

The Tree of Life A Group Poetry Therapy Method for Patients with Advanced Cancer

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Abstract

A study examined the suitability of group poetry therapy for psychosocial support among patients with advanced cancer. A group of seven patients met eight times to participate in poetry therapy exercises, aimed at promoting a sense of connectedness to the self, others, and nature. The method applied was based on the concept of *holotropia*, emphasizing a holistic self and unity with the world. Nature-themed exercises, such as virtual nature walks and looking at nature photographs, were part of the writing exercises. Mindfulness exercises aimed to help participants to compassionately observe their experiences, promoting emotional exploration and acceptance. Integrating Green Care and mindfulness elements into poetry therapy created an empowering and healing experience for participants. Our study highlights the potential of poetry therapy to enhance emotional resilience and connectedness among patients with advanced cancer.

Keywords: group poetry therapy; advanced cancer; Green Care; mindfulness; connectedness; compassion; self-compassion

Introduction

We conducted a study (Nyfors et al., 2024) examining the suitability of group poetry therapy for providing psychosocial and emotional support to patients with advanced cancer. A group of seven patients with advanced cancer met eight times under the guidance of a facilitator and used poetry therapy methods to examine different emotions provoked by a serious illness. The goal of the integrative poetry therapy method applied in the research was to reduce emotional loneliness, strengthen patient-experienced compassionate connectedness from a broad perspective to self, others, and nature, and make these connections visible through narration (Nyfors et al., 2024). This goal was based on the knowledge that cancer can lead to emotional loneliness in patients (Deckx et al., 2014; Deckx et al., 2015, 1521). This article focuses on examining the poetry therapy method applied in the study. The focus is on the method itself and its backgrounds. The exercises conducted in the group, and written outputs of patients are examined in the article “Writing connections as a source of significance: group poetry therapy among patients with advanced cancer” (Nyfors et al., 2024).

Theories and concepts

The group’s emblem was the *tree of life*, which is a widespread archetype common to many religions, mythologies, and folktales. The tree of life represents the source of life, a force that connects all lives, or the cycle of life and death itself (Eldridge, 2024). Rooted in the earth but with branches pointed to heaven, trees can be considered intermediaries between two worlds:

the above and below (Biedermann [1992], 1996, 350).

The poetry therapy method applied was inspired by the concept of *holotropia*, developed by the Czech-born psychiatrist and transpersonal psychology pioneer Stanislav Grof. The term *holotropia* means moving towards wholeness, or becoming part of the whole (Grof, 2012, 2). The goal of the method applied was to open up the self and promote connectedness through practical poetry therapeutic exercises. The integrative method included virtual Green Care activities, perspectives of transpersonal psychology (and ecopsychology), and mindfulness exercises. The group also read various texts, on the basis of which the patients performed writing exercises. The written outputs of patients were shared and discussed in the group.

Transpersonal psychology and holotropia as concepts

Transpersonal psychology is based on humanistic psychology, whose leading figure is Abraham Maslow. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the understanding of higher, specifically human qualities that are unique to human life, such as love, self-consciousness, self-determination, personal freedom, morality, art, philosophy, religion, and science. (Grof, 2008, 46). On the basis of humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology was later developed by a small group, including Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof. Transpersonal psychology considers the entire spectrum of human experience, such as mystical states, cosmic consciousness, psychedelic experiences, trance phenomena, creativity, and religious, artistic, and scientific inspiration. (Grof, 2008, 47). Transpersonal psychology can be defined as a psychology that considers what traditional psychology may ignore (Hartelius et al., 2007, 142).

Holotropic states of consciousness are unusual states of consciousness with healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential (Grof, 2012, 3). These kind of states can be produced, for example, by psychedelics or experiential therapy techniques which include, for example, Gestalt therapy, primal therapy, and holotropic breathwork (Grof & Grof, 2010, 7; Grof, 2009, xxii). In holotropic states of consciousness, a person can transcend the narrow boundaries of their ego (self-awareness) and access their full identity, identifying with all that exists and even with the creative principle itself (Grof 2012, 2). The concept of holotropia used by Grof refers to a state called *ego-dissolution*, where the boundary between the user and the outside world begins to blur (see *ego-dissolution* in Hynninen et al., 2020).

Ken Wilber speaks of experiences of unity, usually with nature, where self-awareness can momentarily disappear, and identity can expand to encompass the entire visible or sensorimotor world. This is known as nature mysticism. Such a profound sense of unity can be described as follows: the distinction between subject and object vanishes, the inside and outside lose their significance, and identity transforms from an individual body-mind self-image to one that encompasses the entire world (Wilber, 2009, 298–299).

Holotropy can also be understood as a reduction in self-centeredness. Iris Murdoch refers to the concept of *unselfing*, reduction of self, which essence is love that leads people to disconnect from selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is (Murdoch, 2014, 91). In her essay “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts” Murdoch shares her nature-related experience where the focus on the bird distances her from her own self-centered concerns:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its

hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.

The possibilities of poetry therapy in general from the perspective of the holotropia concept

Literature, reading, and writing have the potential to unite and strengthen inclusion. Literature serves as a shared consciousness and memory, shared narratives that connect us to each other. Literature creates a network between writers and readers. This networking through shared narratives can itself be described as holotropic. Sharing our own story connects us to others, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The narration process in poetry therapy is itself integrative and promotes association with other people. According to Lewis et al. (2000) sharing emotional experiences and reliving the experiences of others is a form of limbic resonance – a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby people become attuned to each other's inner states.

In poetry therapy activities, the unifying dimension of sharing stories and dialogue is particularly evident. Studies have revealed that emotional writing is an effective method for dealing with traumatic and emotionally stressful experiences (Glass et al., 2019; Pennebaker, 2013, 3; Smyth et al., 2008). Sharing, talking, or writing about a traumatic experience has been shown to have a positive effect on both physical and mental health (Pennebaker, 2013 [2004], 4, 7–8).

Various difficult life situations can lead to psychological and existential crises. For example, depression can be seen as a state of broken connections, where the depressed person's connections to their previous personality, senses, feelings, fundamental beliefs, spiritual values, other people, and nature are severed (Pollan, 2021, 623). Another example of an existential crisis is facing one's impending death. The end of life can be associated with anxiety and existential suffering. Bolton (2009, 145) refers to Kübler-Ross, who states that (cancer) patients do not talk about death (in their last year of life) unless they are provided with a context in which to do so. A poetry therapy group can serve as just such a context for emotional writing, processing, and sharing experiences, discussion, giving and receiving peer support, and connecting with others, moving from lonely isolation to being part of a larger whole.

Green Care and mindfulness in poetry therapy as sources of healing and inclusion

I realized that I was underground in a beautiful forest, deep in the woods, in brown loam. I was surrounded by roots, I saw trees growing, and I was one with them. I was dead, but I was still lying in the ground among the roots. [...] I was part of the earth. [a person with breast cancer describes their psychedelic experience]. (Pollan 2021, 570)

The nature theme and Green Care thinking, as well as mindfulness, were integrated to the poetry therapy method applied in the study. Nature is often a context where a person can experience deep peace, tranquility, empowerment, and, on the other hand, merging with nature, as the woman with cancer states in the quote above becoming part of the earth. This can be called nature mysticism, which is not based on any religious paradigm.

Laakso (2022, 371) refers to the experience of *being*, as discussed in ecopsychology, which is a state of sufficiency and acceptance created by the natural environment, where the experiencer can feel at one with the place: being present and forgetting oneself. When a

person achieves an original sense of belonging, an experience of being that heals and restores is created. (Laakso, 2022, 371)

Green Care and its applications in poetry therapy

Green care is an umbrella term for a broad spectrum of health-promoting interventions that all use both biotic and abiotic elements of nature in their treatments. The goal is to maintain or promote a person's social, physical, mental, and even educational well-being (Haubenhofner et al., 2010, 106, reference to Sempik et al., 2003).

The natural environment is a restorative environment due to several factors. One factor relates to the perspective of connectedness: making natural and social connections by doing activities within a social group, or by having contact with animals or looking at wildlife. This perspective also includes a spiritual dimension where the key is to become a part of nature (Haubenhofner et al., 2010, 109). The experience of being a part of nature can be a healing experience. Humans have, according to the biophilia hypothesis, an inherent need to seek contact with nature and other forms of life (Kellert & Wilson, 1993)

Nature themes in the research group served as relaxation exercises and background material for metaphor work. The group made virtual nature walks by MIELI Mental Health Finland with different themes of the seasons (autumn, winter, spring), of which the visit to spring nature took place at the last meeting. The idea was to take advantage of the symbolism of the seasons, where spring represents hope, growth, and new life. The group also utilized nature photographs (Aijasaho, 2022), Nordic Power Animal cards (Frey & Tukiainen, 2018) and Forest and Meditation cards (Taivasmaa, 2020) in the background of the writing exercises.

Mindfulness and writing as tools for opening up to oneself and the world

Mindfulness means conscious presence in the present moment (Germer, 2004, 26). When mindfulness is placed in a therapeutic context, its definition often expands to include non-judgment and, on the other hand, unconditional acceptance (Germer, 2004, 26). Mindfulness thus means directing attention to the present moment. The person observes and describes their experiences, such as bodily sensations, emotions, or thoughts, without evaluating them. According to Germer (2004, 24), mindfulness has a special relationship with suffering and its alleviation, as it allows us to be less reactive to events (Germer, 2004, 26).

Activating the observing mind is connected to the perspectives of transpersonal psychology and holotropia in that the non-judgmentally observing mind, the observing self, can transcend both the personal mind and body. The observing self is the Observer, pure Presence, pure consciousness, which in its extreme depth merges with boundlessness (Wilber, 2009, 291). The process describes holotropia, moving towards wholeness in such a way that a person transcends their own body and mind. The mind becomes, in Wilber's (2009, 293) words, an object – rather than a subject – for the observing Self, the Witness.

Jenni Hurmerinta has developed a method of present writing, which aims to learn to appreciate and develop the core self, the authentic self (Hurmerinta, 2022, 246, 250). Improving self-awareness helps us accept ourselves as we are, which in turn increases our resources to direct attention to the surrounding world and other people (Hurmerinta, 2022, 247, reference to Swann 1999, 54–57). This shift from focusing on oneself to focusing on others and the world already describes the process central to the applied poetry therapy method in the study.

Different stages of life come with various challenges and crises. In the early years, pain

points often relate to individual development and the process of self-discovery, known as Jungian individuation. Towards the end of life, suffering may increasingly arise from the awareness of the impending end of both self and world. In this context, the goal of nature-themed meditation and mindfulness exercises, combined with poetry therapy exercises, was not so much individuation or seeking the core self, but rather becoming “one with the earth,” returning to the whole, and detaching from the narrow self, while also observing one's own thoughts, feelings, and sensations in a shared setting.

In mindfulness exercises, various ready-made nature meditations/mindfulness exercises available on the internet were used in the group. For example, the group conducted a guided three-minute mindfulness breathing exercise by The Organisation for Respiratory Health in Finland as an orientation for an emotion processing writing exercise. The group also conducted an evocative mindfulness-type exercise called “Roots,” set in a fictional natural environment. The exercise was an application from Taivasmaa's training cards, *Forest & Meditation* (2020), compiled by the facilitator. During the last meeting, the group performed a mindfulness exercise with a theme of gratitude, after which the participants wrote about the subject under discussion.

Anchoring through the senses to oneself, others, and the world

A person experiences and connects with the external world through their senses. Our thoughts are shaped by lived and experienced events, and our understanding and perceptions arise through the mediation of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, xvii; 186). Different senses enable multi-layered interaction with other people, animals, and nature. Nature offers an endless array of sensory experiences. As Ihanus (2022, 350) states: “When we ground our senses and bodies in the earth, surprising encounters and becoming happen.” Referring to this encounter and becoming, Ihanus (2022, 350–351; reference to Abram [2010, 3]) continues: “[...] we mix our skin with the rain splashed surface of rivers, connect our ears to the thunder and the croaking of frogs.[...] We become the earth. We become animals. We become fully human in this matter.”

When we become part of the world through our sensory perceptions, a holotropic process occurs, becoming part of the whole. At best, according to the above quote, we become the rain-splashed surface of the river, the thunder, the croaking of frogs, the earth, animals, and humans. As Wilber (2009, 298) states: “[...] there is no difference between the subject and the object or between you and 'external' nature. The inside and the outside have lost their significance.”

The sensory aspect related to the poetry therapy method outlined is intertwined with the mindfulness theme discussed in the previous chapter. On the other hand, it also has connections to Gestalt therapy, a branch of psychotherapy that emphasizes the individual's experience in the present moment. Gestalt therapy also involves experiential and bodily aspects: it is an integrative method which includes affective, sensory, cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral

In exercises that delve into sensory experiences, one can focus on either introspection or extrospection, or move between the two. The purpose is to observe sensations and experiences, or phenomena outside oneself, here and now. Since poetry therapy is a creative, expressive therapy, it provides an opportunity to seek creative ways to express different sensations and affects.

For this theme, various mindfulness/meditation exercises are suitable as orientation or as part of the exercise itself. These can be for example nature-themed (extrospection) or related to

one's internal or bodily sensations (introspection). The aim is to compassionately experience being within oneself and, through sensory experiences, expand towards a larger whole.

Strengthening compassion and love through writing: a bridge to deep connection

I previously referred in chapter to Murdoch's concept of unselfing, the reduction of the self. According to Murdoch, love is a form of unselfing. Her notion of unselfing emphasizes love as the force that, through attentive and just regard, frees one from selfish consciousness and opens one to the world as it truly is (Murdoch, 2014, 91). When an anxious person encounters something that briefly diverts their attention from worries, they can gain distance from their anxiety and insight into their situation.

Suffering is often associated with an intense sense of separation. The core of our being is actually loving kindness, which connects us to everything that lives (Brach, 2022, 32). To feel compassion on a universal level, one must first cultivate self-love and self-compassion. When we treat ourselves with compassion, we can also feel empathy for others and even feel connected to everything that exists. According to Wilber (2009, 331), "You do not look at the sky, but you are the sky. You can taste the sky. It is not outside of you. As Zen would say, you can drink the Pacific Ocean in one gulp and swallow the Cosmos whole – because consciousness is not divided into a seeing subject here and a seen object there." Strengthening compassion and love is part of the holotropic process, as it opens us to the surrounding world, connects us to the fates of others, and makes us part of everything that exists.

Compassionate acceptance can be fostered using the methods discussed in the previous chapters, which include writing combined with mindfulness, nature themes, and focusing compassionate attention on sensory experiences. The goal of these exercises is to strengthen a compassionate attitude towards oneself, one's body, and even one's suffering. Practicing 'unselfing' or directing loving attention to others can be achieved by changing perspectives or focusing sensory observations outside oneself, according to the principle of compassionate attention, and incorporating this into writing.

Discussion

The findings from our study on group poetry therapy among patients with advanced cancer offer insights into the psychosocial and emotional benefits of this integrative poetry therapy approach. The applied poetry therapy method facilitated meaningful emotional expression and fostered a sense of connectedness among participants (Nyfors et al., 2024).

The concept of holotropia, as articulated by Grof (2012), formed an integral part of the poetry therapy method applied in this study. Participants engaged in activities designed to promote a holistic sense of self and unity with the wider world.

Nature themes served as relaxation exercises and metaphorical backdrops in the poetry therapy sessions. Virtual nature walks by MIELI Mental Health Finland, featuring seasonal themes (autumn, winter, spring), provided a serene context for participants. The spring nature visit, symbolizing hope, growth, and new life was particularly impactful because for the participants, hope was a key supporting force in a challenging life situation (Nyfors et al., 2024). Additionally, nature photographs (Aijasaho, 2022), Nordic Power Animal cards (Frey & Tukiainen, 2018), and Forest and Meditation cards (Taivasmaa, 2020) enriched the writing exercises with vivid imagery.

The role of mindfulness, defined as conscious presence in the present moment (Germer, 2004), aimed to function as opening participants to themselves and the world. Mindfulness

exercises encouraged participants to observe their experiences without judgment, facilitating emotional exploration and acceptance.

The therapeutic power of literature and narration was evident throughout the sessions. Writing and sharing personal stories fostered a sense of community and mutual understanding among participants. As the patient's response to the question, what was the best part of the group, demonstrates: "Peer support and the reassurance of not being alone with your thoughts. Often, others expressed feelings that reflect my own."

Compassionate acceptance was fostered through mindfulness and nature-themed exercises combined with writing, promoting a compassionate attitude towards oneself and others.

The integrative approach combining poetry therapy, transpersonal psychology, and Green Care as a holistic method aimed to support the emotional well-being of patients with advanced cancer. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of such interventions and investigate their applicability to other patient populations.

In conclusion, the study highlights the potential of group poetry therapy as a valuable tool for fostering emotional resilience and connectedness among patients facing the challenges of advanced cancer. By creating a supportive space for self-expression and shared narratives, poetry therapy can help mitigate emotional loneliness and promote a sense of unity and wholeness.

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