FINDING RELIABLE ON-LINE THERAPEUTIC WRITING SOURCES: A MANUAL FOR COUNSELLING PROFESSIONALS

JENNIFER PARSONS

B.A., Laurentian University, 2005

A Project
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF COUNSELLING

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

August 2008

I dedicate this work to my daughter Sarina.

She is my inspiration for continuing my education and pursuing my

dream of attaining a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology.

She is the light of my life!

Abstract

On-line therapeutic writing Web sites introduce new technology for providing information about various types of writing therapy methods and for delivering related therapy. This project has two dimensions - a literature review and an applied component. The first part of the literature review presents a general overview of on-line counselling. The second part focuses on practice-based and evidence-based research on various writing therapy techniques. The final part of the literature review addresses Web site evaluation. The second part of this project responds to the virtually non-existent standards for assessing writing therapy Web sites and the need for criteria to assist counsellors interested in finding reliable on-line writing therapy Web sites. Based on the literature review a set of criteria for assessing writing therapy Web sites were established. Five of the most reliable Web sites that met the standards are discussed. Limitations of the project and recommendations for the future of writing therapy Web sites are offered. Appendix A of this project provides a manual that may be used as a reference for counsellors wishing to find reliable on-line writing therapy Web sites. The information in this manual contains the pertinent details discussed in this project.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my daughter Sarina, thank you for being patient and supportive through all my undergraduate and graduate work.

I also wish to thank my parents, Elsie and Ken, who supported me throughout my entire education. Without the support of my parents, pursuing a university education would not have been possible.

A big thanks to my supervisor Ronna, who was there for me every step of the way throughout my final project, despite her busy schedule. Thank you for your knowledge and support.

Last, but certainly not least, a special thanks to my sister-in-law and friend, Sue. Thank you for your timely editing, your suggestions, and your kind words of encouragement, they meant a lot to me!

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table

Chapter 1: Research Project Introduction

Research has demonstrated that therapeutic writing is an effective psychological intervention (e.g., Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Herring, 2007; Manier & Olivares, 2005; Miller, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997). Given that therapeutic writing "facilitates self-regulation which, in turn enhances psychological and physical health" (Lepore & Smyth, 2002, p. 9) this type of intervention appears to be a potentially important strategy for counsellors. Lepore and Smyth indicate that therapeutic writing is now among one of the many interventions available to consumers on-line. With the increasing popularity of counselling oriented internet interventions, professional practitioners would benefit from guidance for their appropriate use. Indeed Childress & Asamen (1998), a full decade ago, suggested it is essential to create standards for these Web-based strategies. There is currently little research in the area of internet interventions (Ritterband, et al., 2003) and fewer studies have been conducted on specific on-line interventions such as writing therapy.

The quality of on-line health information can be questionable (Wilson, 2002). Due to this lack of credibility, consumers of this medium need the skills to accurately evaluate the information being provided to avoid drawing on faulty information (Risk, 2002). Creating guidelines for writing therapy Web sites is important to assist counsellors who wish to acquire information on writing therapy for use with clients. In this project, a manual is presented (Appendix A) that proposes standards to be followed for counsellors wishing to find reliable on-line resources. Five writing therapy Web sites that meet the proposed standards are included in the manual.

Project Rationale

The process of evaluating and rating the value of Web site interventions requires thorough investigation (Childress & Asamen, 1998). Presently there is no guide or manual available for counselling professionals to refer to when attempting to find a suitable writing therapy Web site for use with their clients. As background to developing such a manual, this project addresses literature pertaining to proven writing therapy techniques, and the significant aspects of Web site evaluation. The creation of a manual that recommends standards for identifying accessible, reliable, and valid on-line therapeutic writing Web sites, and that identifies five writing therapy Web sites that meet all of the criteria is potentially a valuable resource to counsellors with an interest in the topic. Counsellors can refer to these Web sites for use with clients or for educational purposes to learn more about writing therapy. No assumption is made or proposed that the five selected sites are inherently superior to others. They will however be representative of sites that fit the recommended criteria.

Structure of the Project

This project is separated into five chapters, and begins with a general overview of on-line counselling, followed by a review of literature concerning proven writing therapy techniques, and Web site evaluation measures. Next, the methodology section explains literature review methods, search strategies used for Web sites, Web site evaluation procedures, and methodological limitations. Following this, findings from the Web site evaluation are reported. Five reliable writing therapy sites are listed and discussed. Chapter Five then offers a discussion of the findings, limitations, and future directions.

Appendix A presents a manual for counsellors to use when searching for reliable on-line writing therapy sources. This manual includes an introduction, and short review of relevant literature regarding writing therapy and Web site evaluation measures. Next, the methodology used in the creation of the manual is explained, and findings from the Web site evaluation are described. To conclude the manual, a discussion and implications section is offered that includes limitations of the manual.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Three main sections comprise this literature review; the first relates to on-line counselling, the second to writing therapy, and the third to Web site evaluation. The scope of this project requires selecting from an abundance of writing therapy techniques. To address all available techniques is beyond the scope of this project, so an illustrative selection of writing therapy techniques will be provided. Components of the writing paradigm, emotional and physical outcomes of writing therapy, journal writing, and visual and dream journal writing are addressed in this second section. In addition, components of letter writing therapy, autobiographical writing, deep writing, connecting writing therapy techniques with specific issues, and variables in writing therapy are also discussed. In the third section, an overview of Web site evaluation guidelines is provided with particular attention to literature which offers recommendations for finding trustworthy, reliable Web sites. There may be other suitable recommendations not mentioned in this review. Combined, general insights relating to on-line counselling, and the literature pertaining to writing therapy and Web site evaluation may assist counselling practitioners wishing to find reliable sources of on-line information regarding writing therapy with clients.

This project assumes an ethical stance by the practitioner. As such it is assumed that the practitioner would be familiar with writing therapy interventions prior to including writing therapy into the counselling process. A brief, but not inclusive overview of common writing interventions is included to assist in that familiarizing process.

On-line Counselling

On-line counselling has been increasing in popularity among practitioners and consumers over the last decade (Young, 2005). This has generated advantages, and has also created some concerns. For example, Young conducted a study with 48 internet-based clients that examined client attitudes concerning on-line counselling. Results indicated that anonymity, counsellor credentials, and convenience were the most reported reasons for selecting on-line counselling over face-to-face counselling. The biggest concerns expressed by the internet-based clients included worries of being caught, and fear of reduced privacy and security during on-line chats. On a positive side, on-line counselling offers an alternative method to traditional counselling for clients who are not able to physically meet with counselling practitioners (Oravec, 2000). Also, clients who require additional support with face-to-face counselling, or who feel highly comfortable with the internet may enjoy on-line counselling (Oravec). Further, other benefits of on-line counselling include the ability to receive help anonymously, and an increased willingness to change (Schultze, 2006).

While on-line counselling provides benefits to some, there are also many concerns with this form of therapy. D. Robson & M. Robson (2000) assert that non-verbal communication is lost with on-line counselling. In addition, these authors also stress that counselling professionals providing these services should uphold ethical standards. H. E. Shaw and S. F. Shaw (2006) conducted an evaluation of 88 on-line counselling Web sites through the use of an ethical intent checklist. The checklist included 16 items, and was created from the American Counselling Association's ethical standards for on-line

counselling. The results indicated that less than half of the on-line practitioners were adhering to 8 of the 16 items on the checklist.

On January 31, 2000, the World Health Organization and the Pan-American Health Organization joined to create a panel of 50 experts from around the world, and created the *eHealth Code of Ethics* (Rippen & Risk, 2000). The eHealth Code consists of eight guiding principles to be followed by people providing health care services on the internet. The principles include candor, honesty, quality, informed consent, privacy, professionalism, responsible partnering, and accountability. More information about this code of ethics can be found on the internet by going to www.ihealthcoalition.org/ethics/ehealthcode0524.html. Providing mental health information through the internet is one of the many types of on-line mental health care options offered to consumers today (Oravec, 2000). Writing therapy is a form of mental health information readily available to users of the internet.

Writing Therapy

Writing therapy is referred to by many different titles including therapeutic journaling, expressive writing, and reflective writing to name a few. The common thread implied in each of them is that of therapeutic benefit through the act of writing. In this project the term *writing therapy* (or *therapeutic writing*) is used to refer to the act of writing for therapeutic benefit. Wright and Chung (2001) express the general meaning of writing therapy as "client expressive and reflective writing, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist/researcher" (p. 279). An investigation of some elements of various effective writing therapies offers insight into selected reliable content for writing

therapy Web sites. Components of evidence-based, then practice-based literature are discussed.

Components of the Writing Paradigm. One well researched form of writing therapy is referred to as the *writing paradigm* and was coined by Pennebaker (1997). In this writing technique, Pennebaker suggests participants write about 15 to 30 minutes a day, for 3 to 5 days in a row. The participants are given instructions to write their innermost thoughts and feelings about something that has emotionally and greatly affected their lives. Either the same topic may be selected, or a different issue may be written about on each day. In addition, Pennebaker also advises that the participants not worry about spelling, grammar, or the organization of the paper. A key requirement in this type writing therapy is to continue writing for the allotted time, and to write continuously until the time period has ended (Pennebaker). This evidence-based therapeutic writing technique is referenced in many other research articles (e.g., Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Manier & Olivares, 2005; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Searching for writing therapy Web sites that include this writing procedure may enhance the likelihood of finding well-researched writing therapy approaches. Other techniques may be equally effective that have not been scrutinized by research yet.

Emotional and Physical Outcomes of the Writing Paradigm. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) outline the results of writing about traumatic and stressful events. These authors also describe Pennebaker's (1997) writing paradigm method. Baikie and Wilhelm employed a meta-analysis approach consisting of 13 studies that all utilized the writing paradigm technique with healthy participants. The study concluded that while writing therapy did temporarily cause emotional grief, a decrease in positive mood, and an

increase in negative physical symptoms, the long-term benefits were great (Baikie &

Wilhelm). In follow-ups, participants reported better lung and liver performance, elevated

moods, and improvements in memory and immune system performance to name a few

(Baikie & Wilhelm). The findings in this research suggest that it would be appropriate for

writing therapy intervention Web sites to list special precautions for the consumer.

Specifically, there may be initial emotional and physical setbacks, but improvements

should be felt over time. These self-reported findings are valuable, as Wright (2005)

notes the importance of client perspective on writing therapy.

Journal Writing. While the writing paradigm method of writing therapy has indicated

positive results in clinical studies, the participants used in these studies may not be

typical of clients seen by counselling professionals. Practice-based evidence offers tacit

knowledge that practitioners attain from working with clients. For example, Adams

(1990) discusses various forms of writing therapy referred to as *journaling* that are

designed to address issues such as grief recovery, dream interpretation, and personal

conflict. Adams recommends eight techniques for completing this type of writing

therapy. Adams, like Progoff (1975) who preceded her, promotes starting with an

entrance meditation, dating each journal entry, and saving all of the writing. In addition,

Adams, like Natalie Goldberg (1986), proposes writing quickly without worrying about

penmanship, writing continuously without stopping, and writing openly and truthfully.

Finally, Adams advises upholding privacy of the journals, and writing in a way that feels

natural.

Visual and Dream Journaling. Porterfield (n.d.) offers another interesting practice-

based method of writing therapy called *visual journaling.* In visual journaling, Porterfield

asserts that the inclusion of art assists in accessing sections of the brain that are not normally utilized when using only words. This writer maintains that creating pictures in journals encourages people to reach deep insights about themselves and their surroundings. This method helps to create thoughts that can be written on paper. Porterfield also proposes another form of writing therapy referred to as *dream journaling*, which is intended to inspire creative work. Porterfield describes four basic steps for this form of writing therapy. First, an intention to recall dreams before sleep begins is established. Next, a dream journal and writing device is kept close to the bed so that dreams may be written immediately after awakening. Following this, when the dream has been transferred to paper, a poem may be created, or a picture drawn or painted relating to the dream. Finally, Porterfield recommends raising questions regarding individuals or symbols that emerged in the dream.

Components of Letter Writing Therapy. Letter therapy is another method of writing therapy, and requires a large amount of feedback on the part of the therapist (France, Cadiax, & Allen, 1995). France, et al. recommend a style of letter therapy based on the combined success rate of use with numerous clients. These authors advocate for an initial face-to-face meeting between client and therapist so the letter writing process can be explained. Next, there must be a conversation about trust and confidentiality issues (France, et al.). Subsequently, these authors propose an opening letter from the client to fully explain presenting issues, followed by a response from the counsellor, and then a series of letters written back and forth between the client and therapist for as long as necessary. The counsellor provides feedback with each response letter, and the total number of letters written varies depending on the issues being dealt with (France, et al.).

Finally, a face-to-face follow-up session is recommended (France, et al.). The counsellor feedback is aimed at pointing out client strengths, reinforcing actions, and encouraging positive attitudes (France, et al.). Letter writing therapy as outlined by France et al. may also be a reliable source of information for practitioners to access on-line. While France, et al. advise that letter therapy is not strongly supported in the literature, they also maintain that one study found those who write letters often made fewer doctors appointments than those who did not.

Autobiographical Writing. In the novel *Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery,* Miller (2001) suggests that autobiographical writing provides healing for many purposes. Miller indicates that this form of writing may be useful for people suffering from an illness, loss of a loved one, abuse, or any other upsetting events that disturb one's life. Autobiographical writing "can be a powerful way of reconnecting, of weaving all the pieces of your life back together" (Miller, p. 8). This style of writing helps to create meaningfulness and inner healing through various writing exercises that may be contained within fifteen or twenty minute intervals at a time (Miller). Miller offers ten different workshops that all include specific writing suggestions to help the writer tell their life story. These exercises include writing about symbolic images in the mind, using personal documents, music, and significant objects to trigger memories, and writing about momentous childhood experiences to name a few (Miller). The writing exercises may then be organized to craft a personal life story (Miller).

Deep Writing. Herring (2007) adds a variation to writing therapy in that she recommends paying attention to the breath in order to promote a more profound connection with the writing process. This author suggests that, upon inhalation, energy

flows into the body and around the body (Herring). Upon exhalation, the body submits to the world around it, trusting that it will fill up again (Herring). Herring promotes self-awareness as a fundamental attitude for *deep writing*. Through the process of journaling, Herring offers encouragement and prompting questions for the writer to answer on paper. Herring asks the writer to write as freely as possible. Some of Herrings questions include exploration of the writing process, personal obstacles, and using the five senses to visualize and describe memories in full detail. Herring also encourages the writer to draw pictures to help with description of emotions, and to write poetry about themes which emerge in the workplace. One of Herrings writing techniques focuses on body awareness, feeling each part of the body, one area at a time while lying in a comfortable position, followed by writing about the experience.

Connecting Writing Therapy Techniques with Specific Issues. Klauser (2003) offers several writing techniques specific to twelve different issues in her book *With Pen in Hand: The Healing Power of Writing.* This author provides a series of writing methods that she refers to as a collection of her best techniques from her three previous writing therapy books. Klauser recommends some general suggestions in writing therapy which can be followed throughout her various techniques. Klauser advises writing freely, writing before bed or first thing in the morning, continuing to write even when resistance emerges, and if unable to write about the distress, then write about physical feelings. Some of the therapeutic writing techniques Klauser provides center around divorce, loosing a child, the loss of a job, rape, abuse, and disease. Each chapter of Klauser's book presents an issue, then offers people's true recollections about the given issue, followed by techniques for the reader to use. Each story is intended to offer inspiration for the

reader who can, in some way learn from the written story (Klauser). For example, the technique that follows stories of rape asks readers to put on some music, write their story precisely as it transpired, collect their strength, and then rejoice in their completeness (Klauser).

Variables in writing therapy. In writing therapy, there also appears to be variables that have the potential to influence the effectiveness of the process (Manier & Olivares, 2005). Manier and Olivares researched variables that could potentially effect the outcome of writing therapy. The participants in this study included 86 students who presented with varying distress levels determined by the Beck Depression Inventory. Manier and Olivares found that the males had more positive outcomes than the females in this study, and participants with mild to moderate distress levels benefited the most. The authors indicate the possibility that males may have benefited more because they had not previously engaged in emotional disclosure about the events they selected to write about. This research points to the idea that it may be helpful if the creators of writing therapy Web sites provided information about who might benefit the most from a given type of writing therapy intervention. Authors of these sites could also indicate the degree to which the approach they are suggesting has been subject to research, including details of who conducted the research and the conditions used.

Examination of research on writing therapy provides a great deal of information that counselling practitioners can take into consideration before selecting on-line writing therapy as resources for use with clients. Internet research also offers the same prospect for counselling practitioners. In addition to familiarity with various writing therapy approaches, acquiring the skills necessary for accurately evaluating intervention Web

sites may be of particular interest for counselling professionals wishing to learn about reliable writing therapy suitable for use with clients.

Web Site Evaluation

Evaluation Guidelines. Ohio State University (2003) offers valuable suggestions of areas to look for that should be taken into consideration when evaluating Web sites. These proposals are useful for the purposes of finding trustworthy, reliable writing therapy Web sites. First, the purpose of the Web site should be made clear so that the user may quickly determine whether the Web site is providing the desired information. For example, the intention of the Web site may be to provide information, or it may be to sell products or encourage a particular opinion (Ohio State University). In addition, the Web site should include links such as *more about this site*, *site index*, and *site map* (Ohio State University). Next, it is essential to ensure that the author of the site possesses the appropriate credentials to be writing about the given topic (Ohio State University). There should be links that provide additional information about the education and experience of the Web site author, as well as information about the Web site publisher (Ohio State University). It would also useful to check if the authors indicate membership with a professional association, which would be a statement of their credibility. After analyzing information about the Web site author and publisher, the content of the Web site should be examined to ensure that the information is current, supported with references, and not lacking in breadth (Ohio State University). Finally, reviews of the Web site being researched and other sites that link to it should be investigated to reveal what type of recognition it has received from others (Ohio State University).

Many guidelines for Web site evaluations have been proposed, but Barker (2005) also recommends some informative, helpful principles that may combine with the suggestions of Ohio State University (2003) to create a more thorough assessment of intervention Web sites. Some of the techniques in these evaluation guides overlap, while others are unique from each another. Barker indicates the importance of employing critical thinking skills when determining the value of a Web site. He provides five insightful steps to be carried out for a methodical appraisal of Web sites. Included in his guidelines is the suggestion that the uniform resource locator (URL) address of a Web site should be analyzed first. If the URL belongs to a personal page, it normally contains a personal name. Personal pages may take additional time to explore and to find some type of authentication that the information provided is trustworthy (Barker). In addition, Barker advises that if the URL includes a *.gov*, *.mil*, or other country short-form, then it is typically a government site. Further, if it contains an *.edu*, it is an educational site, and if it possesses an *.org*, it is the address of a nonprofit organization. It should be noted that, while other countries may use *.edu* in the URL address for universities, Canadian universities use *.ca*. Therefore *.ca* may also indicate an educational Web site. This author also highlights the importance of finding information about the Web site creators and writers involved by looking for links such as *about us*, and *background*. If links to this effect can not be found, the letters in the URL can be removed to each backslash in the address until the desired information is located (Barker).

Web sites should also indicate when they have been last updated, and should be kept up to date regularly in order to provide current information (Barker, 2005). According to the techniques provided by Barker, the author or organization should be presented, the

educational and experiential background of the author should be appropriate to the discussed topic and should be listed, and the opinions of the author should be explored. Moreover, the quality of the information can be established through following links, exploring references, ensuring information has been properly cited, and making certain that all links provided work properly. Barker also specifies that evaluators should find out what other Web sites link to the Web page being studied by entering the URL in alexa.com, or doing a search in Google or Yahoo!, adding the word "link" and then a colon before the URL address. Other ways of finding information on the Web site include doing a search on the title of the Web site in a respectable directory and looking up the author's name in Google or Yahoo!. The evaluator should also beware of such things as fraudulent Web sites and the objectives of the authors (Barker). A hypothetical example would be a Web site posing as a government site, requesting payment for forms that would otherwise be free on the official government Web site. Some internet security software will monitor Web sites and let the user know when a fraudulent Web page has been detected.

Summary

On-line counselling offers several advantages to consumers, yet there are also many concerns with offering mental health services through this medium. One of the biggest concerns appears to be the degree to which providers of on-line counselling are able to meet ethical standards. Writing therapy is one form of mental health care services provided on the internet today. It seems that there is currently a developing volume of research on writing therapy and an abundance of direction on Web site evaluation measures, but there is a dearth of research on writing therapy Web sites. Practitioners

interested in finding resources for writing therapy may want to take certain precautions in their search. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) advise that while long-term benefits of writing therapy are evident, there can be short-term physical and emotional drawbacks. This may be an important caution to note on writing therapy Web sites.

The writing paradigm is used in many studies and has been recognized by many researchers for some time (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Lange, et al.; Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). While evidence-based practice may offer sound writing therapy techniques, practice-based evidence is also an important consideration when selecting writing therapy resources. Journal writing may be beneficial for people suffering from many different ailments, and Adam (1990) offers eight helpful suggestions for use in this type of writing therapy.

Porterfield (n.d.) encourages visual and dream journal writing therapy to reach deep insights and inspire creative work. Letter writing therapy may be another useful resource for practitioners and requires a great deal more feedback from the counsellor than the writing paradigm method (France, et al., 1995). Miller (2001) provides writing therapy techniques for autobiographical writing to create a life story. This form of writing offers meaningfulness and inner healing through following Miller's various exercises. Deep writing therapy combines breath and body awareness with the writing process to create a more intense connection when writing (Herring, 2007).

Klauser (2003) promotes exploration of specific personal issues through the use of story and writing therapy exercises. Manier and Olivares (2005) point out variables that could potentially be factors in therapeutic writing outcomes. These authors found in their study that males benefited more than females and that participants with very little, or very

high distress levels did not reveal much change. People with mild to moderate distress levels may benefit more from writing therapy (Manier & Olivares). Further research is necessary to clarify whether gender is a significant variable in writing therapy, or if level of emotional disclosure is the issue in question.

Several Web site evaluation guidelines may be taken into consideration when searching for reliable, valid writing therapy Web sites. The intentions of the Web site should be made clear by the authors, and the site should also include pertinent links (Ohio State University, 2003). The authors should possess the appropriate credentials (Ohio State University), the URL should be investigated, and the information provided by the Web site should be up to date (Barker, 2005). It is also important to investigate markers of quality by others who have reviewed the Web site, and the sites should include current, accurate information from educated authors (Barker). Other researchers also concur with evaluation procedures suggested by Ohio State University and Barker (e.g., Coutts, 2007; Kirk, 1996; Smith, 2005).

The writing therapy research presented in this review represents a fraction of the abundance of writing therapy techniques that currently exist. The information provided may be used as a starting point for finding writing therapy information on the internet that could be considered helpful for use with clients. There may be numerous other writing therapy approaches that could also provide healing benefits, but to list all of them would go beyond the scope of this project. Each writing therapy technique may not be favorable or suitable for everyone. As Herring (2007) points out, "writing, like life, is dynamic, not static. There's no key that fits every lock, nor one lock for every writer" (pp. 8-9).

The counselling professional has an ethical responsibility to be well versed in the field of writing therapy, and possess the ability to discern writing therapy material that is backed by practice-based or evidence-based research and is appropriate to the client for which it is being considered. Further, the contents of the Web site evaluation research in this review may also be used as a guideline in part for finding reliable, valid, writing therapy Web sites. It should be noted however, that these guidelines are not meant in any way to be exhaustive of all possible evaluation tools.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A thorough review of literature addressing the important considerations for finding

reliable, valid on-line sources for writing therapy interventions was conducted. To

accomplish this task, literature concerning writing therapy, and Web site evaluation were

investigated. Guidelines for writing therapy Web sites were created based on the

information reported in the literature review. An extensive search for writing therapy

Web sites was then conducted and 25 of these sites were evaluated (see Appendix B for a

list of Web sites included in the assessment). Appendix A comprises a manual that will

assist counselling professionals in identifying reliable, and valid on-line writing therapy

Web sites.

Literature Review

A variety of search methods consisting of chapters.indigo.ca, the local library,

electronic databases, and the World Wide Web (WWW), were used to ensure a broad

base to the literature review. The Chapters.indigo.ca Web site and the local library were

accessed to purchase and borrow practice-based writing therapy books. The University of

Calgary databases were utilized to find a collection of information on the project topic.

The databases used included Psych Info, Academic Search Premier, Psychology &

Behavioral Sciences Collection, and Education Resources Information Center. The

following search terms were used for finding writing therapy and Web site evaluation

sources in the electronic databases: writing therapy; writing therapy interventions;

therapeutic writing; therapeutic writing interventions; journaling; journal therapy; journal

writing therapy; autobiographical writing; autobiographical writing therapy; reflective

writing; reflective writing therapy; poetry therapy; Web site evaluation; Web site

assessment; Web site appraisal; Web site review; Web site fraud; evaluating Web sites; and standards for Web sites.

When obtaining information from the internet, special precautions were taken to ensure that only reliable, valid information was sourced. Evaluation procedures suggested by Barker (2005) and Ohio State University (2003) as outlined in the literature review section were implemented before selecting on-line information for this project. Search engines used for finding resources on the internet included Google, Google Scholar, msn Search, and Yahoo!. The search terms utilized to find writing therapy and Web site evaluation research on the internet were the same as those used for searching the electronic databases. The literature review focuses on considerations for reliable, valid writing therapy techniques, and evaluation procedures for Web sites.

Web Site Evaluation Procedures

The internet search engines and search terms used for the literature review were also implemented to find writing therapy Web sites for evaluation. Through the search, 25 therapeutic writing sites were identified for appraisal. The number of Web sites was selected because this was as many as could be found that were actual *writing therapy* sites, and not simply writing sites, or sites intended primarily for commercial purposes. A grid was created. The vertical axis was the assessment evaluation criteria. The horizontal axis was the listing of the selected Web sites (Table 1). For each writing therapy Web site, an *X* was placed in the rows where corresponding guidelines were met, and a *Q* was assigned where the criteria was considered questionable. An *NA* was placed at intersections where the criteria could not be evaluated and if a given criteria was not met,

the intersection was left as an empty space. Once all 25 Web sites were evaluated, five

Web sites that met all the criteria were noted for inclusion in the manual (Appendix A).

Evaluation Guidelines

A combination of the Web site evaluation principles set out by Barker (2005) and

Ohio State University (2003) were used to assess the 25 writing therapy Web sites

(Appendix B). These guidelines were not created specifically for writing therapy Web

sites, but can be applied to any Web sites on the WWW. Creating specific guidelines for

therapeutic writing information provided on Web sites was not as straight forward as the

Web site evaluation component. Ohio State University (2003) points out that author

credentials of Web sites should be listed, which would also apply to creators of on-line

writing therapy information. A consumer should know if they are dealing with someone

who has psychological training. At this point in time therapeutic writing is not a regulated

field or intervention, so statements about who is qualified can not be assertively made.

However, the trend toward training is reflected in the increasing emergence of training

programs.

Training is recommended for several of the writing therapy approaches available. For

example, the Progoff Intensive Journal Program consists of a process equivalent to about

one college course in addition to regular attendance at Intensive Journal Workshops to

become a certified Journal Consultant (Progoff, n.d.). The National Federation for

Biblio/Poetry Therapy (n.d.). proposes training to become a certified applied poetry

facilitator (CAPF), certified poetry therapist (CPT) or registered poetry therapist (PTR).

The prerequisite for entering into the CAPF program is a Bachelor's degree or higher in

the mental health field. The PTR program requires an applicant to possess a master's

degree or higher (in mental health). The study period for both the CAPF and PTR programs is 440 hours of training. To become registered as a Poetry Therapist, 975 hours of study are required, along with a Master's degree or higher. Although writing therapy is not regulated, professionals wishing to use writing therapy with clients have an ethical obligation to their clients and regulating bodies not to practice outside of their scope.

Specific Criteria for Web Site Evaluation. Nine criteria created from the literature review were used to evaluate each of the selected writing therapy Web sites. First, the URL address was investigated according to a Web site evaluation guideline suggested by Barker (2005) to determine whether the site was personal, government based, educational, or created by a non-profit organization. The URL check (described in Chapter 2) was carried out as more of a process guide, something to be aware of during the evaluation process. Next, author credentials (Ohio State University, 2003) and links to creators and writers of the Web sites (Barker) were explored. To meet this criterion, authors also needed to report some type of membership to a professional association. If no links to the creators and writers of the Web sites existed, then letters in the given URL address were removed to each backslash, and searches were conducted with the new addresses. Each Web site was then checked to determine if the information being provided was current (Barker; Ohio State University). In addition, links on each site were checked to distinguish whether they functioned properly, and if the links led to reputable information (Barker; Ohio State University).

Other criteria were also implemented for evaluating the 25 writing therapy Web sites. The URL address of each Web site was entered into alexa.com, then the Google, and Yahoo! search engines were utilized for each Web site to observe which other Web

sites were linked to the sites being evaluated (Barker, 2005). In both Google and Yahoo!, the word "link," then a colon, and then the URL address of each Web site was typed and searched for (Barker). Barker also suggests monitoring fraudulent activity on Web sites, and this was observed through Norton Internet Security fraud monitoring software (Symantec Corporation, 2008). The purpose of each Web site was also identified (Ohio State University, 2003). For example, it was noted whether the Web site was primarily offering information. If the intention of a given site was to sell products, or support specific opinions, this was not considered to meet the criterion. Finally, it was also recorded whether references, and substantial amounts of information were provided for each Web site (Ohio State University).

Methodological Limitations

There are limitations in the methodology of this project that should be noted. First, the literature review section of this project is not inclusive of all the potentially valid and reliable writing therapy approaches available. As such, the writing therapy literature is provided as a reference to some of the existing therapeutic writing methods. There may be other noteworthy therapeutic writing Web sites not listed in the findings section of this project. The evaluation guidelines created by the author are not meant to be a complete set of rules, but rather helpful recommendations for assessing writing therapy Web sites. Specific guidelines for writing therapy information are not offered in this project because this intervention is currently not regulated. Finally, the manual proposed in Appendix A includes a summary of the relevant information included in this project. It should be noted that upon completion of this project, the manual is intended to be field tested by practicing counsellors so that they may provide feedback to the author, which may be

implemented prior to the publication of the manual. It is hoped that the feedback will be

integrated into the material to help establish validity.

Chapter 4: Results

Twenty-five writing therapy Web sites were evaluated according to the established

criteria set out in chapter 3. Table 1 illustrates the findings of each evaluated writing

therapy Web site. An *X* was placed at the intersection of each Web site and criterion

where the given criterion was met for the specific Web site. Where a criterion was not

met for a Web site, the intersection was left as a blank space. If the criterion was

considered questionable in a situation where conflicting information was presented, a *Q*

was placed in the applicable junction. An NA was placed at intersections where the

criterion was not available. An explanation of each criterion listed in Table 1 is

explained. Next, highlights of findings from each of the criterion are provided. Finally, a

listing of the five selected Web sites that met all evaluation criteria is presented. A brief

review of the criteria derived for the project is provided next in order to reveal more fully

how the author interpreted the guidelines.

Explanation of Criteria

The following criteria were selected based on the research presented in the literature

review of this project (chapter 2). The selected evaluation criteria are adopted from Ohio

State University (2003) and Barker (2005) and are reviewed here to clarify interpretation

of the criteria.

URL Address. The URL address was investigated to determine whether the Web site

was personal, government based, educational, or from a non-profit organization. Barker

emphasizes the importance of exploring the type of information source to determine

reliability of information. For each Web site evaluated, the URL addresses were taken

into consideration when establishing reliability of the source. URL addresses were

investigated to note any incongruence between the URL address and content of the Web sites. For example, a URL address might end in ".org" but the Web site may be personal rather than organizational-based. Barker suggests taking added caution for personal Web sites where there are no publishers or domain owners attesting to the information being provided.

Author Credentials. Author credentials and links to creators and writers of the Web sites were thoroughly explored. Ohio State University (2003) maintains that authors of sites should hold suitable education, training, or experience on the topic being discussed. Barker (2005) cautions that the Web site should not be based on opinion and that the author should be fully qualified on the given subject. Seeing as writing therapy is currently not a regulated field, the evaluator created her own standards. The evaluator looked for authors who possessed formal education with some writing therapy training and facilitating experience. If the author did not provide details of formal education, the evaluator looked for authors with an abundance of experience in teaching writing therapy that had also taken some writing therapy courses or workshops. In addition, the evaluator investigated author credentials to determine whether membership to a professional association was indicated. If the author did not provide details of this information, this criterion was not met. Membership to a professional association offers consumers a place to lodge complaints if a problem is encountered.

Current Content. Each Web site was checked to determine whether the information being provided was current. This criterion was established by looking at the bottom of the Web pages on each site to verify when the site was last updated (Barker, 2005). If this information was not available, dates on the information being provided were investigated.

For example, if the Web site offered workshops or other events, these were examined to confirm whether the dates were current.

Functional Links. For each Web site evaluated, all links were checked to reveal if they functioned properly, and whether the links led to other helpful looking information. If the linked sites provided some type of service, product, or information that was related to writing therapy, then the site being evaluated met this criterion. Nonetheless, if more than 3 links were non-functional, the given Web site did not meet this criterion.

Linked to Other Sites. Each of the writing therapy Web sites being evaluated were entered into alexa.com, Google, and Yahoo! search engines (Barker, 2005). If other sites were found to be linked to the Web site being evaluated, then this criterion was met.

No Fraud Detected. If Norton Internet Security software did not detect any fraudulent activity on the given Web site being evaluated, then this criterion was met.

Clear Purpose. Barker (2005) draws attention to the significance of confirming that the evaluated Web site is interested in offering information. The purpose of each Web site was identified through observing whether each evaluated Web site was primarily offering information. If the main intent of a site was to support specific opinions, or sell products, then this criterion was not met.

References Provided. Barker (2005) indicates that Web sites providing scholarly information should specify sources through footnotes or another method. This criterion was met only if the given Web site offered footnotes, or links to references of evidence-based or academic work.

Quantity of Information Provided. To meet this criterion, each of the evaluated Web sites needed to provide instructional material or direction for acquiring instructional

material on writing therapy. In addition, if the Web site primarily offered links to writing therapy information, or workshops to learn more about writing therapy, they also needed to offer some writing therapy information on their site to meet this criterion. Each Web site was required to provide a greater quantity of writing therapy information in comparison to amount of products and services for sale. Otherwise, the purpose of the Web site was considered questionable as to whether the main purpose was to sell products and services, or offer information.

Findings of Each Criterion

URL Address. All sites met the *URL address* criterion. The URL address of each Web site was taken into consideration, and there was no reason for the evaluator to believe that any of the URL addresses could have adversely affected the reliability of any sites. Caution was added when evaluating URL addresses belonging to personal Web sites, but this was not an issue. For example, deenametzger.com is a personal site authored by Deena Metzger, and this site met all criteria, making one of the top 5 sites. Deenametzger.com demonstrated that being a personal Web site does not necessarily lower credibility.

No Fraud Detected. All the Web sites also met the *no fraud detected* criterion. No fraud was detected on any of the Web sites, as Norton Internet Security would have blocked fraudulent sites and provided a warning not to use the given sites. It was assumed that Norton Internet Security was able to pick up any fraudulent activity however the evaluator can not guarantee that this security software is infallible.

Linked to Other Sites. All of the Web sites met the *linked to other sites* criterion aside from two sites where this information was not available. When this information was

unavailable, alexa.com simply listed the words *no data*. Google and Yahoo! search engines were also used to evaluate this criterion, but this criterion was only met when the external linking sites were not affiliated with the owner of the site being evaluated. Google and Yahoo! list all links to Web sites, including sites with the same owners.

Clear Purpose. Nineteen Web sites met the *clear purpose* criterion and four sites were considered questionable. The main focus of the sites that met this criterion was to provide writing therapy information to its users. These Web sites provided enough information for users to become inspired about, or attempt writing therapy. In addition, the Web sites that met this criterion provided a greater ratio of writing therapy information versus selling products and services. The evaluator thought that it was useful to provide information about certain services (like writing therapy workshops) and products (such as writing therapy books) as long as that was not the primary focus of the Web site. For example, journaltherapy.com offers services and links to useful writing therapy books, but there is also helpful, inspiring information about writing therapy provided on this site. In the four sites that were considered questionable, the primary focus was not clear. These Web sites seemed to devote an abundance of Web pages to selling products and services, with little on writing therapy. The two sites that did not meet this criterion did not offer much information on writing therapy, and seemed to be promoting something other than writing therapy information. The sites that did not meet this criterion or were considered questionable could have met this criterion by providing more information about writing therapy, and less focus on promoting other ideas, products, and services.

Author Credentials. Six Web sites met the *author credentials* criterion. The Web sites that met this criterion provided author credentials, possessed some form of education and training or experience in writing therapy, and all indicated membership to a professional association. Writepath.org offers an excellent example of author credentials. The author of this site provides extensive information on credentials, education, experience, and publications to substantiate the information she provides. The 19 Web sites that did not meet this criterion did not provide information about either author credentials, or membership to professional associations. It should be noted that 12 of the 19 sites that did not meet this criterion offered appropriate author credentials, but did not indicate any professional memberships. Therefore these 12 sites did partially meet this criterion. The authors of the sites that did not meet this criterion may have possessed the appropriate education, training, or professional memberships, but did not reveal this. Further, these authors may have a great deal of credible knowledge to share, but the evaluation criteria used in this project necessitates that this information be shared with the public.

Current Content. The 18 Web sites that met the *current content* criterion either provided information on when Web pages were last updated, and/or offered calendars of events or workshops with current and upcoming dates. The information was considered current if the date was showing the current month and the current year. Journalmagic.com is a good example of a Web site that offers current information that is easy to identify. On the home page this site offers a link to a daily message with the date provided. In addition, there is also a link offering courses with current, upcoming dates. Six sites did not meet this criterion, and one was considered questionable. The sites that did not meet

Table 1

Guidelines Met for Web Sites Evaluated

Web sites	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
createwritenow.com	X		X	X	X	X	Q		X
deenametzger.com*	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
gilliebolton.com	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
http://www.edge.net/~ dphillip/journal.html	X				X	X			
http://gerrystarnes.com/ journal/	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
inspiredtojournal.com	X		X		X	X	Q		
intensivejournal.org*	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
journalforyou.com	X				X	X	X		X
journalinglife.com	X				X	X	X		X
journalingtools.com	X			X	X	X			
journalmagic.com	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
journaltherapy.com*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Web sites	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
kporterfield.com	X				X	X	X		X
Newlifestories.com	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
pen.org	X		X	X	X	X	X		
poeticmedicine.org	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
poetrytherapy.org	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	NA
psy.utexas.edu/ pennebaker.com*	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
storyhelp.com	X		Q		X	X	Q		
toolswithheart.com	X		X	X	X	X	Q		X
watercolorjournaling.co m	X		X		X	X	X		
writepath.org*	X	X	X	X	NA	X	X	X	X
writingitreal.com	X		X		X	X	X		X
writingthejourney.com	X			X	X	X	X		
zenwords.ca	X		X	X	NA	X	X		

* *NOTE:* X = criteria met; Q = questionable; NA = information not available.

this criterion were either outdated, or did not provide any indication of dates at all. The site that was considered questionable contained some current content, while other information was outdated. The sites that did not meet this criterion could have met it by providing dates if the information was in fact current.

Quantity of Information Provided. Sixteen Web sites met the *quantity of information provided* criterion, and one was recorded as not available. The Web sites that met this criterion offered enough instructional information on writing therapy to help users learn more about this field. Http://gerrystarnes.com/journal/ is a good example of a Web site that offered an abundance of writing therapy information. This site offers a free on-line journal writing workshop for the public to try. The Web site that was recorded as not available offered a newsletter, but no other readily available writing therapy information. The eight Web sites that did not meet this criterion were limited in instructional writing therapy information, and some provided more products and services than they did quality information. The sites that did not meet this criterion could have met it if they offered more writing therapy information or direction for where to acquire it, and less marketing of products.

Functional Links. Fourteen Web sites met the *functional links* criterion. This criterion was only met if all links in each of the sites were functional, and the links led to helpful looking information. If the functional links led to other Web sites that were relevant to writing therapy, this criterion was met. At least four links were non-functional in all 11 sites that did not meet this criterion.

References Provided. Six writing therapy Web sites met the *references provided* criterion, and one site was recorded as *not available.* The Web sites that met this criterion offered either footnotes, or links to references of evidence-based or academic work. Psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker.com is a good example of a Web site that provides a great deal of references. The Web sites that did not meet this criterion could include more scholarly references on their Web site which would add credibility according to the suggested guidelines in this project.

Five Selected Writing Therapy Web Sites

The five top writing therapy Web sites include: deenametzger.com, intensivejournal.org, journaltherapy.com, psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker.com, and writepath.org. Two of the five top Web sites met all of the established criteria; journaltherapy.com, and writepath.org. The remaining three top Web sites met eight of the nine criteria. These Web sites include: deenametzger.com, intensivejournal.org, and psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker.com. These three Web sites did not fully meet the *author credentials* criterion. While they all possessed appropriate education, training, and/or experience, they did not offer indications of membership to professional associations. Beyond meeting all the criteria, these sites were easy to navigate, and offered a great deal of useful information. It is important to note that the criteria have not been weighed against one another to determine which criteria are considered the most important. What constitutes a well done site would be dependant on the specific criteria deemed important and necessary to the individual users of the writing therapy Web sites.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this section, a short discussion about the general findings of the writing therapy Web sites is provided. Following this, implications from the findings of the research are offered. Next, limitations of the research are explored and finally, future directions are offered.

As noted in the methodology section, writing therapy is currently not a regulated field so there are no defined standards. When authors of Web sites possess very little, or no formal training at all, consumers of these Web sites will need to make a judgement call as to whether the information being provided is coming from a reliable source and/or is appropriate for them. If Web site authors indicate membership to a professional association, this provides a place for consumers to make complaints if need be. This type of affiliation is also a statement of credibility/professionalism. Further, when authors of writing therapy Web sites are selling services and/or products, consumers may wish to clarify the intentions of the site. When an abundance of links and a large quantity of information were devoted to selling products or services, the evaluation criterion was considered either questionable, or not met. Writing therapy sites offering products and services may or may not provide useful information for counselling professionals. Ohio State University (2003) emphasizes the importance of determining the purpose of Web sites when evaluating them. Some of the Web sites evaluated appeared to have a large amount of pages devoted to selling products or services in comparison to the quantity of writing therapy information being provided.

Many of the writing therapy Web sites did not meet the *references provided* criterion because they did not include footnotes or links to resources to communicate where the

information was coming from. Ohio State University (2003) maintains the importance of supplying references to information provided on Web sites. Evaluating Web sites can be unclear in situations where conflicting information is presented. Some of the evaluated Web sites lacked evaluation criteria, but offered useful information. The Web sites that made the top five list were easy to navigate, and offered an abundance of helpful writing therapy information.

Implications

There are several implications arising from the findings of this research. First, writing therapy practitioners may find the results of the evaluation useful. In addition, owners and authors of Web sites may attend to the proposed criteria to ensure that they meet the criteria, and if they do not, to improve the quality of their site. Professionals interested in finding quality writing therapy information on-line may benefit from browsing the top five writing therapy Web sites. Professionals may also implement the evaluation guidelines when searching for writing therapy information on the internet to increase the likelihood of finding quality information. Finally, for consumers of writing therapy Web sites, this research highlights the availability of credible, reliable on-line content. Further, this research provides users with selected tools necessary to ensure that they are accessing quality on-line content.

Limitations

The author had difficulty finding writing therapy Web sites that appeared feasible for evaluating. There may be other therapeutic writing therapy sites that would have met the evaluation criteria if evaluated, but were not found. Also, there may be many credible sites and facilitators of therapeutic writing that were not found in this project due to the

specific criteria that were selected. During the evaluation process, the author became aware that while a set of evaluation criteria had been established, some of the results may vary depending on the evaluator, and the possible variation in interpretation of selected criteria. For example, determining the purpose of a Web site may not always be clear when the author is selling products or services in addition to providing information. Likewise, establishing whether links led to reliable, valid sources was difficult when the links led to other Web sites. It was easier to determine the quality of information when scholarly journal articles were provided as additional resources.

Some of the Web site owners who did not meet the *author credential* criterion may have met this standard had they provided some explanation of professional background, or indicated membership with a professional association. For example, when one Web site owner that did not meet the *author credential* criterion was emailed, she verified that she did in fact possess professional training. After receiving this information, the criterion was not changed. An important focus in this project is to offer counselling professionals a basis for finding valid, reliable writing therapy Web sites. When evaluating such Web sites, the consumer would be wise to contact owners or writers to clarify any confusion. Nevertheless, the evaluation guidelines suggested in this project propose that writing therapy Web sites should clarify author credentials for consumers to examine (Barker, 2005; Ohio State University, 2003).

It would have been helpful to investigate reviews on the sites that were evaluated, but this criterion was not included due to the lack of reviews found. Comments were posted on several of the Web sites evaluated, but these observations were considered promotional in nature. Owners of Web sites have the option of posting only positive

remarks. In addition, most articles in the Web sites were sourced, but actual information on writing therapy was often not referenced. It could be assumed that the primary writers of these Web sites possess the appropriate credentials to be the authority figure on the given topic. Nonetheless, the evaluation criteria specify that references should be provided by way of footnotes or links to references. Providing proper references offers credibility to writers so that consumers of writing therapy Web sites can feel more confident about the integrity of information they are receiving.

Future Directions

The author is not aware of any other research similar to that which was conducted in this project. The author hopes that this project encourages others to continue researching the quality of writing therapy Web sites. This project, combined with future information relating to standards for writing therapy Web sites, may benefit counselling professionals interested in finding valid, reliable on-line sources of writing therapy information. Missing reference links was one of the common criterions not met with many of the Web sites evaluated. If Web site providers are interested in providing quality, valid, reliable writing therapy information to consumers, it may be helpful to include references in their sites. Professional counsellors come from a paradigm of training, which aligns credibility with evidence, academic evidence, and or substantive experience.

Throughout the process of completing this project, the author learned that it was difficult coming up with a tangible way to evaluate the content of the writing therapy Web sites. In a subsequent revision, the author would use a different process for assessing this criterion. For example, Patterson (1986) provides eight criteria for evaluating a theory that could be modified and used as a guide for evaluating content of therapeutic

writing Web sites. The eight criteria include importance, preciseness and clarity, parsimony/simplicity, comprehensiveness, operationality, verifiability, fruitfulness, and practicality. The first criterion (importance) draws attention to the level of significance of the information being provided. Next, preciseness and clarity could be implemented by assessing whether the material is being presented clearly. The parsimony/simplicity criterion could be applied through exploring whether the Web site uses a simple set of instructions and/or descriptions. The comprehensive criterion could be used to determine whether the information is thorough. Following this, the operationality criterion speaks to whether the recommended procedures or actions can be followed. The verifiability criterion could be employed by checking if there is any way to check out how one is doing. Fruitfulness would question whether good results are produced when the practitioner tries the recommended procedures, and practicality would address whether the content is practical.

There is still a great deal of research that needs to be addressed to establish further evaluation criteria, usefulness, reliability, and validity of writing therapy Web sites. This project offers a starting point for future researchers wishing to explore writing therapy Web sites further. Another future direction would include examining the extent to which writing therapy Web sites actually help people. Also, if consumers may experience setbacks, the Web sites could offer suggestions on how to deal with this. There are numerous different types of writing therapy that may benefit people in various ways. An important consideration in this type of research would be to investigate which techniques are best delivered on-line. Further, research could also be conducted to determine the utility and validity of on-line writing therapy training courses.

References

Adams, K. (1990). *Journal to the self: Twenty-two paths to personal growth.* New

York, NY: Warner Books.

Anderson, C., & Mac Curdy, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Writing and healing: Toward an*

informed practice. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Baikie, K. A., & Wilhelm, K. (2005). Emotional and physical health benefits of

expressive writing. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 11,* 338-346.

Barker, J. (2005, March 22). *Finding information on the Internet: A tutorial: Evaluating*

Web pages: Techniques to apply & questions to ask. Retrieved February 10, 2007,

from http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html

Bolton, G., Howlett, S., Lago, C., & Wright, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Writing cures: An*

introductory handbook of writing in counselling and therapy. New York, NY:

Brunner-Routledge.

Childress, C. A., & Asamen, J. K. (1998). The emerging relationship of psychology and

the internet: Proposed guidelines for conducting internet intervention research. *Ethics*

and Behavior, 8(1), 19-35.

Coutts, H. T. (2007). *Critical evaluation of resources on the internet.* Retrieved August

19, 2007, from http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/criticalevaluation/index.cfm

France, M. H., Cadieax, J., & Allen, G. E. (1995). Letter therapy: A model for enhancing

counseling intervention. *Journal of Counselling & Development, 73,* 317-318.

Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within.* Boston, MA:

Shambhala.

Herring, L. (2007). *Writing begins with the breath: Embodying your authentic voice.* Boston, MA: Shambhala.

Kirk, E. E. (1996). *Evaluating information found on the internet.* Retrieved March 20, 2007, from http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/index.html

Klauser, H, A. (2003). *With pen in hand: The healing power of writing.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Lange, A., Schoutrop, M., Schrieken, B., & Van De Ven, J. (2002). Interapy: A model for therapeutic writing through the internet. In S. J. Lepore & J. M. Smyth (Eds.), *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being* (pp. 215-255). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Lepore, S. J., & Smyth, J. M. (Eds.). (2006). *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being.* Baltimore, MD: United Books.

Manier, D., & Olivares, A. (2005). Who benefits from expressive writing? Moderator variables affecting outcomes of emotional disclosure interventions. *Counseling and Clinical Psychology Journal, 2*(1), 15-28.

Miller, P. (2001). *Writing your life: A journey of discovery.* Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy. (n.d.). *Getting trained: Poetry therapy training overview.* Retrieved May 30, 2008, from http://www.nfbpt.com/ summary.html

Ohio State University Libraries. (2003, April 17). *Evaluating Web sites > Overview – Key ideas.* Retrieved February 10, 2007, from liblearn.osu.edu/tutor/les1/

Oravec, J. A. (2000). On-line counselling and the Internet: Perspectives for mental health

    care supervision and education. *Journal of Mental Health, 9*(2), 121-135.

Patterson, C. H. (1986). *Theories of counseling and psychotherapy* (4th ed.). New York:

    Harper and Row.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process.

    Psychological Science, 8(3), 162-166.

Pennebaker, J. W. (2004). *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma*

    & emotional upheaval. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Pennebaker, J.W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of

    narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 55*(10), 1243-1254.

Porterfield, K. M. (n.d.). *Illuminations: Visual journaling inspirations.* Retrieved July

    10, 2007, from http://www.kporterfield.com/journal/Illuminations.html

Progoff, I. (1975). *At a journal workshop: The basic text and guide for using the*

    intensive journal. New York, NY: Dialogue House Library.

Progoff, J. (n.d.). *Advanced professional training in the Intensive Journal Method.*

    Ronkonkoma, NY: Progoff Intensive Journal Program for Self-Development.

    Retrieved March 20, 2008, from http://www.intensivejournal.org

Rippen, H., & Risk, A. (2000). Ehealth code of ethics. *Journal of Medical Internet*

    Research, 2(2), 1-11.

Risk, A. (2002). On the way to quality. *British Medical Journal, 324,* 601-602.

Ritterband, L. M., Gonder-Frederick, L. A., Cox, D. J., Clifton, A. D., West, R. W., &

    Borowitz, S. M. (2003). Internet interventions: In review, in use, and into the future.

   *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34*(5), 527-534.

Robson, D., & Robson, M. (2000). Ethical issues in internet counselling. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 13*(3), 249-257.

Schultze, N. (2006). Rapid communication: Success factors in internet-based psychological counselling. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 9*(5), 623-626.

Shaw, H. E., & Shaw, S. F. (2006). Critical ethical issues in on-line counselling: Assessing current practices with an ethical intent checklist. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 84,* 41-53.

Smith, A. G. (2005). *Criteria for evaluation of internet information resources.* Retrieved August 20, 2007, from http://www.vuw.ac.nz/staff/alastair_smith/evaln/index.htm

Symantec Corporation (2008). *Norton internet security.* Retrieved January 1, 2008, from http://store.norton.com/v2.0-img/operations/symantus/site/promo/pd/navnis08_360_us-2year.html

Wilson, P. (2002). How to find the good and avoid the bad or ugly: A short guide to tools for rating quality of health information on the internet. *British Medical Journal, 324,* 598-600.

Wright, J. K. (2005). Writing therapy in brief workplace counselling. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research, 5*(2), 111-119.

Wright, J., & Chung, M. C. (2001). Mastery of mystery? Therapeutic writing: A review of the literature. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 29*(3), 277-291.

Young, K. S. (2005). An empirical examination of client attitudes towards on-line counseling. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 8*(2), 172-177.

Appendix A

Finding Reliable On-line Therapeutic Writing Sources:

A Manual for Counselling Professionals

Finding Reliable On-line Therapeutic Writing Sources: A Manual For Counselling Professionals
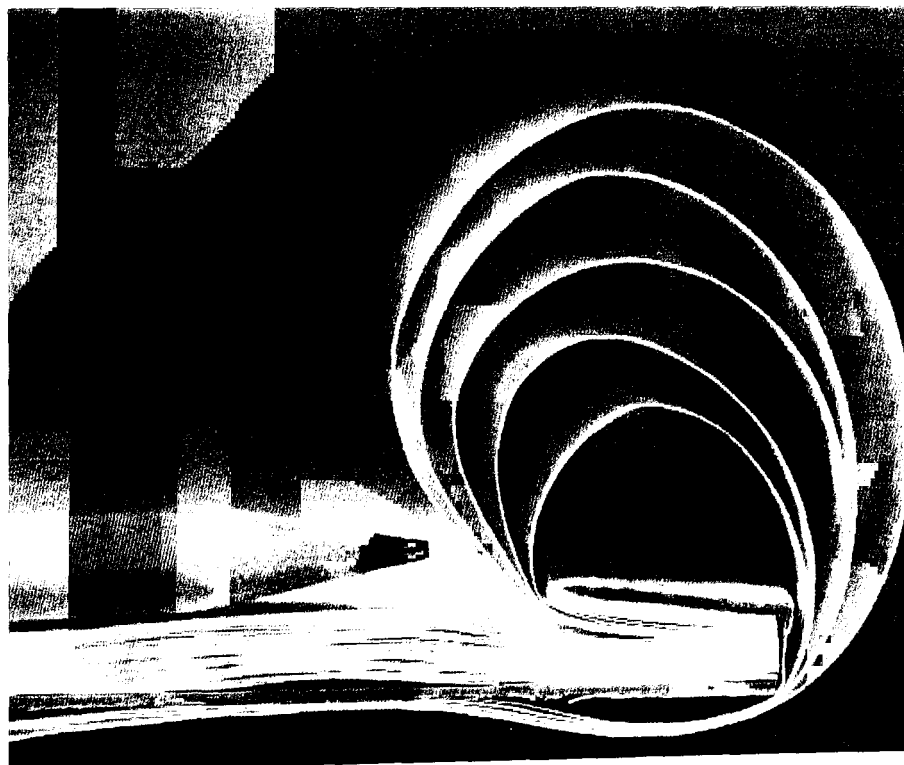
How Might This Apply To Your Practice ?

There is a body of research suggesting the therapeutic benefits of writing therapy (e.g., Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Herring, 2007; Manier & Olivares, 2005; Miller, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997). Writing therapy has demonstrated benefits with people suffering from trauma (Pennebaker, 2004), stress, high blood pressure, and cancer, along with other emotional, cognitive, and physical conditions (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Now that writing therapy is among the many interventions available on-line and because the quality of on-line health information can be questionable (Wilson, 2002) you may wish to have a way of evaluating the various sites. This manual suggests nine criteria to help you find effective, reliable writing therapy Web sites. The criteria are based on research from Barker (2005) and Ohio State University (2003) and are not meant to be exhaustive of all possible criteria. The proposed criteria are meant to assist you in assessing such sites. The purpose of this manual is to familiarize you with the recommended criteria so that you can be more equipped to evaluate writing therapy Web sites. As a counselling practitioner, you may want to exercise caution when using writing therapy. In an effort to act ethically, writing therapy should be utilized by counsellors that are familiar with this burgeoning field that is currently unregulated.

Some Questions To Think About

As you begin, here are some preliminary questions to think about:

- Do you ever use therapeutic writing as an intervention with clients?

- How do you implement writing therapy?

- How large is your repertoire of therapeutic writing strategies?

- Where do you look for writing therapy information?

- Have you ever looked for writing therapy information on-line?

- How adequately prepared to you feel to assist a client in doing writing therapy or using a writing therapy Web site?

- Have you ever considered using therapeutic writing to enhance your own emotional health?

- What other questions do you have?

How Was This Manual Created?

This manual is not about teaching therapeutic writing interventions, nor is it about advocating any specific writing therapy techniques. It is about evaluation of on-line writing therapy sites. Nine criteria for evaluating writing therapy Web sites were systematically developed using both writing therapy and Web site evaluation research and literature. Twenty-five Web sites were evaluated using the recommended criteria, and five writing therapy sites were selected that met all the criteria. Findings of the development phases are included in Table A2 of this manual. The five chosen Web sites are also discussed later in this manual. Further details on this project may be found at the University of Lethbridge Library.

So Where Do I Begin?

To enhance your awareness of the breadth of available approaches, a sampling of writing therapy approaches from clinical and research sources are provided. Next, criteria for evaluating writing therapy Web sites are offered to assist you in finding on-line writing therapy information. Finally, a section on how to use the criteria is proposed. An activity is presented to practice evaluating writing therapy Web sites. A chart and checklist are also provided that you may print and use for future evaluation purposes.

What Does The Writing Therapy Research Say ?

Several evidence-based and practice-based research examples of writing therapy techniques are described below, including commentary about the established or perceived benefits.

1. Pennebaker (1997) coined one form of writing therapy referred to as the *writing paradigm*. This evidence-based research suggests that participants write for about 15 to 30 minutes a day, for three to five days in a row. The participants are given instructions to write about a topic that has caused them a great deal of emotional upset. Either the same topic may be selected, or a different issue may be written about on each day. Pennebaker advises that participants should not worry about spelling or grammar. In addition, the participants are asked to write continuously for the allotted time without stopping. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) conducted a study using the *writing paradigm* method and found that long-term benefits included several improvements in physical condition including better lung and liver function, improvement in memory and immune system performance, and improved mood to name a few.

2. Porterfield (n.d.). offers practice-based evidence research that she refers to as *visual journaling*. In this form of writing therapy, Porterfield asserts that including art in journals assists people in accessing sections of the brain that are not normally utilized when using only words. This method of therapeutic writing helps to create thoughts that may then be

written on paper. Porterfield indicates that creating pictures in journals encourages people to reach deep insights about themselves and their surroundings.

3. Miller (2001) presents another writing therapy technique called *autobiographical writing*. In the book *Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery*, Miller discusses ten different workshops that include suggestions to help the writer tell their life story. The various exercises include writing about symbolic images in the mind, using personal documents, music, and significant objects to trigger memories, and also writing about important childhood experiences to name a few. These writing exercises can then be organized to create a personal life story. Miller asserts that autobiographical writing provides healing for several purposes. This type of writing therapy may be useful to people suffering from an illness, loss of a loved one, abuse, or any other upsetting life events. Autobiographical writing is assumed to help create meaningfulness and inner healing through the various proposed exercises that may be contained within 15 to 20 minute time-periods.

4. Herring (2007) advocates paying attention to the breath when carrying out writing therapy for a process that she calls *deep writing*. When inhaling, energy flows into, and around the body. When exhaling, the body submits to the world around it, trusting that it will fill up again. Through the process of journaling, Herring offers encouragement and prompting questions for the writer to answer on paper. Herring asks the

writer to write as freely as possible. Some of Herring's questions include exploration of the writing process, personal obstacles, and using the five senses to visualize and describe memories in full detail. One of Herrings writing techniques centers on body awareness, feeling each part of the body, one area at a time while lying in a comfortable position, then writing about the experience. Herring maintains that *deep writing* promotes a more profound connection with the writing process.

If You Are Seriously Interested ?

You may want to further your understanding of the theoretical aspects of therapeutic writing by reading *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* (Anderson & Mac Curdy, 2000); *Writing Cures: An Introductory Handbook of Writing in Counselling and Therapy* (Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004) and/or *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being* (Lepore & Smyth, 2006).

What Are The Criteria?

The following criteria for evaluating Web sites are adapted from Barker (2005) and Ohio State University (2003). You may use these criteria to assist you in the process of finding valid, reliable on-line writing therapy information. The nine criteria are not meant to be exhaustive of all possible criteria, but are intended to offer a starting place for evaluating writing therapy Web sites.

1. <u>URL Address</u> – Type the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) address in the Web browser to find the given Web site. You should investigate the URL address to establish whether the Web site is personal, government based, educational, or from a non-profit organization. Personal sites normally include a personal name, and government sites usually end in ".gov," ".mil," ".ca," or another type of country short form. Educational Web sites typically end in '.edu," and non-profit organization sites commonly end with ".org." You will want to explore the information source to determine the reliability of information. URL addresses should be inspected to note any incongruence between the URL address and the content of the Web site. For example, a URL address may end in ".org" but the Web site may be personal rather than organizational-based. You may want to take extra caution with personal Web sites as there are no publishers or domain owners attesting to the information being provided.

2. <u>Author Credentials</u> – You should also thoroughly explore author credentials and links to creators and writers of writing therapy Web

sites. Authors of sites should hold suitable education, training, or experience on the topic being discussed. Web sites should not be based on opinion and the author should be fully qualified to write on the given subject. Writing therapy is currently not a regulated field, so you will want to have an idea of acceptable professional credentials before evaluating therapeutic writing Web sites. It is also helpful for Web site authors to indicate membership to a professional association. If you encounter a problem, you may then lodge a complaint to the ethics review board of their regulating body. In addition, you should also have some knowledge of credible writing therapy interventions before evaluating the Web sites.

3. <u>Current Content</u> – Check Web sites to determine whether the information being provided is current. Look at the bottom of Web pages to verify when the site was last updated. If this information is not available, dates on the information being provided may be investigated. For example, if the Web site offers workshops or other events, these can be examined to confirm whether the dates are current.

4. <u>Functional Links</u> – You should check all links to reveal if they function properly, and whether the links lead to other helpful looking information.

5. <u>Linked to Other Sites</u> – The Web sites you evaluate can be entered into alexa.com, Google, and Yahoo! search engines to establish whether other sites are linked to the sites you are evaluating. The degree to

which the site you are evaluating has been linked by others indicates its popularity, which adds credibility. When a site is popular, more other sites may want to link to it.

6. <u>No Fraud Detected</u> - Your internet security software will normally detect any fraudulent activity on a Web site. For example, a number of unethical Web sites use their site for phishing, which is picked up by internet security software such as Norton. Phishing occurs when a Web site attempts to steal your personal information, which may include items such as passwords or credit card numbers. If fraudulent activity is revealed, note that this may not be a reputable site.

7. <u>Clear Purpose</u> - The writing therapy Web site you are evaluating should be primarily interested in offering information. If the main intent of a site is to support specific opinions, or to sell products, then this may not be a suitable Web site for becoming more informed about writing therapy.

8. <u>References Provided</u> - Writing therapy Web sites providing scholarly information should specify sources through footnotes, links, or another method. The references should lead to evidence-based or academic work.

9. <u>Quantity of Information Provided</u> - Writing therapy Web sites should provide you with instructional material or direction for acquiring such material on writing therapy. In addition, the majority of Web pages on a

site should not be used to promote products and services, thereby

exceeding the quantity of writing therapy information being provided.

How Do I Use The Criteria ?

Table A2 provides a summary of 25 Web sites evaluated using the criteria

outlined in the previous section. Of particular note are the five following Web

sites that met all the criteria:

- Deenametzger.com

- Intensivejournal.org

- Journaltherapy.com

- Psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker.com

- Writepath.org

If you look through these Web sites, you will see that they are good examples

of what writing therapy Web sites should include that meet the proposed nine

criteria. Beyond meeting all the criteria, these sites were easy to navigate, and

offered a great deal of useful information. It should be noted that the criteria

were not weighed against one another to determine which were more

important. It is up to you to decide whether specific criteria are more

important than others.

Try The Web Site Evaluation Activity!
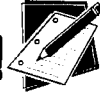
The following Web Site Evaluation Activity Chart (Table A1) is a tool to assist you in gaining confidence for evaluating writing therapy Web sites. In the chart provided, you will see the nine criteria are listed across the top axis, and a Web site is listed in the far left axis. Go to the Web site listed and look for each of the criteria. When each criterion is found, place a checkmark or an X in the appropriate intersection. This sheet may be printed for future use when searching for valid, reliable writing therapy Web sites. Once the sheet is printed, simply add each Web site being evaluated underneath the one provided and continue with the same steps that were taken with the sample Web site. After the chart, you will also see a checklist provided that offers questions to be used in combination with the chart. You will notice that the chart only lists the titles of each criterion, so the checklist is can be used with the chart to remind you of the details of each criterion. Simply place a checkmark beside the questions underneath each criterion when the given Web site answers the questions with a *yes*.

Table A1

Web Site Evaluation Activity Chart

Web sites	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
Psy.utexas.edu/ pennebaker.com									

Web Site Evaluation Activity Checklist

1. URL Address

   ☐ Did you check the type of URL address?

   ☐ Is the URL address congruent with the content of the Web site?

   ☐ If it is a personal Web site, did you take extra caution when evaluating?

2. Author Credentials

   ☐ Were you able to find the author credentials?

   ☐ If the author credentials were presented, do you believe they are suitable?

   ☐ Did the author reveal membership to a professional association?

3. Current Content

   ☐ Did you check the bottom of the Web pages to determine whether the site was recently updated?

   ☐ Did you check the information to ensure it is current?

   ☐ Does this Web site appear to be current/contain current information?

4. Functional Links

   ☐ Did the Web site contain functional links?

   ☐ Did the links that were provided lead to other helpful looking information?

5. Linked to Other Sites

- □ Did you enter the URL address into alexa.com, Google, and/or Yahoo! to determine whether other sites are linked to the Web site you are evaluating?

- □ Were other sites linked to the site you are evaluating?

6. No Fraud Detected

- □ Was no fraudulent activity detected by your internet security software?

7. Clear Purpose

- □ Was the primary purpose of the Web site to offer information and not to sell products and/or services, or promote an opinion?

8. References Provided

- □ Did the Web site provide footnotes, or links to references of evidence-based or academic work?

9. Quantity of Information Provided

- □ Did the Web site provide instructional material or direction for acquiring instructional material on writing therapy?

- □ Did you feel there was a sufficient quantity of writing therapy information provided directly on the Web site?

Table A2

Results from the Research Conducted Leading to this Manual

Guidelines r r r r ɔr Web Sites Evaluated

We	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
createwritei	X		X	X	X	X	Q		X
deenametzg	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
gilliebolton.com	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
http://edge.net/~dphillip/journal.html	X				X	X			
http://gerrystarnes.com/journal/	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
inspiredtojournal.com	X		X		X	X	Q		
intensivejournal.org*	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
journalforyou.com	X				X	X	X		X
journalinglife.com	X				X	X	X		X
journalingtools.com	X			X	X	X			
journalmagic.com	X		X	X	X	X	X		X

Web	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
journaltherap:	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
kporterfield.c	X				X	X	X		X
Newlifestories	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
pen.org	X		X	X	X	X	X		
poeticmedicine.org	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
poetrytherapy.org	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	NA
psy.utexas.edu/ pennebaker.com*	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
storyhelp.com	X		Q		X	X	Q		
toolswithheart.com	X		X	X	X	X	Q		X
watercolorjournaling.com	X		X		X	X	X		
writepath.org*	X	X	X	X	NA	X	X	X	X
writingitreal.com	X		X		X	X	X		X
writingthejourney.com	X			X	X	X	X		

Web	URL address	Author credentials	Current content	Func. links	Linked to other sites	No fraud detected	Clear purpose	References Provided	Quantity of information provided
zenwords.ca	X		X	X	NA	X	X		

NOTE: Xaiaiaiaiaria met; Q = questionable; NA = information not available

Appendix B

List of Web Sites Evaluated

1. createwritenow.com

2. deenametzger.com

3. gilliebolton.com

4. http://edge.net/~dphillip/journal.html

5. http://gerrystarnes.com/journal/

6. inspiredtojournal.com

7. intensivejournal.org

8. journalforyou.com

9. journalinglife.com

10. journalingtools.com

11. journalmagic.com

12. journaltherapy.com

13. kporterfield.com

14. newlifestories.com

15. pen.org

16. poeticmedicine.org

17. poetrytherapy.org

18. psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker.com

19. storyhelp.com

20. toolswithheart.com

21. watercolorjournaling.com

22. writepath.org

23. writingitreal.com

24. writingthejourney.com

25. zenwords.ca