their creative thoughts, on paper.

A very strong argument in this case relates to the upsurge in a negative mood following a session of written expression; this point relates to the research findings of Murray, Lamnin and Carver (1989), Pennebaker (1991), Donnelly and Murray (1991), and Murray and Segal (1994). In the latter study, it is pointed out that this could limit the "practical use" of the written method (Murray & Segal (1994: 404). In fact, Pizarro (2004: 6) believes this "unintended side effect" of writing therapy is sufficiently serious because it may, ultimately, defeat the object of the therapeutic exercise. These points relate directly to the matter of a therapeutic relationship made in the introduction to this article. On the other hand, it should be noted that Pennebaker's (1991: 91) follow-up research — four months after the original experiment — found that the volunteers' moods had improved: "Writing about their deepest thoughts had started a process that resulted in a lighter mood and more positive outlook." This finding was substantiated by reports from the student health centre which reported that these students had visited the health service for treatment "much less" than the control group(s).

The question at this point, therefore, is the question of how the individual goes about this form of self therapy. The next main section of the discussion will address this matter.

### **WRITING AS THERAPY: APPLICATION**

A very important point regarding writing in this context is the one made by Wenz and McWhirter (1990: 40), namely, that a "mindset" for writing is useful — meaning that there should be some proclivity towards writing (these authors discuss the creative writing experience within a group context, and the principles are relevant to this discussion). Inevitably, in writing as therapy *some* ability is implied.

Equally important is the question of separating the two parts of the writing process (Elbow in Hunt 2000: 20): the creating and the editing. The idea that writing is facilitated if the writer is able to achieve this separation, is attributed to Elbow (in Hunt 2000: 20), who believes that writing is a developing process: A free flow of words should be encouraged as a right-brain activity, whereafter these can be "shaped" by applying the critical or left-brain faculty. This distinction serves the purpose of letting go of conscious control (Hunt 2000: 20) which normally attends left-brain thinking.

L'Abate and Platzman (1991: 103) and L'Abate (1992: 47-50) refer to the importance of Phillips and Wiener's work and paraphrase their guidelines for the use of therapeutic writing, for example:

- Writing should be done at set times and for a set period of time. (It must be pointed out that a certain degree of experimentation, certainly during the initial

stage of writing, is useful until such time as the individual determines what works best for him/her [Haarhoff 1998: 34]).

- Focusing on a specific topic is useful.
- They also emphasise that writing should take place freely, without pause to consider grammar or other language considerations — cf. Elbow (in Hunt 2000: 20).

Pennebaker (1990: 49-51) answers some of the questions commonly asked about the writing methods. In view of the fact that the author has come across very little material of this nature and, given his extensive research on the writing methods, this information is considered extremely relevant:

- What should the writing topic be?
  - The author suggests focusing on everyday issues, not necessarily the “most traumatic” experience of one’s life.
  - He believes it is critical to describe not only the experience itself, but particularly the emotions surrounding the issue.
  - He suggests writing continuously without being overly concerned about grammar, spelling or sentence construction. (The emphasis here is on “*overly concerned*”.)
- When and where should one write?
  - One should write whenever the need arises — it need not necessarily be that frequently. [This contradicts L’Abate and Platzman’s (1991:103) previous guideline. The answer probably lies in a degree of individual experimentation, as pointed out by Haarhoff (1998: 34).]
  - Where one writes depends on circumstances, but a unique setting has an influence on writing.
  - Writing should ideally take place in a setting where there is no interruption or troubling sounds, sights, or smells. (The emphasis here is on “*troubling sounds, sights, or smells*”. Sensory stimulation (in the form of essential oils, for example) on the other hand, may enhance the writing experience.)
- What should one do with what one has written?
  - He suggests anonymity in the sense that one should keep what one has written to oneself or even destroy it when finished. Here one should compare Jordaan’s (2007: 1) incisive discussion of the advent of the online diary (blog), a public writing and discussion space where individuals elect to note their life experiences and most private thoughts on the Internet in

diary format. This forum for the writing experience stands in stark contrast to Pennebaker's (1990) view and highlights the 17 year difference between the Pennebaker and the more contemporary experience. However, this difference cannot be explained only by the time difference, and it may be surmised that the more introverted individual would prefer the Pennebaker option, while the blog route is for the more extroverted.

- He believes that, from a health perspective, one should act as one's own audience and not rationalise or justify oneself in terms of the perspective of another.
- What should one do if one hates to write — is there a substitute?
  - The author suggests talking into a tape recorder as a substitute — continuously, for fifteen minutes a day.
  - Irrespective of which method is used, it is important to relax and practise, bearing in mind that no one is evaluating one or one's work.
- What can one expect to feel during and after writing?
  - He cautions that the writer may feel “sad or depressed” immediately after writing (this was confirmed in all the Pennebaker studies; see, for instance, Pennebaker 1990). However, these feelings usually dissipate within approximately an hour, or may last for a day or two at most, in some cases. On the upside, feelings of relief, happiness, and even contentment are experienced soon after the conclusion of the writing process.
  - He believes that writing should provide both distance and perspective which will accompany the improved understanding of feelings and emotions produced by the writing exercise.

Haarhoff (1998: 34) points out that it is important for the individual making use of the writing technique to ascertain what mood she has to be in, in order to write — angry, excited, or at peace, for instance. In other words, one should be aware of which particular mood facilitates writing.

Further to the setting and mood which facilitate writing, there are a number of specific techniques to be used in writing for personal development.

### **Specific techniques utilised in writing**

The actual techniques employed in therapeutic writing in therapy are manifold and, once again, full justice cannot be done to these in the limited space of this article.

Of these techniques, that of poetry appears to be the most developed one — for instance, the Association for Poetry Therapy was established as long ago as 1969, while there is a “biblio-poetry therapy” model in existence which was established in the United States in the 1930s (Field 2006: 97). Another technique which has been intensively developed is that of journals: Dr Ira Progoff, in particular, is well-known for



his efforts in this regard and has developed the Intensive Journal® programme (Progoff 2005). Another important exponent is Kathleen Adams who, in 1985, founded The Center for Journal Therapy (Adams 2005).

A bird's eye view of the field points to the following as being available to the interested individual, bearing in mind that this is not an exhaustive review for reasons mentioned formerly:

- **Poetry:** According to Sampson and Hunt (1998: 207) the “most fruitful model for a writing therapy” is provided by poetry therapy. However, it should be understood that poetry is one of the genres (Haarhoff 1998: 163-176) within the larger field of writing for both creative and therapeutic purposes. There is a long tradition of using poems as a means of generating therapeutic writing (Field 2006: 97). For this reason, poetry therapy appears to be most often practised in writing groups and in a workshop format (cf. Bolton, Field & Thompson 2006). Other than this group or workshop format, the writing of poetry itself has a curative benefit. Oaklander (1988: 97) makes the point that rhyming poetry is not the most useful for “free-flowing expression”; therefore, it should be pointed out that poetry need not necessarily rhyme in order to be regarded as such.
- **Journals:** Journal writing focuses on the writer's internal experiences, reactions, and perceptions and differs from traditional diary writing where daily events and happenings are recorded from an exterior point of view (Adams 2005) (see also journal writing from a psychological perspective by Halberg 1987). Sampson and Hunt (1998: 206) refer to “a detailed method of therapeutic diary writing” advanced by Ira Progoff. Progoff renders the journal process in book form which involves documenting one's life from different perspectives; the contents page, for instance, includes entries such as a “Life History Log” and “Intersections” (Haarhoff 1998: 31). This author identifies with the Allan and Bertoia (2003) approach to journals: theirs is a Jungian approach, and consequently emphasises dreamwork. The authors refer to their technique as picture and writing journals and suggest a booklet of approximately 184 x 228mm, recommending that the top half of the page is blank and the bottom half lined which would enable the addition of drawings to words and sentences. In this approach, journals are referred to as “experience journals” and so-called time-tabling logs (i.e. “Today I did this and then that ...”) (Allan & Bertoia 2003: 50) are not permitted. The goal of these experience journals is to enhance perceptiveness about the environment and to facilitate reflective thought. One variation on the journal theme is a dream journal where the dream is not only recorded, but where some aspect of it is illustrated (hence the suggested format for the journal) (Allan & Bertoia 2003: 59). The dream journal is regarded as an important tool in view of the fact that the self-healing ability of the individual emerges at night — “when the control of the ego and ego defenses weaken during sleep and the dream process becomes activated” (Allan & Bertoia 2003:190).

- Letters: Letters are used as a vehicle to offer interpretations, hypotheses, empowerment and messages about self-esteem or as a form of strategising; in short, therapeutic letters may take many different forms and may also incorporate different goals (Wojcik & Iverson 1989). Furthermore, according to these authors, letter writing can be incorporated into a variety of theoretical models. Schaefer (1988: 392) provides information best suited to this dissertation: Writing letters or even notes can be very therapeutic as a method for expressing feelings. They are particularly useful in the sense that they are not as direct or as confrontational as a face-to-face exchange. Moreover, by expressing themselves in a letter, individuals are able to clarify what they want to say and how to say it. Finally, letters may be mailed while others may simply be written for their therapeutic value.
- Self-descriptions: This comprises a description of the self by writing about positive and negative characteristics (Van der Merwe 1996: 121).
- Stories and autobiographies: Not much information on the utilisation of the story-writing technique as such could be found. However, there are references to story-telling mainly and, to a lesser extent in certain sources, story-writing. In addition, at least one of the exercises listed in the following section results in stories. In the main, these two techniques refer to the way in which an individual can write incidents or aspects of her life as “stories”, the purpose of which is integration. Two important aspects in this regard are: First, the fact that personal memory is “unreliable”; secondly, stories, and particularly life stories, change over time as the individual’s perspective changes. Although it may be understood that the autobiography is written mainly by older persons as part of their developmental tasks at that age, this technique may be put to good use at any age.

The following section will explore some of the writing exercises which may be employed.

### **Exercises utilised in writing**

It is self-evidently impossible to provide examples of all the different writing exercises employed by the individual, mainly because these are open to the individual’s imagination, creativity, and innovative skills — to unlimited effect. The following, which are summarised in Appendix 1, are examples of how writing as therapy may be focused:

- The first exercise singled out, is that of “freewriting”, which is an exercise in *how* to write. With reference to the earlier point regarding a release of conscious control, Elbow (in Hunt 2000: 21) suggests the following exercise in two parts: The first comprises two or three writing periods of approximately five minutes. During each of these periods, the writer will write continuously — for the first, there is no given starting point; the writer simply starts writing whatever is in her head. In this period, no attempt is made to edit in any way and, should the writer

become stuck, the previous word or phrase will be repeated until the flow commences again. Once the five minutes are up, the next stage comprises a reading of the text, and an underlining of anything seemingly interesting or significant as a basis for the next stage of the exercise. During the second stage, the selected word, phrase, or image is written at the top of a new sheet of paper, and another five minutes of freewriting commences, using the heading as the trigger and with the emphasis on keeping the flow going; this stage can be repeated several times. Having completed the first part, the writer proceeds to the second part which comprises the editing stage for which at least 20 minutes is allowed. Corrections are done at this point and shape is given to what has emerged from the freewriting exercise. As an alternative, it is suggested that the second stage is postponed for at least a week, so as to create distance from the material (Brandt in Hunt 2000: 23). Hunt (2000: 91) recommends this exercise as a means of suspending the “critical faculty” so as to evade the control of defence mechanisms.

- Hunt (1998: 21-27) describes the exercise “writing with the voice of the child” which provides insight into the inner life by accessing early memories. This exercise is facilitated by the use of old photographs of the individual, her parents, and early environment. The individual is requested to “enter” the photograph and experience it in sensory terms, before writing down words and phrases associated with the memory. Thus, this forms the basis of a more connected piece of writing in either prose or poetry format.
- Bradshaw (1990: 149-151) recommends writing the myth or fairy tale about one’s childhood (Bradshaw 1990: 149-151). He suggests focusing on an event or events during the school years for instance, or on an event that strongly affected the individual. The story should have two parts: the first commencing with “once upon a time”, describing the events chosen by the individual and how they created the spiritual wound. Part two should begin with “and when she/he grew up”, focusing on the later life-damaging effects of this wound. Bradshaw (1990: 151) believes that the resulting story enables the individual to get in touch with feelings about issues, while it also enables the individual to see the connection between the neglect of unmet developmental dependency needs and consequent life history. Bradshaw (1990: 149) points out that myths and fairy tales circumvent the rational, thinking brain.
- Moskowitz (1998: 35-45) employs an exercise referred to as “the self as source” to enhance personal development through self-exploration, investigation, and understanding. The author utilises the exercise, for example, by locating an area of conflict or polarity within the individual’s personality — such as the “good” girl and the “bad” girl. These two aspects of the personality are described as two different characters, named and ultimately integrated by creating a story.

- Hunt (2000: 33-35) describes “creating a life map”, which is useful not only in identifying topics and themes arising from one’s own experience, but in “objectifying the self”. In this exercise, a horizontal line is drawn across an A4 sheet to indicate the lifespan from year zero to the present. The task is to divide this line up into time segments, denoting significant change in the individual’s life. For each segment, the following are to be identified and written underneath the line: significant places; significant events; and significant people. A word or phrase to characterise one’s relationship with the outside world during that period is to be added. Having completed this part, the next task is to distance oneself from the personal material and to identify topics and themes of a more general nature which characterise the different time segments; these are to be written above the line. Having completed the life map, certain of the topics or themes can be singled out and used as a trigger to write a story (about an aspect of one’s life — author’s addition).
- Hunt (2000: 29-31) uses dialogue on paper as a means of “taking us back into the present of the experience and re-experiencing it from the inside”. Individuals are asked to write a short piece, using mainly dialogue, under the title “The Misunderstanding”. This exercise facilitates a dialogue with “the voices of significant people in our lives ... voices which exert a powerful influence over our views of ourselves and our relationship with the past” (Hunt 2000: 97).
- On the subject of keeping a dream journal, Allan and Bertoia (2003: 61) suggest the following technique for those who “don’t have dreams” or “don’t remember” dreams. While falling asleep, the individual is to repeat “I am going to dream and remember it”; in addition, a tape recorder or dream journal should be kept beside the bed and the dream should be written down immediately on awakening, before getting out of bed.
- Allan and Bertoia (2003:78) make use of letter-writing and have found a “To whom it may concern” format useful, especially with individuals who have just come through a very difficult period; the suggestion is that the letter would be helpful to others, but its actual benefit lies in the possibility of it integrating an experience. They also suggest the “unsent letter” in instances where communication with another party could exacerbate the existing problem. Allan and Bertoia (2003: 84) regard this technique as especially helpful in dealing with bereavement in that it affords the opportunity of completing unfinished business with the deceased.

Hunt (2000: 27) is of the opinion that exercises such as the ones described above provide a means of getting in touch with oneself and one’s experience “at a deep, emotionally felt level”. Furthermore, the above exercises can be explored and expanded in different ways, one of which is by combining them with art and music. Playing music before or while a writing exercise is conducted is a means of heightening sensory awareness. In this regard, it is important to take note of Pennebaker’s (1990: 112)

observation. He compares art and music therapies and states that these are found to “quickly strip away” inhibitions and other defenses. In such a state, individuals are more emotionally aware although, as the author points out, they do not necessarily achieve understanding. Pennebaker’s point (1990: 112) is that thoughts and feelings are understood through the process of writing. Leavitt and Pill (1995: 146) explain this phenomenon in their view of writing as being “metaphoric”. In terms of the concept “metaphoric”, the authors understand that writing is more a “primary process” than a conversation, and metaphor facilitates rapid access to innermost thoughts, which make them easier to approach and, ultimately, to integrate.

## CONCLUSION

This article indicates that writing as a form of personal therapy has value and, moreover, that the perception of its value is embedded in a basis of empirical research. Other than a review of the body of work which substantiates the idea of the therapeutic value of writing, the discussion highlighted its application from a practical point of view, including both techniques and exercises for writing as therapy. Three central points emerge from the discussion, namely that there is a question as to how such a writing treatment should be structured and what it should contain. A second point concerns the matter of support for the individual in the course of such a personal writing treatment, and it is clear that such support is imperative. Furthermore, it is evident that this form of personal therapy is not exclusively for the intellectual or the gifted individual and although having a universal application, a mindset for writing is mainly required. Finally, it may be surmised that writing in this manner is a “self-help” therapy, one which leads to physical and psychological change. Arguing from this premise, it is conceivable that the basic tenets of such a form of therapy may be practised on a group level, thereby influencing communities and society as a whole.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This concept is borrowed from Hunt, C. & Sampson, F. (Eds.). 1998a. *The Self on the Page. Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

<sup>2</sup> The author has been practising autobiographical writing for a number of years. She combines this form of writing with auto-ethnographic research.

<sup>3</sup> The following sources were consulted and provide detailed information on the nature of their studies and the resultant findings: Pennebaker & O’Heeron 1984; Pennebaker & Chew 1985; Pennebaker & Beall 1986; Pennebaker, Hughes & O’Heeron 1987; Pennebaker & Susman 1988; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser 1988a; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser 1988b; Watson & Pennebaker 1989; Pennebaker, Barger & Tiebout 1989; Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp 1990; Francis & Pennebaker 1992; Pennebaker 1993; Wegner & Pennebaker 1993; Hughes, Uhlmann & Pennebaker 1994; Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, Davison & Thomas 1995; Pennebaker & Francis 1996; Pennebaker, Mayne & Francis 1997. (This is not a comprehensive reflection of their body of work, but rather of the ones that could be accessed.)

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**APPENDIX 1****Examples of exercises which may be utilised in writing**

<i>Exercise</i>	<i>Description</i>
“Freewriting”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise in how to write</li> <li>• Releasing control, critical faculty</li> </ul>
“Writing with the voice of a child”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides insight into inner life</li> <li>• Accesses early memories</li> </ul>
Writing the myth or fairy tale about one’s childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commences with “once upon a time”</li> <li>• Concludes with “and when she grew up”</li> </ul>
“The self as source”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhances personal development through self-exploration, investigation and understanding</li> <li>• Can focus on polarities</li> </ul>
“Creating a life map”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifies topics and themes arising from own experience</li> <li>• “Objectifies the self”</li> <li>• Divides lifespan into time segments</li> </ul>
Dialogue on paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retraces an experience and re-experiences it from the inside</li> </ul>
“To whom it may concern”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing a letter so as to integrate an experience</li> <li>• Could be utilised as “unsent letter” as alternative method</li> </ul>
Exercises to facilitate written techniques:	
The dream journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat: “I am going to dream and remember it”</li> <li>• Keep tape recorder or dream journal beside the bed and write dream down immediately upon waking up</li> </ul>
Poetry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draw a picture about feelings experienced while listening</li> </ul>
Exploration and expansion of written exercises:	
Combine with art	Draw a specific part of self or create a symbol of an experience so as to facilitate integration
Combine with music	Play music before or while writing an exercise to heighten sensory awareness.