

Songwriting As Therapy

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“To draw you must close your eyes and sing.”

Pablo Picasso

Closing my eyes and singing, it doesn't get much better than that, just singing from the heart. Music has a direct link to that place inside where feelings and true thought exist. Singing, and playing a musical instrument, can communicate these feelings; writing original music takes it another step further. Writing music gives thoughts and feelings a canvass.

Writing songs can be a very powerful tool in therapy. It puts thoughts and feelings together in a package that can then be viewed from different angles. There are so many interpretations that can come from the simple beginnings of a lyric sheet. The music itself can help interpret the lyrics as happy, sad, angry or contemplative. These feelings can be further expressed in the singing and arranging of the song. In therapy, expression of feelings is often at the heart of the work with an individual or group.

There are a variety of techniques I use for songwriting in therapy, from improvisation to re-writing words to familiar tunes to writing the entire song from scratch with a client. I use songwriting to address feelings of isolation, depression, anger, fear, or joy. I also use it to assist someone, specially a child, learn concepts from appropriate boundaries to academic skills.

Musical improvisation is a great tool because it can truly reflect feelings of the moment. I sometimes use improvisation to sing songs to a client about their life. This has been more the case when my client is unable to speak or, otherwise, communicate, as with someone who has dementia (mental confusion). I worked with a man in a nursing home who was no longer able to speak and it was not clear exactly what he was able to process in his brain, his communication with others was minimal. I used to sing to him stories of his life with information gathered from family members and chart notes. There would be occasional moments when he would look directly at me with a big smile. It may not seem like much but for this man it was momentous.

I sometimes record the songs I write with a client (or songs they write on their own) and we listen back to gain another perspective on a song and the feelings expressed. For this purpose, I often used a low-tech tape recorder in my office. Sometimes we take a field trip to a nearby recording studio and record using the amazing technologies available in this setting. This can be an incredibly powerful experience.

Songwriting is also my personal process for making sense of this world and of my work and life. In some ways, I write because I have to. It is a way to get thoughts out of my head, adding the music and poetry lends beauty and color to the process. To me, adding music to words is like turning off the fluorescent lights and eating dinner by candlelight.

I am also a great believer in keeping a journal. Keeping a journal is a great way to collect thoughts on a regular basis, thoughts that need reworking or thoughts that can later be used in a song. Sometimes I have a client use a journal to help organize her/his thoughts and feelings about a particular issue. We then take some of those journal entries

and compose a song from them. I also use journal writing for my own processing of events, in fact, I have kept a journal since I was 10 years old. I like to write my more personal thoughts in the front section of the journal. In the back I record thoughts that I want to write more about later or use in a song. Usually this includes thoughts about work, life, or great lyrics that come to me in the middle of the night.

Writing down thoughts and feelings, whether in a journal or song, can be an incredibly healing process. It is a way to give voice to the essence of who we are, to understand and express ourselves and, to some extent, our relationship to the community and world that surrounds us.

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