

Using therapeutic letters in group schematherapy.

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE: This article focuses on utilizing therapeutic letters within group schema therapy—an innovative therapeutic approach that integrates elements from various therapeutic approaches. The primary aim is to explore how therapeutic letters can enhance the therapeutic process and support the treatment of patients.

METHODS: To achieve this objective, we conducted a narrative literature review centred on schema therapy and using therapeutic letters as a therapeutic strategy. We systematically searched databases (PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar) using the keywords "schema therapy," "therapy letters," "group," "therapeutic strategies," and "adult psychotherapy." Additionally, we gathered clinical insights from schema therapists through interviews to gain a practical perspective.

RESULTS: Group schema therapy primarily targets identifying and modifying early maladaptive schemas and maladaptive schema modes that originate during childhood and persist into adulthood. Within this context, therapeutic letters are an effective tool, allowing individuals to process intense emotions stemming from their formative years. Individuals complete these letters as homework assignments and then, divided into small groups, read them aloud while receiving emotional support and encouragement from their peers. This process enables individuals to explore their thoughts and feelings, potentially reframe their life narratives, seek forgiveness, and ultimately progress. Various types of therapeutic letters are discussed, including the "uncensored letter", "letter from the other site", "letter to a parent child", "business card", and "letter from the future".

DISCUSSION: The article provides an in-depth overview of the techniques and exercises employed in group schema work when using letters. It also addresses potential challenges, such as difficulties with visualization, resistance to change, and trust issues.

CONCLUSION: Therapeutic letters emerge as a valuable tool in group schema therapy, enhancing the therapeutic process and supporting individual treatment. However, further research is necessary to comprehend and fully maximize their potential.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on using therapeutic letters in group schema therapy, a therapeutic approach that integrates elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), attachment theory, gestalt, and psychodynamic concepts (Young *et al.* 2003). Therapeutic letters, which have been employed as a strategy in various psychotherapeutic approaches such as narrative therapy, cognitive therapy, and cognitive analytic therapy (France *et al.* 1995; Praško *et al.* 2006; Wojcik & Iverson, 1989), represent a powerful tool that can enhance the therapeutic process and support individual treatment (Prasko *et al.* 2009a).

Therapeutic letters can help individuals process strong emotions and bring to mind aspects of their experience that have not yet been fully processed (Prasko *et al.* 2012; Sutton *et al.* 2024). This process allows patients to explore their thoughts and feelings, potentially reframe their life narratives, find forgiveness, and ultimately move forward (Rasmussen & Tomm 1992). Therapeutic letters aim to extend the therapeutic process beyond the confines of the consulting room. A therapeutic letter, written by the therapist to an individual in therapy, serves as a specialized narrative tool that functions as both handouts and homework. These letters are tangible materials that individuals take home—highly customized documents that validate their knowledge, resources, and breakthroughs. Furthermore, these letters serve as homework assignments, encouraging individuals in therapy to apply and build upon what works during their sessions and prompting them to consider the positive trajectory if these favourable developments persist (White & Murray 2002).

METHOD

A thorough literature search was conducted using PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar databases. The search strategy incorporated keywords such as "schema therapy," "therapeutic letters," "therapeutic group," "therapeutic strategies," and "adult psychotherapy." As a result, articles, books and monographs discussing the role of therapeutic letters in schema therapy or adult psychotherapy were identified. These texts underwent detailed analysis, extracting and compiling relevant

information related to therapeutic letters within therapeutic strategies.

We collected clinical insights from schema therapists through interviews to provide a practical perspective. These therapists, who integrate therapeutic letters into their group practice, were interviewed about their experiences using this approach in group therapy. They shared the benefits and challenges of therapeutic letters and described their methodologies when working with individuals in therapy. This real-world context complemented the theoretical insights gained from the literature review.

RESULTS

A short overview of schema therapy

Schema therapy focuses on identifying and changing maladaptive life patterns (or "life traps") through therapeutic strategies such as limited reparenting, psychoeducation, imagination work, chairwork, relationship work, cognitive restructuring, emotional and behavioural techniques, and therapeutic letters (Arntz & Jacobs 2013).

Group schema therapy evolved from the original individual psychotherapies developed by Jeffrey Young and forms a comprehensive model where cognitive, experiential or emotionally focused and behavioural interventions are integrated to interrupt habitual personality patterns (Farrell *et al.* 2014). Group schema therapy is transdiagnostic and can be offered in groups with mixed or homogeneous diagnoses for different durations and settings (Roediger *et al.* 2018). Group schema therapy was developed for the needs of individuals with borderline personality disorder. Nonetheless, patients with other personality disorders, individuals with anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, mood disorders, and individuals with addictions can benefit from it (Salgó *et al.* 2021). The group can help these individuals, at least to a limited extent, to fulfil their basic emotional needs in a corrective manner, to realize the connection between their current experiences and patterns of behaviour with childhood experience, and to understand how they transfer their previously learned patterns of experience and behaviour to the present and to the patterns of experience and behaviour that appear in the therapeutic group.

The role and importance of therapeutic letters in group schema therapy

Writing therapeutic letters is an important experiential strategy for processing painful emotions. This method was created 30 years ago and gradually developed to be used extensively in individual and group psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and training (Praško *et al.* 2006, 2009a, 2009b). Therapy letters can play an important role in group therapy. They provide individuals in therapy with the means to express and process strong emotions associated with their maladaptive

schemas. Often written as homework and then shared and worked on during group sessions, these letters allow individuals to communicate their feelings, needs and defences in a safe and supportive environment (Sutton et al. 2024).

Social and interpersonal experiences in childhood strongly impact how individuals perceive themselves and the nature of their problems and strengths. However, this perception is not definitively formed and rigid; it is constantly changing to some extent. The problem with a maladaptive experience tends to be its rigid and stereotyped position, which is independent of the needs of the individual and the environment. At the same time, individual perceptions can be incomprehensible to the surroundings (Chu 2000). Nevertheless, it is possible to look for connections between individual belief systems, the life story and the current context (Greenberg 2002; Young et al. 2003). Traumatizing and dysfunctional families can significantly negatively affect their members' future adult life (Mullen et al. 1994; Young, 1994). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds characterized by less cohesive, less adaptive families, in which parental conflict, separation, and substance abuse occur, are also more likely to be physically, sexually, or psychologically abused (Andrews et al. 2004; Fergusson et al. 1996; Woodward et al. 2001;). The family context may also influence sexual development (Terr 1991). Experiences from childhood, school, and current life constantly influence individual beliefs and, consequently, behaviours.

Patients with traumatic experiences in childhood often show a high degree of dissociation (Chu 2000; Chu & Dill 1990; Praško et al. 2011; Romans et al. 1999), which probably serves to protect them from being overwhelmed by unbearable emotional states (McNally et al. 2006; Romans et al. 1999; Terr, 1988). They do not remember many aspects of their childhood experiences; they suppress or emphasize certain parts of their life stories (Chu & Dill 1990; Chu et al. 1999). These individuals are more often resistant to treatment and do not benefit as much as others from standard pharmacotherapeutic and psychotherapeutic interventions (Arntz & Weertman 1999; Chu & Dill 1990; Prasko et al. 2009a, 2009b). Without processing painful childhood experiences, treatment may be unsuccessful; problems may become chronic and lead to the deterioration of quality of life and the devastation of patient's relationships (Terr 1988).

Writing letters allows the problem to be expressed outwardly, described, confronted, imagined and elaborated; the subsequent step points to finding an acceptable solution that the individual imagines and, at the same time, consolidates through writing (Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993). Writing therapeutic letters also allows a personal way of confession, self-knowledge, and self-management when confronting emotions, often unprocessed since childhood and unmanageable in adult life (White & Epsom 1990).

Important persons associated with creating and maintaining negative early maladaptive schemas have a long-term, often lifelong, effect on the individual. It is not important whether the individual is in contact with these persons, whether they live far away, or even if they have already died. Still, from the individual's point of view, they play an important role in their self-evaluation and evaluation of others and the surrounding world. One way to process these painful, usually childhood experiences is to write a letter to the important close persons who are connected with the development of early maladaptive schemas. In group therapy, we usually approach working with traumatic emotions from childhood after uncovering early maladaptive schemas. The individual in therapy writes the letter as homework, brings it to the session and reads it to the small subgroup. The purpose of the experience in therapy is to manage a strong emotional response related to childhood traumas.

Writing therapeutic letters is usually given as homework, but reading these letters is typically a group-based process. Some parts of the letter may evoke such strong emotions in the individual that they should write them together with the therapist (e.g., while hospitalized). Typical therapeutic letters are addressed to the Critic modes (i.e. Punitive, Demanding and/or Guilt-inducing parent modes), and important people in the individual's life who participated in developing this Critic modes, such as parents, siblings, partners and friends, classmates, teachers, and coaches (Praško et al. 2007).

Therapeutic letters as a tool for strengthening the emotional process

Therapeutic letters aim to extend the therapy process beyond the consulting room door. They can also be a useful tool for enhancing the emotional process. Therapeutic letters are used in a variety of intervention formats. Most psychotherapists use therapeutic letters, sending them to individuals as their letter and as part of the therapy process, for example, as a description of a case formulation or a summary of the work they have done (Goldberg 2000; Wojcik & Iverson 1989; Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993).

Therapeutic letters as a tool for processing and managing emotions

Therapeutic letters can help individuals process strong emotions and bring aspects of the experience that have not yet been processed to mind. This process allows individuals in therapy to explore their thoughts and feelings, perhaps reframe their story, find forgiveness, and ultimately move forward (Sutton et al. 2024).

Individuals who have memory and attention problems during recovery from psychotic episodes and have trouble remembering what they discussed during a session can access important information from these types of letters. When writing therapeutic letters, the therapist needs to think about the writing style and how

Tab. 1. Therapeutic letters for emotional processing of early maladaptive schemas

<p>The meaning of working with therapeutic letters:</p> <p>(a) To provide a "different ending" experience when connected to the critic modes.</p> <p>(b) To better understand what happens when schemas are activated,</p> <p>(c) To activate child mode, use Healthy Adult mode.</p> <p>(d) Step-by-step processing of strong emotions associated with early maladaptive schemas.</p> <p>(e) Association with conditions related to early maladaptive schemas.</p>

to convey a sympathetic, affirming attitude while also describing the therapist's conception of what is going on with the individual and what the therapist thinks might help (Goldberg 2000; Wojcik & Iverson 1989; Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993).

Therapeutic letters as a tool for processing early maladaptive schemas

Although cognitive-behavioural therapy emphasizes the importance of cognitions or thoughts in activating or maintaining negative affect, there is an increasing emphasis in schema therapy on considering the role of emotional processing (Leahy, 2001). Many individuals in therapy do not understand the strong emotions they experience in interpersonal situations or do not have access to deep emotional feelings. Parents teaching their children about their emotions is important to how children manage emotions as adults. Many of our individuals in therapy believe that they should always be rational and logical, never have conflicted feelings, and should "think in order to understand things, not feel".

An authoritarian parenting style involves criticism and excessive control of children's feelings. At the same time, dysregulated parents are overwhelmed by their own emotions and often dismissive of their child's emotions. As a result of cognitive and emotional avoidance (suppression), several unprocessed emotional experiences are transferred to subsequent similar situations (Sutton *et al.* 2024). Writing therapeutic letters is a meaningful cognitive and experiential method for working with deep emotional schemas developed during childhood.

The processing of early maladaptive schemas is extremely useful for individuals with anxiety disorders, personality disorders, or affective disorders. It helps in understanding not only why psychopathology develops but also (a) to understand why psychopathology develops, (b) to understand better why maladaptive patterns develop, (c) understand interpersonal behaviours and how they are maintained, (d) to know how to change cognitive and emotional patterns; and (e) change maladaptive behaviour patterns. Incorporating letter writing also addresses avoidance of emotional experiences and deepens the ability to accept and cope with deeper emotions (Leahy 2001).

The patient uses the letter to express their feelings and needs, including defending their rights in the past and present. The letter is written independently, brought to the group session, and read to the group members.

These letters are not intended to be sent to an important person. However, they are meant to help process individuals' strong emotions in therapy and strengthen their Healthy Adult mode. The letter may be written critically or as an inner representation of an important person associated with developing early maladaptive schemas. A letter can also be written to people who have already died (Table 1).

Emotional processing has four basic goals (Praško *et al.* 2006):

- To activate emotions through experiential or emotion-focused exercises.
- To evoke emotional states associated with early experiences and treat them with a Kind Parent mode.
- To teach the individual to manage strong emotions in a safe environment.

To activate Healthy Adult through empathy for other group members.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE USE OF LETTERS IN GROUP SCHEMA THERAPY

Writing therapeutic letters is a common homework exercise, which is then read in a group. However, sometimes the content is so emotionally powerful that it is better if the individual starts writing the letter in the protective atmosphere of the group. Individuals write letters to important people, usually parents, siblings, friends, partners, and their children. An individual in therapy uses the letter to express their thoughts, feelings and needs, including their rights and their defence. These are not letters that should be sent to the persons concerned, nor should their contents be communicated to them personally, which needs to be repeatedly emphasized to all group members. The individuals write letters to persons within themselves, those who once created their maladaptive schemas or those who currently "help" maintain them. However, it is more about their internal representations of these persons than what they are like in real life. Letters are also commonly written to persons who have already died.

How to integrate therapeutic letters into group schema therapy

Integrating therapeutic letters into a group schema therapy regimen requires careful planning and

Tab. 2. How to Silence the Critic

The therapist divides the group into subgroups of three people each. They have the roles of assistant therapist, protagonist and second assistant. They alternate in these roles after 20 minutes. The therapist guides the individual through the following steps:

- Imagine your Critic Mode (in its various variants: Punitive, Demanding, Guilt or Shame Inducing Critic)
- In which situations it appears. What do you think of this mode?
- How do you feel then? What is your Vulnerable Child experiencing?
- Imagine that this image represents your Critical Mode. It would be best if you settled him down, let him know he is abusing you, restrain him, and stand up to him.
- Try to work with Angry Child, Vulnerable Child and Healthy Adult modes to protect you from him.
- For homework, write a letter to the Critical mode.

preparation. The therapist should first explain to individuals in group schema therapy the purpose and meaning of therapeutic letters and how they can help in the treatment process. Clear instructions should be given on how to write a therapeutic letter, including to whom the letter should be addressed (e.g., the inner Critic mode or an important person from the past) and what emotions and experiences should be expressed in the letter. The therapist should also provide a safe environment for individuals to write and share their letters.

The group discusses the letter, considers its effect on both the writer and the addressee, empathizes with both people and considers the short-term and long-term consequences of the letter for the mutual relationship.

Examples of therapeutic letters and their use in practice

Therapeutic letters can adopt different forms and content, depending on the individual needs and experiences. For example, a letter can be written to the individual's inner Critic mode, where the individual expresses their feelings and needs as well as defends their rights. Another letter can be addressed to an important person from the individual's past who was involved in developing their maladaptive schemas. In this letter, the individual can express their feelings towards this person and process the strong emotions associated with this person.

As a rule, some individuals in a group, sometimes all, have similar experiences to those they hear. This strengthens the feelings of belonging and empathizing with each other.

Letter to the Critic

In this process, the individual actively communicates with their Critic mode, which includes various negative aspects such as criticism, punishment, demands, scares, and the induction of guilt or shame. The individual rejects this critical mode's development and focuses on where and when it was developed (Table 2). The main objectives of this process are:

- To silence and reject the claims of the Critical mode.
- Tell the critic mode what actions have been taken and the consequences for the patient.
- To write emphatically to the Critic mode about why the individual no longer wants this mode to influence his life.

- To suggest taking other roles in persons life. For example, instead of directing the aggression towards patient in the form of criticizing, use it constructively when setting healthy boundaries with others.

In addition, other objectives may be:

- To advocate for the patient's Vulnerable or Angry child.
- To reject hypercompensation, use a Detached Protector or as a coping strategy.

The individual can write the letter in the Healthy Adult mode. Using a Child mode to reject the Critic mode is also possible. This approach allows the individual to better understand and address their negative feelings and thoughts associated with the Critic mode (Table 3).

An uncensored letter

If individuals in therapy write to close persons, this usually involves at least three or four letters to the same significant other. The letters should not be censored as they should contain all the thoughts, emotions, needs, demands and judgments the individual has or feels about this person. It is important to let everything sound natural, in the rawest possible form, as it goes in the individual's mind, without censorship or editing. If the message is excessively "combed", the therapist asks the individual to supplement the letter with another, more open message. The individuals in the group reinforce each other when they express their attitudes towards the person in question. Through the feedback and support of the group, the individual can discover other important emotions that are still there concerning the person who wrote the letter. These are usually anger, regret, disappointment, helplessness, feelings of injustice and desire for closeness and love, but positive emotions are also expressed. This letter is meant to help patients experience the fact that every relationship is multi-layered.

It is optimal to find several levels of emotional experience: anger, contempt, envy, jealousy, pain, sadness, abandonment, fear and uncertainty, grief and responsibility, love, understanding, and intimacy. The individual should not omit the list of their needs that they feel were missing in their childhood. Formulations should be expressed with sincerity. If the formulations

Tab. 3. Letter to the Critic

My dear Eternal Critic,

I am writing you this letter because I would like to express my hatred and contempt. You're ruining my life. You and the people who fed you all these years. Only because of you, I am here, within the four walls of the psychiatric ward.

Since I was little, I have been haunted by the feeling that I hate myself. I am not worthy of life; the world would be better without me. Mom, you are the one to blame for me having these thoughts when you did not want me and acted like I was not there. How could you do this to me? I was still a baby, a little girl who needed you the most. But you were not there for me. You did not have time for me. You had to focus on my siblings. Why did you agree to have so many children? Why weren't you the voice of reason to stop Dad from this recklessness? I was already beyond your strength, which took its toll on me. I feel alone all the time now. Rejected. When you cuddled with my siblings, you never wanted me around. And I did not go because you do not feel the same for me as others. I was the unwanted one. That is how I am now because of you.

Critic, you still torment me with the feeling that I am disgusting. You are also to blame for this. Mom. I know you were jealous of Dad like me. And so you constantly devalued me. You told me that. You told me I was disgusting when I got angry or cried. You said to me that I was opening and draining the cesspool that was inside me. And I felt awful on body and soul. When you said these things to me and treated me like that, when you told me outright that I was ruining your holidays, I always messed up everything. I believed it, and I still think it today. And I do not want it anymore.

Dad, you taught my Critic to stop me from enjoying sex. Your Christian paranoia has dictated right and wrong to us since childhood. Not only did I feel like the worst person in the world my entire childhood, but you instilled in us that sex is permissible only after marriage and that any form of contraception is murder. It was because of you that I was tormented by feelings of guilt when I wanted to protect myself during sex like any responsible girl. When you found out, you screamed that I was a murderer and a whore. And Mom, I hate you for telling Dad that. It still makes me sick to this day.

My perfectionism and constant demands were trained in me mainly by you, Dad. Nothing was good enough for you. Even though I tried my best in school and was more than good, it was never enough for you. Any bad grade you punished. Mentally and physically. I remember the bruises you gave me. And if not you, then mom. She punished me again for being rude. Many times, more than you. And I am still not good enough, and it is your fault. I blame myself all the time. And you, Dad, you blame me to this day. That I did not finish college hurts.

If I had to think about who created the urge to hurt or kill myself, it is my Critic. I would probably have to talk to all of you who made my life miserable. My Critic is talking to me in the voice of my father, who physically punished me and mentally blackmailed me for the smallest of things. My mother punished me the most among children and constantly showed me how much she despised me. My classmates bullied me from the first grade until the end of elementary school, even though I never did anything to them. My brother groped me when I was sixteen. My ex-boyfriend who beat, humiliated and raped me. I hate all of you. It is because of you that I am hurt now. Hurt. I now believe that those who are supposed to love me will always hurt me. I felt hurt so much. And I still have to live with you today. And pretend that nothing happened and everything is ok. And at the same time, such terrible shit happened to me. It would take a novel to list everything that is wrong with us. You are the only reason I do not feel lovable. And I cannot accept love, even if it is being given to me with all my heart now.

Mom, you taught my Critic that I will never be enough no matter how hard I try. I will never mean as much to you as Anežka, even though I cared for you when you were pregnant. Although I practically raised my two youngest sisters. Even though I learned to cook at 11 to help you. Although, as a child, I voluntarily tried to help you beyond my age. I do not remember you appraising me. And you never even remembered it. But you praised Anežka. She was always perfect for you. Why not me? Didn't I do enough for you? Didn't I try? I am not enough for myself now. I do not care about myself and cannot make myself happy.

As you can see, Critic, you have many role models. Those closest to me were people who beat me, abused me and constantly convinced me that I was not worthy of love. That I will be alone. That no one will help me. And you memorized it and repeated it to me every day. And I experience this again and again every day. I hate you for this. And I also hate the people who raised me. Who fed you those fabrications and anger? But I do not want you anymore. I do not want to listen to you. I do not deserve this pain. I do not deserve to die, as you often tell me. I do not deserve to be punished. I did not do anything.

Lida

are "modified", the therapist asks the individual to add additional and more authentic feelings (Table 4).

A letter from the other side

The next letter is a letter the individual wants to receive from the important person to whom he/she wrote the uncensored letter. It is a letter to one's Vulnerable Child. The patient responds to their letter with what they believe would be the most beneficial response, thereby providing self-support. Letter writing offers a way to find support not only from external sources but also from internal sources. Even if the patient writes it, its wording can be very important to them because the patient must empathize with the other person /herself and try to understand why the person behaved the way they did. The individual should write everything they

want and need to hear from that important person in the letter. Such a letter can help individuals disrupt their maladaptive schemas and neutralize painful childhood experiences. Although they are writing this letter to themselves, its creation may be essential because the individual recognizes what they want. Patients are thus encouraged to see the situation from a different point of view (Table 5).

In the group, the individual can choose another member from whom he/she wants to hear this letter. However, as a rule, individuals want the letter to be read by one of the therapists. The therapist needs to read the letter slowly so that the emotions it evokes can develop and be experienced. The other members of the group close their eyes and listen. Not infrequently, the whole

Tab. 4. Example of an "uncensored letter"

Mom,

this letter is very difficult for me to write. Even though I know I will not send it to you, I am afraid to write it. I also feel guilty for writing it at all. You pissed me off so much that I do not even dare to write what annoyed me about you. However, I am very angry with you for all that sniping and for showing disdain for how I cannot clean my room. I apologize for being afraid to show you the student book when I got a B grade. For how ice-cold, unapproachable you were to me, how I was always frozen in terror when you raised your sharp, commanding voice. My God. It was childhood, just fear and terror, constant fear, where and what I failed again. How you cruelly punished me for every manifestation of childish freedom, how I had to kneel and was not allowed to move, even though it was putting so much pressure on my knees, and when I cried, how you started screaming at me in a high-pitched voice that it cut into me like a knife. I hate you for this, Mom. For the cruelty, despotic behaviour, and uncompromisingness. How you beat me for every little thing. You were like a Gestapo. How could you do this to me, such a little girl? When I look at my childhood photos, I only see a sad little girl, a princess with sad eyes. A princess who should have been picked up and cherished. I needed you. When you complimented me, I was always in a daze, but it was rare. I needed you to praise me more often, be gentle, and understand me. No one understood me. Mom, I still miss the tenderness you owe me. I have an endless need for tenderness, for someone to give it to me. None of my partners understood it, but I did not choose gentle guys. Now, I want tenderness for the children, and I am afraid not to restrain them too much. But you were the one who should have satisfied my need, given me enough so that I could give her now and not demand so much from others. Our whole relationship makes me sad, and it hurts when I remember my childhood. The other girls were happy spending time with their moms, who taught, praised, and played with them - I have never experienced that. You kept telling me how the kids you teach at school are better than me, how I am stupid, lazy, useless, incapable, who do you think I am after, probably after my father, who is also useless. That is why I tried so hard to show that I am capable. That is why I tried so hard to study, to get good grades so that you would recognize that I am worthy of your love. You took good grades for granted and kept finding new faults in me. When you told me as a teenager that I was uninteresting, just a nerd without talent and that no boy would care for me, it hurt terribly. I could not even hate you for it. I just felt helpless, like you cut me in two with some sword. I never trusted myself in anything because of you. Good grades and college could not boost my self-esteem. I did not trust myself because you did not trust me. And I needed you to believe that I was smart and capable. That is why I have not been able to find a boyfriend for so long. That is why I was afraid at work that I would not be able to handle it, and I tried to be there all the time so that I would not make a mistake. That is why I turned my life into slavery. But I do not want it anymore. I do not want to carry you in a backpack on my back for the rest of my life and hear you whispering that I am useless. Then, I experience fear and am unsure of who I am. I am sorry that you did not praise me more, cuddle with me, play with me, or tell me what a clever little girl I was like other mothers did. I know it was not possible for you. You did not experience it either because you grew up in difficult conditions since childhood. However, I still needed it and still do. I was already thinking that if you miss it too, I would start giving it to you first. But when I wanted to hug you, and it was hard for me, you pulled away with what I was pulling on you. I felt like a begging homeless person to whom no one would give even five crowns. Still, I love you, Mom. She even really likes it. I often think of you, and you say that you had a hard time in life and that I would like to help you. I also help you with shopping and laundry, but what I would like for us to meet emotionally is impossible. You are frozen in it, and I cannot warm you up. I noticed that sometimes my children can do it, and I am glad. However, I am afraid that I will be a stranger forever. That is why I feel the loneliest when I am with you. Even now, as an adult, I would happily climb onto your lap and let myself be rocked the way I used to rock my children. But I guess I will have to fend for myself. I can do it, and I will still try to be warm to others so I am not like an icicle like you were to me. Yes, I can be warm to children and friends, and now I am also warm to Honza. But I am squeamish about it. I am always afraid he will pull away like you. But I want to fight it. I am gentle with him, and he sees that. I also think about a hug. And he can hug me in such a way that I squirm. I also like to lie on his shoulder and let myself be caressed. I experience it in my entire body as complete surrender. He has strong muscles and beautiful, tender hands. When he hugs me, I feel that he loves me. He gives me what you could not. And I take it in full gulps. You probably never experienced it, and I am so sorry. But I noticed that Honza sometimes also takes you by the shoulders. You flinched at first, but he did not mind. Now, it seems that it does you an awful lot of good. You also like to talk to him. I was jealous of that and wanted him all to myself. But now I wish you the same. Honza is a decent guy, and maybe he will save us both.

Your Alena

group cries, greatly supporting the individual whose letter has been read. This letter has a "healing effect," according to individuals. It allows us to better accept and cope with some things from the past. It contains secret wishes that individuals want to hear from a significant other. Whatever the individual wants can be described in this letter: an apology, an explanation of why the significant other behaved negatively, an expression of closeness, freedom, acceptance ("you are mine"), safety, or love ("I love you"). The individual begins to build their inner ideal parent. A therapist or group can tell a patient, "Don't be unnecessarily modest or shy and help yourself in everything you've ever lacked." We convey the individual to the painful part of the person-

ality. This can help with healing psychological traumas (empathy, apology) by:

- Providing acceptance ("You are mine, I love you...")
- Providing safety ("I'm with you...")
- Providing reinforcement ("You know...you're doing well...")
- Providing freedom ("you can do it yourself...").

A letter to the child of the close person

The individual in therapy writes this letter to an important person from when the person was a child. The task is to first find out what this person's (usually a parent's) childhood was like and what they missed in childhood, what conditions they had in childhood, what their upbringing was like, and what stresses and obstacles

they had to endure. This information can be gained directly from the person in question or other relatives or by looking at family photos or videos. We asked the patient to think about what this child in the picture was missing from their parents. Based on this information, the patient writes an empathic letter from a Healthy Adult position, expressing understanding for this child, encouraging them, and trying to satisfy their unfulfilled needs for safety, acceptance, praise, and encouragement. This letter provides the experience of an adult's sense of care and protection for an important person in a reversed role. Suddenly, there is no longer a big rejecting mother or a physically abusive father but a child with unmet childhood needs. This letter helps balance the roles between the individual and their close relative. Suppose the patient cannot find information about the childhood of a close person: in that case, they write it down as fantasy, based on knowledge of their emotional needs and estimation of their non-fulfilment from the person's behaviour. For example, suppose the parent was overly critical, overworked, or probably not appreciated enough by his parents. In that case, the patient needs appreciation, which the individual can express in a letter. This letter allows a deeper understanding of why the person behaved as he/she did as an adult. When individuals in a group read this letter, they usually find a significant similarity with the stories of their parents, who grew up in the same generation under similar conditions. This letter develops tolerance and kindness in the group, a better acceptance of one's injuries, and a realization that the parent or

other significant person also did not have it easy with their parents and under the conditions in which they grew up. This mentalization and, at the same time, transcendental understanding of suffering has a significant influence on the development of the inner Kind Parent mode of group members (Table 6).

Business card letter

A fourth letter may be important to write in the Healthy Adult mode. That is, openly, honestly, courageously, but not in a dry manner, with dignity and respect for yourself and the addressed person and understanding of yourself and the addressee. This letter evaluates what was not good in the relationship but empathizes with the other party, without anger or feelings of humiliation, but in a balanced, mature way. This letter should be written from a Healthy Adult perspective. It is written directly, bravely, but without bullshit, intended to reconcile with dignity and great respect for the addressee. The "business card" letter is:

- An "adult to adult" letter.
- It addresses changing roles, including compromises and empathy for an important relative
- I'm okey - you're okey

The individual in therapy can be proud of what they wrote in this letter (Table 7).

Other types of therapeutic letters that can be used in group schema therapy

Many other therapeutic letters can be very helpful in group therapy. One type is the letter that the therapist

Tab. 5. Example of a "Letter from the Other side"

<p>Dear Alena,</p> <p>I love you, my little girl, so much. Although I usually could not show it, I always loved you, was proud of you, and perceived you very closely as a part of myself. Unfortunately, I never knew how to show love. You know that I grew up as a half-orphan, and after the war, my mother was alone because my stepfather was imprisoned. My mom was unhappy; we had no money, and there were five of us. There just was not much time for feelings. I never learned to show it when I liked it, so neither you nor Julca felt it from me. I thought you had to study well to get by, and you reassured me about that when you both went to college. You are impeccable women and mothers, filling me with peace and reconciliation. Dear Alenka, I am very proud of you. I also admire how you treat your children and how nice your relationship with each other is. I have never been able to do that, but now I am doing well with your children. I am discovering how I can love them. How can I be tolerant, kind, caress, and take them on my lap? I am pretty happy about it as if I was expressing my love for you to them.</p> <p>I want to apologize to you for the strictness and uncompromisingness with which I treated you in my childhood. I could not do it any other way and thought it was right. Back then, we were taught that children should not be spoiled. That is how I did it. But I still loved you so much and was proud of your every step, how you took your first steps, how you started calling yourself "mommy," and all that baby stuff. It all touched me inside. Soon, I also had to go to work, and you went to daycare, so we were short of money. You cried a lot, and it broke my heart. But there was nothing else to do. Or it was that we did not have to save for a car, but Dad wanted a car. I wanted to pamper him. Now, I am sorry, and I apologize for not being home with you longer.</p> <p>Alenka, I want to tell you that you do not have to try so hard, that you are valuable the way you are, and that you are a very valuable, great girl. You do not have to prove your worth to anyone. You have had it high since you were little. You are a very beautiful, smart, and loving girl. Often, when I see you with the children and with Honza, I am very moved and very proud of the daughter I have.</p> <p>I am glad you touch me physically now and then. Although I cringe because it is unusual, it is also pleasant. Do not be discouraged. But do not rush me. When your man takes me around the shoulders, I can stand it. I even like it very much. I almost envy you. How self-effacing and nice he is. Your dad was just as withdrawn about it as I was, so I did not enjoy closeness. When I see you and Honza together, how you calmly hug each other in front of me, as if warm blood were flowing through my veins, makes me feel good.</p> <p>My Alenka, I hope you are happy and satisfied. I will be very happy to watch it. You are already your own and far exceeded anything I could have imagined. And that is why I am proud of you - you have come much further in your love than me and your grandmother - my mom.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Your mom</p>

Tab. 6. Example of a "letter to a child of a close person"

Dear Stephania,

In a few lines, I would like to write you what probably no one has told you yet, but I would like you to know it. I know that you are a very smart and clever little girl and that you already know what is good and what is bad.

Your father often goes away for long periods for work, and your mother is alone at home. You are very clever in helping her so much. I would be very happy if you could find more time for yourself. After all, you are still a child who, besides school duties, has the right to enjoy your childhood. You will have much time for adult duties when you grow up.

I like you very much and want you to play more, have more fun and be happy.

Stephania, do not let other people, even Mom and Dad, stop you from crying and shouting when you are angry or laughing when you are happy. Everything you feel is yours; you can only decide what to do with your feelings. There are no good or bad feelings. They are your unique feelings. If you are sad and you cry, it is right. No one has the right to force you to hide your feelings.

On the contrary, it is best to show them and try to talk about them. But never forget that others also have this right. If you like someone, tell them. He cannot know how you feel about him unless you tell him. None of the people can read each other's minds. When you grow up, it may happen that not everyone you like will feel the same way about you. That is just how life goes. It is not a tragedy because someone always wants to return your love.

You are the only person who knows you best; it depends on what you decide to show others about yourself. Give to others what you would like to receive, and do not do what you would not want them to do to you.

Stephania, you are exceptional, and I believe you are very strong. You have the right to make a mistake. You can always look back on your mistakes and learn from them.

Girl, you are brave and strong, but if something bothers you, it is always better not to be alone. I would be glad if you could find someone you can confide in. Even if you have to bear the pain alone, another person's perspective can make your struggle with adversity easier and show you a lot that may have remained hidden from your eyes.

Your Alena

writes to the patients. These letters can take different forms and purposes.

Therapist's letters to individuals in therapy

Encouragement letters are written to provide support and encouragement to individuals in therapy. They can emphasize the individual's progress or aim to strengthen their motivation to continue working on themselves. These letters can be a powerful tool for boosting confidence and self-esteem.

Understanding letters are written to help individuals in therapy better understand their problems and challenges. They may include explanations of concepts and theories used in therapy or provide deeper insight into specific issues or patterns of individual behaviour. These letters can help individuals in therapy better understand themselves and their emotions.

Change assistance letters are written to support individuals in therapy in the process of change. They may contain specific strategies and suggestions for dealing with particular problems or provide support and encouragement in difficult situations. These letters can be very helpful for individuals trying to make positive changes in their lives.

A letter from a Healthy Adult to different modes

Writing letters from Healthy Adult in different modes is often used in group therapy. The goal is to express understanding, empathy, or encouragement or to confront modes kindly with the consequences of their behaviour that may hurt child modes.

During one group session, where chairs, stuffed animals, or masks represent different modes, the individual in therapy will clarify what the good parent might communicate to the individual modes. Group

members identify modes they would like to deal with in some way. As homework, they will then write a letter to each of these named modes.

In the next session in the group, representatives of each mode are spread out on individual chairs, and the individuals then read what they wrote to each mode. Other group members encourage and sympathize with the protagonist and share similar experiences. Individuals gradually take turns in the role of protagonist.

This technique emphasizes the importance of group work and promotes mutual support and sharing of experiences among group members. It is a powerful tool for fostering understanding and empathy within a group schema therapy.

A kind (healing, supportive) letter to oneself

Writing a kind (healing, supportive) letter to oneself is also used in group schema therapy. The procedure for using this letter in a group is as follows.

- (a) Preparation: First, individuals write this letter as homework. In the letter, they will focus on different aspects of their life and feelings, which they must deal with kindly.
- (b) Letter reading: The individuals read their letters aloud in the following group session. Individuals need to take kindly to various things discussed during this reading. This can include things that have gone wrong or failed in their lives, what they blame themselves for, what they are angry about, what they want to be encouraged, strengthened or rewarded for, what they want to defend themselves about, what they want to be to themselves and others about the righteous, how kindly they treat the things of the past, from childhood to adulthood, in what

Tab. 7. Example of "business card letter"

Dear mom,

I want to tell you what I think is important for you to know. I know that a lot has happened between us in the past, but I feel that the time is slowly coming for me to move on and look at us more in the present and future context.

Mom, I am glad you are here, and I love you. I appreciate that you supported me in some things. I know you did it because you love me and care about me. I am glad that despite all the difficulties we experienced in life, we stayed in touch and did not stop talking to each other. There are things I cannot come to you with.

What matters to me is that we can talk to each other without fear, regret, or tearing at each other wounds we carry in our souls. I want to let go of the past and not let it divide us further. I believe that you would like something similar.

Let us live our time together for what is, not what was or should have been. I care that you are comfortable with me. And I would be very happy if you could come if you want to say anything. I would love to hear from you about whatever you want to talk about.

I care about you so much, and I do not want to cause you pain. You are a person who has a firm place in my heart, and external circumstances cannot change that.

I love you, Monika.

they way to treat themselves kindly in the present, and in what they want to encourage themselves for the future.

- (c) Discussion: A group discussion follows the reading of the letter. Other group members can express their thoughts and feelings about what was said in the letter and share similar experiences. This discussion can provide valuable feedback and support for the individual who wrote the letter.

A kind (healing, supportive) letter to oneself can help individuals better understand themselves and others in the group and cope with their feelings and experiences.

An open letter to a partner

An open letter to a partner is a therapeutic tool that allows the individual to express their feelings, thoughts and needs regarding their relationship. Even if the letter is not sent, writing it can help the individual in therapy better understand their emotions and gain a clearer view of the relationship. Here is how to use this letter in a group.

- (a) Preparation: Individuals can write an open letter to their current or past partner. The therapist will emphasize that this is an uncensored letter where they can express all their feelings and thoughts.
- (b) Letter writing: Individuals sit down with pen and paper and start writing. They should include:
- What do they value in their partner, and what bothers them?
 - What is fulfilled in their relationship, and what is not.
 - Their needs and expectations for the future.
- (c) Sharing within the group: Individuals voluntarily share their feelings and thoughts with other group members after writing the letter. The therapist can lead a discussion about what individuals have discovered and what their relationship with their partner means to them.
- (d) Reflection: The therapist can guide individuals to consider what actions they can take based on

what they have learned. Options for changing behaviour, communication or expectations in the relationship are discussed.

This way, patients can better understand their needs and emotions and find meaning in their relationships with their partners. It is important that the therapist creates a safe space for sharing and respects each individual's individual experience.

"The Time Machine" - a Letter from the Future

This technique allows the individual in therapy to look into the future and reflect on their life. The following procedure shows how to use this letter in a group:

- (a) Preparation: Individuals are instructed to imagine they are eighty years old and looking back over their lives. They should realize what they would like to communicate to their current self.
- (b) Letter writing: Individuals write a letter to their current self from the perspective of their eighty-year-old self. It will focus on the following points:
- Awards: What can they be awarded for? What successes have they achieved?
 - Encouragement: What can they encourage? What qualities can they strengthen?
 - Forgiveness: What do they need to forgive themselves for? What mistakes would they like to overcome?
 - Learning: What else would they like to learn?
 - Wishes: What would they wish for in the coming years?

This letter allows individuals in therapy to reflect on their lives and think about what is important to them and what they want to achieve. Group discussions can support and enable the sharing different perspectives on the life journey.

The end of the therapy letter

The end of therapy letter (Griffiths & Simmons, 2018) is a personal summary created by the client at their

therapy's conclusion, applicable to individual and group settings. This letter does not follow a specified format but generally includes a written recap of the therapeutic journey. It often features a formulation section, where the client uses descriptions or diagrams to outline their modes or core beliefs. Additionally, the letter summarises the collaborative work completed, key learning points, and future goals. Clients might also include messages from their Healthy Adult to their Vulnerable Child, especially when they feel sad or challenged. This can be a way to remind themselves of the nurturing and support they can provide internally.

The letter could also contain recommendations for books, movies, apps, and other resources that could aid the client moving forward. In group therapy settings, participants could work in pairs to discuss the main benefits, findings, and learning points before spending time writing them down.

There are various options for how this letter can be utilized post-therapy. It might be read aloud as a closure activity, or the client might prepare it to be sent to themselves after six months as a reminder of their progress. The therapist might keep a copy of these letters, or the client might keep it at home to read during difficult times as a motivational and reflective tool.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING THERAPEUTIC LETTERS IN GROUP SCHEMA THERAPY

Therapeutic letters bring many possibilities for group schema therapy to elaborate on past experiences, mediating self-understanding, self-care, and understanding of others. They have their benefits but can bring with them some limitations and difficulties.

The benefits of using therapeutic letters in group schema therapy

Letters provide individuals in therapy with a safe and structured way to express and process strong emotions associated with their maladaptive schemas. Letters also allow individuals to communicate their feelings and needs to important people from their past, which can be therapeutic and help them heal. In addition, therapeutic letters can provide therapists with valuable information about the individual's emotional state and progress.

Possible disadvantages or limitations of using therapeutic letters in group schema therapy

The use of therapeutic letters in group therapy can present several challenges. One is individuals' resistance to writing letters or the fear of sharing their letters with other group members. Some individuals may have difficulty writing letters, while others may worry about how others perceive them. Writing and sharing therapeutic letters can also bring up strong emotions that may be difficult for some individuals.

It can be challenging for therapists to manage and process the strong emotions that are evoked during the process of writing and sharing therapeutic letters. It is important that the therapist is prepared for these challenges and has strategies to work with them. For example, therapists can provide individuals with additional support and reassurance or work individually with individuals to prepare them to write and share their letters.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on using therapeutic letters in group schema therapy. The benefits of this approach have been highlighted, including providing individuals with a safe and structured way to express and process strong emotions associated with their maladaptive schemas. Possible challenges and strategies to overcome them have also been discussed.

The use of letter writing is an excellent intervention in schema therapy for individuals with anxiety and affective and personality disorders. The letter-writing process is fundamentally collaborative and allows individuals to work in a group at their own pace while encouraging their empowerment and emotional process. Using a therapeutic letter can also help fellow individuals and the therapist better understand the meaning of the individual's story.

Sometimes, in group therapy sessions, the individual cannot express their true feelings about crucial moments so a therapeutic letter can be helpful.

Careful planning and preparation for further practice are important when integrating therapeutic letters into a group schema therapy. Therapists should give individuals clear instructions and support in the writing and sharing their letters. For further research, it would be useful to conduct additional studies focused on the effectiveness of therapeutic letters in group therapy and to develop new strategies for managing and processing the strong emotions evoked while writing and sharing therapeutic letters.

Therapeutic letters are a powerful tool in group schema therapy that can help individuals better understand and process their maladaptive schemas. Although this approach presents some challenges, the potential individual benefits are significant. With further research and practice, therapeutic letters in group therapy may be expanded and improved.

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