Therapeutic Letters: Expanding Their Use in Working with Adolescents and Families

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Letters have been accorded the status of being one of the oldest and most intimate forms of literature (Dawson & Dawson, 1909). The term and the practical application of “therapeutic letters” were originally attributed to the domain of narrative therapy, and specifically, to the work of David Epston and Michael White. However, letters have since been used quite extensively in many domains of clinical practice. There is anecdotal evidence that therapeutic letters have substantial effects on both writers and recipients (Epston, 1994; Wojcik & Iverson, 1989; Wood & Uhl, 1988). Outcome studies and clinical in-session comments have consistently indicated that families and clinicians value the letters, with reports of the value of a letter being estimated as equivalent to three to ten clinical sessions (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 1995; Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996).

Therapeutic change does not necessarily take place within the one-hour session; rather, the goal of therapy is to generalize the work learned to outside the session where “real life” happens. Therapeutic letters can extend the process of therapy beyond the session room door by continuing in the meaning-making that occurred in a therapeutic conversation. Therapeutic letters can help contain the strong emotions experienced in interpersonal situations and can assist in accessing deep emotional feelings that are sometimes difficult for young people to get in touch with. The written word thereby captures the essence of all new possibilities. (Prasko, Diveky, Mozny, Sigmundov, 2009).

Our presentation will focus on the ways in which letters can be utilized to forward the treatment of youth who have committed sexual offenses. Letters have commonly been utilized for “apology,” but letter writing can extend well beyond this practice. Letter writing provides the distance to develop emotional intimacy through sharing and risk taking in written form. They are used to set the context for therapeutic work, facilitate gentle confrontation, help voice the unspeakable, and, ultimately, to help shape the new non-offending identity of the young person. For the recipient, the letter allows for the space, safety and control over how they receive potentially new or emotionally charged information. The time for reflection is built into the letter exchange, allowing everyone an opportunity to digest the meaning from his or her own perspective. The therapist, parents, the youth who has sexually harmed, or the victim can all author letters within the therapeutic context.
Epston (1994) said that letters are an extension of clinical work with families, and this presentation will demonstrate the multiple ways to connect individuals through the architecture that the letter allows. The conversation that is facilitated is concrete and tangible because of the written form. Questions are answered, responsibility is taken, apologies are given, and new beginnings are offered. While often generated with tentative hope of relationship repair and closure, the letters become the document of record as the script of their new chapter is written. As well, much of our treatment work culminates with a letter to self regarding a new “personal code”. This personal code flows out of the “Sexual Decision-Making: YOUR Personal Code” book, and this too will be shared within the context of the workshop.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- To provide an overview of the ways in which therapeutic letter writing can be employed, including familiarizing participants with the letter templates used by each individual involved in sexual offense-specific treatment (victims, parents, the adolescent who has offended, and therapist).
- To demonstrate how letter writing can advance sexual offense-specific treatment beyond an “apology” letter.
- To provide an opportunity to practice therapeutic letter writing in the workshop, thereby furthering the confidence of the participants to implement some of these activities with their own clients.
- To introduce the “Sexual Decision-Making: YOUR Personal Code” book to assist youth in developing their own personal code of conduct for healthy sexual relationships, culminating in a letter to ‘self’ outlining a template for the youth’s future behaviour.
- To demonstrate how to assist youth in engaging in critical self-reflection vis-à-vis letters to ‘self’ regarding sexual values and beliefs, and identify how these values and beliefs inform the work done with adolescents who have sexually harmed.

References:


