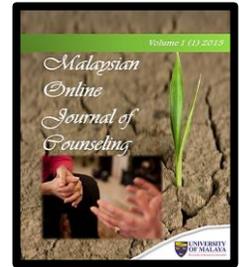


CREATIVE JOURNALING TO PROCESS ISSUES IN MIDLIFE: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of creative journaling to help clients grapple with the existential questions that beset them at midlife in order to come to an understanding of how they want to live out the second half of their lives. It is a multiple case study involving 5 women from differing backgrounds. The women met once a week for ten weeks and were put through various semi-structured creative journaling activities that helped them to flesh out their past and present hurts, hopes and desires, and encouraged through the group process to confront and come to terms with those issues. At the end of the ten weeks, the participants were asked to give their feedback, both verbally and through journaling, about how the experience of creative journaling therapy personally affected them.

Keywords: Creative, Journaling, Therapy, Midlife, Group

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INTRODUCTION

Most people would recognize journaling as a creative act that is not only a pathway for communicating our feelings and experiences, but also a channel for self-discovery and self-understanding (Burke, 2002). However, as a therapeutic tool, creative journaling in Malaysia has barely been given the proper recognition it deserves. It was initially developed as a self-help tool to help people engage in self-expression and raise self-awareness, but it has also become recognized in many countries as an effective counselling tool that allows clients to articulate and re-experience their emotions. The act of putting down thoughts and feelings on paper seems to help people to sort them out and come to a deeper understanding of the issues in their life (Adams, K., 1999).

Expressive writing allows traumatic emotions to become more manageable by providing a means to arrange and think of painful emotions in a coherent way (Lepore 1997). In other words, writing about our trauma or emotions helps us to achieve a kind of significant personal integration.

There seems to be a general consensus that any form of artistic expression would lead to internal resolution (Edwards, 2004) and viewing past experiences differently (Wright, 2005). Through art, dance, writing, music and drama, we probably do accomplish a sort of emotional catharsis; but by using words to describe those emotions, we can go a step further - we can work through internal conflicts, and learn to make sense our lives. Experiences that at first appeared unconquerable seem more graspable and easier to handle after we see them on paper (Pennebaker, 1990). And once the issues are worked out we can frequently put them away and no longer have to think about them.

Creative journaling has been especially successful in helping people express their silent internal vernacular because it uses both imagery and words while at the same time requiring practically no skill. While art therapy depends mainly on images, and writing uses words, creative journaling combines the two; enabling clients to their express their emotions, thoughts and experiences with much enjoyment, little training and with ease. It is no wonder that creative journaling is finding increasing support among therapists with the idea that it may be used to supplement conventional forms of psychotherapy as a means of increasing client self-reflection and facilitating disclosure (Burke, 2002).

That our non-verbal internal language communicates with the psyche has long been known by thinkers. Jung (1916, as quoted in Casement, 2001) called this process the active imagination. He stated that “the starting point of the active imagination must always be the emotional state...and one way of accessing this is through writing... or painting or movement” (Casement, 2001). As images emerge through journaling, the individual is offered a way of glimpsing into the depths of their unconscious, wherein lies the shadow stuff. In this way, buried emotional material can become assimilated into the light of awareness. Creative journaling thus becomes a tool that forges a link to the personal unconscious, triggering the individuation process and initiating personal transformation (Lara, 2010).

The idea that journaling can be an experience towards healing and growth was first given impetus by Jung, who believed that our psyches contain an uplifting purpose – an inborn drive towards psychological fulfilment and maturity (Casement, 2001). By helping us access our inner world and propel it outward, journaling thus facilitates the psyche’s innate quest for balance and harmony.

Jung placed special importance on the turbulent psychological changes that are associated with midlife. The midlife articulated by Jung is also that stage which Hollis (1993) refers to as the Middle Passage. "The middle passage is an occasion for redefining and reorienting the personality, a rite of passage between the adolescence of first adulthood and our inevitable appointment with old age and mortality." Just as Jung maintained that we need to let go of many of the values and beliefs that guided the first half of our life and confront our unconscious, Hollis labelled the middle passage as a time of life when individuals receive a second opportunity to achieve their true potential while at the same time earning the wisdom and vitality of old age.

How Creative Journaling Works

Jung believed that many dreams contain messages from the deepest layer of the unconscious called the collective unconscious, which he described as the seat of creativity. The contents of the collective unconscious he called archetypes. Jung posited that we can communicate with our archetypes by paying attention to our dreams, and by engaging in creative activities such as writing, painting or creative journaling (Casement, 2001). The way creative journaling works then is to help participants to bring their thoughts and feelings first to awareness, then to words. Since it is unbound by any writing convention -- it allows equally words, symbols, scribbles, stamping, or doodling, collages or drawings -- it allows unfettered expression of the inner self. Our task during midlife is to be less influenced by rational thought and to instead give expression to these unconscious forces and integrate them into our conscious life (Hollis, 1993).

Some writers view imagery as the mind's fundamental means of inner communication with the subconscious mind (Ganim & Fox, 1999). After all, our psyches speak to us through images, dreams and visions. Words are regarded as only a secondary form that human beings have invented in order to communicate with one another. Why then does it produce such beneficial effects? For one thing, when people write about an experience, they are able to stand back and consider the complex connections between the event and their own emotions (Pennebaker, 1990). They have the opportunity to become detached, to find meaning and increased understanding of their responses to the event. Giving words to experiences also makes emotions more recognizable, and once the emotions are recognized, they can be resolved. Recent research has indicated that the use of language is just as vital for the 'personal process' as dreams and images.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While much of the prevailing literature cites the expressive and healing power of creative journaling as a means of engaging clients in the process of therapy, the problem is that most of the available literature explores the use of journaling to deal with serious issues such as pain, grief, loss, sickness and trauma. There have not been many studies regarding the use of creative journaling as a therapeutic aid for otherwise healthy, non-traumatized individuals whose interest lies mainly in self-understanding, reaching self-awareness and attaining self-growth. In Malaysia, before counselors and therapists can be persuaded to incorporate creative journaling or any other kind of

expressive art work into their practice, there should first be studies done to demonstrate the effectiveness of expressive arts as a therapeutic tool.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to observe the process of creative journaling on the self-awareness growth of five women aged 40-60, over a ten week period, facing the kind of midlife issues described by Carl Jung and Hollis.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed the following questions:

1. Does creative journaling facilitate self-awareness and self-expression among participants?
2. What kind of creative journaling techniques can be used to help clients achieve self-expression and self-awareness?
3. Is creative journaling a suitable medium for use with Malaysian clients?

METHODOLOGY

This is a result-oriented research project, using multiple case studies. The objective was to observe the process of expressive writing on the self-awareness growth of five women aged 40-60, over a ten week period. The participants were all volunteers; 5 middle-aged women between the ages of forty and sixty who lived in the Petaling Jaya area who had responded to advertisements and were then interviewed one-on-one to gauge their suitability for the study. The participants subsequently gathered once a week for ten weeks with the researcher to engage in creative journaling and then to process their journaling work through group therapy/discussion. At the end of the ten weeks all participants were interviewed one-on-one and asked for verbal feedback as to how they believed the therapeutic writing experience assisted their journey of self-awareness.

Data was collected each week by means of intake forms, recording devices, photographs of participants' artwork, group discussions, observation and verbal feedback.

Materials and Instruments Used in the Study

The activities in the research study utilized theories and tools such as Jung's Typology, the Enneagram and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as well as the writing/drawing materials to facilitate journaling such as question-prompt worksheets, archetype cards, Persona cards and mixed media materials. Mixed media materials included magic markers, coloured paper, cardboard, buttons, ribbons, stickers, sequins, glitter, water colours, glue, scissors, old magazines, paint, items from nature and other creative materials.

The Process

To bridge the gap from the unconscious to conscious awareness, the researcher used materials like archetypal cards, spontaneous journaling, and serial drawings, all of which would help engage the participants in expressing wishes and repressed emotions. The participants were directed to produce poems/ prose/ artistic creations using colored pencils, magic markers, paints and brushes, crayons, or whatever materials at their disposal. The point of therapy was to “bring the unconscious to the conscious” through their creative journaling works. On the one hand, the therapist’s role was to help to make sense of the journaling works so that participants could extract meaning from their work. The group process favoured a Person Centred approach, incorporating the principles and beliefs of Jungian psychology. Sessions sometimes began with a group discussion, followed by creative journaling and then processing, and sometimes with creative journaling, followed by processing and group discussion. Processing of creative material involved answering a series of unstructured, open-ended questions designed to prompt the inner “dialogue”. Participants were also sometimes introduced to simple personality quizzes and theories to help them further understand the reasons for their own personalities and behavior.

Weekly Lesson Plan

Sessions followed a weekly lesson plan; each week, there was a separate activity with separate goals. Creative journaling helped participants to channel and express their responses. Responses were recorded and later transcribed, then analyzed by the researcher to watch for understanding and development of insight. Below is given the activity and its goal by week:

- Week 1: The activity was to journal about a significant memory from their childhood. The goal of this activity is to help participants see how we are all influenced by events that might seem small and insignificant but that affect our perspectives in life, either in a positive or negative way.
- Week 2: The activity was to journal on an archetypal card which they picked. The goal was to identify the participants’ dominant archetypes, and to help them express the areas in their lives where they face joys or personal difficulties.
- Week 3: The activity was to create a ‘persona’ for an imaginary character, and the goal was to understand their own strengths and weaknesses through the created ‘personas’ and understand how this knowledge can be used to strengthen their daily roles.
- Week 4: The activity was to journal about their favourite archetypes. The goal was for them to realize which social roles were dominant in their daily lives.
- Week 5: The activity was to learn about negative archetypes or wildcards. The goal was to help them understand how they respond to uncomfortable situations or stress.
- Week 6: The activity was to journal about one significant male figure in their lives. The goal was to understand the concept of the shadow and the anima/animus in men and women.
- Week 7: The activity was to create a collage about themselves. The goal was to express through their hopes and dreams, their underlying philosophy in life.

- Week 8: The activity was to look at their collages from the previous session, then journal about where they thought they stood on Maslow's hierarchy at this point in time. The goal was for them to realize which of Maslow's needs were most important to them at the moment.
- Week 9: The activity was to answer a short MBTI quiz, then do some journaling. The goal was for participants to understand their own motivations and behaviours, as well as those of the others.
- Week 10: The activity was a group discussion about what the process of the last nine weeks.

The goal was to understand the participants' experience, as well as find out what they felt they had learned. At the end of the session, the group underwent the termination process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although much of the existing research suggests that favourable outcomes are associated with expressive writing (such as enhanced self-expression and self-awareness; as well as physical, emotional and mental well-being) whether or not this applies in a Malaysian context had not been fully explored before the study.

However, when the data collected from the sessions were studied and analyzed under the following themes:

- i. increased self-awareness of cognitions and emotions in the participant
- ii. emergence of the personal myth of the individual
- iii. emergence of insights,

The results of the study were found to be congruent with the existing literature.

DATA ANALYSIS

Of the five participants, two were married, two single, and one divorced. All were of middle class background, and none suffered from any serious emotional or psychological issues. They all reported one thing in common – they were seeking an avenue for self-expression and growth. All the women were either working or in between jobs, and three of them also had a child to support. All were educated to at least high school level, with one of them having finished a professional degree. Most the women were living with their families; only one was living on her own.

Participant One

Participant One's biggest concern was a 'fear of death' since her brother and protector had recently passed away. She wanted to 'get to know herself' so that she could stand on her own two feet and learn to make decisions concerning her life without outside interference. When the story of her 'self' that emerged during group work was compared with the three themes mentioned earlier, it could be seen that she had come to realize she had a hidden inner strength that would

help her survive the loss of her brother, and that she was surrounded by people who supported her and a 'universe that would take care of her'. She also learned to become aware of the strengthening qualities she would still need to develop in terms of creating and maintaining her personal relationships.

Participant Two

Participant Two was a single mother who expressed a need to find a niche for herself in her career, as well as to make a decent life for her daughter. Her biggest concern was becoming immobilized to illness before her daughter could grow up and support herself. During the ice-breaker, she described her life as being full of ups and downs because she had a habit of plunging into things without thinking. During the archetype-card activity, she picked a card showing a skeleton seemingly holding out its hand. She interpreted this as a need to caution herself against the dangers of making wrong decisions. In the following weeks, she identified her dominant archetype as being that of the Mother, and realized that she wanted to be 'successful, confident and pretty' like her character 'Eva' (a persona). At the end of the study, she acknowledged to herself there were still many facets of Maslow's lower, middle and higher level of needs she wanted to do and experience in her personal life.

Participant Three

Participant Three was a soft spoken woman who said little during the first meeting. Her main concern was 'wanting to have a meaningful life after retirement'. Participant Three seemed to be an 'observer'; During the first session, she described feeling as if life were full of decisions to be made, decisions which could have either a negative or a positive outcome. As a result, she often found herself slightly apprehensive about which way things would go. Her 'persona' was a character called 'Sam', whom she described as lost, trapped, doubtful, fearing and uncertain. When asked if any of those adjectives applied to her, she admitted that she often felt fearful about making decisions because she was not always sure about what may happen. Participant Three's personal myth seemed to include several mixed themes - independence, inner will, and a fear of being not in control. She believed in making sure things would turn out all right, but still worried about the 'curve balls' that life was bound to throw her. Her one 'significant' relationship, which had been wonderful and loving to start with, came to an end because she found her partner becoming possessive and controlling. What bothered her most, she said, was the expectation that she would change herself to suit him. She admitted that she believed in taking life on her own terms.

During the creative journaling, Participant Three's ability to see life in metaphors and poetic imagery emerged. She described life as a 'chessboard, where the decisions we make can have many different combinations of outcomes,' and which may turn out to be 'positive or negative, depending on how we choose to view it'. She likened the moment of receiving an insight to 'being woken up by the tinkle of a falling drop of water.' She compared our ability to view things positive or negative as 'looking through either large or small picture frames'.

Participant Three's realization that she shared the 'doubt' and 'fear' of her imaginary character Sam, emerged during the third week and was a turning point towards how she viewed

herself. Her self-healing archetype emerged. She transformed her fear of not being able to control life, into the realization that she now has the opportunity to be constantly surprised by it. As a result, her personal voice became more self-assured, and her collage created during the seventh session exhibited this new assurance.

In Participant Three's case, the creative journaling helped her to face her shadow qualities of fear and self-doubt, and allowed the inner archetype of her Philosopher to emerge; an archetype that is wise, strong and always ready to appreciate the mysteries of the universe.

Participant Four

Participant Four was passionate about teaching art and bringing people closer to nature. She listed her main concern as 'finances', and hoped the group process would bring her to a level where she would be as open towards accepting the 'negative events in life' as 'the positive ones'. Her personal myth emerged as follows: her early childhood was filled with memories of fun and laughter and family togetherness. She grew up with four siblings, but always remembered herself as being her father's favorite. One of her early memories involved being physically disciplined by her father for the first time, and she admitted that it came as a shock to her at the time. However, she also remembers family vacations, trips to the toy store, and being spoiled by her parents. During the third session, she remembered having felt somewhat confused during her childhood at this preferential treatment towards herself, especially since her father appeared distant towards her older sister and brother. She connected this to their estrangement from him in later life, especially when he was on his deathbed. After his passing, she related how she had found an old letter among his belongings which proved that he actually harboured a great love towards his two children. The insights she received made her realize it was her duty to rectify this misperception on the part of her siblings, and to show them the letter (which she had so far kept hidden) so that broken family relationships could be healed.

She also realized from the combined journaling and group discussions a personal truth: that she has often started projects and did not finish them. One of her personal resolutions at the end of the growth group was to work on this aspect of herself. She knew what she wanted – to open her own art studio – and she now knew what she had to change about herself in order to achieve it. Her dream for the second half of her life was to impart her love for art to others, and to help people to grow emotionally and spiritually by bringing out their inherent natures through creativity. Her collage in the seventh session put this desire clearly.

Participant Five

Participant Five was also a mother-of-one, who was passionate about helping people. She had a large, extroverted personality, and seemed to like to laugh and talk a lot. Participant Five's main concern was her health, but she also said she hoped the group experience would help her get to know more about herself, especially those 'hidden areas and closed doors I would like to open'. Participant Five's personal story was of a carefree childhood filled with daring exploits, adventures and constant getting-into-scrapes. It was also about being punished often and experiencing a yearning for the love of her strict, disciplinarian father. Her mother passed away when she was

quite young. In adulthood she was involved in a succession of relationships, some serious, some not; it was not until the age of 39 that she finally settled down. She spoke of a 'restricted' childhood where she and her sisters were expected to behave in a certain way; it is possible that her string of relationships and rebelliousness was a reaction to all these restrictions.

When Participant Five picked her persona, she chose a character whom society had plucked from her natural environment, and tried to mould in accordance with the conventions / social expectations of the day. To the question "Is this what Eliza wants?" she addressed the fundamental issue troubling her now. The trade-off for Participant Five was between the freedom and excitement of the single life, and the emotional stability of a family.

There was another conflict. After she got her degree in Economics, she tried the corporate life for awhile. But something was missing. When she became involved in the humanitarian "Creators of Peace Circle," which educates and empowers women to become the agents of change within their communities, she seemed to find her true calling. This was work she loved, but it did not pay. Whereas the other one, which was meaningless, did pay. That was the conflict she referred to, involving her 'income generating job' and her 'non-income generating job. Which one to choose? It was not until she did the creative journaling exercise that she realized there was no conflict. She could do what she loved and not worry about generating income, because make money that was what society wanted her to do, not what she wanted for herself.

For Participant Five, it was all about regaining her lost identity - her freedom, and the ability to do what she really wanted, regardless of what society thought. It was a sobering moment, but it brought a lot of peace. In the end she could truly say, "The work of the past two months have helped me realize who I truly am, 'inside of myself.'"

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It should be noted that several of the participants had forgotten about many of the incidents mentioned here until they were called up from their personal unconscious through the power of creative journaling. Processing of their work then helped them to heal some old wounds and to recognize that they needed to embrace a more self-empowering self-concept. In the end, they were able to modify their personal myth to incorporate philosophies that would help them look toward a more favorable personal outcome.

In general, each of the participants showed different levels of positive outcome when compared under the following themes:

- i. Increased self-awareness of cognitions and emotions in the participant
- ii. Emergence of the personal myth of the individual
- iii. The emergence of insights

While Participants One and Five were already persons of great self-awareness and self-expressiveness at the beginning of the study, they still reported receiving some insights during the process, and experienced the resurgence of long-forgotten memories. Participant Three did not verbally acknowledge receiving any insights that were life-changing, but tracking the development of her personal journey from week one till week seven showed some progress from the standpoint

of the facilitator. Participant Four reported a few helpful personal insights; and Participant Two reported that creative journaling did not work for her at all, while the group discussions were more beneficial. However, like Participant Three, Participant Two's self-understanding, evidenced through the processing of creative material produced showed some degree of evolution, even though it was neither consistent nor dramatic. During one session, what she did not produce was even more telling than what she did.

How does the process of creative journaling facilitate self-cognizance and understanding of participants' emotions? One explanation lies in the pictorial nature of artwork (Ganim & Fox, 1999). Through an image, an abstract idea is made concrete. The act of drawing allows the journaler to see in pictorial form, what was originally an intangible idea. In creative journaling, once imagery first uncovers the inner feeling states, then words can be used to make rational sense of the images. Through the process of first drawing then articulating, knowledge grows, and insight is achieved.

Role of the Therapist

The remarkable power of creative journaling to put people in touch with their unconscious, and to unearth the themes and patterns that regulate a person's life, has implications not only to the individual, but to the therapist. The memories and emotions that arise during creative journaling represent the elements of the personal narrative which, when put together, helps the therapist to understand the story of the whole person. The personal narrative must however be understood in the context of the main emerging motifs and patterns which also arise from creative journaling. If we know a client's personal narrative, we come to recognize the various often conflicting themes that order their lives. If we recognize the patterns, then we can help them find ways in which to change their personal 'truths' for more constructive ones. The knowledge and feedback of the therapist becomes important in helping the client to negotiate life's difficulties. Thus while creative journaling can be useful in itself to the individual outside of therapy, its true effects are only realized with the help of the therapist's knowledge and training. As a tool for therapy then, creative journaling has immeasurable value.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was intended to study the effects of creative journaling on a group of women undergoing the midlife passage. As such, it is limited to women with particular lifespan development issues such as career/ family conflict, child-rearing, self-identity, health, old age, personal growth, and so forth. It does not aim to explain the experience of individuals experiencing traumatic problems such as violence, sexual abuse, or severe grief/loss. The effects of expressive writing on clients with more serious emotional and psychological problems should be studied to see if they are comparable to those of women facing normal developmental issues.

Also, because this study was conducted in a group setting, it is difficult to gauge how much of the cognitive/ emotional insights gained by the participants was due to the process of creative journaling, and how much was due to group dynamics (Corey, 2005). It is well known that the support and challenge of group members influences the learning outcomes of the individual.

Participant Two reported in fact, that she learned more from the other group members than from the creative journaling process.

Finally, in keeping with the nature of the qualitative case study, only a small number of participants were studied, and the results therefore cannot be generalized to the larger population. It is hoped that this study will serve as a foundation for more in-depth research studies in the future.

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