

POETRY AS A MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION: AN IN-DEPTH LITERATURE
REVIEW

A Thesis submitted to the faculty at Stanbridge University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy

by

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Abstract

An in-depth literature review was conducted to correlate the relationship between the creative writing process of poetry as an intervention and its impact on occupation. Multiple studies associated with mental health, illness along with comorbidities, health and wellbeing, socioeconomic status, and cultural influence were gathered. Data was collected amongst a wide population consisting of children and adults with various mental health conditions. The in-depth literature review aimed to answer the research question, “What does the current literature say about creative writing-based interventions as a means for therapy, and what are the implications for poetry therapy to address prominent mental health issues in occupational therapy?” Evidence indicated poetry-based interventions improved outcomes for mental health conditions and allowed for greater emotional expression and overall well-being in both group and individual settings. The implications strongly suggest further use of poetry in occupational therapy practice as it offers a meaningful and accessible client-centered activity that can meet communication, self-regulation, self-expression, and social participation goals.

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Poetry as a Mental Health Intervention: An In-Depth Literature Review

Poetry can be defined as “a literature and art form that evokes an imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm” (Nemerov, 2025, para. 1). Poetry is typically presented in written or verbal form and can be organized through various methods (i.e., haikus, sonnets, free verses, acrostics, and more). Although poetry is a long-held practice and art form, there is little research on the connection between poetry and its potential as an alternative therapeutic intervention for individuals with mental illness symptoms, especially in the context of occupational therapy. As of 2022, 1 in 5 Americans (59.3 million people or 23.1% of the US adult population) experience mental illness ranging in severity (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). In addition, mental health tops the list of health problems among Americans in 2023, topping various conditions such as obesity and cancer (Young et al., 2023). Before the nation’s mental health crisis exacerbates even further, a shift from the traditional medical treatment approach to alternative, creative-based treatments, specifically poetry, must be considered.

The aim of our study is to evaluate the current literature in creative writing-based art therapies like poetry as treatments for health and wellness across populations with varying conditions affecting mental health (i.e. cancer, chronic illnesses) and mental illnesses (i.e., depression, anxiety, schizophrenia). We also aim to explore existing research involving the use of reading and writing poetry to support holistic wellness and overall well-being. We seek to analyze and understand the health outcomes of poetry and other creative writing expressions from the available research and suggest further

extension and application of poetry therapy for occupational therapy practice in mental health settings.

Our project supports the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA, 2021) mission, “to advance occupational therapy practice, education, and research through standard setting and advocacy on behalf of its members, the profession, and the public” by focusing on greater research and education on the potential of poetry as an intervention (p. 1). Therefore, our study, an in-depth literature review contributes to advancing the research and expanding the scope of the profession of occupational therapy. Out of the three strategic principles, “transform, advocate, and build” from the AOTA Strategic Framework, our project aligns with the principle, “build,” as we would strive to advance learning and professional development as well as share new ideas and knowledge to an audience of therapy practitioners within the occupational therapy community (AOTA, 2021, p. 1).

Regarding the *Occupational Therapy Research Agenda's* five goals and priorities for occupational therapy research (assessment/measurement, intervention, basic research, translational research, and health services research) created by American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) and the AOTA (2019), our research would most closely align with intervention and translational research. Our research on poetry therapy would support intervention research by proposing poetry as a rehabilitative intervention and occupation that promotes greater participation and quality of life. The translational research goal of “examining the implications of novel developments in sciences related to occupational therapy” would be met as poetry is a new and alternative treatment option to

improve mental health and wellness across populations and conditions (AOTF & AOTA, 2019, p. 4).

Statement of Problem

Since creative writing can be used in many forms, we aim to take a deep dive on how it can be carried out as an intervention to promote the quality of life and well-being among individuals with various mental health conditions. The question of our study is, “What does the current literature say about creative writing-based interventions as a means for therapy, and what are the implications for poetry therapy to address prominent mental health issues in the context of occupational therapy?” We are focusing on populations with a wide array of health conditions across all age groups (from children to adults). More specifically, our focus will be on the use of poetry intervention for the purposes of mental health and well-being, but we also want to take a closer look at the existing research on writing-based therapy for other conditions relevant to occupational therapy, like cancer, stroke, schizophrenia, and more. Exploring the impact of poetry on daily life occupations and personal well-being will give us insight into its impact in relation to lifestyle management and holistic wellness. Due to a lack of research on the use of reading, writing, and listening to poetry specifically as an occupational therapy intervention, so we hope to address that gap by discussing the potential implications of current research findings on the future of occupational therapy practice.

Instead of incorporating a product, our project will solely focus on existing literature and its relation to creative writing. This will be implemented through an in-depth literature review, which will be presented in the results section. We analyzed our findings to be used for further education and to understand the relationship between

creative writing-based interventions and its overall impact on mental health and wellness. The study will contribute to the field as occupational therapy practitioners may increase their education and awareness of poetry as an evidence-based intervention, meaningful activity, or means/ends of therapy that they can consider when developing treatment plans for their patients.

Statement of Purpose, Hypothesis, and Research Questions

The purpose of our study is to explore the use of creative writing-based art expressions, specifically poetry, as a potential intervention for occupational therapy practice in mental health by conducting an in-depth literature review of the current research related to mental health and well-being utilizing poetry across various settings, ages, and conditions.

Our hypothesis is that participating in poetry therapy--whether that involves the reading or writing of poetry across various topics independently or within group settings--promotes greater health and wellness measured by a reduction in symptoms related to various mental conditions. We hypothesize that participation in poetry correlates with improved mental health according to both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Our research questions are, “What does the current literature say about creative writing-based interventions as a means for therapy, and what are the implications for poetry therapy to address prominent mental health issues in occupational therapy?”

Literature Review

Throughout history, poetry has been used as a means of self-expression. However, current research also supports the use of poetry for a wide range of applications: to teach and educate, to cope with and heal from trauma, to communicate complex emotions and

experiences, to build and unify communities, and more. Most importantly, poetry has been utilized to support mental health outcomes across a wide range of populations (children, students, older adults), settings (online/telehealth, group therapy, individual therapy) conditions, and cultures.

Poetry for Mental Conditions

Poetry has served as a groundbreaking alternative treatment to improve the quality of life for individuals with mental health problems. For example, bibliotherapy, “the scientific application of literature towards a therapeutic goal,” has been applied using poetry in many mental health settings (Griffin, 1978, p. 114). Chamberlain (2019) explored the potential benefits to participating in read-aloud poetry groups for functional older adults at various stages of recovery from depression, anxiety, and psychosis in an inpatient psychiatric ward. Ten 1-hour sessions were held once a week where poems on themes of aging, childhood, nature, war time, seasons, love, and more were read aloud and discussed by patients. Fifteen attendees participated in the poetry groups, which were facilitated by a librarian, occupational therapist, and ward manager. After phenomenographic analysis of semi-structured interviews of some of the participants, it was found that the reading group had a positive therapeutic effect. Participants reported greater empathy and evoked an emotional sense of shared experience with others. In addition, increased participation in reading aloud contributed to a greater sense of self-confidence and overcoming their own self-doubt.

Individuals with schizophrenia have psychiatric symptoms which result in decreased mental health due to difficulties communicating and expressing their thoughts and emotions (Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021). A one-year therapy group that included

poetry therapy client interviews, texts written in the poetry therapy sessions, and a learning diary and notes by the group facilitator were used for this study. The results showed that the most significant therapeutic factors of the poetry process were social interaction, safety, and written self-expression. Writing in a group setting, especially through collaborative writing, had many positive effects on the clients. It allowed them to experience life's worth, raising their hopes. Metaphors and collaborative writing made it possible to discuss difficult personal experiences. It was also noted that the participants' sense of humor showed improvements following poetry writing and collaboration. The poetry group improved self-esteem levels, and group members were looking forward to future sessions. Group poetry therapy showed that individuals were eager to see each other and express themselves.

In another study, individuals with schizophrenia and bipolar syndrome have problems with self-esteem which negatively impacts personal and social performance (Akhan et al., 2022). The study was done in a mental health center and consisted of 30 individuals. Poetry therapy was administered to the group once a week for a total of eight sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. Patients expressed emotions and opinions about the sessions were evaluated by using poetry therapy. A poet İsa Kahraman was invited to the poetry sessions, and poetry recitals were held for two sessions in this study. After the second/third session, the facilitator demonstrated the support for members who took the risk to share their feelings and encouraged other members to express support. After the third session, the clients were able to write poems independently at home, showing increased agency and self-motivation. The results showed that self-esteem and performance significantly improved with a p value of $< .024$. Being able to express

emotions with a group who have the same diagnosis attributed to self-esteem. Being surrounded by individuals who are experiencing the same situation provides an outlet for expression. Providing the clients with the autonomy to write their own poems increased social performance. Additionally, individuals were empowered when they poured their emotions into their poetry.

Another study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of group poetry therapy and improving happiness in chronic schizophrenic patients (Rajaei et al., 2023). The study consisted of 11 participants in the experimental group and 11 in the control group. The study used a pre-test and post-test of the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire to measure participant psychological well-being. The data were analyzed by single-variable covariance. Participants attended a total of 11 poetry therapy group meetings. For the first few meetings, participants were able to share and read poems expressing their day-to-day complaints, delirious beliefs, hallucinations and repressed impulses. The next meetings consisted of satirical poems for patients to encourage them to change their view of life from a humorous point of view and find a way to cope with life issues in a way other than unhealthy mechanisms like emotional repression. For the last few sessions, poems were read with the content of motivation, hope and interest in life. In the last meeting, the group leader summarized the items learned from the poems and the treatment process, the feelings of each patient towards other people in the group, and the necessity of continuing to enjoy poetry even after the completion of these sessions. At the end of the meeting, the posttest questionnaire was administered. It showed that the experimental group were higher in happiness than the scores of the control group ($p < 0.05$). Schizophrenia patients

felt happier when they have healthy and friendly social relationships with others, and poetry therapy training helps achieve this.

In a quasi-experimental study conducted in Caldas, Colombia by Agudelo-Hernández & Montoya (2024), 171 adolescents displaying psychiatric symptoms and living in rural and semi-urban environments were divided into 10 groups for weekly poetry sessions. The results of the participation in poetry group sessions showed statistical significance between poetry applications and a reduction in psychiatric symptoms. The poetry sessions also helped the adolescents shift their mindsets by decreasing their internalized problems and social problems, providing a clear benefit to their attitudes and overall mental health (Agudelo- Hernández & Montoya, 2024). This study reveals that the benefits of poetry are not limited to adults but can offer its therapeutic value to adolescents residing in more isolated environments.

Poetry for Cancer Patients

Women with cancer also experience psychiatric problems such as depression and anxiety (Daboui et al., 2022.) Receiving a breast cancer diagnosis takes a serious toll on women's mental health, leading to a decrease in their quality of life. In a quantitative study with 31 participants with breast cancer, poetry was read on a weekly basis to patient as a means of therapy. Weekly poetry therapy was held for six weeks by an expert in literature and poetry therapy. In every session, selected Mawlana (Rumi) poems were read, and at the end of sessions, the patients were recommended to read a special book between sessions. The poems centered around themes of hope, prayer, patience, and tolerance. The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS) was administered in the

first week and the last week of the study to measure participants' self-reported emotional states of depression. The results showed that depression and anxiety was significantly reduced with a p value of < 0.03 . Poetry is a way to communicate emotions. It uses imagery, imagination, and metaphors to help express and understand one's emotions. Depending on the severity and progression of their cancer, cancer patients may need to quit their jobs. They also might have less time to spend with their family and friends due to exhaustion. This study reveals that poetry offers cancer patients a source of relief from the burden of their diagnosis.

Another study was conducted on women with breast cancer and the effectiveness of a reflective poetry therapy group on their mental health. Holopainen and Ihanus (2024) found that participation in group-oriented poetry therapy interventions improved psychological well-being by decreasing negative emotions. The study consisted of six participants that met up eighteen times in 2019. The group used poetry therapy to reflect on their disease and through reflective and transformative writing. Three primary themes noted from the participants' poetry writing included being explicitly seen and heard as a breast cancer survivor, physical/social/mental traces left by the disease and surviving despite the disease. Based on the women's responses, poetry was an effective method to help participants integrate their experience with breast cancer into their life story and selfhood. It was found that participants enjoyed the group and felt it improved their quality of life. They also reported a reduction in feelings of anger toward their cancer as a result of the group process (Holopainen & Ihanus, 2024).

A study by Bacelar Arruda et al. (2016), showed how listening to poetry can improve feelings of depression, pain, and hope amongst cancer patients (p. 944). Cancer

patients require a multitude of treatments such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and surgery. Even with numerous advancements in technology and medicine, these treatments still heavily affect physical and emotional health, exacerbating patients' symptoms and mental health (Bacelar Arruda et al., 2016). Music and poetry are adjunctive complementary therapies that can help to promote patients' well-being by providing creative outlets. The participants had pre- and post-standardized tests that assessed their emotions of depression, pain, and hope, and the results showed that involvement in poetry improved all of these areas.

Poetry for Self-Development

Two participants in a study who had past experiences with mental health problems revealed that poetry writing gave them a deeper sense of personal meaning, which therefore positively impacted their mental health (Hilse et al., 2007). The participants were observed at a community college during weekly poetry workshop sessions and were interviewed after providing consent. Five stages of open, axial, and selective coding were conducted to come up with categories that were derived from poetry and its meaning. The categories that evolved after the interviews were creation, communication, connection, and awareness. Creation and communication encouraged the urge to write after the inspiration of a spark as well as being able to share writing and experiences with others (Hilse et al., 2007). Members read other participants' poetry, which gave the authors a chance to reflect on the significance of how their thoughts had evolved over different excerpts of their writing. However, it could at times become a stressful process if interpreted differently than the writer's initial intent, since their writing was so deeply personal so it was important for it to be authentic to the authors'

inner feelings and experiences. Connection and awareness also allowed participants to feel connected to themselves and the environment, which ultimately led to a greater understanding of themselves and others (Hilse et al., 2007). The study ultimately emphasized poetry writing as a meaningful occupation for the poetry members, as well as their abilities to connect with self.

Poetry for College Students' Mental Health

In another study by Carvalho et al. (2021), it was concluded that poetry had a profound effect on nursing students' mental health. The study consisted of 96 nursing students who wrote poetry texts and reflected on the emotions they felt. Since they had creative freedom, some of the works produced by the nursing students were accompanied by images, handwritten texts, and computer-made works. The students' reflections on their works showed that many felt different emotions such as sadness, despair, loneliness, anger, and hatred. Conversely, the importance of affection, tranquility, patience, and love was emphasized in their poems. The researchers concluded that poetry provided nursing students with a helpful outlet for introspection, emotional and cognitive reasoning, and mental health promotion (Carvalho et al., 2021). Some students had difficulties with rhyming, but the poetry process provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and choose the words to accurately convey their emotions. Ultimately, the study showed that poetry empowers individuals to take control of their mental health.

Poetry Delivered on Online Platforms

Interestingly, poetry therapy delivered on remote, online platforms also has a profound positive effect on mental health. Poetry therapy delivered through an online platform was explored in the Surviving by Storytelling project that aimed to provide

creative writing, poetry therapy, and narrative therapy to marginalized populations with mental health problems and learning disabilities (Pearson et al., 2024). The Surviving by Storytelling project involved over 30 poetry workshops since 2018, the majority of which were delivered online through Zoom out of necessity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a research through design method, an approach that views knowledge gained as a result of people working together in a learning process to design new things, the study came to five significant conclusions. These findings were that poetry workshops should focus on being solely therapeutic; online spaces can provide opportunities for stories to branch out; the importance of facilitators to reflect on appropriate titles that corresponds with their role; taking into account the possible harms of poetic exploration; and balancing the loss of symbols and spaces amongst communication (Pearson et al., 2024). The research from this project reveals that poetry can be used as a means of therapy but is not considered its own type of therapy on its own and has the potential to inform and guide future occupational therapy best practices in relation to telehealth and online delivery of mental health services.

Another example of how reading and writing poetry remotely on the Internet served mental health and well-being was through the website, *Poetry and Covid*, an online poetic community created during the COVID-19 lockdown (Caleshu et al., 2023). The website allowed participants to freely read others' poetry as well as publish their own to express their wide-ranging emotions amidst the pandemic. During the project, over 1000 unique entries from over 600 poets were submitted to the public website. A survey of over 400 website visitors found that the website provided significant value to their wellbeing. Particularly, poetry was useful in improving feelings of loneliness and

depression in 50% of respondents. In total, the website helped over 80% to be able to express themselves, over 65% to relate to other people and process feelings about the pandemic, and over 50% to feel less and alone while also being able to find comfort despite unpleasant situations (Caleshu et al., 2023). The considerable positive impact of the poetry website highlights the powerful ability of poetry experiences to unify communities, express complex feelings, and help people find solace and hope during a time of global fear and uncertainty. The results of this research support the use of poetry reading and writing for emotional and mental health regulation and further as a meaningful occupation that can be completed independently and in a telehealth therapy setting.

Poetry as a Leisure Activity

In addition, poetry can be enjoyed in various forms such as listening and following along with a preferred audio selection. Audiobooks offer an alternative way for readers to follow along with storytelling through active listening. A study by Aravena-Canese et al. (2024) gives insight on the growing age of individuals above 60 and the need to maintain entertainment and interest through leisure activities with modern day society and technology. Since audiobooks can offer a pleasurable experience, the study wished to identify the impact on the perception of wellbeing among older adults who listen to poetry using an audiobook, as well as the efficiency in maneuvering the mobile app. A quasi-experimental study consisting of 60 older adults explored the use of an audiobook mobile application for a total of 4 weeks. Although no data was collected to indicate the effectiveness of listening to poetry, the study expresses the need to further investigate the correlation between poetry audiobooks and its impact on the perception of

wellbeing. The results indicated that listening to poetry through an audiobook had a positive impact on the perception of wellbeing.

Participating in creative writing and other creative occupations as a leisure activity can be essential in promoting health and wellbeing amongst individuals. A qualitative study examining participants who considered creative writing as a leisure activity received a semi structured interview, which consisted of the creative writing forms the participants used, as well as their experiences and reflections on how writing served as a benefit to their wellbeing (Rampley et al., 2019). Five themes were developed which were creative and communicative freedom, writing as an escape from reality, writing as intrinsic to sense of self, the vulnerable identity of a “writer”, and strategies for coping with the vulnerability of a writer’s identity. Findings indicated the benefits of creative writing in providing meaning, but it was also revealed that it came with a sense of discomfort of being judged by others based on the quality of their writing (Rampley et al., 2019). Ultimately, the study emphasized the therapeutic benefits of writing but also addressed the negative impacts that can be associated with the writing process, such as social isolation and negative feedback.

Poetry for Self-Expression, Emotional Regulation, and Communication

A 6-week poetry unit was conducted amongst a language arts class of 6th and 8th graders who attended a school for individuals who are deaf (Arenson & Kretschmer, 2010). The students in the language arts class used American Sign Language (ASL) as a means of communication to engage in poetry. A qualitative approach was used to determine if poetry could be of benefit to both the students and teachers in implementing and understanding the written language to promote self-expression (Arenson &

Kretschmer, 2010). The poetry unit contained 32 lessons taught in a span of 6 ½ weeks, which consisted of strategies to interpret poetry, the components of poetry and why it is significant to poets, the students' reflections of underlying meanings, and ASL translated poetry. Prior to the unit, the students reported having little knowledge and understanding of poetry and its relevance. However, after the unit, the results indicated the beneficial components of ASL poetry in allowing students to communicate and express feelings (Arenson & Kretschmer, 2010). As a result, the teachers also benefited in being able to get students to grasp a better understanding of poetry through ASL and its meaningful impact.

One study suggested that poetry has a profound impact on emotions.

Wassiliwizsky et al. (2017) showed how poetry can affect the brain's neural circuitry and elicit positive emotional experiences. Participants were assessed on the occurrence of chills and goosebumps while listening to poetry. Participants reported chills and their goosebumps were assessed through observation of piloerection. Goosebumps are a reflex in which hair follicles contract and raise the hair on the skin often eliciting positive emotions. Neuroimaging revealed that listening to poetry affected the brain's reward system (Wassiliwizsky et al., 2017). The part of the brain engaged in rewards was more active under magnetic resonance imaging, as well.

Poetry is not only a means for creative expression for individuals with illnesses but is also an effective means of communication for people with dementia to their caregivers. According to a British study by Gregory (2011), reminiscence-based poetry interventions restored a sense of personhood and humanized individuals with dementia in the eyes of their caregivers. The study took place in a residential care home and daycare

center in southwest England and interviewed 21 individuals with dementia ranging from mild to severe cases. The individuals with dementia were interviewed by poets who allowed them to talk about anything that they wished and childhood memories were commonly shared. Then, the poet would use their stories to create a poem co-authored by themselves and the person with dementia which would be read aloud to the care staff at their care institution.

After analyzing qualitative interviews with the residential care and daycare staff, it was discovered that the poetry intervention had an overall positive impact on clients' quality of care by "providing carers (caregivers) with a fuller understanding of clients' past and present lives, enabling and encouraging them to communicate more effectively with those in their care, allowing clients to engage in productive activities and facilitating meaningful social interactions between people with dementia and their carers" (Gregory, 2011, p. 5). Caregivers' negative preconceived notions about their clients' condition were challenged as the clients were able to recall memories with remarkable clarity and remember the past experiences they had led. Caregivers were also able to learn more about and appreciate each individual's unique and rich history and listen to their clients without being distracted by the demands of day-to-day tasks like getting them washed up or preparing their food. Ultimately, this study reveals a theme of poetry increasing the quality of care by providing a means of humanization and connection between individuals with dementia and their caregivers. This qualitative study demonstrates that communication and understanding of individuals with dementia can be achieved by giving them proper time, attention, and patience.

Poetry as a Community Development Tool

Poetry writing can also be implemented in populations that aren't necessarily impacted by neurocognitive disorders but as a tool for community development. A study investigated the use of poetry as a means of community building through semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals in Montreal, Canada involved in poetry groups based in local food banks and drop-in centers (Sjollemma & Hanley, 2014). Community development, as defined by the article, includes four components: capacity building, community building, social capital development, and agency in influencing a specific process or state of affairs. The goals of the poetry groups were to build a greater sense of agency and empowerment amongst participants who were often part of marginalized and low-income groups. Although these adversities conflicted with regular attendance and led to smaller group sizes, the overall impact was positive. Participants enhanced their literary knowledge, developed social skills, felt more eager to participate within their communities, and improved their self-esteem. Overall, this article explores the benefits of poetry writing groups as a low-cost and portable method of community development, suggesting it is a promising first step to addressing broader social issues like poverty and social isolation.

Youth in low-income neighborhoods often face barriers that affect their ability to access the resources needed to accommodate specific needs. Forty participants from sixth to eighth grade took part in an art intervention located in a public housing neighborhood (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). The study used a quasi-experimental design to determine the influence of poetry art intervention on academics, social competence, and multicultural attitudes based on self-perceptions (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). The participants were

broken up into two groups based on the proximity from their public housing neighborhood to an afterschool program site. Both workshops took place within a 4-week course and were facilitated by one staff member and two professional poets from an art-based program known as Art from Ashes. The first group reported strengths in all three measures as opposed to the second group where no statistical significance was shown after the intervention (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). Several participants also gained enough confidence to share their work towards the end of the workshop compared to the beginning where hesitation was more profound. Although more research regarding academics, social competence, and multicultural attitudes is needed, the study shines light on the positive influences of art-based interventions when implemented in an after-school program, such as the ability to express oneself.

Another study was conducted on United States immigrants who used poetry to help cope with the overwhelming and isolating nature of immigration. A psychoeducational group was held for 10 sessions to encourage the use of poetry in identifying, expressing and resolving acculturative influences and experiences (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002). The participants consisted of outpatient community health clients whose first language was not English. Incorporating poetry in group counseling allowed for its healing properties to be displayed through the individual, personalized growth journeys of adult immigrants. After 10 poetry sessions, the participants were encouraged to learn alternative ways of self-expression by combining simple words. Experimenting with different words created opportunities for learning and growth which helped to break that barrier of fear (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002). As a result, this helped to restore a sense of identity in the participants' acculturative experiences. The articles on college

students and immigrants using poetry for education and self-expression, respectively, share similarities due to their ability to use poetry to foster learning and growth.

Cultural Significance of Poetry in Holistic Health and Well-being

Also, poetry is of great cultural importance and is an important tool for healing and self-development. Shukla (2021) argued that poetry has the power to help in the healing and growth of individuals whom psychotherapy is unable to reach. This suggests that psychotherapy is a resource-intensive process requiring much dialogue and is often inaccessible to larger populations that seek psychological interventions. In addition, the article supports poetry as a long-held tradition and avenue for deep self-reflection, existential exploration, and romantic attitudes. In Indian culture, poetry captures the complexities of human experiences and emotions as well as offers an opportunity to achieve a transcendental, higher state of consciousness. This article relates to occupational therapy practice, as poetry reading and writing can be applied as a mental health intervention, requiring fewer resources and training than psychotherapy but still offers positive results of deep self-understanding and healing.

In addition, poetry has been used in Chinese culture as a method of teaching important life lessons (Zhang, 2022). In a study of Chinese college students, poetry was implemented into an educational setting with the goals of teaching cultural traditions and improving mental health. The study found that participating in a semester-long poetry appreciation course helped positively shape personality and promoted psychological healing amongst college students. Some mental health benefits included decreased negative symptoms involving tension and fear and increased positive personality factors of warmth and apprehension (Zhang, 2022). This article touches on the significant effects

of poetry within educational settings and calls for increased poetry implementation within school curricula for better student mental health outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks

Cognitive behavioral therapy theorists mention that behavior can impact cognition and therefore treatment focuses on shaping thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (Brown et al., 2019, p. 306). Creative writing as an intervention offers therapeutic tools to promote reflection and interpretation. Since this framework offers a holistic approach, it creates opportunities to touch on a variety of experiences and its symbolism when used in interventions. Participants in the study from our literature review engaged in creative writing forms, such as poetry, in which they practiced writing down thoughts and reflections based on the prompts given. These studies all shared similarities regarding participants' motivation and feelings of an improved sense of self despite the challenges revolving around mental health. Group workshops played a significant role in participants being able to share their writing as this allowed for interactions consisting of various viewpoints. An occupational therapy theory that best corresponds with the use of this framework is the Model of Human Occupation. This model emphasizes the client's performance being impacted by motivation and the influences of the mind and the body (Kielhofner, 2008). If the client does not feel fulfilled in what they're doing, performance can decline, especially if there is no relevance to past roles and routines. The majority of the studies consisted of participants with past experiences of poetry writing, which was a motivating factor in participating in the interventions, as well as the positive influences poetry writing had on their mental health.

Methodology

Design

The inclusion criteria for the articles in our in-depth literature review included research articles published in scholarly journals between 2000 to 2025. The articles were 25 years old and younger, as our study aimed to evaluate poetry as a current, alternative therapy intervention. For the sake of relevance, we emphasized the importance of articles published within the last 25 years. The inclusion criteria for the articles included studies conducted on participants of all ages from children to older adult populations. All types of research studies of both qualitative (observational) and quantitative (intervention-based) nature were included: randomized-controlled trials, cohort studies, case-controlled studies, qualitative studies, and longitudinal studies were involved in our article search. Exclusion criteria consisted of studies that do not acknowledge mental health conditions as a significant factor in overall health and wellness. In addition, studies older than 25 years were not included in our in-depth literature review.

For our data collection approach, we searched for relevant articles using the EBSCO databases provided by Stanbridge University. This consisted of a thorough search of the article databases: CINAHL Complete, Academic Search Complete, MEDLINE Complete, PsycInfo, and Education Resource Information Center. In addition, Google Scholar and PubMed were used to find articles. The key search terms used in these databases were “poetry and mental health,” “poetry as a therapy intervention,” “poetry as a treatment for depression,” “poetry and rehabilitation,” “creative writing for mental health,” “art-based therapy for mental health,” “expressive writing as a therapy tool,” “poetry and healing,” “poetry and chronic conditions,” “poetry for children with

mental illnesses,” “poetry for children with mental developmental issues,” and “poetry and well-being.”

Data Analysis

Once applicable studies were identified, they were analyzed by reviewing the methods of poetry for therapeutic use and the outcome measures. Then, the articles were organized into different categories based on the age of the population and their mental health condition. After a thorough data collection, the patterns that emerged were interpreted and the potential implications for occupational therapy practice were considered. Our in-depth literature review provided an informative, educational, evidence-based resource that was disseminated amongst the occupational therapy community and utilized by practitioners to guide their practice.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Ethical and legal considerations were not applicable to our in-depth literature review as our research did not involve a novel experiment or recruitment of participants for a study. The only potential ethical and legal consideration was collecting research in an appropriate, legal manner and acknowledging and appropriately citing the works of other researchers. Attaining research was collected through multiple databases provided by Stanbridge University, along with readily available texts on Google Scholar and PubMed. No articles for our research were illegally or unethically obtained.

Results

For this study, we reviewed current literature to obtain findings relevant to poetry-based therapy. In total, 23 peer reviewed articles were examined. A multitude of categories were applied to the research, which included groups in the community,

illnesses associated with primary diagnoses and comorbidities, poetry in the school setting, and health and wellbeing. Similarities between the studies were found, which indicated the influences of poetry as a whole in promoting self-regulation and self-expression. Three studies focusing on the use of poetry among students emphasized the impact of creative writing in shaping and strengthening targeted areas, whether it be related to improving qualities associated with mental health or using poetry to expand communication and expression through ASL (Arenson & Kretschmer, 2010; Carvalho et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022). Five studies involving community-based workshops and sessions implemented poetry as a means of coping, reflection, and expression (Agudelo-Hernández & Montoya, 2024; Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002; Forrest-Bank et al., 2016; Hilse et al., 2007; Sjollemma & Hanley, 2014). Among these five studies, two articles touched on socioeconomic factors and the use of poetry as an outlet and a form of expression in navigating hardships (Agudelo-Hernández & Montoya, 2024; Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). Two studies on wellbeing discussed the positive influences of poetry as a leisure activity and its relation to wellness (Aravena-Canese et al., 2024; Rampley et al., 2019). Four additional studies examined the impact of poetry among individuals diagnosed with illnesses and its effect in enhancing quality of life and addressing mental health concerns associated with the symptoms and comorbidities of the illness (Bacelar Arruda et al., 2016; Daboui et al., 2022; Gregory, 2011; Holopainen & Ihanus, 2024). Two studies on online poetry regarding an online workshop through telehealth and a poetic community website demonstrated the benefits of poetry towards mental health during COVID-19, and its abilities to provide a safe therapeutic space while also promoting self-regulation (Caeshu et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2024). One study used

neuroimaging as a tool to evaluate the activity occurrence in the brain when listening to poetry (Wassiliwizsky et al., 2017). This study found that listening to poetry had a positive influence in rewarding parts of the brain. Three studies on individuals with schizophrenia expressed the influence of poetry in improving self-esteem, as well as reports of increased happiness in the ability to have healthy and social relationships with others, when engaging in poetry (Akhan et al., 2022; Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021; Rajaei et al., 2023). A study on bibliotherapy found that older adults in an inpatient psych ward displayed increased self-confidence and empathy after participating in read-aloud poetry groups (Chamberlain, 2019). Another study on the cultural and healing properties of poetry describes poetry as an alternative healing approach for individuals who do not have access to psychotherapy, as it provides opportunities for self-reflection and self-exploration (Griffin, 1978). These results indicate a common correlation, being that poetry serves as a reliable source to improve the quality of wellbeing amongst a wide range of individuals, especially revolving around mental health.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore and understand the use of creative writing-based art expressions as a potential intervention for occupational therapy practice in mental health. Our in-depth literature review demonstrates a significant correlation between poetry and its effect on mental health. Our research examines the effect of poetry on individuals in various settings, ages, and conditions. A key finding was that poetry writing gave a deeper sense of personal meaning which positively impacted an individual's mental health (Hilse et al., 2007). However, poetry's effect is not only limited to writing. It has been found that listening to poetry provided the same effect on

increased mental health and well-being. In a study by Wassiliwizsky et al. (2017), it was mentioned that listening to poetry elicited positive emotions affecting the brain's reward system. Similar to listening to our favorite kind of music in which our body releases endorphins, increases mood, and decreases pain. There were a limited number of studies found during the research process, most presenting small sample sizes. However, for future studies, it would be imperative to use larger sample sizes, various settings, and different diagnoses to see the positive effects of poetry.

Limitations

Some limitations of this review are that the interventions are only specific for a certain population and not generalized to a broader population. Our review consisted of individuals with Parkinson's disease, breast cancer, myocardial infarctions, students, and individuals in palliative care in one location. More research must be done with other different diagnoses in different locations to better see the effect of poetry. The articles also only consist of sample sizes ranging from 10-50 participants. A larger sample size will increase reliability and validity of the research. Some interventions were only used for a short period of time ranging from 6 weeks to 3 months and to 6 months. Lastly, since some of the participants' diagnoses progressed to the last stage, so their participation decreased (Holopainen & Ihanus, 2024). For future research participants of the same functional level should be addressed to decrease the chances of dropouts. It is difficult to increase the sample size of individuals in a hospital or palliative care, so future research must include other healthcare organizations to have a bigger sample size.

Conclusion

Poetry has been shown to improve health and wellness, utilizing self-expression and making it unique to the writer. It is difficult for individuals to express themselves amongst others, making poetry a safe place for self-expression to elicit positive emotions. The power of poetry has the power to decrease negative thoughts and emotions, which leads to improvements in mental health. Since mental health has become the number one health problem in America, it is imperative to find new holistic approaches to help improve mental health as medication alone is not sufficient in managing mental illness. The rise of mental health problems poses difficulties in performing occupational activities. An occupational therapist's primary focus should be on mental health to improve engagement in occupations. Finding a holistic approach combined with medication has tremendous potential in managing mental illnesses. Through writing and listening to poetry, clients will be able to cope with their trauma, encourage self-identity, and influence motivation for change. Occupational therapists can use this approach as an intervention to help their clients' functional performance to improve quality of life and wellbeing.

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Figure 1

Past Year Prevalence of Any Mental Illness Among U.S. Adults (2022)

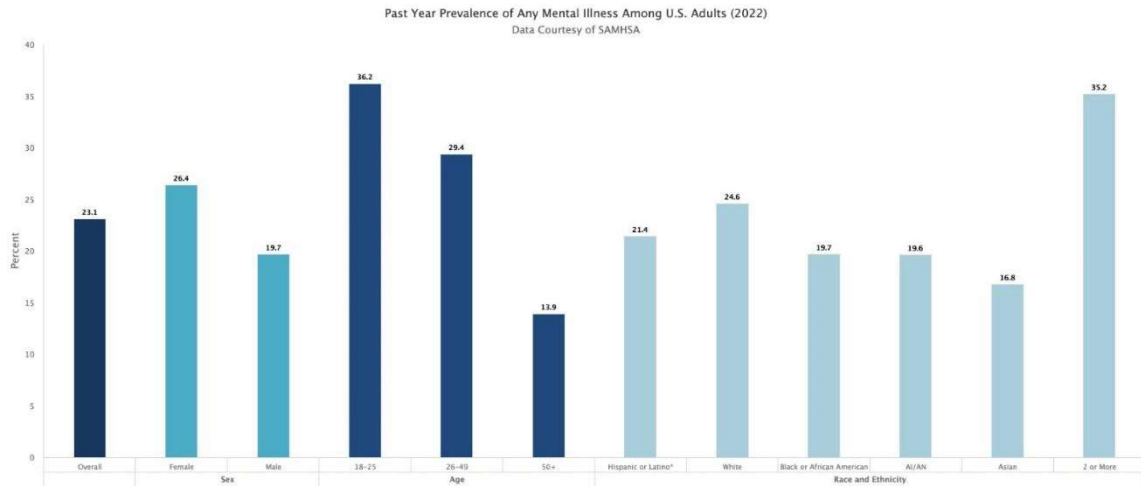
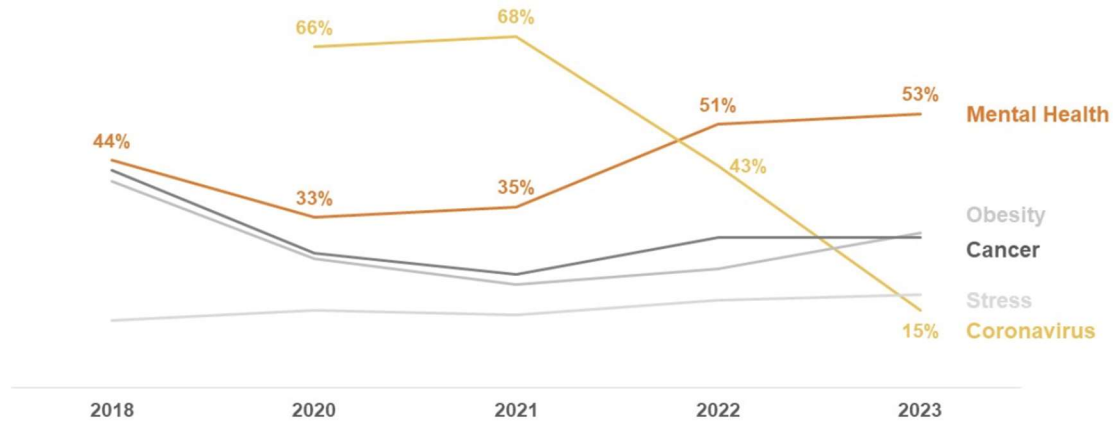


Figure 2
Mental Health as the Top Health Problem Among Americans (2023)

Mental health tops the list of health problems among Americans

Question: Thinking generally, which of the following, if any, do you see as the biggest health problems facing people in your country today?



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 Note: Coronavirus was first included in 2020

