

special
articles**ANONYMOUS**

How writing and using Insight Poetry helped me to overcome my illness

In 1986 I suffered a severe mental breakdown. I have had serious mental health problems for 15 years. Over the past 15 months, my mental and physical health have improved considerably. During this time, I have been writing and using Insight Poetry to help overcome my illness.

When I broke down in 1986, the experience was absolutely terrifying. My thoughts were so disturbed and deluded that I was unable to come to a logical conclusion as to what was wrong with me. I can recall thinking that when the sun went down, I would go blind. My thought processes took the form of a powerful stream of anxiety and delusion. I felt confused, embarrassed and in denial. I had always been proud of my academic achievements, and now my mind was literally grinding to a halt. A very disturbed, and disturbing, state of mind. A self-perpetuating cycle of mental illness.

My first point of contact with the mental health system left me frightened and scarred, wounds from which I am now only beginning to recover. The lack of bedside manner, harsh ward conditions and a martinet approach from day one sowed the seeds of mistrust. Far from helping me to overcome my illness, I felt that my complaint was further repressed and compounded by successive admissions and re-admissions over more than a decade.

I see my illness as complex but controllable. During my admission to the new ward facilities at Fulbourn 15 months ago, I took a long, hard look at myself and decided that I had to address my health problems. I decided to write my own care plan and to take personal responsibility for my behaviour, how I reacted, what I said and for my temperament. I began to monitor myself, looking for early warning signs of health deterioration, such as loss of temper, delusive or neurotic thoughts or erratic behaviour. If my thoughts were at all disturbed, I would fall back on the poetry that I was now writing and nip off the offending thought train before it developed. A type of self-censorship perhaps? I noticed that when I successfully identified a thought as being delusive, the fear, anxiety and tension associated with the delusion were dissipated. After all, if the delusion is exposed as being not factual, then what is there to worry about? The self-perpetuating cycle of psychosis/neurosis is broken and the distress associated with the delusion evaporates. It is perhaps like waking from a living nightmare, reassuring oneself that it is only a frightening dream and not reality. By exposing the delusion, I immediately feel calmer, more relaxed and reassured.

An example of where I have broken the cycle of delusion and anxiety is an instance where the extreme anxiety and delusion are linked by the subject matter. I used to suffer anxiety over side-effects of antipsychotic

drugs linked to the delusion that architecturally strange buildings must contain awful factory production lines manufacturing such drugs. Seeing or visualising that building used to trigger an attack of extreme anxiety. Hence episodes of mental illness can perhaps be self-perpetuated until the cycle is broken, fears are allayed and the distress is dissipated.

I started writing poetry during my last admission. I originally intended it to be a creative and interesting way of keeping a diary. The subject matter of my poems gradually developed to become an outlet for the pent up feelings inside me. Often humorous, the poems allow me to release the nervous tension inside me. The poems are verses built around fragments of ideas that have occurred to me – part mental exercise and part word puzzle. The writing has become my hobby, and I think of the poems as commonsensical adult nursery rhymes. I actively use them as a tool to give vent to any subject matter which may be causing me to become anxious, and as a first line of defence if any delusive thoughts or misconceived ideas come into my mind.

The poems are usually constructed as rhyming couplets. In such a form, they are easy to remember. Useful, because it is easy to forget and fall back into old, bad behaviour habits. It was perhaps difficult for me to see myself as other people saw me. I knew that there was a problem which needed to be addressed, a complex and many-faceted problem. My poems deal with many different fronts which in some way impact on my life.

Looking at psychosis in isolation, I realised that while I had disturbed thought processes, not all my thought processes were disturbed. I had a body of misconceived nonsensical ideas held in my memory which distorted proper thinking. The idea that such a body of nonsense existed only occurred to me recently. Before this insight, I was not consciously splitting delusion from reality. The realisation that such a body of nonsense existed was a dawning for me. I decided humorously to call it my fourth A level, framing it to give the body of nonsense form, shape and an identity. Generally, I add to the body of nonsense and it grows, a non-factual body of ideas with tenuous links to the real world. Having established the above, my next success was being able to identify which thoughts and ideas were the delusive ones. If a delusive thought came into my head, I would ask myself the question, 'Is that thought delusion?'. If yes, then I would repeat the first two lines of my psychosis light and hope poem – 'That thought was delusion, I've nipped it in the bud'. In fact I have three categories:

- (1) Delusion
- (2) Neurotic
- (3) Normal.



special
articles

I identify and at the earliest possible stage cut off thought trains which fall into a negative category. I have recently started thinking of negative thoughts as being the colour red and those thoughts which are positive as being the colour green. This traffic light type of tool, seen on the local television news, was used by a child behaviour therapist to teach children to behave in a balanced way. It can also be applied by adults who have behaviour abnormalities.

Examples of Insight Poetry

Assertiveness

Short clear statements I will use,
Assertive I will be.
You my friend I will not abuse,
Respect, equality and empathy.

Psychosis, disturbed thoughts, light and hope

That thought was delusion,
I've nipped it in the bud.
I can recognise thought rubbish,
And split factual from the dud.
I can separate the nonsense from reality and fact,
From my muddled past existence, I am finding my way back.

Psychosis

Your delusive way of thinking,
Makes you behave eccentrically.
And you just don't know you're poorly,
Hypersensitivity.
When you act on disturbed thoughts,
To your cost you may soon find,
That such disturbed thought process,
Is a dangerous state of mind.

The pace of life

Physical and mental,
Treat your body and your mind,
In ways that are quite gentle,
And hopefully you'll find,
That you won't wear out so quickly,
Or suffer burnout stress.
Both physically and mentally,
Subject yourself to less.

In conclusion, Insight Poetry has helped me to overcome my illness. I hope that this article proves to be both interesting and useful, and that it will in some way help other sufferers of serious mental illness.