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# Unsilencing the Voice Within: Expressive Writing as a Therapeutic Tool

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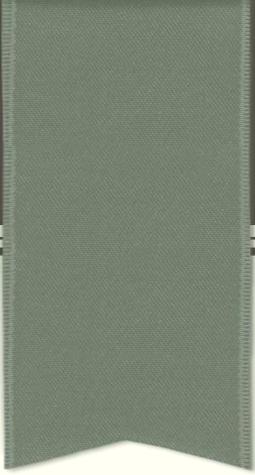
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# UNSILENCING THE VOICE WITHIN: EXPRESSIVE WRITING AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

Presented by: Karla L. Sapp, Ed.D., LPC, NCC  
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2015 National Youth At-Risk Conference Poster Session  
Savannah, Georgia



# Targeted Audience

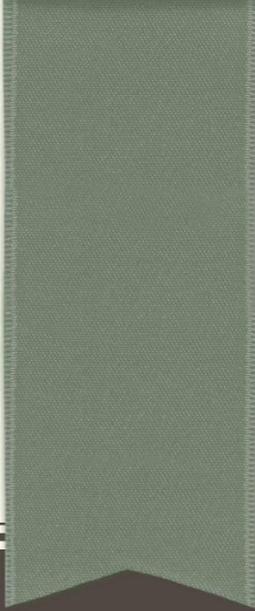
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- Teachers
- Criminal Justice Professionals
- School Counselors and/or Psychologist
- Health and Human Service Counselors and Personnel
- Marriage and Family Therapist
- Social Workers (MSW, LMSW, LCSW)
- Licensed Professional Counselors (LAPC, LPC, LPC-I)
- Clinical Supervisors
- Licensed Mental Health Counselors
- Community Support Individuals

# Objectives

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- Provide statistical data on the unique adolescent population defined as At-Risk
- Define writing and methodological use for healing one's inner self
- Develop knowledge of Expressive Writing Paradigm, use among several disciplines, and its therapeutic value
- Identify various approaches to creative expressive writing among the At-Risk Youth population
- Discuss the Implications for Professional Practice and Application directions



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# YOUTH AT RISK: THE STATISTICS

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# CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance 2013 Nationwide Results

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- 14.8% of students have been bullied electronically, while 19.6% of students report having been bullied on school property
- 7.3% of students have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse
- 73.9% of students have been on dates or went out with someone in the last 12 months
  - 10.3% of this population had been hit, slammed into something, or injured with an object or weapon
  - 10.4% had been kissed, touched, or physically forced to have sexual intercourse
- 29.9% of students had felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2+ weeks and had stopped participating in activities
- 17% of student had seriously considered attempting suicide
- 8% of students had attempted suicide one or more times

# 2013 National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health

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- In 2013, an estimated 24.6 million Americans aged 12 or older were current (past month) illicit drug users, meaning they had used an illicit drug during the month prior to the survey interview. This estimate represents 9.4 percent of the population aged 12 or older. Illicit drugs include marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, or prescription-type psychotherapeutics (pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives) used non-medically
- Marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug in 2013. There were 19.8 million past month users in 2013 (7.5 percent of those aged 12 or older)
- 1.5 million current cocaine users aged 12 or older, or 0.6 percent of the population
- Slightly more than half (52.2 percent) of Americans aged 12 or older reported being current drinkers of alcohol in the 2013 survey
- In 2013, an estimated 21.6 million persons aged 12 or older (8.2 percent) were classified with substance dependence or abuse in the past year

# Youth and the Criminal Justice System

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- Every year, juvenile courts in the U.S. handle an estimated 1.7 million cases in which the youth was charged with a delinquency offense, 4 approximately 4,600 delinquency cases per day.
- Over 70,000 juvenile offenders are not living in their homes but are held in residential placement (e.g., juvenile detention facilities, corrections facilities, group homes or shelters).
- Estimated 250,000 youth are tried, sentenced, or incarcerated as adults every year across the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Source: <http://www.campaignforyouthjustice.org/documents/KeyYouthCrimeFacts.pdf>

# Other Statistical Data

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## Homelessness and Runaway Youth

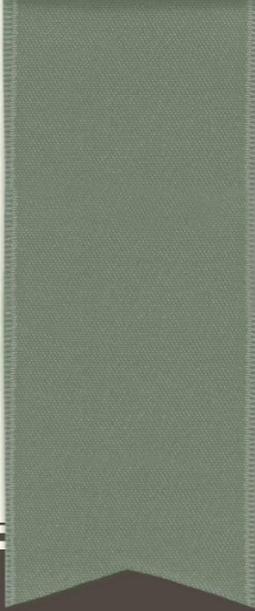
- 1 in 7 young people between the age of 10-16 will run away
- Youth ages 12-17 are more at risk of homelessness than adults
- 75% of runaways are female
- Estimated between 6-22% of homeless girls are pregnant
- 46% report being physically abused; 38% report being emotionally abused; 17% report being sexually abused
- 75% will either and/or have dropped out of school

[www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx)

## School Drop-Outs

- Based on data from the Current Population Survey, the status dropout rate decreased from 12 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 2012

Source: National Center for Education Statistics



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# FINDING THEIR “VOICE”

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# A Public Health Issue

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- Academic failure has emerged in studies as an important risk factor for crime, violence, and substance abuse (Hawkins, Catalano, & Brewer, 1994)
- Dr. Genevieve Chandler (School of Nursing at University of Massachusetts) sees the loss of voice in adolescents as a public health issue and has trained nursing students to use writing with youth at risk, working to prevent their dropping out of school and ending up in the court system

# Writing Defined.....

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“The act of writing is a tremendous adventure into the unknown, always fraught with danger. But the deeper you go and the longer you work at your art, the greater will be your treasures” ~Pat Schneider

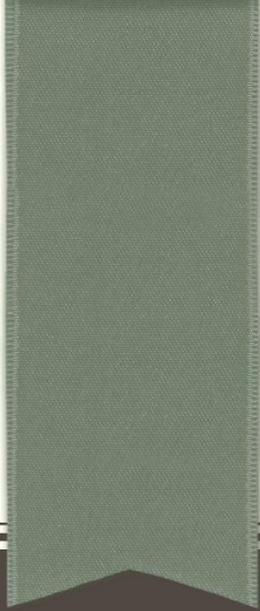
- An act of communication with self and others
  - Powerful tool for thinking and learning
- Expression of personal thoughts and feelings
- Exploration of personal experiences, reactions and interpretations
  - Helps to create new and/or provide connections between ideas

## Words With A Purpose....

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“But if I write what my soul thinks, it will be visible, and the words will be its body” ~Helen Keller

- Methodology for healing not only the psychological wounds, but physical illnesses
  - Linked to working on one's own inner life and outer relationships



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THE VOICE:  
UNSILENCED AND UNCUT

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# Expressive Writing Paradigm

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- Pennebaker and Beall (1986) conducted the first expressive writing study
  - College students wrote for 15 minutes on 4 consecutive days about traumatic and life-changing events in their lives and the feelings associated with the events
- Growing body of literature has proven that expressive writing have beneficial effects on physical and emotional health
  - Over 200+ published studies and research articles, several meta-analyses



# Expressive Writing Among Disciplines and/or Areas of Focus

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- Medical
  - Illness related visit to physician
  - Self-reported physical health ratings
  - Improvements in immune function
  - Blood Pressure
  - Lung function
  - Liver function
  - Wound healing
  - Number of days in hospital
  - Asthma and Rheumatoid arthritis
  - Cancer patients
  - HIV patients
  - Chronic pain
  - Poor sleepers

# Expressive Writing Among Disciplines and/or Areas of Focus

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- School-Related/Academics
  - Grade Point Average
- Mental Health/Substance Abuse
  - History of trauma
  - PTSD
  - Male psychiatric prison inmates
  - Victims of natural disaster
  - Recent relationship break-ups
  - Females and body image
  - Children of alcoholics
  - Caregivers of children with chronic illnesses
  - Bereavement
  - Suicidality

# Expressive Writing Among Disciplines and/or Areas of Focus

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- Job-Related / Employment
  - Absenteeism from work
  - Re-employment after job loss
- Sports/Athletics
  - Sporting performance
- Memory
  - Working memory
- Meta-Analysis
- Social and Linguistic Behavior (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001)
- Life Goals
- Letters of Gratitude

# Expressive Writing Theoretical Considerations

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- Inhibition Theory (Pennebaker, 1989)
  - Belief that writing expressively helps disclose thoughts and feelings that have been repressed
  - Frees individuals of long-term stressors which lead to and/or exacerbates illnesses and decreases functioning
  - Emerges through dreams, ruminations, memories, related behaviors and/or cognitive symptoms
- Cognitive Processing Theory (Pennebaker, 1993)
  - Belief that by utilizing expressive writing to confront events that are life-changing and/or traumatic, one would gain insight into what happened after reorganizing thoughts and feelings about event and gaining meaning
  - Linguistic Factors: increased positive emotion words and a moderate amount of negative emotional words, increased use of causation words (i.e. because, cause, effect) and words that elicit insight (consider, know)
- Self Regulation (Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002)
  - Disclosure through writing provides individual with sense of control over the expression of their emotions; understand their response to the event, explore source of emotions, and improve overall well-being
  - Expanded the range of possible writing topics utilized, to include: writing about positive experiences, and focusing on present and future self

# Expressive Writing Goals

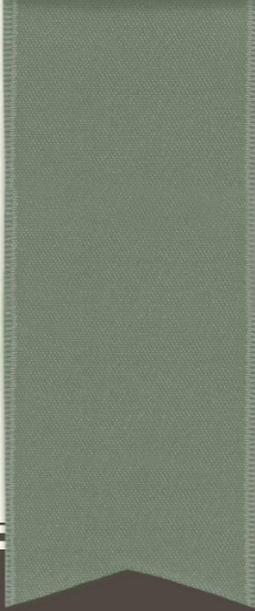
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- Develop an understanding of oneself and perception of others
  - Enrich creativity, ability to express self, and self-esteem
    - Improve interpersonal and communication skills
    - Express intense emotions and release tension
  - Find personal meaning through ideas and insight
    - Facilitate self-change
  - Increase coping skills and functioning

# Therapeutic Value of Expressive Writing

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- Gain clarity by writing statements of belief and meaning
- Ability to broaden view of emotional experience (negative and/or positive)
  - Learn significance of experience (Thematic Purpose)
    - Judgment that comes from the experience
    - Refers to what was learned and why it was important
      - Often expressed towards the end of the writing



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# AT-RISK YOUTH AND EXPRESSIVE WRITING PROCESS

“A Creative Approach”

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“Talented children and youth who are disruptive, or violent, or delinquent, or just poor students are a paradox worthy of exploration in a search for new solutions or explanations”

~Ken Seeley (2003)

# Expressive Writing... Who Can Benefit?

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Youth who often have:

- troubled home lives
- learning difficulties
- issues with substance abuse
  - mental health struggles,
- general disinterest in school
  - family issues
- lack of self-confidence or self-esteem
- criminal history or involved with criminal justice system

# A Creative Approach.....

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- Provides at risk youth with a way to express themselves, finding their inner voice, without have to speak a word
- Empowers at risk youth to deal with their past, identify their struggles and positive attributes, develop self-esteem and confidence, and breathe life into their desires
- Allows at-risk youth to channel their risk taking behavior in a positive manner, not denying who they are, but improving themselves in order to begin achieving dreams and identifying positive opportunity.
- Helps to materialize their past, present, and future into a reality
- Encourages them to shares personal details of their lives with themselves and others
- Ultimately, through self-expression, at-risk youth are able to positively impact their development as individuals

# Approaches to Creative Expressive Writing

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- Journal Writing
  - Commonly used among adolescents and adults, for a variety of personal and therapeutic use
  - Writing focused on the individuals thoughts, feelings, observations about a identified topic
  - Encourages self-expression and opportunity to reflect and problem-solve.
- Poetry Writing
  - Vehicle for creative expression of more abstract, emotional concerns
  - Technique used to help resolve individual identity crisis
- Bibliotherapy
  - Use of books to help people deal with and solve problems
  - The underlying premise of bibliotherapy is that clients identify with literary characters similar to themselves, an association that helps the clients release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Abdullah, 2002)
- Written Dialogue
  - Conversations in writing, between the individual and themselves and/or other person
  - Technique used to identify and resolve conflict with self and others

# Approaches to Creative Expressive Writing

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- Therapeutic Song Therapy/Writing
  - Form of music therapy
  - Similar in nature to bibliotherapy but with the use of music of various genres
  - Utilize a portion of a song lyric(s) for individuals to relate to and/or instrumental music for an individual to write their own feeling and thoughts in the form of a song
- Comic Writing
  - Incorporates art therapy with writing therapy
  - Can be utilize with written dialogue

# Expressive Writing Sample Exercises/Prompts

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## ▪ Journal Writing Prompt Samples

- I want..... (be specific , writing everything that comes to your mind)
- If you could create the life you would like to have, what would it look like? What kind of person would you be? What kind of people would you spend it with? How would you feel? How would you make other people feel? Where would you like to live? What type of work would you do? What would your home look and feel like? What would be most important to you, freedom, stability, love, and acceptance?
- There was once a time when I..... (be specific, write everything that comes to your mind)

## ▪ Bibliotherapy Sample

- *Catcher In The Rye* – Beloved Object: “*She was the only one, outside my family, that I ever showed Allie’s baseball mitt to.*” (77) Holden’s younger brother’s baseball mitt is very important to him. Objects can hold personal histories and memories. Describe an object that is very important to you. The monetary value of the object has no consideration for you, but there is something else about the object that causes you to cherish it. It might be something you already have or something that you would one day want to possess.

# Expressive Writing Sample Exercises/Prompts

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## ▪ Poetry Writing Exercises

- I am..... Write a poem describing who you are (be specific as you can and write everything that comes to mind)
- Think about a recent experience you had and write a poem describing how you felt and your thoughts about what happened

## ▪ Written Dialogue Sample

- Have there been a time when you felt really angry? Write a dialogue between your angry self and your calm self. In this dialogue, have your angry self focus on what caused the feelings of anger, how it made you feel while using your calm self to share reactions to what happened and provide why you could have handled the situation differently.

- Example:

**Angry Self:** Today while at school, my friend told me that she didn't like my outfit

**Calm Self:** I have had that happen before and I didn't like it

**Angry Self:** Yeah, I didn't like it either. After she told me that I got mad at her and told her that I didn't want to be her friend again

**Calm Self:** \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in blank and continue dialogue)

# Expressive Writing Sample Exercises/Prompts

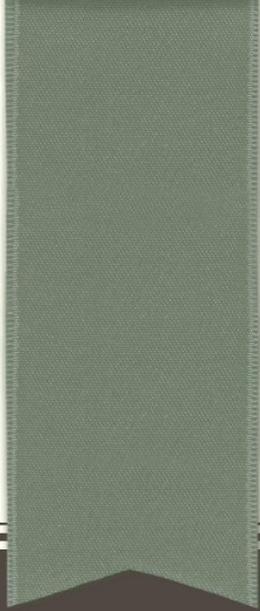
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- **Therapeutic Song Therapy/Writing Exercise**
  - Adam Song – Blink 182: *Focused on bullying and/or suicide*; After listening to the song and its lyrics, write about your feelings and thoughts. Discuss a time when you experienced some of the feelings and thoughts shared in the song and what you have learned from their words
  - Instrumental Music: Music has been found to be a calming mechanism. While listening to the a chosen instrumental musical selection, write down what you are feeling and thinking and then turn those words into a song.

# Tips for Effective Creative Expressive Writings

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- Expressive writings are written in first (1<sup>st</sup>) person (the writer uses “I”)
- Focuses on events and/or experiences (past, present and future-oriented)
  - Events are significant to the writer
    - Provide a wide range of topics
  - Writings are done in specific time frame
- Writer should be able to learn from the writings (thematic purpose)



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# PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Expressive writing appears to have great potential as a therapeutic tool in diverse clinical and non-clinical settings

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# Implications

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- Can be implemented in both individual and/or group therapy; substance abuse and mental health treatment ; criminal justice system; school setting
- Can be integrated with traditional therapies or utilized alone
- Develop a structured, time specific approach
  - Consideration Factors include: location, writing instructions, and involvement of clinician/mental health professional
- Incorporate both the cognitive and emotional components of the experience is important
- Can be assigned as homework or carried out before, during, and/or after a session
- Collect data to assess effectiveness within individual settings, to include pre/post measures of functioning and physical/psychological health
- Writing topics that examine the individual self is just as useful as exploring traumatic and/or negative experiences, as it allows the individual to focus on new experience and possibilities, effecting personal growth

# Directions for Application

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- Provide a broad range of writing topics. Encourage the youth to write about what they are thinking and feeling and not what you want them to write about
- If the youth would like to share what they have written, they should be encouraged to talk about it instead of reading it per se
- Encourage youth to write continuously, for a determined amount of time, and not worry about grammar or spelling mistakes
- Provide direction as to what youth should do with their writing to protect their privacy
- Have the youth try writing for 3-4 days and then assess the effectiveness. If determined it is not effective, try something else
- Always be mindful that the writings do not become a form of rumination

# Presenter Information

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