

Reading, writing can be a prescription for healing, doctors are finding

By Dallas Morning News, adapted by Newsela Staff

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's voice is whispery on the other end of the telephone as she relates some of the experiences she has overcome. She lived with a mother who had schizophrenia, a kind of mental disorder. Cooke also grew up in a variety of foster homes, battled cancer, struggled with drug abuse — the list goes on.

"I really didn't believe I would make it through childhood, but the act of writing brought me through," she says.

Now 56 and an award-winning poet, Coke teaches writing as a way of healing to cancer patients, at-risk youth, doctors, families and just about everyone else.

Writing can be a type of meditation, Coke says. It's a process that helps us unravel and understand both the good and bad things that happen to us.

Reading is also healing, she says.

Storytelling Goes Back Through Time

We learn indirectly through the experiences of the characters we read about, Coke says. Because we empathize, or feel for others, we expand our understanding of other people in other circumstances. We are also less concerned with our own misfortunes.

Coke points to books such as Frank McCourt's memoir "Angela's Ashes," in which he relates growing up poor in 1930s and '40s Ireland. Reading books like that makes us feel a little less alone, a little less troubled, she says.

The use of storytelling for our well-being is deeply rooted in human history. Think of fairy tales that teach moral lessons, religious texts that wrestle with valleys of despair and mountains of hope, or poetry that cleanses the writer's soul. Recently, doctors and psychologists have begun looking at the health effects of reading and writing with a more critical eye.

Readers Feel For Their Characters

Raymond Mar, an associate professor of psychology at York University in Toronto, studies the effect reading fiction and nonfiction has on our ability to empathize. He found that children and adults who have read stories their whole lives were more likely to correctly identify the feelings and thoughts of others than those who do not read regularly.

In other words: People who read stories are better at empathizing.

Why?

"When people are engaging with narrative fiction, they're imagining what it's like to be in these stories," Mar says.

Trying to understand these characters exercises the same mental muscle that helps us understand people in the real world. And the better we are at "walking in their shoes," the more likely we are to treat others well, he says.

Reading Encourages Conversation

For adults, it doesn't appear to matter what you read, Mar says, so long as you are reading.

With children, however, it's important to talk with them about what they are reading. Those conversations help them understand the story and empathize with its characters.

Reading stories, then, can become an opportunity for children and adults to talk about complicated states of human existence, Mar says.

Some doctors have also begun to see storytelling as a way to improve emotional well-being.

A movement called narrative medicine has grown from the idea that both writing and reading literature can help doctors and patients communicate better. Together they can discover meaning in the illnesses they battle.

It Is About Communicating

Dr. John Harper, a heart doctor at Texas Health Presbyterian Dallas, is a promoter of this movement. He started the annual Literature and Medicine Conference at the hospital five years ago.

Each year, an author is asked to speak, teach writing classes to hospital staff and sponsor an essay contest about how literature influences medicine.

Harper says doctors who read stories are more empathetic and, therefore, more compassionate or caring, and more willing to listen to their patients' stories. It also helps doctors to communicate better, he says.

The tiny differences in meaning in poetry and writing can communicate emotion far better than any scientific explanation, he says.

"The sound of a coffin hitting the earth is a sound utterly serious," Harper says, quoting one of his favorite lines from Antonio Machado's poem, "The Burial of a Friend."

He uses the line to communicate the depth of his intent to patients and family members facing deadly illnesses. Saying something beautiful and meaningful like that shows how serious he considers their illnesses and his compassion for their suffering, he says.

Healing Takes On Many Forms

Writing is also healing, says Harper, who teaches his residents that writing about their experiences is a way to release their emotions.

"If you have an experience and you sit down and write about it, you can pour that emotion out," Harper says. Getting rid of these thoughts and emotions helps to find meaning in what happened — the death or the survival of a patient — and then allows you to move on with your life.

That's the same message Coke teaches her writing students.

Getting it down allows the quiet, thoughtful process that "we need as human beings to unravel the things in our life or to enjoy the things we're having fun with fully," she says.

"It's like throwing a ball, and if you really want it to go to a certain place, you have to follow through with your hand. The writing is the follow-through that helps it land."

Directions for Response:

This week you need to write a response of TWO paragraphs. This should be done on a separate sheet of paper and follow this format:

- 1) **1st Paragraph:** Write a summary of the article. Make sure you:
 - a) Use your own words
 - b) Choose only the most important details
 - c) Pay attention to the order of the details you include
- 2) *****HELLO HELLO PAY ATTENTION: Your 2nd Paragraph Will Be DIFFERENT This Week!*****
 - a) Write a paragraph about a character from a book you've read. How did this character speak to you? What did you learn or understand from the character's experience?
 - b) Yes it has to be from a book.
 - c) If you can't think of a book, write about the ways you can relate to Conrad's character in *Ordinary People*.