WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Advancing Skills in the Delivery of Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

Exercises and Readings for Narrative Medicine Groups
Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
General Writing Prompts

These prompts can be used in narrative medicine groups as icebreakers at the beginning of a meeting or after reading a short piece of literature together.

- **“Write about the story of your name.”**
  This prompt works well as an introduction exercise. Have participants write for 3 minutes and then share what they wrote in dyads, in triads, or with the whole group.

- **“Write about one of your scars.”**
  This prompt also works well as an introduction exercise. Have participants write for 3 minutes and then share what they wrote in dyads, in triads, or with the whole group.

- **“Imitate the form of this piece of writing.”**
  This prompt can bring forth things from the reader and writer that surprise them and can instill a sense of confidence in new writers.

- **“Write about a patient whose suffering has moved you.”**
  This can be used as a prompt for writing that takes 20 minutes. It intends to draw attention to the fact that all narratives are written from a particular perspective that reflects individual histories, values, expectations, and social positions. Reading these stories to one another will illuminate the differences in perspectives. To further this exercise, participants can then chart notes for the patient they wrote about to examine contrasts in tone, meaning, perspective, language, and emotion expressed in a medical record versus a story.

Close Reading Pieces & Writing Prompts

The following pieces of literature are effective narrative selections to read together in narrative medicine group meetings with health care clinicians, patients, or other communities. After reading them silently or aloud, group members can consider and discuss the elements: frame, form, time, plot, and desire. Some of the suggested pieces explicitly pertain to Veteran and combat experiences, some concern health care delivery, and some are more generalized. (PDFs of pieces are included on website.)

**Veteran experience**

- **Achilles in Vietnam, Jonathan Shay**
  This entire book can be taken up by an ongoing group meeting or extracts can be drawn from it.
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- **The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brien (excerpts from pp. 2-3 and 14-16)**
  This collection of related short stories is based on author Tim O’Brien’s own experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam War. It is quite an accessible text, written in unique and thought-provoking forms, and captures universal themes through personal narratives of soldiers. It could be especially effective to use with Veterans, VA providers, and anyone in military communities. Any of the stories could be read, but the excerpts on pp. 2-3 and 14-16 work well with the following prompt.

  *Prompt:* “Make a list of what you carry, or what your patients carry, imitating the form from the passage (They carried...They carried...They carried...).”

- **“For Esmé—with Love and Squalor,” JD Salinger (The New Yorker, 8 April 1950)**
  This is a longer short story that would need to be read before the group meets and can be used just for close reading. The protagonist, an American soldier stationed in England and then in Bavaria during and just after WWII, suffers from a nervous breakdown. Through an unusual friendship with a young girl, the soldier finds hope and healing. The explicit portrayal of varied aspects of the soldiering experience makes it a relatable text for VA providers and Veterans. (Searchable on the web.)

  **Healthcare delivery**

- **“Blood,” Zdravka Evtimova from Pale and Other Postmodern Bulgarian Stories, Vox Humana Books, 2010**
  This is a very short story that can easily be read on the spot and is an excellent text for facilitating participants to bring their own experience to the story. It concerns anxieties about boundaries in care-giving relationships, the limits of responsibility, and how to determine how much is enough to give.

  *Prompt:* “Write about a time you did or did not give the blood of a mole.”

- **The English Patient, Michael Ondaatje (the first two pages)**
  This novel is set in Italy during WWII. The first two pages work well to read together during a narrative medicine group meeting. They introduce a nurse and her patient in a vivid and intense depiction of pain and care-giving.

  *Prompt:* “Write about a scene of suffering.”

- **“The Ship Pounding,” Donald Hall**
  Clinicians and patients alike can connect to this poem, which is directly about medicine, unlike some of the other pieces suggested. When first orienting people to narrative medicine, it can be helpful to use something directly related to medicine.

  *Prompt:* “Write about the hospital as a place.”
“The Short Arm of Chromosome 4,” Frank Huyler
This short story concerns the role social, medical, and family values play in health care. It can be divided into two parts: begin with the group reading the first two pages together, alerting them that this is not where the story ends. Pause and discuss. Then ask participants to respond in writing to the prompt (below). After they write, share, and discuss with the group, then hand out the final two pages. Read the author’s ending and discuss.

Prompt: “Write the rest of the story.”

Poems

“The Death of Fred Clifton,” Lucille Clifton
This short and rich poem addresses the death of a spouse. It is a good piece for encouraging group members to consider the setting, who is speaking, who the speaker is speaking “for,” and the power of just a few words arranged in a particular way.

Prompt: “Write about the things themselves.”

“Bird Understander,” Craig Arnold
This is a powerful poem about the expectations and limitations of care-giving.

Prompt: “Write about a time when you took care of someone or when someone took care of you.”

“Girl,” Jamaica Kincaid
Responsive writing based on this poem works well when participants fully attempt the form Kincaid uses, pouring their content into her “container.” (Searchable on the web.)

Prompt: “Write instructions to yourself in the style of Kincaid’s poem.”

Veterans’ Narratives for Reading and Discussion

These Veterans’ narratives can be read and discussed together in groups.


- Speeches by disabled Veterans Nathan Short and Neil Colomac:

- VA Patient Narrative by third-year medical student Amy Waldner.
Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health?
Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php

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