

PSYCHOTHERAPY

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

Jan Prasko<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>, Tomas DIVEKY<sup>1, 2</sup>, Petr MOZNY<sup>5</sup>, Zuzana SIGMUNDOVA<sup>1, 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital Olomouc; <sup>2</sup> Faculty of Medicine, University Palacky Olomouc  
<sup>3</sup> Prague Psychiatric Centre; <sup>4</sup> Centre of Neuropsychiatric Studies; <sup>5</sup> Mental Hospital Kroměříž.

*Correspondence to:* doc. MUDr. Ján Praško, CSc. Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital Olomouc  
 I. P. Pavlova 6, 77 52 Olomouc, Czech Republic. E-MAIL: prasko@fnol.cz

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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