

'Lit therapy' in the classroom: Writing about trauma can be valuable, if done right

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Credit: Unsplash

Some of my students have been assaulted. Others have been homeless, jobless or broke, some suffer from depression, anxiety or grief. Some fight addiction, cancer or for custody. Many are in pain and they want to write about it.

Opening wounds in the classroom is messy and risky. Boundaries and intentions can feel blurred in a class where memories and feelings also

present teachable moments. But if teachers and students work together, opportunities to share difficult [personal stories](#) can be constructive.

Writing about trauma

The [health benefits](#) of writing about [trauma](#) are [well documented](#). Some counseling theories—such as narrative therapy—incorporate writing into their therapeutic techniques.

[Research suggests](#) writing about trauma can be beneficial because it helps people re-evaluate their experiences by looking at them from different perspectives.

Studies [suggest](#) writing about traumatic events can help ease the emotional pressure of negative experiences. But [writing about trauma](#) is not a cure-all and it may be less effective if people are also struggling with ongoing mental health challenges, such as depression or post-[traumatic stress disorder](#).

Internationally acclaimed researcher and clinician Bessel van der Kolk asserts in his book, [The Body Keeps the Score](#), that trauma is more than a stored memory to be expunged. Rather, van der Kolk suggests our whole mind, brain and sense of self can change in response to trauma.

Pain is complicated. And teachers in a classroom are not counselors in a clinic.

If properly managed, though, sharing stories about personal suffering can be a relevant and valuable educational experience. It's a strategy that, in a professional setting, could be referred to as "lit therapy."

An empathetic space

[Dr. Jill Parris](#) is a psychologist who works with refugees and uses lit therapy as an extension of trauma counseling. Parris and I also worked together on the project [Home Truths: An Anthology of Refugee and Migrant Writing](#), which paired refugee authors with a writing mentor to develop personal stories about challenging migrant journeys to Australia.

Parris says writing about trauma is helpful in most cases, as long as teachers and their students monitor stress levels and offer an empathetic space where storytellers are given the time and tools to manage the complex feelings that may surface.

"It is important that people feel absolutely free to avoid focusing on [traumatic events](#) and this should be made clear from the start," says Parris.

Teachers should therefore be wary of implying traumatic personal stories are inherently worthy subjects, that divulgence alone is more likely to receive a higher grade or publication. It isn't. In fact, sharing a [story](#) may be detrimental. It may be unfair to the author's future self, the other people involved in their experience, or to the piece's intention for its readers.

Helping individual students identify their own readiness to share personal experiences is an important first step. Parris recommends asking students how they *know* they are ready to share their story. What has changed to *make* them ready? Answering these questions helps people sit outside themselves.

As teachers, we also need to be mindful that sharing painful memories presents a risk for those hearing them.

Vicarious trauma

[Vicarious trauma is a real threat](#). To help mitigate the risk of emotional contagion, teachers should check in with students at the beginning and end of class to monitor feelings, reminding people they are in the present, that the trauma they recounted or heard was survived.

If people feel stressed, Parris recommends looking around and forcing ourselves to name what we see, hear, feel, taste and smell as a way of [returning to the present](#). Discussing what people will do outside class to care for themselves is also useful.

As teachers, it is important to help our students organize their thoughts and feelings in relation to the craft of professional writing, which is writing intended for consumption by an anonymous reader.

Students are likely to write what they're passionate about—the good, the bad and the ugly. Their best writing comes out of what's meaningful to them. Teachers can help guide their students' search for authenticity.

Feelings and experiences matter, but writers and readers also want to know what they mean. Revealing how masters of personal storytelling bridge the personal and the universal is useful in demonstrating the broader purpose of sharing stories.

Story craft is part of how author Joan Didion's [The Year of Magical Thinking](#) is both a personal reflection and a forensic investigation of grief. Part of a writing [teacher's](#) job is exploring how personal stories can contribute to the archive of collective human experience.

While I work with adult students, there is also [evidence](#) narrative writing exercises can help children and teenagers process thoughts and emotions related to challenging personal events.

This work is emotionally demanding. Scenes of horrible things people

have told me occasionally invade my mind, as if another person's lived experience orbits my own memories. It's unsettling. It's also why stories matter. Because hearing them can help us better understand the people who share them. Stories help us glimpse the humanity in the hardship, showing us while pain is universal, compassion is too.

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