

# **The Use of Creative Writing Interventions in Substance Abuse Treatment**

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**Search Terms:** (sobriety OR abstinence OR decrease OR recovery OR self-expression) AND (addiction OR drugs and alcohol OR youth at risk OR substance dependence) AND (poetry OR poem OR lyrics OR creative writing OR journaling OR reminiscence) AND (therapy OR treatment OR recreation therapy OR therapeutic recreation) NOT smoking cessation

**Years:** 1997-2014

**Databases:** Academic OneFile, EbscoHost, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, PubMed

**Number of Articles:** 6

## **Summary of Research Findings**

This literature review focused on the use of creative writing interventions in the treatment of adolescents and adults with substance abuse issues. A total of six articles were reviewed that described programs in inpatient (Alschuler, 2000; Howard, 1997; Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis & McMahon, 2014; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012; Tyson & Baffour, 2004), outpatient (Alschuler, 2000), and school settings (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012; Young, Rodriguez & Neighbors, 2013). Some adopted a treatment focus (Alshuler, 2000; Howard, 1997; Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014), while one explored possible prevention initiatives (Young et al., 2013). Two articles focused more generally on the therapeutic applications of writing based interventions and why they may be particularly well suited for producing therapeutic outcomes in this population (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012; Tyson & Baffour, 2004).

A variety of creative writing interventions were presented including poetry (Alschuler, 2000), expressive writing (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013) and interventions combining both music and poetry (Howard, 1997; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012). Interventions were frequently structured around a theme that was relevant for the group. Themes included positive and negative experiences with drinking (Young et al., 2013); emotional topics relevant to the individual (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014); encouragement (Howard, 1997); and relapse prevention/recovery maintenance, installation of hope, decision making, emotional conflicts, and relationships (Alschuler, 2000).

In one study, clients were asked to self-identify activity interventions they used for improved coping, and writing and listening to music were the top two responses (Tyson & Baffour, 2004). This may be one reason these two modalities are frequently combined during treatment. Additionally, since music and poetry were determined to be equally effective treatments within this population (Howard, 1997), Olson-McBride & Page (2012) argued that music can provide a culturally relevant, safe and familiar starting point for participants to become engaged and form connections.

Despite limited research in this area, creative writing activities appear to be a viable treatment intervention that can not only lead to decreased drinking intentions (Young et al., 2013), but can also lead to improvements in depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms and physical health in individuals with substance abuse issues (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014). Furthermore, treatment sessions involving creative writing have been linked to improvements in self-confidence/self-esteem, social skills (Alschuler, 2000), social/emotional self-expression/self-disclosure (Alschuler, 2000; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012), coping, self-awareness (Alschuler, 2000; Tyson & Baffour, 2004) and trust (Alschuler, 2000) in this population. If clients have not previously had experience with creative writing, leisure skill development may also occur (Alschuler, 2000).

## **Knowledge Translation Plan**

Recreation Therapists should consider using creative writing interventions when working with adolescents and adults with substance abuse issues since these interventions may assist in creating a therapeutic alliance between therapist and client (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012), increase on-task behavior of clients (Howard, 1997), and assist clients in reaching their goals (Howard, 1997).

A variety of evidence-based writing activities can be explored including both individual and group poetry writing (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012), the use of poetry magnets (Alschuler, 2000), expressive writing (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013), freewriting (Alschuler, 2000), clustering (Alschuler, 2000), and combined music and poetry sessions including lyric analysis (Howard, 2007; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012).

Since the frequency and amount of time allotted for sessions yielding positive results varies greatly in the literature, therapists can consider both short-term and long-term creative writing groups. Also, since mixed groups and homogeneous groups (particularly women’s groups) have been explored, therapists should use their clinical judgment to determine what type of group dynamic might work best for their clients.

As always, the Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS®) should consider the individuals they work with when implementing activities involving potentially sensitive and emotionally overwhelming topics. Additional time for processing may be necessary in some cases. However, this should not discourage therapists from addressing sensitive and personal subjects since self-disclosure and the processing of personal issues is often greatest when content is more personal. Participants frequently describe emotionally focused essays and music as more meaningful, personal and revealing (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2014). Given this, therapists may find clients are most engaged when they have some autonomy in selecting material and topics as part of session development so that activities align with their personal interests and issues.

	Intervention	Themes	Outcomes
Addiction Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Writing</li> <li>• Lyric Analysis</li> <li>• Poetry Writing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual</li> <li>-Group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Disclosure</li> <li>• Self-Expression</li> <li>• Connection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Self-Disclosure</li> <li>↑ Therapeutic Alliance</li> <li>↓ Drinking Intentions</li> </ul>
Addiction Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freewriting</li> <li>• Clustering</li> <li>• Poetry Magnets</li> <li>• Music &amp; Poetry</li> <li>• Lyric Analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement</li> <li>• Past Experiences</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Emotional Conflicts</li> <li>• Decision Making</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Recovery Maintenance</li> <li>• Relapse Prevention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Self-Disclosure</li> <li>↑ Therapeutic Alliance &amp; Trust</li> <li>↑ Self-Confidence &amp; Self-Esteem</li> <li>↑ Social Skills &amp; Self-Expression</li> <li>↑ Self-Awareness</li> <li>↑ Physical Health</li> <li>↑ Goal Attainment</li> <li>↑ Coping Skills</li> <li>↓ Trauma Symptoms &amp; Stress</li> <li>↓ Depression &amp; Anxiety</li> </ul>

## References

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- Olson-McBride, L., & Page, T. F. (2012). Song to self: promoting therapeutic dialogue with high-risk youths through poetry and popular music. *Social Work with Groups, 35*(2), 124-137.
- Tyson, E. H., & Baffour, T. D. (2004). Arts-based strengths: a solution-focused intervention with adolescents in an acute-care psychiatric setting. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 31*, 213-227.
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