

The Power of the Narrative: Looking into the Impact of Creative Writing
When Dealing with Various Traumatic Experiences

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Abstract

When dealing with a traumatic experience, a person may choose to cope in a variety of ways. One option is to write about the trauma, the feelings during the trauma, and the feelings before or after the trauma using some form of narrative writing. This could be through poetry, short stories, diary entries, letters, and so on. For some people, it can be difficult to voice their thoughts and feelings out loud to another person, so narrative writing allows an alternate way to express what may have happened. By using the words in the narrative writing, the person can disconnect from the trauma or see it in a new light that would be most beneficial to them. The most important part of this strategy is that the control of what happens next gets to be given to the individual because the person just underwent a traumatic experience that was likely out of their control. If the person decides to share the narrative writing though, it is important to recognize the potential impact on the receiving audience. It can be either potentially harmful or beneficial to those out there depending on their past experiences and how the narrative was received. There is the potential of causing harm to the audience members being exposed to it. The effects of a traumatic experience do not only affect those who were present for the event, but also anyone else who may be experiencing it second-hand.

Keywords: psychology, trauma, narrative writing, coping mechanism

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Introduction

When going through life, there is seemingly a certain amount of control that people have over their days. However, we cannot always predict what will happen next. Sometimes there is a major life event, either positive or negative, that may affect the way that a person chooses to live their life on a daily basis afterwards. This paper will focus on a negative effect such as a traumatic experience. These experiences can influence a person's daily life because they can change how a person goes about their day, how they feel about themselves, how they feel about others, and their overall sense of security. After going through a traumatic experience, some people do sit and wait for the 'next time.' Meaning, they expect that something else just as bad, if not worse, will come about to harm them again. With this, the use of narrative writing has been implemented as a coping strategy for those dealing with these traumatic experiences to express their thoughts and feelings without needing to say the words out loud. This type of release can potentially be extremely beneficial to both the author and their audience, if they choose to share it because of the connections that can be made between the individuals. However, it can also be harmful to the audience members depending on how they are being exposed to the narrative. Although the overall well-being of the person who has gone through the traumatic experience is the most important, it is still important to recognize how their actions can affect others.

What is Trauma?

Throughout a person's life, people go through a variety of experiences, both good and bad. Within some of the bad experiences can be ones that are extremely distressing or disturbing

to a person, which is broadly known as trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Trauma does not have to be confined to one single event as most people believe. Trauma can also include repeated events and sustained/chronic experiences (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Some examples of trauma include sexual assault, child maltreatment (neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse/psychological maltreatment), domestic violence, war-related trauma (refugee and war zone trauma, terrorism, combat-related trauma), school violence, community violence, medical trauma, traumatic loss, natural disasters, and so on (Boals, 2018). Although trauma itself can be defined easily, this list dictates how diverse traumatic experiences can be. It is also important to recognize that traumatic experiences can happen to anyone. Of course, some populations may be more at risk than others. For example, in terms of adult sexual assault, it is more common for women to be victims than people of other genders (Boals, 2018). However, there are a multitude of types of traumatic experiences that can affect a wide range of people. Traumatic experiences can be thought of quite broadly but can be broken down into different subgroups that would include the various types of traumatic experiences listed above.

One subgroup of trauma can be determined by who/what the trauma was caused by. Meaning, a traumatic experience can be either caused naturally or human-caused. For example, a massive hurricane that destroys a town would be a natural event, or also commonly referred to as acts of God (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). These events are out of human control and therefore there is little for people to blame. On the other hand, human-caused events such as an arsonist intentionally burning down a building that in turn kills people is clear in terms of there being someone to blame. The cause of a traumatic event occurring is something that a lot of people take into account when their thoughts and feelings are being formed following an event. For example, it is more common for people who experience a human-caused

trauma to view the event as more traumatic because they may feel as though something could have been done to prevent it; whereas there is no way that someone can stop a hurricane from ripping through the coastline (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014).

A second subgroup of traumatic experiences differentiates between individual trauma, group trauma, community trauma, and mass traumas. Individual trauma refers to a traumatic experience that only happens to one specific person (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). With this type of trauma, there may be a lack of support that the individual feels because no one else had gone through the experience with them. There is also a higher potential of someone keeping their traumatic experience a secret from others because they may fear that others may not believe them or they may have a sense of shame that comes from it as well (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Group trauma is typically defined as traumatic experiences that are occurring to only a small group of people who share a common identity, history, activities, and concerns (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). One of the most common examples of people that experience group trauma is first responders. First responders are often victims of group trauma because they are the ones who are making themselves readily available during some of the most dangerous times. An example of a group trauma could be a team of firefighters who lose members of their team during a roof collapse of a building that was on fire. Community trauma is different from group trauma because it affects a much larger range of people. One example is if there is a school shooting that kills a multitude of children of varying ages. This would be a community trauma because of the different people in the community that are affected such as the students, parents, teachers, first responders, and so on (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). It is typical that in cases like these the community itself comes together with a sense of comradery

because everyone is seemingly going through a very similar experience (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Finally, mass trauma occurs when there is a large number of people who are either directly or indirectly affected by an event through loss of property, loss of services, loss of lives, and so on (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). An example of a mass trauma was in 2010 when a massive earthquake occurred in Haiti that cost the lives of thousands and then left millions homeless. It is typically the scale of the event that would determine if it is a mass trauma or if it can be defined as something else.

Another subgroup of trauma is defined as interpersonal trauma. These events are typically repeated or ongoing traumatic events that occur between people who know each other, such as spouses or parents and their children (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). This trauma is unique in the sense that there is no mystery as to who is causing the trauma, but there can be an added element of fear when reporting such trauma. One example is intimate partner violence which can also be referred to as domestic violence and is defined as a pattern of actual or threatened physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Interpersonal violence can be extremely traumatic for a person because of the sense of trust that is broken between two people who were seemingly close to one other. This can be something that makes it hard for survivors to learn to trust others in the future. It can also make it difficult for the individual to tell others about the experience in fear that the perpetrator would be able to know how they are talking about and in turn hurt them again.

An additional subgroup of trauma is developmental trauma. This type of trauma includes specific events or experiences that occur within a given developmental stage that later influence development, adjustment, physical health, and mental health (Center for Substance Abuse

Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). Typically, this occurs in children who experience trauma at a young age, but they are not the only population that can be affected. For example, if a parent suffers the loss of their child, the parent may then view this as traumatic because of the event occurring outside of the expected timeline. Meaning, it is more common for the parent to die before their child, so a parent may not be able to handle having their child die before they do. Another example of developmental trauma can occur from adverse childhood experiences. Through various research, it was found that these experiences can affect someone's well-being for their entire life as well as put them at an increased risk of vulnerability to physical, mental, and substance abuse disorders (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 2, 2014). This makes it that much more important to implement intervention techniques such as narrative writing for those individuals to be able to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Various Effects of Trauma

The effects of trauma on individuals is not something that is one hundred percent universal to each person who experiences it. Of course, there is some overlap of the effects experienced. However, it is important to recognize that every individual is unique, and their experience of a traumatic event is also unique. This is even true when a traumatic experience affects more than just one individual, such as a natural disaster. Not everyone will have the same lasting effects from the experience. Trauma can affect people emotionally, physically, cognitively, and behaviorally (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). In terms of emotions, it is common for a person to experience emotional dysregulation. Meaning, someone would have a difficult time in controlling their emotions and may be switching to and from emotions at a pace that is not common. The most common emotions felt following a

traumatic experience are anger, fear, sadness, numbness, and shame (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). Physically a person may be affected because of an injury sustained at the event, or it could be other lasting effects such as somatic complaints, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, neurological, musculoskeletal, respiratory, dermatological disorders, urological problems, and substance use disorders (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). A person's cognitive perception of the world can also be drastically affected by a traumatic experience. This can be caused by the individual's brain being impacted by the event to suspect that more trauma may occur to them. Some examples of cognitive effects are excessive guilt/survivor's guilt., idealization. hallucinations, delusions, intrusive thoughts and memories, and triggers (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). Reactions to the stress associated with traumatic experiences can vary, but people tend to try to find ways to manage that stress that may cause a change in their behaviors both by themselves and around others. Some people reduce tension or stress through avoidance, self-medicating (e.g., alcohol/drug abuse), compulsive behaviors that give control, impulsive behaviors like ones they wouldn't usually take (e.g., high-risk behaviors), and/or self-injurious behaviors (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). Others may try to gain control over their experiences by being aggressive or subconsciously reenacting aspects of the trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Chapter 3, 2014). In terms of others, a person may tend to lean on their support systems a lot more than they would in the past, or they may do the opposite and completely avoid those people. Overall, it is not a guarantee that every individual will experience everything that has been mentioned because each person and each traumatic experience is so unique.

In a study completed by Wamser-Nanney, Howell, Schwartz, and Hasselle (2018), the researchers looked at how event centrality affected the individual after the traumatic experience. Event centrality is defined as, “the extent to which traumatic experiences are perceived to be integral to one’s life,” (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018). This is important because if someone is not greatly affected by their traumatic experience, then they may not have as many lasting negative effects as someone who’s life revolves around their experience. A common example that a lot of research has backed-up is that it is more typically for those who experience interpersonal traumas to have a more difficult time coping with the intentionally inflicted traumas when compared to accidental traumas (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018). This study was designed to replicate those findings from past research as well as determine if event centrality is associated with indicators of psychological well-being and if the type of traumatic experience can affect the relationship between event centrality and the effects on the individual (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018). This study included 429 young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. These participants had to fill out a variety of surveys and scales to determine the effects of their traumatic experiences such as the Childhood Traumatic Events Scale, Centrality of Events Scale, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Civilian 5, Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, Post Traumatic Growth Index, Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being – Medium Form, and Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018). After collecting the data from the various scales and surveys from the participants, the researchers found that there was a difference found between what traumatic experience an individual had gone through and how that affected them. For example, “when sexual trauma was the index event, event centrality was more strongly related to the outcome than death of a loved one, suggesting the importance of trauma type in understanding event centrality and adverse

outcomes,” (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018, p.505). It can be suggested that sexual trauma would have a higher index of event centrality because of the direct exposure to the traumatic experience by the individual. The study concluded that event centrality was positively correlated to PTSD, depression, and post traumatic growth; whereas it was negatively correlated to psychological well-being (Wamser-Nanney et. al, 2018). Overall, when looking into the effects of a traumatic experience, it is important to recognize how influential it was on a person’s life because that can determine how they are affected by the event itself.

One population that is common to experience traumatic events are children. How these experiences affect them is something that is highly researched because of the risk of long-term effects that can hinder a child’s development. A study completed by Augusti, Baugerud, Solutvedt, and Melinder (2018), researched how the different types of maltreatment that a child may experience could have an effect on the symptomology that the children face following the traumatic experience. This study included 153 children aged 3-12 and utilized the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC) to determine what a child was experiencing and if they were maltreated or not (Augusti et al., 2018). The research states that, “Maltreated children endure highly negative life experiences often inflicted upon them by their primary caregivers or other significant people in their lives...which undoubtedly contributes to the psychological toll these children report to experience (Augusti et al., 2018, p. 396). Studying these types of traumatic experiences in children is vital because it is important to understand how these children are being affected so that there can be effective intervention techniques set into place to help the child. The researchers concluded that maltreatment takes a significant toll on a child’s psychological well-being which would cause more negative symptoms to occur when compared to children who did not experience maltreatment (Augusti et al., 2018). It was also

found that in neglected children, specifically, it was more common for them to internalize their symptoms or show them more subtly, which in turn would make it harder to recognize that a child was struggling (Augusti et al., 2018). By conducting such research, it helps to see how a child can be affected by traumatic experience to know what to help them to work through while trying to cope with the experience.

Types of Narrative Writing

When speaking about creating narrative writings as a coping mechanism for a traumatic event, it is important to know what types of narrative writings there are. No one type is better than another. This is because the most important aspect is ensuring that the person who has undergone the trauma can work through their emotions in whatever way works best for them. Some people may be better at poetry, while others may want to write an entire novel and publish it for the world to see. The choice remains in the hands of the person creating the narrative piece. Some options for narrative writings include, but are not limited to, poems, short stories, novels, songs, diary entries, letters to themselves or others, free writing, and eulogies. Having this creative option for people allows for them to receive the same benefits of disclosing about events in a therapeutic setting outside of one (Smyth & Helm, 2003). To test these effects, it is typical in research for participants in a study to be asked to come in for several consecutive days to take around thirty minutes of time each day to write about their, “deepest thoughts and feelings regarding the most stressful and/or traumatic experiences” (Smyth & Helm, 2003, p. 228). Research does not usually test the effects of the different types of narrative writing, but it can be assumed that the effects can be generalized to the various styles of writing. The main focus of the studies is to show how a person is affected by sharing their experiences overall.

Having the options of various types of narrative writing can be extremely beneficial to someone who is writing about a traumatic experience. Narrative writing in general does not require that someone must be an already trained and published author to be able to do it (Smyth & Helm, 2003). Narrative writing is something that can be accessible to most people. It is also important because narrative writing does not require a therapist to be involved. Someone can decide on their own to do narrative writing in whatever style they may choose. Having the choice of how to write about the traumatic experience can give the person a sense of control that they may have lost in the past through the experience. One example of the effectiveness of narrative writing was seen in a case study done by Smyth & Helm (2003), that studied a woman named Mary who had been abused in multiple relationships and in turn suffered from PTSD. Mary's main concern was if her writing was going to be good enough to explain what had happened to her and what her thoughts and feelings surrounding the experiences were (Smyth & Helm, 2003). However, that was not the point of the study. The point was for Mary to write freely about her experiences in any way that she had wanted and in any form of narrative writing that she had chosen. By the end of the study, Mary had utilized free writing, poems, and letters and felt more peaceful overall and reported, "improved mood, better sleep, and reductions in anxiety and physical symptoms" (Smyth & Helm, 2003, p.233). Narrative writings vary in how they can be written out, but the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that inspire them always come from the same place which allows the various forms of writing to express the same thing the author wants to put across.

Ways to Share Narrative Writings

When creating a narrative writing, the focus of the writing is usually on that of the person writing it. Meaning, they are typically writing it for themselves to work through their traumatic experience. However, there are different options that someone may take in terms of how or if that piece gets shared with others. Some people may choose to keep the writings private and not share them with anyone else. Others may decide to post the narrative writing online either anonymously or with their name attached to the piece. There is also the option for someone to perform their narrative writing in front of others at a possible open mic night of some sort. It is also possible that the individual may be prompted to share their narrative writing in a therapeutic setting either to just their specific counselor or while in group therapy. These different platforms each come with their own risks and rewards for both the author of piece, but also for the audience member experiencing the piece. Sometimes the type of traumatic experience that is being written about can determine how or if a person decides to disclose their experience. However, it is not something that is easily generalizable. As mentioned before, an individual can experience a traumatic event in a way much differently from another individual who had gone through the same event. This still applies when a person is determining how to share their narrative pieces.

One example of how a person can share their narrative writing is through performing it out loud in a public setting. This can be quite different than posting it anonymously online because the reactions to the writing are immediate. The writer can see the facial expressions and hear the utterances from the audience itself. This can create either an extremely positive environment for the writer, or one that causes them more harm depending on the reactions they receive. One way someone can express their writing is through a performative autoethnography. It is said that, “performative autoethnography helps create multiple subjectivities of the trauma

subject through an “extended form of continued engagement” with several selves and the intertwining of multiple accounts of other trauma subjects in one body (Hyunji, 2016). Meaning, the person telling their story is able to bring together the different versions of themselves before, during, and after the traumatic experience. It is common for the writers to portray these different stages as different people which can allow the person to disconnect from their trauma and in turn see both themselves and the traumatic experience in a new light (Hyunji, 2016).

In one study done by Duchin and Wiseman (2019), the participants were child survivors of the Holocaust who shared their traumatic experiences through a collective book of memoirs published around sixty years after the end of the war. The study looked at the different motivations that the participants had for wanting to share their stories and how the individuals felt when getting their stories published with their name connected to it. One participant, named Lea, was motivated to write the memoir because it was the first time she was able to construct a coherent story of what happened to her during the Holocaust (Duchin and Wiseman, 2019). She was inspired to tell her story because she felt like her story did not exist prior to that as she had never told anyone it before (Duchin and Wiseman, 2019). The book of collective memoirs allowed Lea to bring to light what happened, but also provided comfort to her knowing that she was not alone in her story. This example is to show how sharing a narrative writing to the public with your name attached can lead to something that is empowering for the writer. Lea was able to feel a release from her experience while also informing others what went on during the Holocaust (Duchin and Wiseman, 2019). This allows for the writer to feel a sense of importance with their traumatic experience knowing that it is being spread to the public.

For survivors of a traumatic experience, it can also be quite common for them to write about their experience anonymously. This could be due to a variety of reasons. Some reasons

may be because the person is shamed by what had occurred, they do not think that people will believe them, they do not want to be publicly known as a victim, they are afraid of the repercussions of accusing their attacker, and so on. The beauty of this type of sharing is that you can write about whatever you want and are able to put it out into the world without having to directly associate yourself with it. An analysis done by Belovodskaja (2016) looked at the impact of “faceless” writing. His findings suggest that it can be quite empowering to post anonymously because the writer does not have to be directly associated with the writing, and they can reframe the situation in any way they want. Meaning, the writer now has a sense of control back in their lives and can speak about the traumatic experience in whichever way that can provide them the most closure with what had occurred. For example, a sexual assault survivor may re-write the ending of their experience to say that they overcame their attacker, they were was able to stop the attacker from continuing to harm them, and that the authorities were able to arrest the person responsible. This could contrast drastically to the original story in which the attacker was never found or persecuted for their actions. However, by sharing this story anonymously, the writer does not need to defend themselves against people who state that they are wrong because no one would know the true story. One platform in which this is quite common is an app/website titled “Whisper.” It allows the user to create a post to share out to the public with no username or identifying information attached to it. This secrecy gives freedom to its users to post about anything and everything. For those who are survivors of traumatic experiences, it is a seemingly perfect way to express yourself without needing to explain yourself.

Effects of Sharing Narrative Writings for the Author

Traumatic experiences can negatively affect people because they can disrupt one's beliefs about a predictable and controllable world (Andersson & Conley, 2008). Through narrative writing though, a person who has gone through a traumatic experience can gain a sense of control back in their lives. It has been shown that those who utilize narrative writing following a traumatic event had a decrease in negative affect, depressive symptoms, and feelings of hopelessness (Andersson & Conley, 2008). This is likely due to the author being able to control how their story is being told regardless of what had happened to them. Narrative writing is also much more beneficial to an individual when compared to them simply thinking about their experience (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). In a study completed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2006), it was found that those who simply think about their experience in turn have negative outcomes because it is typical for the individual to ruminate on the experience and have repetitive, negative, and intrusive thoughts. However, by utilizing narrative writing, it is easier to cope with the traumatic event because of the distance that the writer can create between them and the piece (Andersson & Conley, 2013). This distance is beneficial to the writer because it allows them to see their experience through a new perspective. This helps the writer to experience an increase in their psychological well-being and a decrease in depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). By writing about a traumatic experience, a person can take a new view on their experience which in turn can lead to them being able to overcome it or at least cope with the effects of it that much better.

When someone undergoes a traumatic experience, it is common for them to seek out professional help by undergoing therapy (Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, & Hancock, 2014). This can be individualized or be in a group setting. While undergoing therapy, a counselor may ask the client to complete some form of narrative writing while in the setting. This could be used as a

tool to have the client look at the experience they are describing in a new lens (Jones, 2011). This can occur because narrative writing in therapy helps the client to separate the problem from themselves, which allows them to externalize the problem which can make it easier to manage (Ricks et. al, 2014). Poetry writing in specific can be especially beneficial to someone because it is, “concerned with giving a voice, form, shape, name or identity to an experience. The texture of words, along with cadence, pauses and silences, are all considered meaningful” (Jones, 2011, p. 16). Knowing this, the counselor can utilize these subtleties to determine what the client is feeling. Group therapy can be beneficial to introducing the concept of narrative writing to a client because they may feel less alone in the process (Lauer & Goldfield, 1970). It also helps to foster a conversation about the traumatic experiences because there are multiple different opinions that can be formed by the various people in the room. For the writer, this can also be extremely intimidating and make them shy away from speaking about their experience. For example, someone may feel as though their experience is not worthy of being shared after hearing someone else’s experience that was much more traumatic than their own (Lauer & Goldfield, 1970). This could potentially stunt the growth that a person may feel from getting the chance to speak about their experience. The purpose of the use of narrative writing in therapy is to allow for the client to expressive themselves, but also to help them to build goals around what they hope to accomplish and how their writing may change over time.

Children are a special type of population affected by traumatic experiences because there is a chance that due to their age, they may not be able to express themselves effectively. There is limited research on the effects of narrative writing in children who have experienced a traumatic event. However, with research done by Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007), it is possible that narrative writing may not be as effective of a tool to use when compared to the

effects that adults experience. For example, in adults, research has been replicated multiple times to show that narrative writing is, “beneficial for alleviating psychological symptoms including distress, anxiety and depression, physical symptoms including better immune system function and fewer doctor visits, and improved real-world behaviors including academic performance and social relationships” (Fivush et al., 2007, p. 1416). With children, they may not get the same benefits as adults depending on their developmental stage. For example, young children are not typically capable of coping with or regulating aversive emotions, and they struggle to tell a story that is anything but chronological that may leave out key connections of how things are related to one another (Fivush et al., 2007). In the study completed by Fivush et al., it was found that children who wrote about interpersonal problems showed an increase in depression and anxiety, and those who wrote more about negative evaluations and situational problems showed an increase in anxiety. These findings suggest that having children express their feelings associated with their traumatic experiences can be harmful to their overall well-being. However, in another study done by Boniel-Nissim and Barak (2013), children who were now old enough to be deemed as adolescents had a much different outcome than their younger counterparts. This study followed a group of adolescents who were prompted to complete online blog about their difficulties in life, including traumatic experiences, and were either allowed to have responses from others or not (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013). The study found that regardless of the condition, the adolescents showed a decrease in stress and depressive symptoms, and showed an increase in interpersonal interactions, self-image, self-confidence, and comfortability with their emotions (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013). When comparing these two studies, it is important to recognize how much of a role that age plays as a factor with the effectiveness of narrative

writing. Meaning, although narrative writing may not be effective for younger children, as they get older, they are able to get more beneficial outcomes from it.

What We Do Not Know About the Effects of Sharing Narrative Writing

When conducting this research, it was found that there is a lack of research that is done on sharing narrative writing outside of the individual who wrote it. If research is being done, it is typically completed in a controlled setting such as in a laboratory or therapy session and is only looking at the short-term effects. However, it would be an important piece of data to know the long-term effects of having your narrative writing out in public. For example, would a decline of responses overtime cause a person to feel as though their experience is not relevant or does not matter to others as much as it once did? There is also little research done that differentiates the effects between the ways someone may share their traumatic experience with others. For example, when comparing how a person may feel sharing their writing anonymously online to standing in front of a crowd and telling it out loud to an audience, the effects may be quite different from one another. This research is necessary because it can be influential for those who go through traumatic experiences and want to express what has happened to them. Knowing the possible effects that sharing their narrative can have may help them decide how and/or if they want to share the piece publicly or if they would rather keep it to themselves.

A suggestion for future research would be to dive deeper into how a person either listening to or reading about a traumatic experience is affected. The research out there is typically focused on how the writers themselves are affected by creating their narrative writing about their traumatic experience, but there needs to be more importance placed on knowing how the audience is being affected as well. On one hand, there is the potential for a sense of relief or

connectedness between an audience member and the author if the experience or the thoughts and feelings surrounding it are similar. On the other hand, if someone is not expecting to be exposed to a narrative writing on a traumatic experience, whether that be through a lack of a trigger warning or the writing being out of context, there can be possible harm done to the audience member. Meaning, their memories may be triggered and then they are forced to relive their traumatic experience, or they may have intense visualizations of the experience that can be upsetting to them (Brosch, 2018). With research typically only being done on the effects of writing the narrative by the individuals who went through the traumatic experience in a laboratory setting, it is not taken into consideration what is like to be exposed to narrative writing in the real world. For example, there is no research that looks at how a person casually scrolling through an online platform such as Facebook is affected when suddenly exposed to a narrative on a traumatic event. This can be quite alarming to most people, and possibly upsetting and/or triggering as well. The effects of being an audience member to narrative writing on a traumatic experience is extremely important to research because there can be an entirely new population of people who are being traumatized second-handedly that is not being looked at.

My Personal Experience

When completing this research, it was important for me to see how I could connect to the conclusions that had been made. I was able to do so when presenting a PowerPoint presentation on this specific paper. When doing the presentation, I told a short narrative piece to the audience with no indication as to who wrote the piece or what it was about. The piece is titled, “The Wave,” and went as follows:

Every day that goes by gives us one more yesterday and hopes for another tomorrow. These days build our lifetime of memories, both good and bad. No two days are the same. We crave consistency. We build up our rituals and daily routines. And then suddenly, it all changes. Our entire world comes crashing down. You're stuck drowning in the ocean, gasping for air with nowhere to turn. All around you is the water consuming you. You fight and fight and fight against it. Eventually you get your head above water, but then another wave comes. You can't escape it. The feelings of loss will never leave you. You may learn to float, but you can't stop that wave that's slowing making its way towards you.

The piece was inspired by the traumatic loss of my dog who passed away on March 26, 2019 and was almost fifteen years old. For me, this was incredibly difficult to not only write but also to share out loud. My dog was my longest best friend and we even shared a birthday for fourteen years. Losing her was one of the most difficult experiences in my life because we were so close, but also because she went from being perfectly fine one day to having a multitude of seizures that affected her ability to function so much that there was no choice but to put her down the next day. Although I knew this would not be easy, I was inspired by this research to push myself to really see what sharing such a personal narrative would do to me and my audience members. It is important to note that I did share this piece within an academic setting, so that may have influenced my feelings during it. For example, I was extremely emotional about it, but I knew that I could not show that to the audience because I needed the author of the narrative to remain a secret until later in the presentation to help to prove a point. I kept the identity of the author a

secret because I wanted the audience members to see how different their views of the writing were depending on who they believed the author to be.

From my point of view, I felt extremely exposed. In my everyday life, I was constantly avoiding talking about the loss of my dog because it was such an upsetting topic for me and would usually result in me crying. When my identity as the author was withheld from the audience, I felt more comfortable about the piece because the audience may have thought that someone other than me was the author. There was also no clear indication that this was about a dog which allowed me to disconnect from the piece when reading it out loud. However, when I had to reveal myself as the author, all that changed. My heart began racing, my breathing was shallow, and I had to fight back the tears forming in my eyes. The truth of the who wrote the piece was out, and now the audience knew that I was struggling with the loss of something. Looking back, this experience was also empowering for me because I was able to push myself out of my comfort zone and speak about this extremely upsetting thing in my life in a room full of people in an academic setting. In my mind, if I could do that, then I believed I could be on the path of getting through the loss of my dog. This was the step in the right direction that I needed.

In terms of the audience, there were not any extreme reactions to the piece I had shared while I was saying it out loud or informing them who the true author was. I did ask a few people after the presentation how it made them feel knowing that I had written the piece, and they said that it did affect how they viewed it. This was mainly because they were now worried about what it was that I was going through and wrote the narrative piece on. Only a few of the audience members knew about the loss of my dog, and none of them made the connection that that was the purpose behind my piece without me telling them first. It was also mentioned by the audience members that the piece was a little shocking to hear because it was such a personal thing to share

while giving an academic presentation. I believe that the setting was the main factor that affected how the audience viewed the piece. No one was expecting it to happen. One audience member came into the presentation thinking that there was going to be some sort of narrative piece but did not think that I would be the one who had written it. With that shock came more emotion than expected because people were not prepared for it. I knew this was a risk to subject the audience to my own personal narrative, but it gave me the opportunity to see how they could be affected outside of a research setting. As mentioned earlier, there is also a lack of research on how an audience is affected by being exposed to a narrative writing, so I knew this could give me the opportunity to potentially see how the research may play out when it is conducted in a real life setting.

Conclusion

For those who go through a traumatic experience, the pain from that experience does not necessarily end when the event ends. It is likely that a person will suffer from negative side-effects following the event. However, narrative writing can be used as a tool to help those who have gone through a traumatic experience to foster positive outcomes for the individual. It is most commonly used to give the person a sense of control by shaping the narrative of the traumatic experience into whatever the person may feel or wish to feel about it. Giving the control back to the individual who was likely to have had no control in the traumatic experience can be extremely beneficial because it sets them on a path towards working through their trauma. It is also important to note that those who may be subject to listen to or read a narrative piece about a traumatic experience may not receive the same benefits as the author of the piece. More research needs to be conducted to determine the full effects of what narrative writing can do for

not only the author, but also the audience. In the time being, narrative writing should still be continued to be used as a therapeutic tool for individuals who wish to use it due the beneficial nature that research states it has. People do not have to be creative to complete narrative writing, but rather they need to make sure they are ready expose themselves and their traumatic experiences in a new way.

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