Therapeutic letter writing with families living with dementia

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‘Therapeutic letter writing to families’

A form of ‘therapeutic letter writing’ is a well recognised intervention within psychology, psychiatry and family therapy.

Letter writing is a way of commending families by looking at their resources and strengths; this has been linked to a reduction of the theory-practice gap and producing a higher level of reflection in clinicians such as nurses (Erlingsson 2009 Sweden)
Dementia UK commissioned ADS to refresh their Admiral Nurse Competency Framework, reflecting the increasingly complex nature of the Admiral Nurse role.

This was alongside the delivery of a masters level module applying the competency framework into practice.
The six competencies

1. Person-centred care
   Developing person-centred care through relationship-centred working

2. Therapeutic Skills
   Ability to work therapeutically with people with dementia and their carers in complex situations

3. Triadic Relationship
   Balancing the needs of the person with dementia, the carer and the professional carer within a designated area of practice

4. Sharing Knowledge
   Sharing knowledge and information within the practice context, through the promotion of the Admiral Nurse role

5. Best Practice
   Promoting and facilitating best practice within your work setting

6. Critical Reflective Practice
   Achieving critical reflective practice skills which are evidence based, through engagement with the Admiral Nurse Competency Framework and a peer support process
Applying the Admiral Nurse Competency Framework, masters module at Worcester University.

Letter writing was considered as a way of developing and enhancing critical reflective thinking, with a broader aim of getting Admiral Nurses to revisit how they work with families as part of the module and relating this to practice and the competency framework.
Starting point.....

Writing letters has shown to be powerful and a learning tool through discussion with other students. Reflective thinking has been linked to providing personal learning opportunities based upon practice experience.
Student nurse needed help to relinquish the ‘expert' role. Erlingsson explored student nurses use and perception of writing therapeutic letter to families and investigated possible benefits.

- Helped to gain a connection between family nursing theory and the family itself and allowed students to develop a family focus.
- Way of commending families looking at resources and strengths.
- Linked to reduction of theory practice gap and a higher level of reflection for evaluation,
- Highlight ideas, review strengths, ask questions provide a distance
Adapting Erlingsson research for teaching and reflecting on the Admiral Nurse Module

• Unlike Erlingsson’s research letters were not sent to families but used to facilitate discussion and a high level of self-reflection.

• A full debrief with feedback after the exercise was carried out as many of the letters were deeply emotional.

• Nurses were given the option of sharing what they had written within the group, many did this and it proved to be extremely powerful part of the exercise.
Letter Writing Exercise; how it worked,

- Reflect on an interaction with a family, can be something small but which stands out.
- Asked to write a letter which could be sent to either the family or an individual within that family.
- Starting with ‘Dear’ and writing in the first person they needed to describe how they felt, giving a rational why they felt feel like this and drawing upon whatever strengths and positives may be present.
- Emphasis was made on avoiding listing problems remembering this is a letter!
Dear John

I know that looking after your wife is an honour for you as you have said to me many times, but I am also aware that this has not always been easy for you as things have changed for her, but I want to let you know that I am struck by your ability to adapt to these changes and keep going with the spirit, love and humour that you show to me when I visit and most importantly to her 24/7.

I know you sometimes question whether you're 'doing it right' ......but I need to tell you that you are amazing in the care you give her and the love you have for her.

I am deeply humbled witnessing this and want to let you know that and how grateful I am to work with you......
Feedback was overwhelmingly positive; the success of this exercise within a classroom has transferability into a variety of practice settings.

Writing a letter in the first person was challenging, differing vastly from the usual production of a clinical summary.

It initiated a deeper level of critical reflection, demonstrating authenticity around the relationship with families living with dementia.
Moving forward......linking theory and practice

I plan to put the letter writing exercise into practice through one of my Practice Development groups, initially sharing and explaining what I have written from the course before facilitating nurses to write their own letters from their practice.

The session is a creative opportunity to increase self-awareness and connect more with practice in an emotional sense.

Through sharing written reflections verbally with AN colleagues there will be opportunities to connect feelings and demonstrate empathy and support to one another.

Suzanne Wightman Admiral Nurse Professional and Practice Development Facilitator (North East)
Dear M

You have inspired me by how well you always tailor presentations so perfectly for the audience in question. I love to see people being inspired through your story!

I have also been in awe of how you cope with the emotion evoked when you share your story and I believe that the way the emotion is felt by others promotes powerful learning and raised awareness.

Over the last two years I have witnessed a wonderful lady who has charisma, resilience, dignity and self-control. I have no doubt that these strengths will support and sustain you in the future. M....... you are amazing!

With very best wishes
S........
Into practice, and the family......

Suzanne has gone on to use this technique within her PD groups and has sent the letter to the family member.

‘Oh Suzanne, you brought a tear to my eyes. That is so lovely, thank you.’ (M)

Another Admiral nurse has shared her letter though an audio recording of a reading of the letter with full consent of the family member who has a copy of this as reading is difficult for them.
Next steps ............
working therapeutically with families

Recently an Admiral nurse reported how they had used letters within a complex family group to address some of the tensions between siblings around Mums care and her relationship with their father.....

Although some of these letters were not sent the process of writing them was therapeutic in its own right allowing some reflective distance between family members and the situation they were in and helping to facilitate conversation with carers.............