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## **RETURN TO SENDER: LETTER WRITING TO BRING HOPE TO BOTH CLIENT AND TEAM**

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*Solution-focused letter writing has been used to provide clients a means of connecting sessions, focusing on strengths, and working toward positive change. In addition, the therapeutic use of letter writing may help therapists themselves refocus on hope. This article details how solution-focused letter writing was used in a university-based practicum to both facilitate change with clients and train beginning therapists. Letter writing was helpful to team and therapist as well as to clients.*

The use of therapeutic letter writing to facilitate change for clients has been widely documented, both in the narrative (Epston, 1994) and the solution-focused traditions (Nunnally & Lipchik, 1989; Shilts & Ray, 1991). Letters are labeled therapeutic when they are client-centered, future-oriented, hopeful, and realistic (Goldberg, 2000). Written to enhance the positive aspects of face-to-face therapy, letters summarize meetings, link people and events, contain metaphoric language, and help turn ideas into interventions. Through hearing and reading scripted reflections and suggestions, clients can validate, expand, and engage in auxiliary

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conversation with therapists (Janus, 2002). Through the use of letters, therapists can slow therapy down, reiterate points, and assist clients in exploring new solutions. Most importantly, therapeutic letter writing can help the client create hopeful meanings, even in grim situations (Nau, 1997).

Abundant research on the effectiveness of therapy has identified the creation of a hopeful context as central to effective therapy (Frank, 1995; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). It is especially important within the solution-focused tradition (Iveson, 2002). Yet beginning therapists can have difficulties avoiding their own sense of discouragement. When therapists take a more hopeful view of their clients, this change tends to result in improved communication with the client, renewed hope in the system, and a more positive experience for the therapist as well (Bowles, Mackintosh, & Torn, 2001). Indeed, solution-focused training has been advocated for the specific purposes of reducing counselor stress and burnout (Bowles, Mackintosh, & Torn, 2001; Oliver, Nelson, Cade, & Cueva, 2007). Within the school system, teaching guidance counselors to write hopeful letters to their student clients has been tried to increase the guidance counselor's own sense of hope and encouragement (Oliver et al., 2007). In his university-based practicum, the second author created a training context in which both clients and student therapists benefited from the therapeutic use of hopeful letters.

### TEAM LETTER WRITING AS A TRAINING TOOL

The following are the guidelines used in this practicum to define and create therapeutic, positive letters. Shilts and Ray (1991) outlined tips for the process of letter writing which have been very helpful. They suggested that therapists (1) ask for permission to write, (2) use compliments, (3) predict or presuppose that things will get better, (4) notice small change, and (5) offer tasks. In addition, they mentioned including the client's voice and consulting with them for follow up (Andrews, Clark, & Baird, 1997). Epston (1994) recommends the use of metaphors and the client's language; he also advises therapists to be candid about reservations. This reminded us to be straightforward in the letters and told us to key in on what the clients were saying in session. France, Cadieax, and Allen (1995) direct therapists to focus on strengths and discuss themes; this reminded us to notice that clients often were already doing something different.

These guidelines helped focus the team behind the mirror, and converted us from a passive audience into a true therapeutic team. Instead of merely observing behind the mirror, the team remained focused on watching for small change, and composing compliments and hopeful predictions. Recent research (Bowles, Mackintosh, & Torn, 2001) suggests that giving beginning therapists guidelines for maintaining a solution focus expedites learning, and also helps them avoid burnout and maintain their own sense of hope. The subsequent cases illustrate how letter writing behind the mirror was such a positive organizing task for our team.

### CASE EXAMPLE I

Alfred, 63, and Olivia, 44, came to therapy as a married couple; they each have two adult children from previous relationships. Alfred and Olivia talked about how they fought often and operated as opponents instead of as allies. Specifically, they hoped to work on their anger and finance issues.

*Therapist's perspective:* Initially, the therapist was concerned about being overwhelmed by the couple's anger and their past failed treatment opportunities.

*Clients' perspective:* Alfred and Olivia came to therapy with a long history of marital conflict, and felt discouraged themselves.

*Team's perspective:* The team considered letter writing to bring new hope into the team, therapist, and client system.

This letter was offered as a reflection to the couple after the initial sessions. It was constructed by the team and read aloud by the therapist (third author) after a short break during the session.

#### Case 1 Letter

Dear Alfred and Olivia,

The team is very impressed with your progress. We think it takes a tremendous amount of courage and hard work by the both of you to get where you are today. As per your request, the team would like to talk about how you keep all this good stuff going. We would like to use the analogy of "taking lemons and making lemonade out of it." We think you two are now able to do that. So, when life presents you a lemon, make lemonade. You now know how to do that. You communicate better—you are respecting each other, and you are at a perfect 10 to keep this going. We suspect that you will continue to improve with more time and work. To use our terms, you are now a "beautiful team of horses" pulling in perfect tandem and rhythm. We are so proud of the both of you. Now, we are at the next phase of therapy. That is when the two of you will be almost ready to fire us. Stay the course and keep going. Please celebrate your new beginnings—a beautiful team.

Respectfully,  
The Team

#### Case 1 Discussion

Bacigalupe (2003) describes writing as a part of the therapy process that details strengths and wisdom of the client and offers resources. Accordingly, this letter begins with stating how the team is impressed with the clients' courage and efforts. The use of "as per your request" also implies that the input of Alfred and Olivia is key to directing the sessions and setting goals (Andrews, Clark, & Baird, 1997). The lemonade metaphor highlights how they have and can continue to overcome adversity. Lastly, the way the practicum team maintained a positive, yet open ending letter shifts focus and prompts personal agency in the clients'

ability to work toward positive change (Goldberg, 2000). This also focused the therapist on hope for change.

### Case 1 Results and Follow-up

Alfred and Olivia were able to recommit to their marriage with a renewed sense of hope. The therapist, also, was able to work with them as a couple without feeling trapped by the past.

## CASE EXAMPLE II

Harry, a 34-year-old man, came to therapy after being referred by his 36-year-old, pregnant wife, Susanna (who was seen three months prior). Susanna came to therapy through a legal aid referral as she was considering divorce because of Harry's alleged drug and alcohol use. After four sessions with the team, Susanna stated that it was Harry's turn to try therapy. Harry stated that he sought therapy to "stay on the right track." He was on parole for possession of cocaine/paraphernalia. At the time of therapy, he reported being clean for four months. Aside from his substance abuse issues, Harry talked about how fighting with his wife affected his frustration and decision(s) to use in the past. He also discussed guilt and shame related to being absent when "little Harry" was very young. Harry hoped to be able to maintain sobriety and to become a good husband and a good father.

*Therapist's perspective:* Substance abuse issues can be discouraging to any therapist, and in this case Harry had a long history. It would have been easy to be immobilized by Harry's history.

*Client's perspective:* Harry felt overwhelmed by his guilt over the past, and was having difficulty moving on.

*Team response:* This letter was constructed by the team in response to these issues.

### Case 2—Letter 1

Dear Harry,

Wow! How amazing it is that after all you and Susanna have been through, you have remained together. Also, I am impressed that you have decided not to be depressed and to be clean and sober. It is obvious that you not only love Susanna and the boys, but that you also love and care for yourself. It takes a lot of courage for you to also stop hanging around negative influences. I wonder how you decided to make all of these changes—accept that you love and want to be with your wife and son, abstain from drugs, care for yourself, etc. You seem very determined and committed to continuing to make positive decisions.

You have made it clear that your goal is to remain/become an honest person who lives a peaceful life. I wonder what *peace* looks like and feels like to you. I wonder

how you are already doing things to be an *honest* man. . . . I look forward to our work ahead in figuring out how you can continue to be that honest, peaceful man that you have been recently . . . keep wiping off the dust!

Take care,  
The Team

### Case 2 Discussion

According to Freedman and Combs (1996), letter writing (1) recaptures past events, (2) thickens stories through languaging, (3) extends ideas, and (4) includes others. Meeting with Susanna for four sessions and subsequently Harry twice provided thorough background information related to their relationship concerns. Acknowledging their devotion in spite of their trials is a sign of affirmation for their strength (Rombach, 2003). Also, complimenting Harry for his decision to become/remain sober and to take care of himself extends the idea of it being possible to be the kind of man he strives to be (Frankfurt & Penn, 1998); likewise, it offers him positive reinforcement upon which to reflect (France, Cadieax, & Allen, 1995). Lastly, the use of Harry's language (i.e., "wiping off the dust") along with the shifting language of presupposition prompts responsibility, reinforces goal attainment, and allows for future change (Goldberg, 2000; Vigden & Williams, 2001).

### Case 2—Letter 2 (Therapist generated by First Author)

Building on lessons learned from the team, the therapist decided to continue the strategy of writing letters to further create dialogue. The letter below was constructed after a series of individual and couples' conversations with Harry and Susanna when Harry presented for a termination session:

Dear Harry,

As I reviewed the first couple of sessions that we had back in January, I marveled at how the story has changed over time. From getting back to where you wanna be, to staying sober . . . now the story seems to be about second chances, new starts, and smelling the roses . . . and those are all things that you talked about with making it through the court case, and of course having a new baby . . . and looking at the positive aspects. Whereas once fear and stress seemed to interfere with your peace of mind, now your faith and communication seem to keep you going . . .

### Case 2—Letter 2 Discussion

This letter along with the subsequent conversation during therapy exemplifies the intent of letter writing. As the lead therapist presented the letter to the client in session, she added dialogue in between reading sentences to prompt further discussion about the positive changes experienced by the client and his family. She

integrated his metaphors of “smelling the roses” to reify his shift and she highlighted alternatives to his once dominated problem talk (White & Epston, 1990). The therapist utilized her memories of the team’s letter to help her stay focused and positive through letter writing on her own.

### **Case 2—Results and Follow-up**

Eppler and Carolan (2005) state that writing and talking together enhances the process of change. With such reflection, Harry shared stories of how he had accomplished his goals of becoming a wonderful father, spending time with his children, and being appreciated by Susanna. Reading the letter aloud created an opportunity for mirroring and allowed for conversation and exchange of ideas so that we could reflect, interpret, and transform (Janus, 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

The greatest lesson learned for us was that letter writing is as useful for team and therapist as it is for the client. According to Moules (2003), “letters connect us to others as sensual ambassadors for our thoughts and intentions . . . When we read the written word of another, we breathe as the author breathed” (p. 34). Bacigalupe (1996) has noted how writing invites reflexivity of multiple meanings, and encourages proactivity and participation. Shilts and Ray (1991) posited that referring to letters allows for more dynamic, enduring change. We saw evidence of this in that the clients would often report reading the letters between sessions. Letter writing also led to positive team building and increased learning for us as practicum participants.

According to Rombach (2003), letter writing is an exceptional method of obtaining therapeutic success because it gives clients a means of measuring their true and genuine wisdom as captured by therapists. Letter writing opens the door to considering multiple perspectives and alternate meanings by capturing reality in context. It also helps to shape and reshape human experience (Lepore & Smith, 2002). This reshaping was as true for team and therapist as it was for client. We saw how reframing often led to unimagined possibilities of getting clients unstuck (Flemons, 2002). Furthermore, some of the therapists were inspired to continue writing letters outside of the practicum experience, which enhanced their sessions beyond the team setting.

Just as the therapist works with the client to create dialogue, the supervisee collaborates with the supervisor in order to develop new meanings which lead to new interpretations (Bobele, Gardner, & Biever, 1995). Empathy, creativity, and collaboration are key ingredients. As research suggests, supervisors are advised to avoid a hierarchical stance or position of privilege (Rudes, Shilts, & Berg, 1997). Yet a solution-focused supervisor is responsible for creating and maintaining an

atmosphere of optimism (Pichot & Dolan, 2003). Team letter writing provides a structure for putting these supervisory goals into practice.

In closing, letter writing was an integral part of the learning experience for a group of doctoral students and a supervisor within a university training program. Letter writing offers a practical method of obtaining therapeutic goals and helps clients to become relieved and empowered. The experience of letter writing also led to the team members' growth and development as therapists by allowing them to enhance relationships and to become more reflective and collaborative. In the spirit of true systemic therapy, this method enriches the experience of all involved in the process. It is highly recommended that other institutions consider incorporating the use of letters to clients as part of their training and supervision practices.

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