

WHAT'S MORE



RELAXING THAN THIS?

SELF

The right hobby can be both restorative and reviving. The Red team investigates just how healing the mental health benefits can be

'POETRY GIVES US PERMISSION TO FEEL'

Arielle Tchirout finds solace in the power of the pen

When I signed up for a poetry therapy session, I didn't think I needed to be healed. I was just going along for the fun of it; at best, I hoped I'd rekindle my love of poetry-writing that I'd lost as a teenager, when I became too self-conscious to believe my poems mattered.

Nevertheless, I was looking forward to my group-workshop Zoom call with writer, university tutor and poetry therapist Victoria Field. I'd never heard of the profession and it turns out it's unique: Field qualified as a Certified Poetry Therapist with a US-based organisation and she's active in developing the field of therapeutic writing in the UK. For 15 years, she has led workshops with diverse groups, including students, adults with learning disabilities and the elderly, encouraging connection and introspection via reading and writing poems.

'When we talk about "poems", we're referring to short, intense pieces of writing,' she tells us, a group of three, at the start of the session. 'It doesn't have to rhyme. It's really just whatever comes out, so we work in a very non-judgemental way. It's not about literary criticism or school, but seeing what appears on the page, and what we might find out about ourselves from doing that.'

We start with a warm-up, an acrostic poem for the word 'October'. Though the session isn't supposed to be like school, my mind drifts to a classroom as I write the word in capital letters down the side of the page. She tells us we have five minutes to fill in the poem, writing constantly without changing anything. Afterwards, we read our poems, and we giggle about the similarities between them: they all centre on coronavirus, and the strange autumn that looms ahead. 'Poetry can give us the sensation that we're not alone in the world,' says Field. 'It gives us permission to feel.'

For the next part of the session, we read and analyse a poem. *Optimism* by Jane Hirshfield appears on screen, and we read it aloud one by one. This, Field says, elicits feelings of nostalgia and comfort, before she leads a therapy-like discussion digging into our thoughts. She asks for memories and images that the poem conjures up; who and what certain words bring to mind.

'When we're out in the world, we have all this stuff going on in our heads, but when you're reading a poem, you can focus on a smaller world, which can help you connect in all sorts of ways,' says Field. She explains that it's different to psychotherapy because you're able to start with the poem; it's outside yourself, which 'perhaps makes it feel a bit safer'. For the final part of the session, we take the first words of the poem ('More and more I have come to

admire...') as a springboard for writing our own poem, with six minutes to open our minds and pour it on to the page. Before I realised what I was writing, I scribbled down a poem about the herbs planted by my boyfriend days before – a man who'd been newly suffering from anxiety and panic attacks, triggered by family issues and the trappings of lockdown. It was a poem about watching his eyes light up when seeing seedlings poking through the soil. Subconsciously inspired by the poem we'd read, it was a verse about hope.

When I read my poem aloud, I cried. I came into the session feeling cheery, but there I was, releasing a sadness I'd stuffed inside my heart in order to make space for his. Field and my co-poets nodded in recognition and congratulated me – not for the quality of my poem, but for releasing my emotions. As a working writer, it felt soothing to be affirmed for my efforts, not for the result.

After hearing the other poems, I felt tired – the good kind of tired you feel after completing your to-do list and diving into a freshly made bed. I logged off feeling calm, quiet and content.

That night, I showed my poem to my boyfriend. He held me close and we planned new plants to grow and shared our hopes for when this pandemic is over. We agreed I should start writing poetry again. I think that imperfect poem, with its clumsy rhymes and long lines, ended up healing us both.

Find Victoria Field at thepoetrypractice.co.uk

**'I felt calm,
quiet and
content'**

'I LEAVE FEELING LIFTED AND LIGHT'

Anna Bonet throws herself into self-expression

'**C**lose your eyes. Centre yourself. Elbows in. Focus. Deep, steady breathing,' says my instructor, Emma Lacey, who (although it might sound like I'm in a yoga class) is teaching me how to throw clay on a wheel. I'm at Clay Time in north London, and while I might not be mid-Vinyasa flow, pottery does share many of the mental health benefits of yoga. In fact, pottery has been proven to be so therapeutic that some scientists think it might be an effective treatment for depression: a 2017 study published in the *Journal Of Affective Disorders* suggests that creating objects out of clay can help improve mood, decision-making and motivation.

Using pottery to heal is part of a wider (and growing) movement in art psychotherapy. Art therapists use the process of self-expression, and the resulting artwork, to help clients understand their emotional conflicts, improve self-esteem and ease anxiety, and anyone who turned to arts and crafts during lockdown might be able to see why. Although, I have to admit that the first 10 minutes of my pottery class isn't what I would call relaxing. Clay is flying everywhere and the wobbly lump in front of me is rotating so quickly I can't control it. The end result is a wonky mess. I can't help but think that if this is self-expression, it's a fairly accurate representation of how I'm feeling. Then, as I try to take it off the wheel with a wire, it collapses – and ends up in the recycling. Lacey doesn't give me much chance to think about it, as minutes later, I have another wedge of clay in my hands, which I thump on to the wheel. 'The first time is always the hardest,' Lacey reassures me. 'Try again. Keep going.' This time, I focus on keeping my body centred with my eyes closed. I wouldn't have thought that not looking would help, but it does. It stops me from getting scared of not being able to control the clay. Instead, I feel my way around it as I methodically lift and lower the sides of the pot to transform its shape. This time, everything feels more steady and my stress begins to melt away.

As I start to understand just how soothing pottery can be, I also realise there's something enjoyable about the fact I'm covered in clay. It's in my hair, all down my apron and even in my shoes. My hands are caked in it. I suppose that my clumsy nature means that I may have been a bit more messy than others, but being that mucky is childlike and playful to the point that I'm feeling worlds away from both my email inbox and the worries of an impending second lockdown.

By my third go during the two-hour clay throwing taster session, I'm beaming. By my fourth, I'm shocked that there are now three small bowls and pots lined up on a slab and ready to be glazed – that I made with my very own bare hands!

I leave the Clay Time studio feeling lifted and light. My session has been so satisfying and calming that as soon as I get home (and cleaned up), I'm looking at when I can book another. This soothing hobby is one I'm definitely going to return to. Visit claytime.london to book a session or follow @claytimecic on Instagram

'I REALISED HOW LITTLE I NOTICE THE WORLD AROUND ME'

Ella Dove loses herself in a flight of fancy

Standing in sheltered woodland, I focus my binoculars and look up. There, in a distant tree, is a great spotted woodpecker, with its black and white back and orange underside, seemingly so close that I could reach out and touch it. Then, another lands beside it. And then, a third. 'Wow,' I exclaim.

'That reaction is why we do it,' smiles Andrew Gouldstone, senior site manager at RSPB Rainham Marshes. 'You never know what you're going to see, and when you see something rare, it's special. We've had a lot of new visitors since lockdown. Birdwatching is a way to lose yourself. It takes your mind off things.' I must admit, I didn't think I'd take to it. As someone with quite a short attention span, the idea of staring out of a hide for hours never really appealed. Yet, in recent months, after days on end working in my flat, I've found myself craving fresh air. Watching Gouldstone point out grebes, kestrels, a buzzard and marsh harriers, I realise how little I notice when it comes to our natural world.

'It's satisfying putting a name to something,' he says. 'If you regularly come back to the same patch, you'll learn how the landscape changes with the seasons, how migration affects birds.' Imagining these tiny feathered creatures crossing countries gives me cause to realise how small we all are, bringing a sense of perspective and awe I've never felt before.

'It's an opportunity to connect with other lives, get to know them, be curious about them, share moments with them, and give us a sense of belonging in a world where isolation is a significant challenge,' agrees Claire Thompson, author of *The Art Of Mindful Birdwatching*. I see what she means. As I watch ducks disappear beneath the water, I feel I've been given a privileged window into a world away from my own.

Tuning into my senses proves equally mindful. So mindful that for two hours, I don't look at my phone, think about emails or plan ahead to what I'll have for dinner. I'm totally absorbed. 'Listening and paying attention takes us out of our busy minds and into our present experience,' says Thompson. 'Stress, low mood and anxiety are often triggered by thoughts about the past or future. When we come into our direct sensory experience, we can feel more grounded, calm and connected. We come out of our minds and into our bodies. We feel present and alive.'

I come away rejuvenated. As a cloud of sparrows fly out from the hedges, I raise my face to the sky and smile. As Thompson puts it: 'In a world where there's constant judgement, assessment and comparison, nature will allow us to be as we are.' There's nothing more healing than that. Visit rspb.org.uk