



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 25: Using Poetry to Cultivate Perspective

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Andrea Helton discusses how poetry can help cultivate a new perspective.

As the pandemic continues to linger with multiple global tragedies, it's safe to say many of us feel like we're losing faith right now. Faith in the world, in our work, in our relationships, and faith in ourselves. We feel hopeless, burned out, and traumatized.

My name is Andrea Helton and I'm an acupuncture and integrative medicine clinician. And for today's Well@Work podcast, I'm going to take a moment to talk about how families can use poetry to restore hope and faith during these difficult times. And when I say poetry, I don't just mean traditional poetry. It can be an emotional passage from a book or text, a song, a quote, an affirmation, any form of spoken or written word that carries an emotional tone.

Psychologist, researcher, author, and professor Gretchen Schmelzer quotes "So much of trauma and grief can feel wordless. Indeed, trauma can actually keep the words away from memory. The impact of trauma can divert blood flow from the parts of our brain that process language, rendering our traumatic experiences into a silent, foggy story that has no edges or anything to grab onto. And traumas can lack language because they simply feel unspeakable." We know that there is power in being able to acknowledge and identify what we're feeling, something I like to call "name it to tame it." But sometimes the emotions are so multifaceted, so complex and heavy, that we can't find the right feeling words to assign them; we simply cannot tell our story. This can be especially true for children, who may not yet have the tools and experience necessary to understand, process, and express complex states of being. Furthermore, when we're in the thick of a traumatic experience, it can be even more difficult to tell our story as we're overwhelmed by the stress and trauma of the present, or recently present, moment.

Poetry, however, is more than words. As Robert Frost says "Poetry begins as a lump in the throat." Poetry is words with melodic meaning, symbolism, beauty, and emotion. It's words that somehow weave together a tapestry that can convey the complexity and magnitude of what we're feeling and touch that which feels unspeakable. Dr Schmelzer also quotes that "Poetry can weave whole new cloth or pick up old dropped stitches... you can weave a poem's words to mend the holes in your heart." So, when we're reading poetry, a deep wordless part of our psyche recognizes its emotional signature and says "yes, that is me, that is how I'm feeling," thus enabling us to start making sense of what we're feeling and organize it into a story.

This is especially true for children, who are struggling to identify and process their feelings. As we know all too well, children's emotional experiences are rarely organized and tied into a neat bow. But if they're reading or listening to poetry or songs or books that resonate, they can do that same "yes, that is me, that is how I'm feeling." Thus, allowing parents and loved ones to help their children tell their own story.

But how can poetry heal? Clinical psychologist Louise Hoffman describes three ways that reading and or writing poetry can actually mirror psychotherapy.

One: release. One of the first goals of therapy is to achieve some form of emotional release or catharsis so it can bring us into a more balanced state to problem solve. Poetry, by nature, is descriptive and poignant; it's meant to make us feel something and empathize with its words. So, when we're reading a poem or listening to music in a setting where we're physically safe, we're not only recognizing what we're feeling, but we're giving ourselves permission to release those emotions.

And two: emotional processing. Another aspect of therapy involves diving into emotional experiences to really unpack them. From there, we work to assign understanding, sense, or meaning to them. Many poems begin by evoking a state of suffering, but do so in a way that is poignantly beautiful. Then the poem often uses descriptions, allegory, metaphor, and other literary tools to bring sense and/or resolution.

And three: awareness and insight. Once we release and process intense emotional experiences, the goal is to gain deeper insight into our psyche and become more self-aware moving forward. Reflecting and journaling on poetry can provide us with that same sense of awareness.

Research psychologist Annamae Sax also talks about how poetry offers a strong sense of interconnectedness to the world, which can be a helpful tool when combating collective loss of faith in the world at large. There is solace to be found when we recognize that what has happened to us has happened to somebody before, especially with children whose experiences are often new and uncharted. We no longer feel singled out by our suffering, but brought into the comfort of shared experience.

Yes, with poetry we can find healing, we can find hope, we can find faith. Poetry, read together, can deepen emotional bonds and help us find connection and solace while we're in the dark. Poetry are the lanterns that can guide us back to ourselves. With time, reading poetry can turn into writing poetry; to help you craft your own words to weave into a tapestry that reflects the depths of your feelings. So, I invite everybody to invest in a little poetry, try to see your life through the lens of a poem. Allow poetry to give a voice and language to that which you feel that cannot explain.

I'm going to finish off with sharing a short poem. So, I want you all to find a comfortable position, hands resting on your lap, palms open and receptive, and take a few deep belly breaths. And really just lean into the words, and see how they resonate with you. Where do they make you feel? What do they make you feel? Do they make your belly stir?



Do they bring a lump to your throat? Do they make your heart ache? Do they fill you with hope and resolve?

This is a poem by Emily Kedar, and it's called "Earth Side."

We are asked to come here, Earthside, to occupy every inch of the body we're given,

To learn its language, its needs and gifts. We are asked to use it as a compass to harbor us in safety and lead us through the wild.

We are asked to care for this place, with the grit and grace of dirt on our hands. We are asked to speak, to give voice to the voiceless and translate light into language, to cast the widest net, to include everything inside of it, to crack the heart wide open and never close it again.

When we are pulled apart by longing, we are asked to keep showing up. To follow this soft insistent tether: to become what we love, to put ourselves in the hands of our ancestors, to be held by them like water, to quench the mouths of our children, to nourish them with who we become.

We are asked to belong, finally. To ourselves, to each other, to the land, to our own shape-shifting shadows. To our own threadbare, indelible light. We are asked to belong to the old tales that brought us here and to the new ones that will keep us alive. We are asked to belong to the great turning wave of this time and this place. We are asked to punctuate our breath with both sorrow and praise.

We are asked to answer by becoming, again and again, the way.

Thank you for listening and remember to stay well at home.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.