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Using poetry to explore mental health & emotional wellbeing

Let's talk about… anxiety

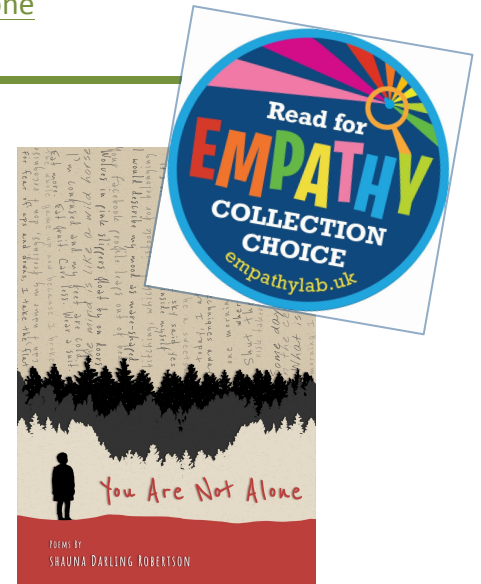with 3 poems from *You Are Not Alone* by Shauna Darling Robertson

www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone

Poetry can be a great resource for exploring our thoughts and feelings, providing a 'way in' to help us connect with different parts of ourselves and communicate with others, particularly when it comes to challenging conversations. Sometimes it can be helpful to explore a topic from a 'safe distance' using scenarios or characters in a poem rather than about talking about ourselves, especially when we're in a group setting.

You Are Not Alone by Shauna Darling Robertson (Troika, 2023) is a collection of poems all about mental health and wellbeing, written with teens and young adults in mind.

Just like our physical health, our mental health can fluctuate over the course of our lives, or even from day to day. The poems in this collection consider a wide variety of experiences, from how it can feel to live with different mental health conditions, to what it's like dealing with the everyday pressures and challenges faced by young people today.

This guide offers some ideas for using a few of the poems in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting to explore several themes related to anxiety.

Contents

Poem 1: 'What I Wanted'
Possible themes: Shyness | Anxiety | Social anxiety | Relationships

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

1. What do you think the relationship between the two people in the poem could be? See how many different possibilities you can come up with.

2. Why might inviting someone to meet for coffee feel like this, with 'the risks involved' seeming 'too great'? Why do you think the risks listed get bigger and bigger?

3. Read through the poem again and, for each couplet (pair of lines), note down one or two feelings the 'I' person might be experiencing at that point. Include some physical sensations in the body as well as emotions.

4. How do you feel about the ending of the poem? Do you think it's true that 'the risks involved were way, way too great'? Why / why not?

5. Having explored different ways of experiencing the poem and the people in it, choose a version of events that feels meaningful or interesting to you. Write a few sentences (or, if you're feeling creative, a poem or a short-short story) about what happens next, starting from where the poem ends. You can use either first-person ('I') or third-person ('he/she/they').

Some suggestions for a classroom setting

- Teachers could invite students to pair up or form small groups to discuss questions 1 & 2 and come up with some answers, which could then be shared with the whole group in a feedback session. Students could report back verbally and the teacher gather and summarise responses (whiteboard, flip-chart, IWB, etc). Alternatively, students could write their responses on Post-it notes which could be then pasted up and viewed / discussed by all. The discussion around question 2 could also be extended to include suggestions of other possible risks, both likely and unlikely / outlandish.

- Question 3 could also be tackled in pairs or small groups, followed by whole group sharing and further discussion. Some suggested feelings (both emotions and physical sensations) might be offered to help students get started. If whole group feedback is used, something like a diamond ranking activity[1] might be introduced to explore which emotions and / or sensations might feel more 'important' or carry more of a sense of urgency.

[1] https://online.visual-paradigm.com/knowledge/brainstorming/what-is-diamond-ranking-strategy

- Question 4 could be a whole class discussion or, to provide variety, teachers could ask students to write a short answer individually, followed by some voluntary sharing of responses.

- Question 5 is intended as an individual writing exercise. Teachers might like to encourage informal forms of writing here, such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue writing. For example, you could ask students to write continuously, without stopping, whatever comes to mind on the topic of 'what happens next' for exactly 3 minutes (which you'll time). This frees everyone up to have an immediate personal response without worrying about 'writing something good'. Afterwards, you could invite students to use their rough notes as the basis for a poem, a short-short story or a piece of prose.

Extension activities

1. The author of 'What I Wanted' has made a short film based on the poem, which you can view at www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone. How does watching the multimedia film affect your experience of the poem? Does it alter your sense of the poem at all, or your feelings about the characters in it? Why / how?

2. Think of a social situation that you feel (or have felt in the past) anxious about. If nothing comes to mind you can imagine one. Take a sheet of paper and divide it into three columns.

   a) In the first column, write down some of your fears about the situation, starting each one with 'What if…'.

   b) In the second column, continue writing 'what if...' fears, but now make them deliberately exaggerated, maybe even bizarre, surreal or comedic.

   c) In the third column, your 'what if…' list is going to be all of the things that could go right, or turn out even better than expected. This time, mix up realistic and surreal examples.

   d) At the end of the exercise, take a few moments to reflect on how it felt for you to work on each of the columns in the exercise.

3. Could you write, draw or make something inspired by your lists in the previous exercise? This might be a poem, a short-short story, a prose snippet, a drawing or painting, a cartoon or comic strip, some music, a video, etc – totally your call!

In a classroom setting

- Question 1 lends itself to a viewing of the film followed by a short group discussion.

- Question 2 is designed as a personal exercise. Students in a classroom setting should be invited to choose an example of relatively low or moderate anxiety, since it's more appropriate in this context to focus on exploring different ways of working with feelings rather than diving into very challenging emotions. Question (d) can include a voluntary invitation to share reflections with the group.

- Question 3 could perhaps be set as a homework exercise, with students invited to share their creations in a 'mini exhibition' in a subsequent session (if they choose to). Students could work on this individually or in pairs.
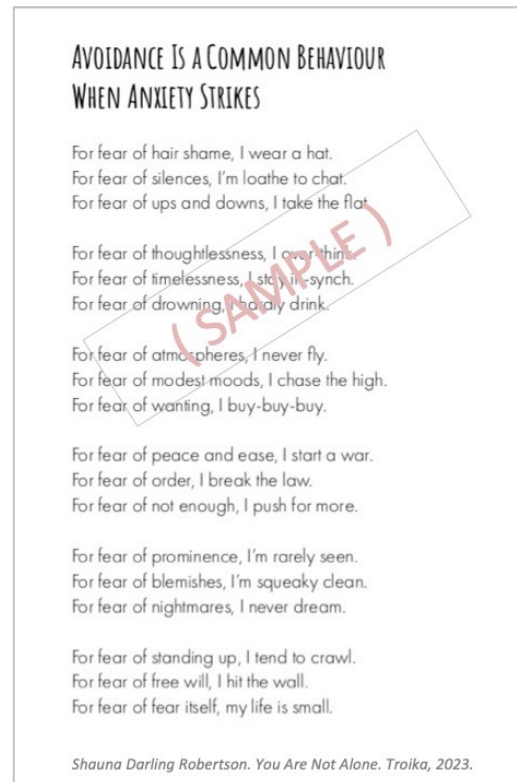
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Poem 2: 'Avoidance Is a Common Behaviour When Anxiety Strikes'
Possible themes: Anxiety | General Anxiety Disorder

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

1. Why might the person in the poem feel anxious about so many different things?

2. To what extent might their habit of avoiding the things they feel fearful or anxious about be either helpful or unhelpful to them? Does your answer depend on what the 'thing' in question is?

3. How do you imagine the person in the poem thinks and feels about their anxiety? Is it okay with them that 'my life is small'?

4. How do the rhythm of the poem and the use of rhyme affect how you relate to the experiences being shared in this poem?

5. The poet has made a short film based on this poem, which you can view at www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone. How does watching the multimedia film affect your experience of the poem? Why / how? How do you feel about the images and the sound / rhythm used?

AVOIDANCE IS A COMMON BEHAVIOUR WHEN ANXIETY STRIKES

For fear of hair shame, I wear a hat.
For fear of silences, I'm loathe to chat.
For fear of ups and downs, I take the flat.

For fear of thoughtlessness, I over-think.
For fear of timelessness, I stay in-synch.
For fear of drowning, I barely drink.

For fear of atmospheres, I never fly.
For fear of modest moods, I chase the high.
For fear of wanting, I buy-buy-buy.

For fear of peace and ease, I start a war.
For fear of order, I break the law.
For fear of not enough, I push for more.

For fear of prominence, I'm rarely seen.
For fear of blemishes, I'm squeaky clean.
For fear of nightmares, I never dream.

For fear of standing up, I tend to crawl.
For fear of free will, I hit the wall.
For fear of fear itself, my life is small.

Shauna Darling Robertson. You Are Not Alone. Troika, 2023.

Some suggestions for a classroom setting

- Students could be asked to pair up or form small groups to discuss questions 1-3. Answers could then be shared with the whole group in a feedback session, either via verbal feedback captured and summarised by the teacher (whiteboard, flip-chart, IWB, etc), or alternatively students could write their responses on Post-it notes which are then posted up and viewed / discussed by all.

- Question 4 could be a short class discussion, and could also be extended to include a wider discussion about how the language and tone (and body language) we use affects how others receive and understand what we're saying.

- Question 5 lends itself to a viewing of the film followed by a short group discussion.

Extension activities

1. Can you make a list of some tools and techniques for handling anxious thoughts and feelings that might be help the person in this poem?

2. Imagine that you're the person in the poem and you're working on overcoming your avoidance behaviours. Instead of dodging the things you're anxious about, you're learning to 'feel the fear and do it anyway'. Write a response to the poem in a similar format, but replacing 'For fear of…' with an opposite. For example:

In spite of nightmares, I dare to dream.
I'm not the sportiest, but join the team.
I'm scared of drowning, but swim the stream.

In a classroom setting

- Question 1 could be quite challenging and so students may need some prompts, suggestions or models. For example, you may wish to explore some common Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) tools for anxiety, tailored specifically for young people (for example, www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheets/anxiety/adolescents).

- Question 2 could be an individual in-class exercise or else a homework assignment, with an invitation (voluntary) to students to read out a few lines or a whole poem to the class. Or, students could write lines from their poems on Post-it notes, which could then arranged into a collective, whole class poem.

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Poem 3: 'Janek Taps the Window Twenty Times'
Possible themes: Anxiety | Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Janek Taps the Window Twenty Times

I've said something stupid, I know it
or I've fired off a text that seemed mean
and that joke I told, did anyone actually laugh

so I tap the window twenty times,
ten with the left index finger, ten with the right,
then I tap out my song –

'Cause I got this
I'm letting it go-go-go
look, it's all gonna be okay

tap tap tap till I've got this,
till it's all (more or less) okay

but I'm always saying dumb stuff
so it's ten with the left index finger, ten with the right

or sometimes (to mix it up) I'll tap out
which gorilla feels sick?
which wildebeest is ill and needs a pill?
or the first five bars of Beethoven's Fifth
and sometimes random lines from A Wrinkle in Time
or every second stop on the Piccadilly Line

my tapping fingers tap the tops of tables, the backs of chairs
the wall, the door, my skull, my thigh

and for sure, my fingers sting
and for sure, my nails are split
and for sure, my ears ring
with the constant sound of tap tap tap

still, I can fill a kettle with one hand
while the other hand taps the sink
and while tapping I can make a sandwich,
write a note, water the plants, feed the cat,
button a shirt, play guitar, catch the 66 bus
as I tap and tap and tap and tap

till I've got this,
till it's all
(more or less)
okay.

Shauna Darling Robertson. You Are Not Alone. Troika, 2023.

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

1. In the first verse, Janek is worrying about how others might respond to his words and actions. Almost everyone has worrisome thoughts sometimes, but how do we know when our thoughts are becoming unhelpful, obsessive or intrusive?
2. What do you think could be the link between Janek's thoughts and his compulsive tapping behaviours?
3. How do you think Janek feels (a) about himself, and (b) about his constant tapping? What clues can you find in the poem that prompt your answers to (a) and (b)?
4. How might the tapping behaviours be helpful and / or unhelpful to Janek? Make a short list of positives and negatives.
5. Do you think that things for Janek are really 'all (more or less) okay'? Why / why not? If not, what do you think Janek could do next?

- Questions 1 & 2 could be structured as a whole group discussion, built around teacher-led prompts or models (e.g. you might like to introduce students to some common 'cognitive distortions' or unhelpful thinking styles, such as: https://balancedtx.com/blog/2018/1/16/10-most-common-cognitive-distortions.

- Students could be asked to pair up or form small groups to discuss questions 3-4. Answers could then be shared verbally with the whole group in a feedback session, with responses captured and summarised by the teacher (whiteboard, flip-chart, IWB, etc).

- Question 5 could be a show of hands followed by a group discussion of ideas. Ideas shared verbally could be summarised by the teacher as above, with perhaps a final show-of-hands vote on the ideas proposed.

Extension activities

1. If you were Janek's friend and you began to notice his compulsive tapping behaviours, how do you think you might respond?

2. How do you think Janek might react to your response?

In a classroom setting

- You may wish to explore questions 1 & 2 via role-play. Students could be asked to work in pairs. One person plays Janek and the other plays Janek's friend. The friend initiates a conversation in which they tell Janek that they've noticed his behaviours. The teacher could take the 'friends' aside first and invite them to take different approaches (eg. concerned, curious, judgemental, scoffing, offering advice, etc). They could also take the 'Janeks' aside and suggest a range of different response styles (eg. defensive, denying, receptive, emotional, angry, etc).

- Pairs could then feed back their experiences to the wider group, and this could evolve into a wider discussion around talking about our mental health and wellbeing, and approaches to helping someone to seek help (eg. www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/helping-someone-else-seek-help; www.pookyknightsmith.com/podcast-tips-for-talking-to-someone-about-their-mental-health).

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Additional resources

Some other poems in *You Are Not Alone* that could be used to explore themes related to anxiety include:

- 'In That Year Our Language Changed Along With Our Lives' – the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 'Jasmin's Ladder of Gradual Exposure' – phobias, panic, exposure therapy.
- 'The Chronic Recruitment of the Autonomic Nervous System' – post-traumatic stress.
- 'We Have Been Optimized' – performance anxiety, parental expectations and pressure.
- 'As If I Should Know by Now' – major life choices at a young age (education, career).
- 'Infobesity' – information overload, burnout.

Exploring the topic further

Most people feel nervous, fearful or anxious at various times, and many of us feel self-conscious or shy in front of others in certain social situations. Some people also struggle with anxiety disorders, such as generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety or social phobia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, among others.

You may wish to draw on some of the resources that are available online from various mental health charities and organisations. Some of these are listed below (note: you'll need to copy and paste some of the longer URLs into your browser).

www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/anxiety

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/about-anxiety

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/anxiety-disorders

www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/anxiety

www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/supporting-a-young-person-struggling-with-anxiety

https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/anxiety

www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/how-to-have-a-conversation-with-young-people-about-mental-health

www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/blog - an excellent blog where young people share their real stories on a range of mental health topics

www.anxietyuk.org.uk