

Chapter 1

Writing Healing Narratives

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ABSTRACT

People, especially hospital patients, want someone to know their stories. Teachers in English classrooms rely on narratives to learn their students' stories. Since learning patients' narratives is an emerging trend in the field of physical therapy as well as other medical practice, this chapter makes connections between writing, health coaching, and physical therapy to illustrate the value of narratives for patients not only in physical therapy, but also in other fields of medicine. Health coaching is a relatively new addition to the medical field that encourages patients to share their stories and set goals for themselves in addition to the goals set for them by their medical team. This chapter uses a multigenre format which discusses writing theory while simultaneously demonstrating an innovative narrative.

I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW WHO I AM

In this narrative, the practice of writing meets the practice of medicine. The story begins with a conversation about multigenre writing, since this chapter unfolds in a nontraditional format not typically seen in academic publications. Then you will read a story that immerses you into the world of an English professor/health coach/Stephen Minister, since while I play three distinct professional roles during any given week, the roles intertwine in a beautiful mosaic that enables me to use writing to help people heal. After the story, you will read additional ideas on writing, medicine, and spirituality, which will provide additional illumination of how the puzzle pieces of this narrative fit together. Finally, I introduce the acronym MICE and explain how it can be used in the medical community to provide additional hope and healing for patients.

This section's title, *I Just Want You to Know Who I Am*, is a line from the song *Iris* by the Goo Goo Dolls. It also describes how patients feel when seeking help: They want someone to know their stories. When seeking medical treatment, a patient wants to feel like his or her story is being heard and the medical provider sees a person and not just a name on a chart. Rankin (2015b) advises that despite demands from a sometimes frustrating medical system, those practicing medicine need to take the time to look their patients in the eyes and not stand with a hand on the door to the exam room because, "just

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as healers must stand up and reclaim the lineage of their professions, patients must reclaim their own power, standing up with their autonomy, their intuition, their willingness to question and participate in changing the system from within, and their vote. It all starts with change at the level of the healer-patient relationship” (p. 238). This narrative will explore the value of writing and how writing can be applied to the field of medicine to help people heal. Whether a patient talks to a health coach, receives prayers from a Stephen Minister, or writes in a journal, the important thing is that the patient feels the story is heard.

While a story can be spoken, writing enables the author to capture additional details of a narrative. Pennebaker (1997) theorized from his research as a psychologist, “if my experience was any indication, writing about upsetting issues must work in ways similar to talking about them” (p. 30). Any patient who has ever walked out of a doctor’s office with the realization of forgetting an important question can benefit from writing notes to remember experiences. Brown (2015) summarizes, “Pennebaker’s research, combined with what I’ve learned in my own work, has convinced me that even brief engagements with writing can lead to significant results” (p. 88). Patients therefore do not have to write a long narrative for their medical practitioners or themselves; a short series of notes or freewriting of a few sentences can be enough to share the story.

Journal writing may be relatively new to the medical field, but for years English teachers have used journal writing in their classrooms. Anderson and MacCurdy (2000) advise English teachers, “we are, however, arguing what we know to be true – stories about painful, traumatic events in the lives of students do appear in our classrooms, they have always appeared, and they will continue to appear, not because we want or don’t want them to, but because writing is quite simply the medium in which, for many people, the deepest, most effective, and most profound healing can take place” (pp. 8-9). Writing in journals gives students a space to explore their thoughts and feelings. While some students do choose to write about painful events, students can also choose to write in their journals about other topics, such as their feelings about an inspirational quote. By writing, students transfer emotions out of their heads and onto the page. Gruwell (2007), whose students became known as the Freedom Writers, states, “I, like my students, realized that it would take more than just writing to feel better – but at least it was a start” (p. 148). The purpose of journal writing is for students to trust themselves and their first impressions while they write narratives. As Goldberg (1990) states, “trusting your own mind is essential for writing. Words come out of the mind” (p. 1). Students have a short amount of time, such as five or ten minutes, to write their first impression on a topic. The time limit is to capture the writer’s first impression about an idea before self-criticism can create any doubt or second guessing.

Journal writing helps students find their writing voice. Lamott (1994) discusses her own experiences and shares, “so I sit for a moment and then say a small prayer – please help me get out of the way so I can write what needs to be written” (p. 117). Writing what needs to be written serves as a form of self-expression that leads to the discovery of writing voice. English teachers know that no matter what the story is now, students always have the power to rewrite their narratives. As Cameron (1998) states, “when we just let ourselves write, we get it ‘right’” (p. 8). If we find the courage to write our stories and trust our writing voices, we write a new narrative.

A SHORT SYNOPSIS OF HEALTH COACHING

Health coaching is still new to the field of medicine; consequently, research studying the benefits of health coaching is only emerging as of this writing. While health coaches have training in the field of

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