

Writing Warm-Ups as an Empathy Exercise: a student-run writing group for medical students

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What is The Human Side?

The Human Side is a student-run group at the University of Michigan Medical School that seeks to explore humanism in medicine and bring students together through informal writing groups and reading groups.

What does The Human Side do?

Every two weeks, 6-8 students gather at a participant's home to write for one hour. Each session begins with an optional writing prompt prepared by someone in the group. The prompts range in topic and are not specifically related to health and illness. After a writing warm-up, students choose to share and receive feedback. We share our writing with the group without preface, edits, or commentary from the writer. Others voice their reactions to both the writing and the content.

Why Peer-Led?

This group draws a diverse group of students with varied writing experience. Rather than taking a didactic approach,^{1,2} we provide an environment for communal sharing and learning. A peer-led group changes the group dynamics, enabling each of us to be more actively engaged with one another and to be more free with our language and disclosure.

"The Human Side definitely enables me to develop a different kind of relationship with the other participants and provides a platform for discussing topics that we might otherwise never broach in medical school."

Why Creative Writing?

Unlike many other writing exercises in medical education,^{3,4} our prompts lie outside the scope of health and medicine. Creative writing encourages us to be more perceptive and thoughtful about our experiences and the world around us. Creative writing can also have a therapeutic effect, through personal expression as well as through building community. Many participants have described these sessions as cathartic and healing.

¹Charon, Rita. "Literature and Medicine: Contributions to Clinical Practice." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 123.12 (1995): 966.

²Ward, Hedy S., and Shmuel P. Reis. "Beyond the Margins: Reflective Writing and Development of Reflective Capacity in Medical Education." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 25.7 (2010): 746-49.

³Halem, David, and Emily Ferrara. "Becoming a Doctor: Fostering Humane Caregivers through Creative Writing." *Patient Education and Counseling* 45.1 (2001): 13-22.

⁴Nevelamen, M.K., T. Mantyriants, and K.H. Pitkala. "Facing Uncertainty as a Medical Student—A Qualitative Study of Their Reflective Learning Diaries and Writings on Specific Themes during the First Clinical Year." *Patient Education and Counseling* 78.2 (2010): 218-23.

Healthcare Values Developed through Writing

The original goal of The Human Side writing group was to protect time for writing during medical school, yet we found ourselves inadvertently practicing several overlapping values of healthcare.

"I feel that writing group has had an impact on who I am, which inevitably influences the physician that I will be. I don't think that one ever masters the art of responding to the suffering and vulnerability of others, whether expressed by writers detailing intimate experiences or by patients living through unimaginable challenges."

Empathy: to understand and share the feelings of another

While there is much debate as to whether empathy is something that can be taught, our writing group suggests that the processes of writing and sharing help us practice empathy. Empathy arises when we witness, understand, and self-reflect. We begin by listening to each other's narratives, then try to understand the writer's experiences through his or her own words and perspective. As writers, we analyze our own experiences in order to help us relate to others.

Listening

Each participant reads his or her freewrite only once. We practice active listening, paying keen attention to detail. Without taking notes, we have to recall our reactions to specific words, transitions, and rhythm. Since we provide immediate, positive, and oral feedback, we sharpen our listening skills. We become more attuned to how we use language to communicate. The writing group format requires us to remember detail and construct a thoughtful response. We hope that this skill will translate to our future clinical practice: listening carefully to a patient's history, remembering the details, and providing immediate, empathetic feedback.

Support

As future health care providers, we will often need to support people at their most vulnerable stages. Writing group fosters the skill of providing verbal encouragement and support to those who read their work. We give, receive, and respond to constructive criticism, which are abilities crucial to team-based healthcare. Talking to peers rather than standardized patients or strangers elicits especially authentic feedback.

Compassion: to suffer with or together

While compassion is often understood as sympathy or even pity, writing group has helped to complicate our understandings of what it means to feel compassion and to be compassionate. The Latin roots of the word compassion mean "to suffer together," which suggests that compassion is an active rather than passive process. In a group of peers, compassion takes on a particularly non-hierarchical dimension. As we write, listen, and share, we learn how to feel compassion when unedited words bring us into each others' experiences. We learn how to express compassion in how we respond to these shared experiences. We not only show empathy for the experiences of others, but we also explore our own emotions and recognize how we are impacted by these narratives. Compassion allows us to connect with one another.

Vulnerability

Freewrites are raw, personal, and rough material. Doctors are encouraged now, more than ever, to admit mistakes and recognize their own limitations. Sharing our freewrites with the group has encouraged each of us to accept and even appreciate the imperfections that may arise in unedited writing. In writing group we share not only unpolished first drafts, but personal stories. Many of us have shared intimate experiences and thoughts with others whom we may barely know. Being immersed in a community of people willing to show their weaknesses encourages us to expose our deeper layers.

Conclusion

This innovative, student-led writing program provides students with a unique opportunity to enhance core healthcare values. Our experience provides insight into how writing can function as an effective tool in healthcare education to help foster empathy and compassion in future healthcare professionals.

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