

# Dear Diary: Catharsis and Narratives of Aloneness in Adolescents' Diaries

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## Abstract

*This research is designed to shed light on the subjective experience and the healing quality of diary writing during adolescence. At the focus are three women, today aged between 25 and 27, Liron, Yifat and Rotem, and their adolescent diaries. A model of diary catharsis is offered in order to examine the diary writing process. The methodology is qualitative and is based on aesthetic-narrative inquiry in which aesthetic content analysis was conducted on the diary texts according to the diary catharsis model. Finally, two in-depth interviews with each woman added to the understanding of the experience of diary writing from their unique perspectives. Research findings attest to fractional catharsis in adolescent diary writing and reveal its healing quality. The experience of diary writing exposes narratives which express the somatic and aesthetic experience of diary writing – loneliness, relationships with parents, sexuality, aloneness and the need to communicate with God.*

## Introduction to the Concept of Catharsis and Diary Writing

The thin paper skin of a diary usually breathes the dense air of a drawer or an attic. Forgotten and neglected, the diary continues its life as an inner representation of adolescence. But what does a diary contain? What are the secrets, the healing moments which enabled its writer to experience endless devotion?

The aim of this research is to shed light on the process of catharsis in the diary writing of three adolescent young women. We wanted to understand the essence of the subjective experience and the healing quality of adolescent diary writing.

Writing a diary usually takes place inside a room, alone, almost secretly,

during the everyday adolescent routine. It is a unique act of creating meaning with physical, emotional and cognitive features. Diary writing during adolescence invites its writer to become an adult reader who sets up an inner dialogue. In this research, we would like to look at the dialogue within the diaries and understand their healing quality using the concept of catharsis as containing the dialectical components of the diary writing process. What are the idiosyncrasies of the diary catharsis?

The term catharsis originally appears in Chapter Six of Aristotle's Poetics where it is associated with pity and fear and is clearly related to the effect or end purpose of the tragedy's affective power (Schonemann, 2006). Aristotle's view of the nature and function of catharsis has been very controversial (Abdulla, 1985). It has been used in many different fields of knowledge expressing a process of inner change which mentally stimulates the spectator / the patient / the reader and causes emotional, cognitive and moral purification. But different theoretical fields emphasize different components and different conditions for the process of creating catharsis. In drama, the catharsis is defined as an aesthetic experience for the spectator, taking place when optimal aesthetic distance exists between the spectator and the stage. The term optimal aesthetic distance:

*'refers to a point located at midrange between the two extremes. It is essentially a psychological mechanism employed by the viewer of any artistic creation when viewing an artistic object that arouses emotions because of its resemblance to something in the viewer's reality.'*

(Schonmann, 2006, p.134)

In the field of psychology, the term catharsis emphasizes dialectical components such as frustration and relaxation (Ferenczi, 1930; Berman, 2003) and the verbal dimension of catharsis is presented as inherent in the therapeutic experience (Freud and Breuer, 1895). A different approach towards catharsis as an interdisciplinary therapeutic tool is offered by Scheff (1979) who stressed everyday catharsis and described it for the first time as a linear process of four stages which creates a psychological change. These stages include a stressful event, optimal aesthetic distance, a physical-mental component and a cognitive-emotional component.

The connection between catharsis and the diary writing seems almost intuitive and little has been written about it. The concept of diary writing in the field of writing therapy has evoked different points of view. On the one hand, the concept deals with the three main characteristics of diary writing: inner dialogue, which the writer creates within her inner world and her body;

continuous dialogue, which the writer creates with her past life story; and transformation, which accrued within the writer's narrative, experience and perspective towards him/herself (DeSalvo, 1999). A continuous perspective encompasses three types of writing: descriptive, the most common type which the writer uses in order to describe life events; expressive, the writer uses this type in order to describe her feelings and emotional states; and reflective, the writer uses this type when thinking and reaching insights about herself. The combination of expressive and descriptive writing is known to contribute to the physical and mental well-being of the writer (Pennebaker, 1997). On the other hand, theories about adolescent diary writing deal with the character of the writer and not with the writing process itself. Most of the writers are girls aged around 14 to 16 who treat the diary as an imaginary friend and as a transitional object. As such, they report feelings of loneliness and aloneness (Sosin, 1983; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, 1997).

Although, as stated, adolescents usually report feelings of loneliness, they often cite the positive aspect of loneliness which is aloneness (Wiseman, 1995). Aloneness enables the adolescent to experience quality time with herself, reflecting and enjoying her inner journey towards rediscovering her identity (Marcoen and Gossens, 1993). The sense of aloneness may enrich the diary writing experience by offering the writer new reflective perspectives. The diary writing act itself, which usually occurs alone behind a closed door, invites the writer to make her own verbal inner journey which inherently includes cathartic elements.

During adolescence, a girl's inner voice is authentic, powerful and uncompromising, in contrast to her muffled voice as an adult (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). Her written voice expresses her adolescence as a period of great emotional and cognitive development. Thus, catharsis in diary writing uses the everyday writing process as a way to create a narrative which aids the writer to process everyday crises (Speedy, 2004; Schafer, 1993).

## **The Model of Diary Catharsis as a Multi-Stage Process**

Analyzing the written adolescent diary voices of three young women, we have attempted to understand the experience of diary writing and its healing quality. Accordingly, we offer a model of diary catharsis (Rottenberg- Rosler, 2005) which includes new perspectives of catharsis, aloneness and diary writing in adolescence by integrating different theories of catharsis based on Scheff (1979), Abdulla (1985) and concepts of adolescent diary writing (Pennebaker, 1997; DeSalvo, 1999; Sosin, 1983). The diary catharsis is multi-staged:

*First stage: Distress description* – The writer uses descriptive writing to express an experience of distress she is experiencing.

*Second stage: Physical-emotional catharsis* – The writer decomposes her experience verbally and physically using expressive writing and inner dialogue. She uses verbs of doing and feeling, asking herself questions or writing to an imaginary audience.

*Third stage: Cognitive-emotional catharsis* – The writer expresses herself reflectively, conducting a continuous dialogue and seeking insight into her experience. She experiences a new and wider perspective of herself, and frequently uses verbs of thought, creating an imaginary audience and a dialogue with her past experience.

Fulfillment of catharsis involves ultimate insights and positive feelings, including relief, control, relaxation, enjoyment and the will to communicate. These indicate the existence of optimal aesthetic distance.

## **Research Method**

The aesthetic-narrative aspects of diary writing suggest the use of both aesthetic and narrative research. The aesthetic way of knowing is based on formal aesthetic qualities (Eisner, 1993). It is relevant for a variety of life situations in the sense that aesthetic experience is a way of creating meaning in everyday life and thus, is not limited to the world of art (Greene, 1995). The lens of the aesthetic way of knowing enables an understanding of the artistic and therapeutic character of diary writing (Eisner, 2004; Schonmann, 2001). The method emphasizes the theatrical way of knowing as a tool for analyzing adolescents' diaries based on the concept of catharsis (Schonmann, 2006). Narrative research investigates the way we create meaning in our everyday experiences by telling stories (Bruner, 1990). Narrative contains the complexity and the contradictions of life and the narrative way of knowing assists in enabling an individual to know herself (Josselson and Lieblich, 1995). The hermeneutic roots of narrative and aesthetic research create meaning as a daily human experience (Josselson, 1995).

The approach to the diary text is based on Berman's (1993) ideas about reading a literary text. He suggests that psychoanalytic reading requires abandoning the pretentious attitude of a therapist towards 'disturbed' figures (or authors). The reader should let the literature be the 'therapist', as the reading process enables observation of other qualities of the writer's and the reader's inner worlds. Therefore, we have examined the unique qualities in the diaries which shed light on the adolescent writer and her way of creating meaning in her daily life.

The research is based on both diaries of the three adolescents and indepth interviews. The diaries have been analyzed using aesthetic-narrative methods which enable triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The two sources of data were integrated, using multiple methods which enriched the researcher's understanding of complexity, details and context (Mason, 2002).

## **The Participants and Research Stages**

The research focuses on three women aged between 25 and 27, named Liron, Yifat and Rotem, and their adolescent diaries. Obtaining the diaries and getting participants' cooperation was not an easy task as it involved exposure of privacy. The procedure can be divided into stages. In the first stage, the participants agreed to take part in the research after hearing about it from people they knew and expressing their willingness to contribute their diaries. In the second stage, we phoned the participants and asked them to re-read their diaries and decide whether or not they would be willing to participate in the research. The re-reading process was complicated for many women who decided not to take part at this stage. This inherently indicates the research limitations as participants were only women who were willing to expose themselves through their diaries. We then had a preliminary meeting with participants who entrusted their precious diaries to us. Anonymity was assured by changing all personal details. In the fourth stage, the diaries were analyzed by content units containing expressions of physical, emotional and relational feelings. The writers were then interviewed twice, a general interview about their lives and a more specific interview about their diary writing experiences in adolescence. In the sixth stage, the diary and interview content analysis were presented to the participants to obtain their approval.

## **The Aesthetic Research Aspects**

The content analysis of the diaries is based on a diary catharsis model in which the creative-artistic diary writing and its therapeutic qualities are observed. The diary texts were analyzed as follows:

1. Texts taken from the diaries.
2. A description of the visual elements of the diary text assuming that visual changes in the handwriting reflect inner feelings (Bolton, Allan and Drucquer, 2004).
3. Analyzing the diaries in terms of the model of diary writing catharsis as a multi-stage process.
4. Discussing the healing quality of the catharsis and its aesthetic

distance as expressed by the writer in the specific text.

## The Narrative Research Aspects

Two in-depth interviews using the diaries were conducted and analyzed. The first was semi-structured and invited the adult woman to narrate her life story and create a dialogue with her inner adolescent self. This enabled an understanding of the woman's experience of diary writing from her own unique perspective in the context of her life story. The second interview continued the first and focused on analysis of the diary according to the model of diary catharsis as a multi-stage process. The process was explained to the writer in order to let her participate in the research process as an equal partner (Elbaz-Lubish, 2001). Content analysis of the first interview was based on the model for reading and analyzing narratives developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) which employs a holistic approach towards a text. The content analysis of the second interview was based on categorical analysis (Shkedi, 2003). The interviews were conducted by a bibliotherapist which helped to create a bridge between the sensitive therapeutic issues of the women writers and the academic interview. Ethical considerations required keeping the information confidential and turning research participation into therapy when necessary (Kvale, 2003).

## Findings

### Rotem's Diary: 'I Have a Stage in my Head'

Rotem, 25 years old, wrote her diary when she was 13-14. It was filed in a daily appointment diary. The following excerpt was taken from the middle of the diary and is quoted in the order in which it was written.

Sept. 1, 1993

*'Hi,*

*I am in my room. Today, that is, yesterday, Shlomit slept over – Wow! I really love that girl. I am now reading The Diary of Anne Frank and it would be nice if, in another ten years, this diary was published...But I am not writing it for what others will think or whatever will be in the future, but rather what is now and whatever I feel like writing. To document myself and what happens to me. So yesterday I met Yuval and his friends and they were so sweet and one of them, Alon, I think he wants a serious relationship with me...we'll see!*

*I feel like writing some more so I'll turn to another page... I don't know if I wrote this, but I don't think the girls in Kfar Ruppin are worth being friends with, and I am sorry that Osnat is getting to be like them. For the meanwhile, I get along with Osnat, but we are not friends like we used to be. Lots of things don't interest her – why do people make such an effort to be bored? I am never bored – I mean it!! I can even be interested in this page and even ...anything!!!*

*Two days ago I spoke to Avi and I told him that I was sorry that we weren't friends any more and we talked for a while and now everything has been worked out and I think we will come back to each other. I hope that my relationship with Osnat will improve and that everything will be great. I haven't prayed for a long time, so now I will do it, I will make a prayer:*

*Dear God!*

*Keep on being good to me in most ways.*

*Help me with my friends and with the boys.*

*Help me with the teachers too, and everything will be fine,*

*And in basketball and with everything!*

*I am at the age of crises and problems*

*Help me not to cross the boundaries*

*Just be good to me – the kid who sends you her love...*

*Wow...expressing all of my feelings really helped me and now I can*

*go to sleep peacefully...I'll just lie down to rest.*

*God-*

*Help me to know sides that I don't know*

*And to open up more to friends*

*And especially – to be happy.*

*Yes. Give me back the happiness that I've lost!*

*And help me also with my diet!*

*Yours forever,*

(Diary Excerpt from Rotem)

*Text Appearance:* The excerpt is closely written, of uniform size and in red ink, four pages in length.

*Cathartic Process:*

*Stage One. Description of Distress:* Rotem begins by writing descriptively: 'I am now in my room', and continues reflectively about The Diary of Anne Frank and her own diary. In a continuing dialogue she imagines how, in another few years, her diary will be published as well, and she declares that the goal of her writing is documentation. She continues by describing the events of the previous day and addresses the imaginary readers and herself, saying, 'I am never bored – I mean it!! I can even be interested in this page and even ...' This sentence expresses a sense of scorn for the diary.

*Stage Two. Physical- Emotional Catharsis:* 'I haven't prayed for a long time, so now I will do it, I will write my prayer'. In turning to God, Rotem begins an internal dialogue. She composes her prayer and in it, she expresses her anxieties: 'I am at the age of crises and problems. Help me not to cross the boundaries'. The appeal to God is a request for help 'with my friends and with the boys... with the teachers'. It seems clear that Rotem experiences verbal emotional catharsis in her inner dialogue with God.

*Stage Three. Cognitive-Emotional Catharsis:* 'Wow...writing down my feelings really helped me and now I can go to sleep calmly...I'll just lie down to rest'. After the release comes the 'calmness', the peacefulness, the sense of relief and the feeling of renewed control. Rotem ends again with an appeal to God and asks for help, so that in the words 'yours forever', it is not clear whether they are directed to God or to her diary. At the side of the page, on the bottom, she writes diagonally: 'And help with the diet, too' as a continuing dialogue in the diary.

*The Healing Power of the Process:* The catharsis is fractionally fulfilled in the process. Rotem describes her difficulties by documenting the events of her life and her surroundings as she has defined the purpose of writing the diary for herself. On the last page, in the catharsis stage, she appeals to God and expresses her feelings in her inner dialogue mediated by him, and in her expressive writing. The aesthetic distance between Rotem and her text is ambivalent and moves between optimal aesthetic distance resulting from the feeling of emotional control she describes and aesthetic under-distance stemming from the sense of 'expressing all of her feelings', the loss of control



and scorn for her writing. At the end of her entry, she moves between a feeling of relief and an appeal to regain her happiness.

The interview with Rotem began with a description of her ambivalence towards diary writing despite the reference to The Diary of Anne Frank in the entry quoted above.

*'I don't remember what led me to begin to write a diary. But I remember that I didn't like books which were diaries... Anne Frank was not an inspirational character for me'*

(Interview with Rotem)

It is clear that in the relationship between Rotem and her diary, she moved between feeling devaluation and pride as she mentions in her interview when she says 'this page...expressing my feelings...', and between the diary as a source of pride when facing the readers: 'What a special girl I am'.

While looking through the diary, she quoted from a poem by Yona Wallach, 'I have a stage in my head' and related to the imaginary audience who had accompanied her writing. Rotem's diary functions as a public 'visiting card' inviting her friend to visit her inner world. However, sometimes she had unexpected visitors, such as her mother:

*'The diary was not personal enough...I was really living the people. I remember them more than I remember myself. Because it seems that I was living them more than I was myself (...) there was something public in it...and this diary was inside a regular calendar diary. Something that I took with me to school. To the class trip. Not something that stayed at home...It was me. A kind of visiting card. People read it (...). It could have fallen into the hands of people to whom I had no intention of showing it. My mother, for example, is a very prying person and she reads everything with no shame. And in general, it could have happened. She also always put my room in order. It is possible that I was afraid to expose myself more due to fear of exposing myself too much because she might read it'*

(Interview with Rotem)

During the interview, Rotem was moved at the meeting between herself today and herself as a teenager, while being undecided as to how much to expose herself to the interviewer: She stated 'what made me happy about the meeting with you is that I began to read diaries again'. The portrayal of Rotem

as a young girl shows 'the stage in her head' for her personal-public diary reflects the theme of identity moving between the desire for exclusivity and the wish to create a link with significant others. The character of the diary as personal-public contributed to its creation of an aesthetic under-distance while it was being written and thus, Rotem felt that she was not free enough to write everything that she wanted to.

### **Yifat's Diary: 'My Diary which is Always at my Side'**

Yifat is a religious woman, 27 years old. Her diary was written between the ages 15 to 17. The following excerpt is taken from the beginning of her diary:

*'To my diary!*

*I received my report card: 8.2. It's good, at least for me. I didn't cry but now I am about to cry. Mom said a word or two but in general my report card is not up to their standard. So...Dad didn't say anything that serious. So what if I didn't get a 10 in mathematics. That doesn't mean that I didn't make an effort. It doesn't mean that it wasn't difficult for me and that I tried hard. It just doesn't mean that.*

*For them everything is superficial.*

*I'm now the worst kid in the house, and I think the most important thing for me now is to get out or to close myself up in my room and calm down a bit. Mom and dad are really getting on my nerves. I want freedom. I feel as though they are sitting on my head – some air, my head aches, move away from me, get farther away from me physically and emotionally. That's my only request from them. If I didn't have my own room, my nerves would certainly have already been on edge today. But I'm lucky that I can close myself off between the four walls (they always say that's bad but, believe me, it's great – usually).*

*It hurt me that he didn't say anything. It hurt me when he looked me in the eye and lied that he hadn't seen my diary and I hate his character, the lies, and I am afraid that in the end, it will be hatred for him. Everything he does for me isn't worth anything if he can't tell me the truth, if he lies to me in my face even when I have all of the evidence. He hardly even tried to deny that he opened my diary,*

*something so personal. Let him see me naked, but my diary is the heart and soul of my feelings and because they aren't hung outside on my door that is, they are not for the public. Because yesterday at the branch with Maor, I was hypnotized and all day I was thinking about him. I really ♥ him!*

*Bye bye*

*With a heart*

*So painful and hurt*

*Yifat*

*I really love you. You are so understanding even though you have no heart or feelings.'*

(Diary Excerpt from Yifat)

*Text Appearance:* The text takes up two closely written pages. The writing is uniform, in blue ball-point pen.

*Catharsis Process:*

*Stage One. Description of Distress:* From the beginning of the text Yifat describes her problems with her parents. She expresses her anger towards them and describes them as superficial in contrast to the depths of her distress.

*Stage Two. Physical-Emotional Catharsis:* Yifat expresses the desire to relieve her distress by crying, even at the beginning of her diary. Her physical feelings are brought up in expressive writing so that she carries on an inner dialogue with her bodily feelings and with the imaginary audience, her father and her mother: 'Get farther away from me physically and emotionally'. The possibility of being 'closed up between four walls' and writing in her room relieves Yifat and enables her to calm down. It appears that Yifat frequently uses verbs of action in contrast to verbs expressing feelings. Yifat writes expressively about a case of looking into her diary. She does not describe the details but writes of her feelings in verbs which express emotion – 'hate'. She feels exposed and wounded. Seeing her diary is more invasive than seeing her when she is in the nude. This stage of the diary is written in crowded, closely written dense lines testifying to Yifat's emotional and physical burden.

*Stage Three. Cognitive-Emotional Catharsis:* 'With a heart so painful and hurt', Yifat completes her text. She feels disappointed with those around her and does not want to communicate with anyone. On the other hand, she

appeals to her diary and is grateful for the fact that it sees into her heart and understands. Thus, Yifat experiences emotional relief and a sense of containment through her diary, which makes her feel better. The relief is described in a small corner of the page and reflects the extent of the pain which has taken over the page.

*The Healing Power of the Process:* Yifat describes her physical and emotional distress at length, regarding her relations with her parents and her pain at having her diary looked at. In contrast, there are two sources which afford her relief and happiness: The first is the boy she is in love with and the second is her diary, which, despite the fact that it lacks feelings, understands what is in her heart. Thus, Yifat gains partial relief from her distress. The aesthetic under-distance between Yifat and the text expresses the emotional storm which she describes and fractional fulfillment of catharsis, considering her ending on a note of pain, diluted with the sense of communication and partial relief experienced by Yifat while writing her diary.

The Interview with Yifat opens as Yifat leafs through her diary. 'I don't know. Today the diary seems a bit ridiculous to me, with all the dramatics and such'. At the beginning of the renewed meeting between Yifat and her diary, she feels ridicule towards and severance from the diary. However, as a part of the continuation of the interview, Yifat presents contrasting feelings towards her diary:

*'The diary was something very significant, like mine, immediate, elementary (...) This diary was a source of relief, someone to speak to, but not really (... ) I feel that the diary helped me to express my feelings as I always felt that no one was listening to me'*

(Interview with Yifat)

The intimacy that was created between Yifat and her diary came up as a central theme. The diary fulfilled the functions of attention and containment in her life. During the interview, while reading the diary, she analyzed her writing:

*'I missed you very much'. This appeal from the beginning contains something calming, as if the diary was an object which I missed, when I returned to it. I see how much I turned to the diary as a person. It was really another individual for me, I asked it 'Give me a sign that you are with me!'*

(Interview with Yifat!)

Yifat felt connected to her diary as if it was a person to spend time with. In the interview she shared the experience of writing which was imprinted upon her:

*'I remember that I would write like, at the time I was feeling something, not afterwards. It was very authentic. Usually I also wrote very messily. And I actually liked that because it was part of what I was feeling (...) Let's say that I argued with my parents and I immediately went to my room to write'*

(Interview with Yifat)

Yifat's parents play an important role in her diary writing experience. During the interview Yifat brought up the fact that her father had looked at the diary and although many years had passed she is still bothered that someone had read her diaries.

*'I once left my diary on my bed and my father read it. It doesn't matter, my father could have read and kept quiet. But one day he said something and I understood that he had read it. I was really terribly hurt by that...It was a very significant event in my relations with him.*

*I mull over it all the time, about what I still want to do with them, with the diaries. If I die, let's say, what to tell my life partner'*

(Interview with Yifat)

The portrait of Yifat as a young girl, as derived from her diary, shows that it was always there at her side. The physical presence of her diary granted it real human qualities and, simultaneously, gave Yifat a sense of acceptance and containment. During moments of distress and crisis, Yifat found refuge among the pages of her diary which absorbed the tension, the anxiety and the salty tears unconditionally. The aesthetic under-distance which existed between Yifat and her diary stems from its being the place in which she could lose control and experience an emotional tempest. In the second part of the interview, after reading the initial analysis of the diary, Yifat says:

*'When I see it that way, it gives me less of the feeling that it was pathetic, when I see it printed, like in books. It gives me the feeling of being a writer, as though I am worthy'*

(Interview with Yifat)

### **Liron's Diary: 'Diary Butterflies in my Stomach'**

Liron is 27 years old and her diary stretches over seven years, from the age of 8 to 15. The excerpt which was analyzed comes from the time when she was 13-14 years old. Each page in the diary notebook had been completely filled in and when handing over the diary for the research, its last part was wrapped up and hidden.

'04/04/91

*Hi,*

*Again, I have butterflies in my stomach. All of the self-confidence I once had has disappeared. I was completely insecure all the time, with butterflies in my stomach and then there was a break. I felt self confident. I didn't have butterflies in my stomach any more and I felt good about myself! But now it's come back. Hell, I feel worthless again. I was idiotic and stupid. Instead of being satisfied that Benny, Uri, and Nadav were paying attention to me, communicating with me and bothering me, I wanted more and more. I couldn't be satisfied with what I had and now it's all gone, Benny, We're not in contact. Uri, too. Yuval doesn't come around any more. He used to come by all the time until I began to say idiotic things. I am really sorry but you can't turn back time. It's gone; no one pays attention to me or ever will pay attention. I'm stupid and disgusting. I had it coming, but I'm still sorry. But what did I do? I'm sick of it, and I want to cry. I'll just cry! But the tears don't come; only the fluids in my stomach are churning. I don't want to close you and go to sleep because then, all the terrible thoughts will come and then, my stomach will flutter four times as much. I hate the nights. If I am not with a friend I am completely exhausted. Then I stay awake with all the self-criticism and the butterflies which stopped for a while but now are back. I hate myself. I am a failure with tons of perspiration sores on my face. Whoever says I am pretty is simply blind. I'm sick and tired of everything, especially of myself, and I want to cry. But the tears don't come out. Only pain from my heart comes out. Only my stomach tells me that. I guess that when I want to cry I just can't. And because of that, only my stomach gives me away. My stomach shows who I am. My stomach makes me feel like garbage. My stomach, or more correctly, the fluids*

*in my stomach. I am terrible and stupid, and because of Yuval, I am so sorry. I'd like to cry. I don't want to go to sleep, and then everything will come back to me. You know the reason for the changing moods in my body. It's the hormones. Increased activity of the hormones in my body. I hate that. It's disgusting that the body works that way against us! Crummy hormones! Yesterday I had a dream about Yoav. Such a strange dream, a dream ----- If I don't cry, I won't feel better. "You're horny." Those words are still in my head. Even if we come back, no one will pay any attention to me. Oh diary, how I don't want to leave, but the lines are going on and the page is getting shorter and I feel like going to the fridge and finishing everything in it and everything I ate at grandma's. Food is comfort, it's good, but...everyone thinks I'm thin, but that's nonsense. Wait till they see me in a bathing suit! OK, bye from the humiliated Liron who's in a terrible mood, really depressed, who wants to cry but it doesn't come out, so I'll go, from the depressed me'.*

(Diary Excerpt from Liron)

**Text Description:** Two closely written pages. The handwriting is unclear, written with a light blue pen.

#### **Analysis of the Catharsis:**

**Stage One. Description of distress:** From the beginning, Liron states that she is unhappy. 'Again I have butterflies in my stomach'. This returns as a metaphor for her distress. She writes descriptively of her feeling that she is not loved any more and describes herself as 'terrible, stupid, disgusting'.

**Stage Two: Physical-Emotional Catharsis:** Liron carries on an inner dialogue with herself. 'But what did I do?' She does not manage to physically decompose herself from her feelings, so she feels them in her stomach and she is unable to cry. Thus, writing in her diary becomes necessary. 'I don't want to close you...my stomach will flutter four times as much'. The written words enable the butterflies to make her stomach flutter, rather than 'terrible thoughts' appearing in her head. She expresses her feelings with a physical description and she uses many verbs which express feeling and doing. In the end, the physical feelings even gain control over her emotions so that, despite her invitation to her stomach for a dialogue, she receives no response.

**Stage Three. Cognitive-Emotional Catharsis:** Liron continues her

reflective writing and appeals to her diary. 'You know the reason for...' She expresses her lack of control both in the writing about her body and her mention of a dream which she fears to describe. Using reflective writing, she tries to impose order on the changes taking place in her body, but even her writing is subject to the limits of the page: 'The page is getting shorter'. A sense of lack of control can also be seen in her desire for food and for comfort. Thinking about her outer appearance leaves her with difficult feelings of humiliation, depression and failure. Liron does not reach fulfillment at this stage and she does not experience relief.

*The Healing Power of the Process:* The process of catharsis through writing is only fractionally fulfilled for Liron. With 'butterflies in her stomach' Liron writes a dialogue taking place among the organs of her body - her eyes which do not cry, her stomach which flutters and her mouth which wants to eat. None of her organs achieve fulfillment, nor does Liron achieve catharsis. While writing, she fills the page, and even writes in the margins. Her desire to eat everything in the refrigerator and to fill up the emptiness inside herself is expressed by her attempt to completely fill up the empty page. The great amount of expressive writing and the inner dialogue testify to the aesthetic under-distance which exists in her writing and which contributes to the fractional fulfillment of the process of catharsis.

The interview with Liron began as she leafed through the diary and reached the parts which were hidden. 'I'd be interested in seeing what I wrote here, how hysterical I was when I gave you the diary'. Liron tore off the wrapping and the diary was exposed. She began to read excitedly, noting the excerpt was about anorexia:

*'Today the nurse told me that I have a problem. I eat too little...I'd like to die. I am sick of it, my diary...My family is falling apart (...) Look at that, my parents are really terrible. They didn't pay attention to anything, not to anorexia and not to anything'*

(Diary Excerpt from Liron)

While re-reading the diary, she opened an inner dialogue with her painful past. Liron reflected upon herself being anorexic:

*'It makes me laugh because I read that there was a problem but I refuse to accept the problem. This anorexia signifies some kind of endurance. I say to myself, you didn't have that much endurance.'*

(Interview with Liron)



Re-reading the diary has affected Liron's relations with her parents. Liron used the diary text as a testimony to her narrative truth while she read it to her mother.

*'After reading the diary, before I gave it to you, I called my mother and I read her things about food – she is in denial and said that nothing like that ever happened. Only after arguing with her for a time she said that it was possible that she had been in such a bad state herself that she couldn't help me'*

(Interview with Liron)

The ability to read parts of the diary to her mother enabled Liron to process content with her mother which had been unresolved from adolescence. Another important relationship is the one Liron described between her and her diary, the physical dimensions of the diary experience reflected as a mystical ceremony/prayer:

*'I felt that it was someone I could talk to, to tell it about food and about the other problems in my life. Writing helped me; I remember that I used to feel better after writing, that I would cry and write (...) I remember very well my physical feelings when writing. It was a kind of expressing my pain in writing...like there was someone who heard and listened and maybe things would be different because of my writing...a mystical attribution, like there are those who pray to God. I believed that I was writing and that would help'*

(Interview with Liron).

The fear of someone else reading the diary came up in connection with the research and the exposure of the diary:

*'Do you know why I covered up that part? Because I was afraid that if you saw that part, you would think less of me. And then, when we spoke...I felt differently.'*

(Interview with Liron)

Between Liron and her diary, there was aesthetic under-distance which was expressed in her sense that 'the diary is me'. She felt a lack of separation between her and what was written in the diary and thus, the extent of the process of catharsis was narrowed in her writing experience. The image of Liron as an adolescent which derives from the diary is, on the one

hand, sadness, pain and despair, and on the other, obligation to the writing, a call for help and the creation of a relationship. The intensive and deep relationship which Liron developed with her diary helped her to contain her difficulties.

## **Discussion**

In this discussion we examine the research findings pointing at fractional catharsis in adolescent diary writing and its healing quality. We discuss the narratives which express the unique experiences of diary writing: loneliness, relationships with parents, sexuality, aloneness and the need to communicate with God and with the diary.

### **Fractional Catharsis in Adolescent Diary Writing and its Healing Quality**

We found that catharsis fulfillment is usually fractional in the sense that transformation is never fully achieved. The diary writing accompanies the adolescent through a period of continual change and insight, as the healing process slowly penetrates the psyche and body. We found support for the theories which perceive the diary as a source of comfort and selfempowerment, helping the adolescent to deal with the everyday challenges of life (Sosin, 1983; Seiffge-Krenke, 1997). Findings also stress the function of the diary as a source of emotions and thoughts: ambivalence, self devaluation, shame, envy and hate, all of which are hard to bear.

Catharsis is inherent during adolescence as a time of great emotional and cognitive development. Diary writing helps to develop a creative way of reaching everyday fractional catharsis. It may create a strong impact, but simultaneously it is a muted daily experience bringing relief and insight. In writing her diary, the adolescent practices her ability to relax and to cope with the dialectical challenges life presents.

The diary catharsis model suggested in this article has been expanded and indicates three important conditions enabling diary catharsis. Firstly, as found in previous research, aesthetic distance plays a major role in the writing process (Scheffe, 1979; Abdulla, 1985). The environment has a salient influence on creating the inspiring atmosphere for diary writing. The three diaries indicate under-distance as most prevalent between the diaries and the writers who usually feel that 'the diary is me'. As Liron wrote in her diary, 'sometimes you are ashamed of yourself, so you don't tell the diary, because the diary is you'. Yifat also wrote about the distance between her diary and herself, 'my diary is my heart and my psyche...they are not for publication'. In the process of writing, under-distance is reflected in the dominance of emotional and descriptive writing. In contrast, when the writer was using

reflective writing, optimal aesthetic distance was achieved and a continuous dialogue helped her to integrate ambivalence and to feel relief. Secondly, the use of reflective writing was found to be crucial to achieving insight and creating an inner discourse. Reflective writing makes it possible to experience cathartic fulfillment. This is an important addition to Pennebaker's (1997) theory which focuses on use of expressive and descriptive writing types and their contribution to physical and mental wellbeing. Finally, in order to fulfill diary catharsis, the writer must experience at least two of the three stages mentioned in the diary catharsis model, the description of distress, the physical-emotional catharsis and the emotional-cognitive catharsis. Physicalemotional catharsis is of special importance and is characterized by expressive writing and inner dialogue with the body. As Liron wrote: 'I want to cry, I have butterflies in my stomach all the time, non-stop, I feel lousy, I want to throw it all up'. The cognitive-emotional catharsis is also important as it facilitates an external perspective towards the writer's crisis.

### **The Subjective Experience of Diary Writing as Reflected in the Diary's Ambivalence Narratives**

The writers have created an autonomous space within the paper walls of the diary, helping them to safely express their ambivalence narratives. These wander among the experiences of loneliness, touching upon themes of sexuality, relationships with parents, positive aloneness and the wish to create a relationship with God and with the diary.

As found previously, adolescent narratives of loneliness and aloneness were found to be meaningful in all three diaries (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke, 1997) and the writers shared negative feelings towards their parents, usually their fathers. The diaries of Yifat and Liron contain frequent reference to parents and family members. Rotem's diary contains fewer narratives about her parents, but she interestingly noted during the interview that her mother, the unauthorized reader of the diary, was an 'experienced intruder'. Liron deals with her complex relationship with her parents through her diary writing and in her re-reading the diary as an adult. She expresses her lonely feelings, 'I had a serious fight with dad and then we made up, I don't know who am I any more, I feel that the rest of the world is against me'. Her past writing is echoed in her present adult feelings towards her parents, 'they didn't notice me'. Yifat writes mostly about her father and her critical feelings towards him. 'That's my father: The more arrogant he is, the more his morality diminishes'. She is angry about her father reading her diary and denying that he had done so, but feels angry at both of her parents. 'I understood that we would never understand each other... since I cannot leave home I will avoid talking with them'. As an adult, she considers that her father's reading of the diary 'was a

formative event in their relationship'. All of the adult women discuss their parents in the context of loneliness during their adolescence.

Significant others are mentioned in the diaries in sexual narratives. The writers secretly express their fantasies and let their imaginations run free. Rotem writes implicitly. 'This way x and y found themselves corresponding, talking on the phone and even ...kissing'. Liron is discussing her interaction with potential partners. 'They think I have big breasts. I was standing next to Yuval and I was thinking that he was attracted to me. Maybe it's my imagination'. Yifat writes more about her feelings of love toward Shalom, the boy she is in love with, but does not deal with physical elements of sexuality. This avoidance might result from her religiosity. The theme of sexuality usually appears linked to frustration and loneliness, as Liron repeats in her narrative, 'no one notices me...I'm nothing'.

Despite the negative emotional experiences, we view the dialectical ability of the diary to express both positive aloneness and the wish to create relationships. All three writers try to communicate with God. This is in accordance with Freud's (1930) argument that the godly presence provides the human psyche with the sense of an existing paternal entity who enriches and takes care of it. God is portrayed as someone who hears the writers' written voices, so the act of writing to him expresses emotions, prayers and questions. Each of the writers has created a unique relationship with God. Rotem wrote, 'Dear God! First, I need your help today, second, thanks for Friday'. God is also central in Liron's diary. She is ambivalent towards him. 'I believe in God and I love him, but sometimes I am angry at him! Why did he cause the Holocaust?! Didn't he think about us? His people?' As secular women, the adult Rotem and Liron were surprised at their attitudes towards God. Yifat, who is still religious, remembered God's role in her diary well. During the interview she read aloud what she had written as an adolescent. 'Thanks to Shalom, Orit and, of course, God – I'm not killing myself'. We sense that faith in God has been a main factor in Yifat's identity.

In addition to God, the diary itself was important to the three writers. The beginning or the end of the writing process usually contained mention of the diary. It was treated as a best friend although it was deaf and could never reply. Liron addressed the diary, 'I love you. You are so understanding although you have no heart or feelings'. Yifat related to the diary as though it were her real friend, 'thanks for the paper and the blue lines you are giving me'. In Rotem's diary, reference to the diary was interlaced with reference to God and to herself. She treated it as if 'it was not really a diary' as she stated in the interview. God and the diary were both included on her inner world journey.

The theme of aloneness reflected in the writer's wish to communicate with God and the diary indicates the possibilities embodied in the diary catharsis process. Diary writing catharsis enables inner transformation of the writer by relating to her ambivalent narratives. The inner adolescent voices of Liron, Yifat and Rotem reflect both catharsis and aloneness. Although each woman's relationship with her diary was unique, in a sense, the research experience has united the adolescent and adult narratives. This was an opportunity for the three women to re-read their diaries and recall their adolescence. During the interviews, the diaries, which concealed secrets, events and feelings were exposed and the personal narratives of the woman were revealed.

The healing quality of diary writing and the fractional catharsis was reflected during the interviews. At the end of the second interview both Yifat and Rotem expressed inner empowerment linked to their adolescent diary writing, Yifat stated that 'I feel like an author' and Rotem said 'I would like to be me again'.

Using aesthetic-narrative methodology, this research has for the first time offered a diary catharsis model which indicates the healing quality of diary writing during adolescence and emphasizes its complexity. Although using the concept of catharsis as a key concept in the adopted model can limit the understanding of the diary writing experience only to the cathartic elements, being aware of this limitation enabled us to create a wider and more intense concept of catharsis. The transformational experience of diary writing as adolescents and diary reading as adult women sheds light on the process of catharsis and deepens the understanding of their experience.

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