

Chapter 10

Reflections of Healing Narratives

ABSTRACT

This narrative discusses research illustrating how writing assists patients in healing from both emotional and physical pain. An English professor and physical therapist collaborated to design a survey that uses writing prompts to assess goal setting for physical therapy patients. Advice for patients, such as keeping a pain journal of symptoms to share with a medical professional, demonstrates how writing helps the healing process while leading to collaboration between a patient and the medical team.

PAIN NARRATIVES

Being a patient feels exhausting. Patients not only experience pain or illness, but also the stress of advocating for effective care while navigating a medical system. While I have not experienced being a patient with the coronavirus, I have witnessed numerous people I know fight the virus. I also saw numerous specialists several years before the pandemic as a patient who eventually experienced remission from the autoimmune disease Sjogren's syndrome. Periodically my neck pain sends me back to physical therapy. Transforming a pain narrative or illness narrative into a narrative of health and healing requires overcoming obstacles. I share the story of my feelings as a patient and the lessons I learned from my experiences to provide inspiration and hope.

PART I: INTRODUCTION TO WRITING AS HEALING (2012)

During the past few years, my life settled into a predictable and comfortable pattern. Each semester my students read wonderful works of literature and created poems, scenes from characters' perspectives, mix CDs, artwork and various other innovative projects based on those wonderful works of literature. They wrote detailed rationales explaining their project choices and shared their masterpieces with classmates on presentation day. This was a day where I always skipped meals because several people in the class

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usually brought food for a genre connected to the text. My life and teaching progressed in a splendid manner until another twist of fate in my life led me to see multigenre writing as more than an academic research project. Multigenre writing became a way for me to help heal my physical pain. This is a story of using writing as healing told from the perspectives of both the patient and the physical therapist; the lessons learned from this experience led to additional research and advice to help others.

I used the theory of narrative inquiry and the practice of multigenre writing to analyze my story of life as a patient. Romano (2000) argues, “theory about narrative thinking provides scholarly underpinning for multigenre writing” (p. 18). Both multigenre writing and narrative inquiry support the telling of stories as research. They encourage researchers to look not only outward at others but also inward at themselves and hold a mirror to their own lives.

In the qualitative interpretive research field of narrative inquiry, when we tell our life stories to other people, we choose how we frame and share information. We don’t just share our stories with other people; for better or worse, the stories we retell ourselves can influence our perception of life. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, “therefore, difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change” (p. 71). If I keep telling myself the same story, I am never going to change.

During my physical therapy for neck pain, if I told myself the story, “I am in a lot of pain right now,” it would force me to dwell on how much I hurt. I needed to rewrite that story as, “I am in a lot of pain right now, but I am getting better.” Even though I felt intense physical pain, my goal became to approach each therapy session with a positive attitude and a willingness to complete the lesson plan of exercises designed for me to help me feel better. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest writing down stories and to “keep an open mind and try to see what patterns emerge” (p. 37). When I wrote down the stories of how I felt, it led to the creation of a neck pain journal and a new perspective on healing. For this reason, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that “autobiography and memoir are recognized forms of research texts” (p. 101).

Sometimes, however, we can’t see the patterns of our own stories and need others to help us view the story from a new perspective.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING WHILE IN PAIN

My physical therapist, Dr. Eric Wanner, always took the time to answer my endless questions about why my neck felt a certain way and what exercises I could do to make it feel better. He also would not let me get away with telling him I felt fine when I didn’t. It helped him plan my exercises and treatment if I assigned my pain level a number at the beginning of each session and gave some examples of what I did between sessions to make the pain feel better or worse.

One particular week I looked at the yellow flurry of post-it notes on which I wrote all my observations about my pain I wanted to tell Eric so I didn’t forget anything. When presented with chaos my reaction becomes to organize everything. Because of the pain, just teaching my classes became a large effort leaving me with no energy to write any interesting articles. I missed writing. Cameron (1998) believes, “there is something very right about simply letting yourself write. And the way to do that is to begin, to begin where you are” (p. 5). So I grabbed a sheet of paper and assigned a high and low numeric value to my pain level for each day. I also wrote down what I was doing to cause the pain. Of course, my writing voice needed to shine through on paper. Instead of being content to write, “I did my exercises today,”

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