

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Therapeutic letters – changing the emotional schemas using writing letters to significant caregivers

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Abstract

The letter writing has been used as a strategy in different psychotherapeutic approaches. Therapeutic letters are intended to extend the work of therapy beyond the consulting room door by continuing the meaning-making that occurred in a therapeutic conversation. Although CBT stresses the importance of cognitions or thoughts in activating or maintaining negative affects, there has been increasing emphasis on considering the role of emotional processing. Many of our patients believe that one should be rational and logical all the time, never have conflicting feelings, and should ruminate in order to figure things out. Meaningful cognitive and simultaneously experiential technique for working with deep emotional schemas, formatted in childhood, is writing therapeutic letters. Inclusions of emotion regulation skills in the treatment especially for patients with personality disorder enhance the efficacy of CBT. We used therapeutic letters to help the patient identify difficult feelings, process them in a way that maybe they could not in a therapy session, and finally get release and freedom from them. Typical therapeutic letters are address to important close persons from the patient life, like parents, siblings, a partner and friends, children. The patient uses the letter to impress his/her feeling and needs, inclusive defenses of his rights in past and present. Patient writes a letter at home, and he brings it then into the session and reads it to the therapist. These letters are not intended to be sent to that important person, but to process strong emotions inside the patient. In fact the patient writes a letter to his inner representation of an important person, who was connected with the development of the maladaptive schemas. The letter-writing process is inherently collaborative and enables the patient to work at his or her own pace while also facilitating patient empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The letter writing has been used as a strategy in different psychotherapeutic approaches, such as narrative therapy, cognitive therapy, cognitive analytic therapy (Wojcik & Iverson 1989; France *et al* 1995; Praško *et al* 2006). Therapists work with therapeutic letters with different patient populations: with adolescents, psychoses, bulimia (Goldberg 2000; Murray 2002; Zimmer-

man & Shepherd 1993). Therapeutic letters can be also used in a nursing practice or in therapy with patients with a somatic illness and family therapy. Therapeutic letters are intended to extend the process of therapy beyond the consulting room door by continuing in the meaning-making that occurred in a therapeutic conversation. A therapeutic letter to a patient, written by their therapist is a specialized narrative tool that works both as a handout and homework. Also, it can be a

useful tool to enhance the emotional process. Letters are handouts in the sense that the patient brings home a highly individualized document that affirms her/his knowledge, resources and breakthroughs. Letters are also homework: they encourage patients on to try out more of what is working during the session, and invite them to reflect on where they might be headed if these favorable developments continue. The term therapeutic letters is used in different format of interventions. Most psychotherapists use therapeutic letters, send them to the patients, as their personal letter, and part of the process of therapy, such as a description of a case formulation or a summary of the work they have been doing (Wojcik & Iverson 1989; Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993; Goldberg 2000). Patients who experience problems with memory and attention during recovery from psychotic episodes and have trouble remembering what they discussed in the sessions can get access to important information from these types of letters. While writing therapeutic letters, the therapist has to think about the style of letter writing, and how to convey a compassionate, validating stance while also describing the therapist conceptualization of what is going on for the patient, and what therapist think might help.

The use of therapeutic letters in our cognitive behavioral practice is different. Although CBT stresses the importance of cognitions or thoughts in activating or maintaining negative affects, there has been increasing emphasis on considering the role of *emotional processing* (Leahy 2001). Many patients do not understand strong emotions they experience in interpersonal situations or have no access to deep emotional feelings. How parents teach their kids about their emotions is important for the way children manage the emotions in adulthood. Many of our patients believe that one should be rational and logical all the time, never have conflicting feelings and should ruminate in order to figure things out. Disapproving parental style entails criticism and over-control of the child's feelings, while dysregulated parents are overwhelmed by their own emotions and reject the child's emotions. Writing therapeutic letters is a meaningful cognitive as well as an experiential technique for working with deep emotional schemas, developed throughout the childhood. Due to the cognitive and emotive avoidance (suppression) the range of not elaborated emotional experiences transfers to the subsequent similar situations. The elaborations of cognitive and emotional schemas are extremely helpful for patients suffering from anxiety disorders, personality disorder or affective disorder for:

- a) understanding why psychopathology develops;
- b) understanding why the patterns of maladaptive interpersonal behavior developed and how they are maintained;
- c) knowing how to change the cognitive and emotional patterns;
- d) change of maladaptive patterns of behavior.

Inclusions of emotion regulation skills in the treatment especially for patients with personality disorder enhance the efficacy of CBT in this group. Many people with personality disorders believe that emotions:

- are incomprehensible,
- are unique to the self,
- are shameful,
- can never be validated or expressed
- and that one's emotions will go out of control if experienced.

We use therapeutic letters to help the patient to identify difficult feelings, processing them in another way than in a therapy session, with the chance for the patients to be finally free from these feelings. The letter writing can allow a physical way for the problem to be externalized, named, and then confronted (Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993). In addition, because the content of such letter is conducted in most part by the patient, the patient determines pacing, what, when, and whether to disclosure (Rasmussen & Tamm 1992). Therapeutic letter represents a way for an individual to trace his or her story through time at a self-guided pace, thereby embodying changes and avenues for potential change for which patients are searching (White & Epsom 1990). Another advantage of using letter-writing interventions relates to the concrete and tangible nature of the letter. Therapeutic letters can be re-read and the story can be considered with a concrete means for evaluation both during the session and well after the session has ended (Goldberg 2000). Typically, the letters are not sending to the addressee, because there are used mostly for the patient communication with him (especially to notify the emotional process running inside him). They can be "addressed" to:

- A letter to an ex-husband to reveal what patient considers to be his part in their marriage's failure;
- A letter to a sibling to whom the patient did any harm or who on the other hand hurt the patient;
- A letter to express feelings towards an alcoholic parent to let him know how his problem affected the patient as a child and has affected him as an adult;
- A letter expressing feelings about sexual abuse to a family member who did it;
- A letter to child who died during the birth process or shortly after delivery;
- A letter to a former partner of the patient, who betrayed the patient or was betrayed by the patient.
- A letter to letting go to a dying parent;
- A letter of love and saying good-bye to a family member who died etc.

Typical components of the emotional processing are:

- (5) Psychoeducation about emotions
- (6) Emotion evocation techniques
- (7) Emotion regulation skill training

This training also would address any avoidance of emotional experience and evoke and deepen emotional experience.

METHOD

The technique of writing therapeutic letters is used typically for homework. Some parts of the letter can stir up such strong emotions in the patient, that it is better for him to write it in proximity of the therapist (e.g. in waiting - room or in day hospital). Typical therapeutic letters are addressed to important close persons from the patient life, like parents, siblings, partner and friends, children (Praško *et al* 2007). The patient uses letter to impress his/her feeling and needs, including defenses of his rights in past and present. Patient writes a letter at home, and then he brings it into the session and reads it to the therapist. These letters are not prepared to be sent to an important person, but to process strong emotions inside of the patient. In fact the patient writes a letter to his inner representation of important person, who was connected with the developing of the maladaptive schemas (Pašková *et al* 2005). The letter can be also written to the persons, who have already died.

Emotional processing has 3 basic aims (Praško *et al* 2006) :

- a) To activate the emotions through experiential or emotion-focused exercises
- b) To induce emotional states connected with early experiences
- c) To teach the client to cope with strong emotions in a safe atmosphere.

Table 1: Therapeutic letters for emotional processing of core beliefs

Sense of working with therapeutic letters:

- a) To give an experience of "different end"
- b) cognitive reconstruction helps to understand processes of attribution
- c) cognitive and emotional avoidance allow avoiding strong emotions – maintenance factor
- d) exposure to strong emotions – step by step training to cope with them
- e) therapeutic letters – contact with basic emotional states connected with cognitive schemas

No censored letter - "Dirty letter" to a significant person

Optimally, the letter should not be censored and has to contain all emotions, needs, demands and condemnations, that patient can feel to this person. It is important to express the emotions in a "raw", naturalistic and crude form. If it is too "soft" therapist asks the patient to write a new, more open and authentic letter. Therapist helps the patient to discover next important emotion in the relationship: aggression, passion, sorrow, disillusion, wish, love etc. These letters can also help the

Table 1: Therapeutic letters to emotional processing of core beliefs

Steps of homework:

1. Letter to a significant person (mother, father etc)
 - "Dirty letter" (without censure)
 - "Full emotions letter"
2. Letter from "the other side" (Letter to own "hurt child")
3. To the child of the significant person from the role of "healthy adult"
4. Letter "visit-card"

patient to understand that all relations, especially to close person, has many tiers of emotions.

He recalls the time he has believed, that he has failed or has been a bad person, or that nobody loved him, he had to be perfect or not making mistakes etc. The letter could contain all feelings, needs, exigencies, condemnations which patient experienced to that person. What he wanted to say to an important person and has not aid in fact. It is optimal to find several levels of emotional experience: anger, contempt, envy, jealousy; pain, grief, abandon, fear and uncertainty; sorrow and responsibility; love, understanding, intimacy. Patient wouldn't leave out list his laws, which he feels were missed in his childhood. The formulations could be expressed with credibility. If the formulation is "kempt", the therapist asks the patient to add additional and more authentic feelings.

"Dirty letter" to a significant person can be focused on opening various emotional levels of the relation:

- Anger, aggression, mistrust, jealousy, irony, punishment etc.
- regret, sadness, loneliness, dependence
- needs, desire
- acceptance, friendship, collaboration, love, gentle

Table 2: Example of uncensored letter to the mother

Letter from "the other side" (Letter to own "hurt child")

Letter writing provides an avenue for locating support not just from external sources, but also from internal sources. Follow-up letter is a letter that patient would wish to get from an important person (parent, sibling, partner, friend etc.). Rather than sending letters of disclosure to others for a response, and often painful or threatening suggestion to those who experienced traumatic events, a patient responds to the letter with what he or she feels would be the most beneficial response, thus providing self-support (Madigan 1997). Even if he writes this letter to himself, creation can be crucial for him, because the patient recognized what he wants. The patients are thus provided with an opportunity to view situation from a different angle. Such a letter can help the patient to change his maladaptive schemas.

The next letter has contains secret wishes, what patients wants to hear from the significant other. Anything the patient wants can be described in that letter: an apology, explanation why significant other behaved

Table 2: Example of uncensored letter to a mother

Mother,

You will never know, how strongly I hate – how disgusting for me is - to call you like this. This word “mother” reminds me of all the degradation in my childhood when you transferred your anger you have brought from work to me as well as to the father. I will never forget the dirty invectives that you called me for each bagatelle. You crip, you baggage, you bitch, you swine. Weren't you ashamed to call me these names although I was still a kid? I hate you. For your screaming, abuse, manipulation, dirty tricks, for complaining to the father and denigrating me in his eyes, for that you poked in my things, snooped in my handbag. How you lay drunk in the bed and gaped at the TV, you let others to serve you, and you berated at the same time. I hate you that you have kicked me when you found out I had started to smoke. But you didn't mind that you hit the bottle. I hate you for being nervous now, and I don't trust myself.

I hate you for that I am afraid of all the criticism now, at work as well as in my marriage. I hate you also for that I sometime behave beastly like you. You taught me to hate you because my childhood had not been as nice as the others.

I hate you for hating myself now, and I disgust myself. It's disgusting life. When I disgust myself I feel that I am disgusting for others too.

I am so sorry that you didn't express love to me. As a kid, I always worried that you could leave me, that you loved only brother, that I am only heavy duty for you. I am sorry that you never came around and just hugged me. I needed it a lot. Therefore, all my life I aspire after a bit of palm, and I do anything for that. It distorts me as I tend for any compliment and acceptance so much that I lose my own self-esteem. However, how can I be proud of myself when you never were proud of me? You also dispraised me in front of friends and relatives, you told about my fat hair, you told that I was not clever enough; I was not good at anything, and so on. How can I trust myself after all?

I think, I had a full right to be loved and accepted by you. I wasn't such a bad little girl. And I loved you anyhow, you were the most important person for me, and you still are, in spite of that I love father more. He was nice to me, and he expressed his love to me. But I have a right for your love. I want it. I do love you still. Although I hate you from time to time, somewhere deep I love you so much forever. The hatefulness comes only from the feeling of falsity that you don't love me.

I wanted to call you many times that I love you, and this is true. I still honor your elegance, humility, ability to understand things. For me, you are a scale in many things. My God, how I would like to be more adult, so that I would not need you so much. I wish that you were already dead sometimes, so that I would get a rest from you. Afterwards, I know that I would not stand it. It is like damnation, to crave a lot for your love and accepting me how I am, but at the same time there is so much anger and animosity, and so much love on the other hand.

I know that you cannot give me what I want. Although you think that you help me always a lot, fuck, you only make important yourself, so that the others can see how you immolate. I sneeze at your immolation.

Your (un) daughter,

Mirka

in a negative way, manifestation of proximity, freedom, acceptance (“*you are my*”), security, love (“*I love you*”). The patient starts to build his inner ideal parent. Therapist can tell the patient: “Don't be uselessly bashful and indulge yourself in everything, what you were missing any time at your life.”

Table 3: Example of the “letter from other side”

Dear Mirka, my little child,

I want to tell you that I love you. When you were born and I had you in my bed, I loved you more than anyone. I admired your first steps, your first words, your smile and making faces. When your brother was born suddenly I had less time for you. I was sorry for that because I saw how you envied him. I understood that but I had to spend more time with taking care of him, when he was younger. I am sorry that he was born so soon after you had been born, so you didn't have enough time for our full attention. I started to be unsatisfied at that time, fed up with everything, and had a lot of quarrels with your father until he had found another woman. I don't know why I was so unhappy. Maybe because my mother was unhappy and you are also unhappy. We are similar, somehow we are not able to enjoy life and feel fine among other people. Because you were my closest person I was unhappy when you did not do well. Immediately I saw it as a horrible thing. I was angry and then I was bad to you. And even then I loved you all the time and I still love you. I want to apologize for my behavior. I want to apologize for being drunk; for shouting at you, using dirty words, for not being able to tell you anything nice in order to give you support.

Nevertheless, you grew up into a beautiful person. You are nice and people like you, even if you don't believe it (we are similar in this aspect). You are fair, straight, honest, human and very thoughtful, brave and very much yourself. I believe that you can beard that and I believe that you can take my behavior and you can excuse me someday. And if not, I will still love you because you are worth it. I wish you to be happy. I hope that you will find a man who will love you and you will love him. You need love. I wish you such love. I wish you such love so much. I love everything on you even if you don't know it. Your mouth, your nose, your hair, ears, your breasts, belly, back and even your vagina. No, it's not erotic, it's maternal. I washed you so many times, I cuddle you, and so it cannot be different.

I love you as you are. I love your personality, your features including your stuffiness – when you go for something even if it looks like nonsense to others.

Your mother

Empathic letter from the “other side“is the letter from the important relative, which client wants to receive (ideal letter). The patient formulates it to his hurting part of the personality. It can help with:

- healing of psychic traumas (empathy, apologize)
- give acceptance (“you are my, I love you...“)
- give safety (“I am with you...“)
- reinforce (“You know...you cope well with...“)
- give freedom (“you can yourself...“)

Table 3: Example of the “letter from other side“

Letter “visit-card “

This letter should be written from modality “ healthy adult”. Then it could be written directly, bravely, but no quackery, destined to reconciliation, with dignity, great respect to the addressed person. Letter “visit-card“ is:

- letter “adult to adult“
- change roles, includes compromises, empathy to important relative
- I am OK – you are OK
- Client can be proud what he wrights in this letter

Table 4: Example to the letter to the father

Table 4: Example to the letter to the father

Dear Dad,

It is very difficult to write you a letter, since you are already dead. When I remember you, I always feel like crying. I was very critical of you during your life. You were very strict to me, I was beaten very often and you did not show me your love. I felt helpless many times when I saw your anger and rigorousness. I have had fear of male authorities since that time as well as worries of failure. I must criticize yourself because you broke my courage to be in intimate relation. I don't believe anybody will respect or like me. I have feared that if I fail to act in anything, others reject me. It would be horrible for me, because I remember, how I suffered when you rejected me in past. That is why I avoid any close relations. On the other hand I crave for somebody close to me.

I understand on the other hand, that you loved me, only you couldn't to display any love. You supported me at university and also in my sport carrier, you have been proud about me. I know from other person, that you speak about me with the proud – but you never praise me directly. I remember that I sometime feel you like me very much. When I was a little boy and policeman interrogate me and you came, shout to the policeman and hold me in your arms. I felt you love me and protect me. Then I feel you relying on me, when mother was ill. I knew you trust me and it affect me. Then, when you started to be ill, I recognized, you love me very much. Sometimes I was the only one, whom you were believed. At the same time you didn't want to trouble me, even you were not feel well. I recognized, you carefully watch my life and from the adulthood you never interfere with it.

Daddy, I love you very much, I think, there is nothing to forgiving, I did it long time ago. On the other side, I am grateful for many things, you did for me. You learn me to be diligent, to overcome fear and go to the action, to believe, that when I decide to do something, I am able to realize it, to overrule the obstructions without keening, hang in, to think on needs of other people, to be modest and unselfish and to enjoy the life. Even I am grateful you to some way „bad characteristics“, which I am catch from you, like priding myself and that I sometimes promise something, what I can't realize. Sometimes I am refined astute and in other time dewy – eyed. Sometimes I detonate with passion like you. Older I am, more of your features I find on myself.

In something I want to overcome you. At least, only for a little bit. I would like to be braver to the authorities and more opened to those people, I like them I want to have bigger courage to be more open in close relations. This quality I can developed only with children yet. I want learn no only work all time, but to have more pleasant activities. I want to know how to distribute more love around me – even it happens some time a bit.

Your Vladimir

The letter to the “little child” of the significant person

Last letter patient writes to the child of important person. We usually ask the patient, to bring the photos of the important person when she or he was as a child, for example photographs of the mother when she was about 8 - 10 years old. We ask patient to think, what this child on picture missed from his or her parents. Which needs of this child have not been satisfied? Then patient writes an empathic letter to this small child. This letter provides the experience of adult feeling of caring and protection above important person in reversed role.

Suddenly there is not a big rejecting mother or physically abusing father anymore, but a child with unsatisfied child's needs. This letter helps to equalize roles between the patient and his close relative.

CONCLUSION

The use of the letter-writing is an excellent intervention in cognitive behavioral therapy for the patients with anxiety, affective and personality disorder. It uses a strength-based orientation, and is interpersonally sensitive. The letter-writing process is inherently collaborative and enables the patient to work at his or her own pace while also facilitating patient empowerment and an emotional process. The using of therapeutic letter might also help the therapist to get closer the meaning of patient's story. Sometime in therapeutic sessions the patient cannot express the real feeling about some crucial moments of his/her life, so a therapeutic letter in that way can be useful too.

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