

The Healing Effects of Poetry Reading on Anxiety Disorders: A Study Design Proposal

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Abstract: Poetry therapy is a form of treatment that promotes healing and growth by using poetry and, more specifically, by using language, symbols and metaphors. The positive effects on mental well-being have been widely demonstrated in literature as there are several publications in this field. The present paper is basically a study design which investigates the healing effects of poetry therapy on anxiety symptoms. A small group of people affected by different forms of anxiety disorders are invited to participate in a ten-week poetry reading session with the final aim to assess the decrease frequency and intensity of symptoms with a specific questionnaire, the ASQ, which detects the severity of the illness and the variation of symptoms at two different times. The study has not been yet carried out, but its design might represent a model to use for further investigations in this area.

Keywords: Anxiety Disorders, Poetry Therapy, Study Design, Healing Effects, Mental Well-Being

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Introduction

Bibliotherapy is the use of novels, poems or other forms of literary works to foster mental well-being (McCarty Hynes, 2012). Poetry therapy is considered as a branch of bibliotherapy that deals with the use of metaphors, imagery, rhythm and poetic devices to improve psychological conditions such as stress, depression and anxiety. It is well established that poetry has a healing effect on many kinds of mental illnesses because the reading of poems may help people to alleviate suffering and to facilitate the recover from symptoms. The benefits may include emotional discharge, being aware of one's feelings, changes of behaviour and attitudes as well as personal growth. Previous research in this area (Healey, 2017; Pettersson, 2018) has demonstrated that reading poetry has a positive effect on improving anxiety and depressive symptoms. The present paper has been conceived as an investigation of the benefits of reading poetry in a group of individuals suffering from anxiety disorders. The main scope of this study design is to evaluate the decrease of anxiety levels in a group of 10 patients affected by anxiety disorders (such as panic attacks, generalized anxiety disorder or GAD and hypochondria) attending a once-a-week meeting of poetry reading for a total of ten sessions. This type of investigation is challenging, and to support the hypothesis that anxiety may benefit from poetry therapy it is worth to mention a recent case study (Raile, 2024) which demonstrated the efficacy of this kind of psychological intervention performed on a single participant who attended a total of ten reading sessions. Raile has demonstrated in his investigation that poetry therapy helps to have a better insight on anxiety symptoms, to improve the quality of life of patients and to teach people how to cope with this form of mental distress. The study design discussed in this paper has the same expectations, that is to support mental well-being and personal growth and reproduces a similar protocol of ten sessions.

Methodology

The sample consists of a group of ten patients suffering from anxiety disorders, of which five are affected by panic attacks, three by generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and two by hypochondria. The patients are invited to participate in a poetry reading group held by the author who is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist working for an outpatient clinic in northwest Italy. All participants are previously interviewed by the same author before being allowed to participate in the investigation. The initial interview consists of collecting information about personal history and life experiences, previous and/or current psychological treatments, interest and motivation to bring a change to their lives along with a correct diagnosis of the mental disorder. Those who have experienced

bibliotherapy or similar groups in the past are not included in the study to avoid disparities among participants. Keeping the group homogenous with regards to age, gender, diagnostic category and personal experiences is a good way to preserve the consistency of the research and sameness of the sample.

According to the International Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy (2021), a facilitator of poetry therapy sessions needs a specific training which includes didactics, experiential groups and supervision and a previous experience as counsellor or therapist is highly recommended. In addition, there are other skills required to be an expert in poetry therapy which are: personal, such as empathy, patience and insight; educational, which refer to a good knowledge of psychological theories and literature; moral, since ethical issues should be taken into consideration for a good practice, As a matter of fact, the facilitator for this project is an expert of mental diseases as well as having a good knowledge of English literature although possessing no formal training as poetry therapist.

To test the improvement of anxiety levels in this group of participants, the Anxiety Screen Questionnaire GAD-7 (henceforth, ASQ) is administered at the beginning of the reading sessions (conventionally, time 0), and at the end of the ten meetings (time 1). The questionnaire is relatively short, self-reported, developed and validated in different clinical settings for the diagnosis of anxiety disorders (Baker, 2019). It is used widely to detect the intensity and frequency of anxiety symptoms particularly for short periods of time, generally weeks. Furthermore, the 17 items explore aspects such as problems with relaxation, worrying, panicky thoughts, feeling uncomfortable and sleep disorders. All these features make this questionnaire the most suitable tool to achieve the main goal of this investigation. Other ways to enquire anxiety levels exist in clinical practice, such as the commonly used Hamilton Rating Scale for Anxiety (Hamilton, 1959), but these have been discarded because they are not filled in by the person and may be influenced by the opinion of the evaluator.

For what concerns the poems to use during the reading groups, poetry therapists may choose any texts they think to be useful although some general guidelines are provided in literature (Mazza, 2022). It is generally recommended to select poems that are not too long, that represent common emotions and life experiences, that may instil some hope, and, most importantly, express simple language. Following these indicators, the most common themes of poetry chosen for this investigation are love, death, religion, nature and illness (Ellis, 2024). Each theme is presented twice during the research in order to discuss deeply the selected topics. Indeed, the repetition of the same theme in two separate and distanced sessions is linked to the idea of reinforcing the participants' approach to the selected themes (active participation) as the activities should not be experienced as a suggestion or imposition from the leader of the group.

The meetings take place on a weekly basis, each session lasting one hour. In terms of cost, the budget required is minimal if one considers the cost of poem copies and the lighting and warming of the meeting room. The facilitator reads the poems out loud for everyone to listen. Participants may be involved in the reading of a poem at the beginning of the meetings, but such a task might not be welcomed by everybody. Even though participant's reading is often recommended (Raab, 2021), in this type of intervention some people may be frightened by speaking in public or may not feel relaxed enough to be involved in the activity. As a matter of fact, the level of anxiety is generally higher during the first sessions, and it would not be convenient to increase distress levels when soothing negative emotions represents a priority. After each reading, there is a discussion concerning the major theme, the message of the poet, the emotional impact, the ideas that emerge and, eventually, likes and dislikes. The poems chosen by the facilitator for the first five meetings are retrieved from the collections of poems at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/browse>. In the second round of meetings, the participants are invited to choose a poem from the same website and to bring it to the upcoming group discussion to enhance their motivation, stimulate initiative and likely enthusiasm. All the poems chosen for the first five sessions are provided in Appendix 3 and it is important at this point to discuss the reasons of their choice which are adapted to the aim of this study and to the peculiarities of the group of participants.

Pierce's poem about love has been chosen for its language, which is accessible to everyone regardless of literacy skills, and for its richness in imagery (*winds roaring, rubber bands, knives*) which may elicit strong emotional

reactions. Moreover, the alliteration with *b* in the last stanza may refer to the verb to be (like being in love) or the noun *beat* (see heartbeat). Brainard's poem about death is an interesting choice because the poet talks directly to the reader and the theme is displayed from different perspectives (spiritual, philosophical, natural events). A variety of emotional responses and thoughtful interventions may be expected after its reading. The choice of Gibran's poem about religion is connected to the fact of eliciting in the group ideas about faith, men's inferiority, personal expectations and meaning of life. Similarly, the images of the mountain to climb and the sea that embraces may be thought inspiring. The theme of nature is introduced by Longfellow's poem which contains an analogy between motherhood and nature. The tone is sweet and gentle which may likely be reassuring and calming for a group of individuals who tend to be restless and troubled. Furthermore, the relationship with one's mother is a situation that may likely emerge during the discussion. Illness as a topic is introduced to the group thanks to Bodenheim's poem. It represents the experience of suffering from a very common point of view with no direct reference to mental problems. Its utility is related to the use of language which may refer indirectly to anxiety symptoms such as *sorrow*, *agony*, *grief* and, interestingly, *quivers*, *whirl* and *turbaned head* which may allude to somatic complaints.

An outline of the reading meetings with a specification of the different steps of the therapeutic process is provided in appendix 1. It is important to write down the number of participants per each session since even the fact that a single person decides to leave (drop-out) should not be ignored. The occurrence of a drop-out is significant and linked to many factors such as symptoms worsening, lack of interest, problems with sharing and so on. In the discussion column of the outline, it is possible to summarize the main elements that emerge such as emotions, thoughts, behaviour, reactions, etc. In the last column, the facilitator may feel free to make personal comments, highlight possible problems or, in general, express his/her opinions on the unfolding of every single meeting.

Discussion

As mentioned before, the focus of this investigation are the healing effects of poetry therapy on anxiety levels in a group of people suffering from three types of anxiety disorders, medical conditions which can benefit from different psychotherapeutic approaches (Penninx, 2021). Therefore, the ASQ questionnaire is administered at two different times and the scores are compared to detect the difference between t_0 and t_1 . The table provided in appendix 2 is used to display the scores that will result at the end of the poetry reading sessions: ASQ scores at time 0 are compared with the scores at time 1. No previous studies exist in literature that have ever measured the change of anxiety levels with the use of a clinical rating scale after a bibliotherapeutic treatment according to a PubMed search carried out with two keywords "anxiety" and "poetry therapy".

The following step is to give a meaning to the results obtained. For instance, the difference between the ASQ scores may be significant if, for example, the t_0 score is 260 and the t_1 score is 120. This would mean approximately a 50% of reduction of symptoms severity. If all participants obtain an average score difference equal or superior to 50%, this may work in favour of the efficacy of poetry therapy. If the difference is not significant or evident, the efficacy the treatment is questionable. In this regard, some aspects should be taken into consideration such as a scarce ability of the facilitator to lead the group, the inappropriateness of the poems chosen, the initial levels of anxiety likely too high, the whole experience that was perceived as frightening, or the group showed no will or spirit of sharing. Of all these aspects, it is worth to further explore the role of the facilitator because leading a discussion group or workshop is undoubtedly not an easy task (Robb-Dover, 2022). Many skills are required to work in this area: ability to encourage, support, advise, direct, educate, monitor, suggest, relax, alleviate, discern, be neutral, that can be learned only after years of practice and experience. This is why in most cases, a certified training is necessary before engaging with people in a working group along with a good awareness of personal attitudes and natural disposition. For example, it would not be wise to work as a facilitator, if one feels uncomfortable in social situations.

A last aspect to discuss about this study design concerns ethical issues. In accordance with the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK (Broom, 2006), the ethical value of any kind of research depends on the

observation of the following key indicators. No harm must be done to any participant; a formal consent to participate must be obtained; a full information about the entire investigation process must be provided; participants' privacy and secrecy must be respected; and the research must be conducted with honesty and virtue. To conform to all these indicators, this study will first achieve the approval of the Ethical Committee of the hospital where the author holds his medical profession. Afterwards, every single participant will be clearly and fully informed about the project and then invited to sign his/her own consent. Throughout the entire investigation, the facilitator will be available to answer any questions about the study progress, discuss any doubts or perplexities and eventually accept the individual's wish to withdraw. Lastly, all the data and information about this research will be kept secret and stored in a safe place (a locked closet designed for the specific purpose) because confidentiality is a priority in any research project. The National Association of Poetry Therapy, located in the USA, provides to its member a code of ethics with the scope to guarantee that biblio/poetry therapists perform their job in the best way. In short, the NAPT highlights the role of responsibility since the therapist is serving a community made of professionals and, most importantly, of common people. Moreover, their level of professionalism should be high which means that therapists need to be adequately certified before practicing. Ultimately, they must take good care of their clients who need continual assistance and to which no damage must be caused.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth to summarise the whole design with reference to Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988). The investigation is aimed to test the improvement of anxiety symptoms after a ten-week poetry therapy session that takes place in a comfortable and safe place inside the designed institution. It includes ten patients affected by anxiety disorders with the expectancy that some change of people's mental wellbeing will likely occur. For what concerns the facilitator's emotional status, the challenging activities might elicit some distress and a range of feelings from gratification and pleasure to disappointment and frustration. The variety and disparity of these psychological reactions would certainly benefit from an adequate supervision by experts in this field so to improve the skills of a group leader. The awareness of one's emotionality should elicit a reflection on the whole experience with an emphasis on the positive and negative aspects that emerge. Supervision and tutoring along with a thorough analysis of the study process will be useful for future investigations in order to avoid recurring underestimations or misinterpretations. In the end, the following questions may arise about this study design: has there been a real benefit for the participants? Did the facilitator gain more knowledge so that s/he can apply it in the future? There are certainly many points of strength in this investigation, but have any shortcomings emerged and how have they been managed? As investigators, we should always keep in mind that reflection is a good practice in any social or scientific research design as we are dealing with the frailties and vulnerabilities of human beings.

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APPENDIX 1

Outline of poetry therapy meetings

Meeting N°	N° of participants	POEM THEME	DISCUSSION	FINAL REMARKS
1		LOVE Poem by Marge Piercy: <i>To have without holding</i>		
2		DEATH Poem by Joe Brainard <i>Death</i>		
3		RELIGION Poem by Kahlil Gibran <i>God</i>		
4		NATURE Poem by HW Longfellow <i>Nature</i>		
5		ILLNESS Poem by Maxwell Bodenheim <i>Suffering</i>		
6		LOVE		
7		DEATH		
8		RELIGION		
9		NATURE		
10		ILLNESS		

APPENDIX 2

ASQ scoring table

Participant	ASQ SCORE time 0	ASQ SCORE time 1	ASQ SCORE DIFFERENCE
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

APPENDIX 3

Poems chosen for the reading sessions

To have without holding

BY MARGE PIERCY

Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on their hinges,
the cupboard unlocked, the wind
roaring and whimpering in the rooms
rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds
that thwack like rubber bands
in an open palm.

It hurts to love wide open
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes
of grab, of clutch ; to love and let
go again and again. It pesters to remember
the lover who is not in the bed,
to hold back what is owed to the work
that gutters like a candle in a cave
without air, to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can't do it, you say it's killing
me, but you thrive, you glow
on the street like a neon raspberry,
You float and sail, a helium balloon
bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing
on the cold and hot winds of our breath,
as we make and unmake in passionate
diastole and systole the rhythm
of our unbound bonding, to have
and not to hold, to love
with minimized malice, hunger
and anger moment by moment balanced.

Death

BY JOE BRAINARD

Death is a funny thing. Most people are afraid of it, and yet
they don't even know what it is.

Perhaps we can clear this up.

What is death?

Death is *it*. That's it. Finished. "Finito." Over and out. No
more.

Death is many different things to many different people. I
think it is safe to say, however, that most people don't like it.

Why?

Because they are afraid of it.

Why are they afraid of it?

Because they don't understand it.

I think that the best way to try to understand death is to
think about it a lot. Try to come to terms with it. Try to *really*
understand it. Give it a chance!

Sometimes it helps if we try to visualize things.

Try to visualize, for example, someone sneaking up behind
your back and hitting you over the head with a giant hammer.

Some people prefer to think of death as a more spiritual
thing. Where the soul somehow separates itself from the mess
and goes on living forever somewhere else. Heaven and hell
being
the most traditional choices.

Death has a very black reputation but, actually, to die is a
perfectly *normal* thing to do.

And it's so wholesome: being a very important part of
nature's big picture. Trees die, don't they? And flowers?

I think it's always nice to know that you are not alone. Even
in death.

Let's think about ants for a minute. Millions of ants die
every day, and do we care? No. And I'm sure that ants feel the
same way about us.

But suppose—just suppose—that we didn't have to die.
That wouldn't be so great either. If a 90-year-old man can
hardly
stand up, can you imagine what it would be like to be 500 years
old?

Another comforting thought about death is that 80 years or
so after you die nobody who knew you will still be alive to miss
you.

And after you're dead, you won't even know it.

God

BY KAHLIL GIBRAN

In the ancient days, when the first quiver of speech came to my
lips,
I ascended the holy mountain and spoke unto God, saying,
"Master,
I am thy slave. Thy hidden will is my law and I shall obey thee
for ever more."

But God made no answer, and like a mighty tempest passed away.

And after a thousand years I ascended the holy mountain and again spoke unto God, saying, "Creator, I am thy creation. Out of clay hast thou fashioned me and to thee I owe mine all."

And God made no answer, but like a thousand swift wings passed away.

And after a thousand years I climbed the holy mountain and spoke unto God again, saying, "Father, I am thy son. In pity and love thou hast given me birth, and through love and worship I shall inherit thy kingdom."

And God made no answer, and like the mist that veils the distant hills he passed away.

And after a thousand years I climbed the sacred mountain and again spoke unto God, saying, "My God, my aim and my fulfillment; I am thy yesterday and thou art my tomorrow. I am thy root in the earth and thou art my flower in the sky, and together we grow before the face of the sun."

Then God leaned over me, and in my ears whispered words of sweetness, and even as the sea that enfoldeth a brook that runneth down to her, he enfolded me.

And when I descended to the valleys and the plains God was there also.

Nature

BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

As a fond mother, when the day is o'er,
Leads by the hand her little child to bed,
Half willing, half reluctant to be led,
And leave his broken playthings on the floor,
Still gazing at them through the open door,
Nor wholly reassured and comforted
By promises of others in their stead,
Which, though more splendid, may not please him more;
So Nature deals with us, and takes away
Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
Scarce knowing if we wish to go or stay,
Being too full of sleep to understand
How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

Suffering

BY MAXWELL BODENHEIM

The morning lowers its fire-veined back
And quivers beneath the edged feet of winds:
So do you stoop to your agony.
The air brushes up the fibrous souls
Of flowers, and sprinkles them between
The flickering-sleeved arms of lime trees:
So does your sorrow whirl you apart.
The brocade-robed night staggers against the wall of the
sky,
And fiercely sinks its woe-turbaned head:
So does your grief lean upon me.