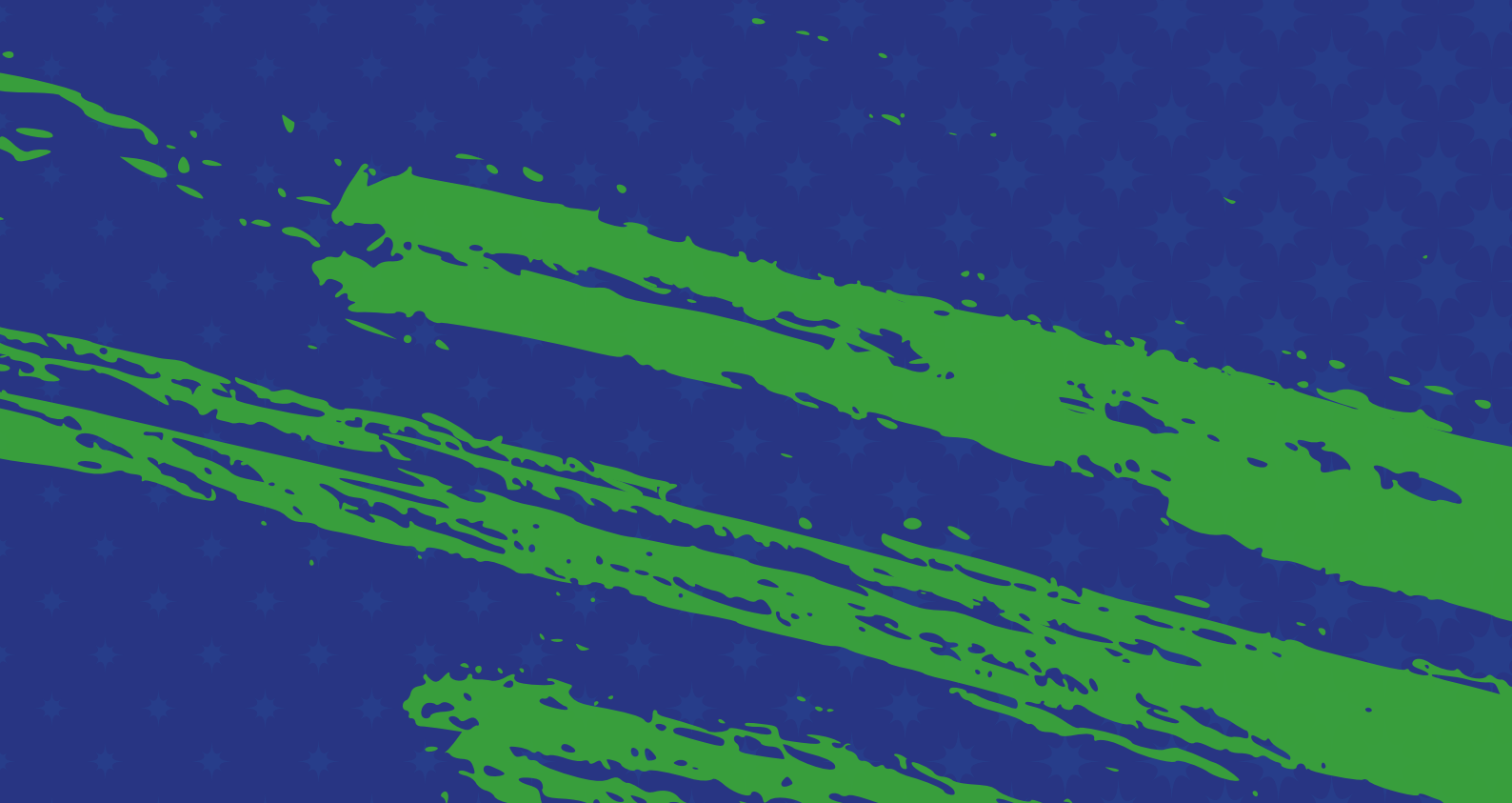


# Mapping the Self:

**A digital toolkit for  
using creative writing  
in healthcare settings**





*Writing images from your memory and your imagination is a healing act. That which was broken or only dimly understood comes clear as you write.*

**Pat Schnieder**



## Contents

- > **1. Introduction to the digital toolkit**
- > **2. Research on creativity for wellbeing**
- > **3. How to deliver a poetry for wellbeing workshop**
- > **4. References**
- > **5. Contact and further assistance**

# 1.

# Introduction to the digital toolkit

## Welcome!

My name is Rebecca Hurst, and I am a writer and researcher, with a particular interest in creative writing and wellbeing. This toolkit is based on practice-based research carried out during a 9-month-long post-doctoral fellowship at The University of Manchester. As a researcher within [Creative Manchester](#) (the University's interdisciplinary humanities-based research platform) I worked in partnership with [Lime Art](#), and was based in Manchester Foundation Trust hospitals. My workshops were attended by patients, visitors, and staff, and by nursing students.

## What is practice-based research?

To repurpose a phrase coined by the poet Eavan Boland, practice-based research is 'a journey with two maps'.<sup>1</sup>

As a life-long journal writer, in my own mind-body the link between the process of creative writing and well-being is clear. And I see evidence of this beneficial link in the feedback from workshops I have led over the years. Working on hospital wards and at Lime Arts' studio, I developed and led workshops, and talked to NHS patients and staff about the role of creativity in their lives. Teaching these workshops, and getting feedback from participants, as well as conversations with other artists working in healthcare settings, shaped, informed and changed my thinking about creativity and wellbeing. I shared my research at a [Research Café](#) and through a series of [Substack posts](#).

In addition to anecdotal evidence, there have been numerous studies that corroborate the link between creative or expressive writing, and positive benefits for both mental and physical health. My research is based on the well-documented premise ([see section 2](#)) that creativity is a valuable tool to support our health and wellbeing.

And it is by making use of both my personal experience and evidence-based research that I have developed and facilitated creative writing and well-being workshops over the past 18 months. In all these workshops we've read and talked about poetry, and we've written and shared our writing. Although I choose the poems and devise the exercises we do, it is the participants who lead the way in creating a group that is supportive and mutually encouraging.

## What is this toolkit for?

From the Social Prescribing Movement to numerous studies corroborating the positive impact of expressive writing on both mental and physical health, creative interventions are widely used as tool for well-being in healthcare settings. Creative writing, in particular is accessible and highly adaptable, and whether used in a group or by individuals, can enhance 'our ability to travel well through life'.

This toolkit will provide an introduction to current research on creative writing and wellbeing ([see section 2](#)), a case study and workbook for artists interested in working in healthcare settings ([see section 3](#)), and a list of resources that I have found useful in my own work ([see section 4](#)).

# 2.

## Research on creativity for wellbeing

### Defining wellbeing.

Two definitions provide a starting point, one from the OED:

*well-being, n.*

- i. *With reference to a person or community: the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare.*
- ii. *With reference to a thing: good or safe condition, ability to flourish or prosper.<sup>2</sup>*

And the second from the World Health Organisation (WHO):

*Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose.<sup>3</sup>*

Both definitions link the well-being of the individual with the well-being of society more generally, while WHO's definition directly connects an individual's personal sense of well-being with their ability to contribute to the society or community in which they live. However, neither seems to capture what the idea of well-being has become as a cultural phenomenon over recent decades.

Particularly challenging is the idea contained within the OED's definition that individual prosperity should be linked to well-being, alongside health and physical safety ('With reference to a person or community'), as opposed to the seemingly more equitable and inclusive 'ability to flourish or prosper' ('With reference to a thing'). It is also worth questioning industry's widespread assumption that well-being is another task that good employees will take care of in the limited time they have available outside of working hours. WHO describes well-being as a 'resource', and one that is not allocated equally.

For all their tangible health benefits, the arts cannot overcome or offer solutions to structural and endemic societal inequities that diminish individual well-being. However, the arts, and specifically creative writing—which is highly accessible, requiring little more than paper, a pen, and functional literacy—can provide some of the skills needed (of imagination, empathy, curiosity, and adaptability) to make us better map-makers, better equipped to navigate a world that is grappling with 'current and emerging health threats such as COVID-19 and environmental disasters.'<sup>4</sup> And enhancing these creative skills empowers us as individuals to flourish within our locality, by which I mean both the communities in which we live and work, as well as the locality of our own bodies and minds.



## Where's the evidence?

The potential for 'expressive writing' to enhance both mental and physical health has been widely studied since the pioneering work of Pennebaker and Beall. In 1986 they published the results of a preliminary investigation on the long-term health benefits of writing about traumatic events.<sup>5</sup> This original study, which has since been replicated, showed 'that expressive writing is a beneficial method to address traumas and emotional upheavals in a healing way'.<sup>6</sup> Through creative self-expression those who are troubled and anxious can find solace. As Gillie Bolton, health care settings from the 1990s onwards—observes:

*Writing is different from talking; it has a power all of its own [...] The very act of creativity—of making something on the page which wasn't there before—tends to increase self-confidence, feelings of self-worth and motivation for life.*<sup>7</sup>

Research has demonstrated that the benefits of expressive writing have been shown to include: fewer stress-related visits to the doctor; improved immune system functioning; reduced blood pressure; improved lung and liver function; improved mood; fewer days in hospital; feelings of greater psychological well-being; and reduced depressive symptoms before examinations. Other outcomes include quicker re-employment after job loss, and improved working memory.<sup>8</sup>

Writing, as a tool for self-care, self-exploration, and personal development, goes by various names. Alison Jones has used 'exploratory writing' in a book published in 2023 that repositions the value of pen and paper in the digital workplace. She highlights 'the everyday magic' of free, expressive writing to tell stories, solve problems, increase a sense of agency and well-being, and enhance empathy and creativity.<sup>9</sup> While Gillie Bolton uses the term 'creative writing', and focuses not only on the potential of 'free-writing', but on the benefits of writing memoir or autobiography, poetry and fiction, and of keeping a journal. Earlier in the 20th century Marion Milner, the British psychologist

and author, published an extraordinary book of self-observation and discovery based on her own diaries. In *A Life of One's Own* Milner described how the process of writing in her journal proved to be both illuminating and regenerative:

*Writing down my experiences ... seemed to be a creative act which continually lit up new possibilities in what I had seen [...] I felt an urge to go on and on writing, with my interest gradually shifting from what to do with my life to how to look at it.*<sup>10</sup>

Recent studies have addressed topics as varied as the use of collectively-written poetry to research principals of care within academic collaboration;<sup>11</sup> developing poetry as a research methodology with people with dementia and their family and carers;<sup>12</sup> and an online writing program for university students in a project researching ambivalence towards change.<sup>13</sup> The UK's well-established Social Prescribing movement will receive £3.6 million in government funding over the next 2 years, offering support to patients who feel 'desperate—powerless to do anything', and for whom arts interventions can help to 'see life differently'.<sup>14</sup> As the charity Freedom from Torture's long-standing creative writing group for survivors proves, there are many people for whom putting pen to paper can be an act of hope and healing. One group member described how:

*Write to Life created an environment where I could regain trust...I feel that I have regained my voice, that I've gained a space to recover my freedom here. It's like finding a friend to whom I can tell whatever is inside me.*<sup>15</sup>

Whether rebuilding your life after profound trauma, living with a long-term, chronic health condition (as are about 15 million people in the UK), navigating a stressful workplace, or dealing with any of the myriad other challenges of contemporary life, research has proven what people have intuitively known for centuries: 'expressive and explorative writing can be deeply healing and therapeutic.'<sup>16</sup>

# 3.

## How to deliver a poetry for wellbeing workshop

### Making the case for creative interventions in healthcare settings.

During my 9-months as a research fellow I considered what creative-writing for well-being means in the era of 'permacrisis', particularly in the context of demanding and stressful workplaces. I also explored how poetry-writing as a research methodology can interrogate and contextualise more accustomed forms of evaluation. My own practice-based research corroborated the existing evidence; by putting pen to paper you find a friend who will listen without judgement. Who won't interrupt. Who will hold the space and hear you out. Who is unexpectedly wise. You can't exhaust or bore the blank page. And when you've written yourself out you'll likely feel better, although it won't at first be clear why. Looking back on what you've written you might notice something that did not register at the time. A kernel of an idea, or a solution to a problem, or another perspective. Maybe even a spark of inspiration, like the electric blue flare of a kingfisher winging down the canal on a grey morning. This spark will take you by surprise; a moment of astonishment, pleasure, or consolation, all arising from a deceptively simple process that Natalie Goldberg calls *writing down the bones*.<sup>17</sup>

### Who benefits?

Working in partnership with Lime Art, the UK's oldest art for health organisation based for over 50 years in Manchester's NHS hospitals, I have learned that creative interventions can support the health and wellbeing of both patients and staff, even in a high stress workplace environment. My own workshops were attended by NHS staff from health care assistants and nursing students to consultants. I also worked alongside patients and their visitors on complex needs wards in 4-bed bays, and collaborated with musicians and larger groups of patients in intermediate care units.

Among the many other projects Lime Art has undertaken in recent years is the exemplary [Create+ programme](#), through which MFT staff access the arts to improve self-care, wellbeing and resilience at work. At the end of its first year Create+ was able to report positive participants outcomes including:

- Reduction in Perceived Stress Scores.
- Improvement in ONS4 measures of wellbeing.
- 45% of participants felt that the Create+ programme had made them want to stay in their job.

More about Create+, including their full evaluation report, can be found [here](#).



## In their own words.

In the stuffy, noisy, often chaotic environment of a hospital ward, creative writing and the reading of poetry enables us to crack open a door that was previously held tight shut. At the end of my 8-week-long residency in 2023, I interviewed a number of staff working on a complex needs ward in a Greater Manchester hospital. Later, using their words answering one of my interview questions, I wrote the following poem:

### What is poetry for?

**A poem co-written by staff at Wythenshawe Hospital and Rebecca Hurst**

*It is something to help with how you're feeling.  
Or, if you're struggling with not being able to say*

*what you want to say. If you have no voice  
then yes — there's truth in poetry.*

*And with poetry you can use words to express  
much more than is written down on the page.*

*You can get your point across. Convey  
what's difficult or hard to say out loud.*

*You can speak the words that otherwise  
your tongue might stumble over.*

*In poetry you feel the power behind the words.  
So yes. There's truth in poetry.*

## What happens in a creative writing for wellbeing workshop?

Extensive research exists proving the efficacy of arts for health. As Simone Spray, the head of 42nd Street, a young person's mental health charity, recently said: 'a notebook can be a creative space': Yet some commissioners within both health care and industry more broadly need to be convinced of the value of art over and over again. One outcome of this demand for evidence is—to quote Bev Taylor, former Social Prescribing Lead for NHS England and director of Music in Mind—a 'constant need to retell stories', with the result that participants feel 'over-researched and under invested'.

In contrast to 'over-researched' participants are the practitioners working within arts for health, described by Dr Robyn Dowlen in her [Centre for Cultural Value vision paper](#) as both under-supported (in terms of training, development, and mental health support) and consistently under researched.

## Workbook.

In order to provide some of the detail Dr Robyn Dowlen argues is [lacking from the academic literature about the cultural experiences held by participants](#), I am offering two resources: a Guided Writing Exercise, and a Poetry & Wellbeing Workbook (initially created for MSc in Adult Nursing students at the University of Manchester).

The short, Guided Writing Exercise explores poetry and place, and is available as both an audio recording and PDF. It begins with a poem, by the British-Jamaican poet John Allen-Paisant. The poem, is followed by a short timed writing exercise.

[> link to AUDIO version of the Short Exercise](#)

[> link to PDF of the Short Exercise](#)

The Poetry & Wellbeing Workbook contains three different activities, and each section take about 20-30 minutes to complete. The workbook includes: a poem to read and reflect on, an introduction to free-writing, and a guide to writing a poem. The intended audience is adults working in healthcare settings, but it might also be a useful resource for researchers wanting to try a creative wellbeing intervention, as well as for teachers and artists interested in creative health.

At the bottom of the workbook is a [link to a short survey](#). Feedback from those who use the workbook will help with my ongoing research, and will be received with gratitude. Please feel free to use this workbook yourself, or to share with others.

[> link to Poetry and Wellbeing Workbook](#)

# 4.

## References

- 1 Boland, Eavan. *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*. Carcanet Press: Manchester, 2011.
- 2 OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press.  
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227050?redirectedFrom=wellbeing&>  
(accessed 28 December 2022)
- 3 WHO Promoting well-being.  
<https://www.who.int/activities/promoting-well-being>  
(accessed 28 December 2022)
- 4 WHO Promoting well-being. Ibid.
- 5 Pennebaker, J.W. and S. K. Beall. 'Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease'. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. 1986. Vol. 95, No. 3, 274-281.
- 6 Gao, X. 'Research on Expressive Writing in Psychology: A Forty-year Bibliometric Analysis and Visualization of Current Status and Research Trends'. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2022. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.825626
- 7 Gillie Bolton. *Writing Cures: An introductory handbook of writing in counselling and therapy*. 2004. p. 1
- 8 Baikie, K., & Wilhelm, K. 'Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing'. 2005. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 338-346. DOI:10.1192/apt.11.5.338
- 9 Alison Jones. *Exploratory Writing: Everyday magic for life and work*. 2023.
- 10 Marion Milner (writing as Joanna Field). *A Life of One's Own*. 1934. p. 44-45.
- 11 CRIS Collective. 'Let there be a "We": introducing an ethics of collective academic care.'  
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EJM-04-2022-0269/full/html>
- 12 Camic, P. et al. 'Developing Poetry as a Research Methodology with Rarer Forms of Dementia: Four Research Protocols'. 2022. DOI: 10.1177/16094069221081377
- 13 Batista, João, et al. 'Write and Let Go: An Online Writing Program for University Students'. 2022. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.874600
- 14 <https://collegeofmedicine.org.uk/from-helping-with-finances-to-finding-local-activities-a-former-nurse-turned-link-worker-reveals-how-her-work-is-making-a-difference-to-one-london-community/>
- 15 <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/what-we-do/survivor-activism/write-to-life>
- 16 Gillie Bolton. *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself*. 1999. p.16
- 17 Natalie Goldberg. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. 1986.



# 5.

## Contact and further assistance

### Rebecca Hurst

Rebecca Hurst is a writer, opera-maker, illustrator, and researcher. She is the author of a poetry collection, *The Iron Bridge*, and a poetry pamphlet, *The Fox's Wedding*. Her music theatre work in collaboration with composers has been widely performed in the UK and Europe. Rebecca has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Manchester, and in 2022-23 was a Creative Manchester post-doctoral fellow researching the potential of creative writing for well-being. In partnership with Lime Arts she works with staff and patients at Wythenshawe and North Manchester General Hospitals.



### Creative Manchester

Creative Manchester is an interdisciplinary research platform based at The University of Manchester. The platform champions research in creativity and creative practice, bringing together research communities with external stakeholders to explore new research areas and address strategic opportunities. Please visit the website for more information about Creative Manchester.

This digital toolkit is available online



[www.creative.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.creative.manchester.ac.uk)

 @UoMCreativeMCR

 Creative Manchester at The University of Manchester

DW.3823.11.24