

## Join the FCO and TWC Online!



Looking for community, creativity, and a chance to center yourself during this time of social distancing?

Family Council Ontario (FCO) has partnered with The Toronto Writers Collective (TWC) to provide online expressive writing workshops for family members. During the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to find ways to connect with our peers, process our emotions, and practice self-care. Expressive writing can help you do that.

Facilitated by writers well-versed in the Amherst method, the workshops will provide a safe and inclusive setting for both new and experienced writers to explore their written voice. Participants will respond to prompts and will be invited to share their creations in order to receive positive feedback from their peers.

**Our 10 workshop program will take place on Tuesdays from 6:30PM - 8:30PM, running from Jan 26 - Mar 30.**

Reserving your ticket confirms admission to all 10 workshops. Enrolment is based on a first come first serve basis

**[\\*REGISTER NOW\\*](#)**

**Read program testimonials below!**

## **Seven Personal Testimonials in Support of:**

### **Family Council of Ontario and Toronto Writer's Collective Workshop "Expressive Writers Course"**

#### **1) H.K.:** Testimonial for Family Council of Ontario and Toronto Writer's Collective Workshop during COVID-19

The workshop wasn't just about writing what we were going through in Long Term Care, even though it was clear we had similar experiences. Every day we were locked out from seeing our loved ones made our hearts heavy. By the end of each writing class there was this lightness.

It was an outlet to create anything and give your mind the rest it needed. It allowed us to use a different part of our brain, I guess. A break from the stress.

I feel as though I came to know the others in our different writings and a comradery formed around the fact that we were all experiencing the same thing.

Each had a unique writing style and each piece was a new way of looking at things. The creativity was astounding. Shelley, the facilitator was spot on. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

Ottawa

#### **2) K.B:** REFLECTIONS ON THE FCO/TWC WRITING WORKSHOP

I attended the FCO/TWC Writing Workshop which was held for ten weeks (May-July), weekly for 2 hours. The workshop was offered through the FCO newsletter to Family Council members. In the workshop we wrote two pieces in response to prompts supplied by the excellent workshop facilitator, Shelley Lepp. We then read what we had written for comment by the other participants.

It was a transformative experience for me and, I believe, for the other participants. We all had been scarred by our experiences with long term care (LTC) during the COVID crisis. I had lost my LTC family member to COVID while many of the other workshop participants were still struggling to oversee their family member's care with limited access to the LTC home. Although COVID

overwhelmed the LTC system and us, our painful experiences pre-dated the COVID crisis.

As many recent news stories have reported, the failures of the LTC system in Ontario have been going on for years and have been the subject of many reports from various expert advocates such as the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario and the Royal Society. Most of these reports were acknowledged as worthy but largely ignored. It took the military report on LTC to really get the public and government to realize the realities that exist in many LTC homes. Through all of this, family caregiver voices have rarely been heard and acknowledged. Family caregiver experiences were seen as unique examples of LTC home failures instead of a systemic failure even though family caregiver stories were remarkably similar.

The transformation brought about by the FCO/TWC workshop was as a result of having a regular space where participants could find and express their voices among people who had similar experiences. Meeting via Zoom was not an impediment nor was geographical distribution around the province including Deep River, Sudbury, Oakville and Ottawa. A mix of men and women caregivers with a variety of family relationships provided a good representation of lived experiences. The workshop also resulted in stronger and more confident family caregiver voices as the workshop progressed. Even when the texts being written had nothing to do with LTC, the participants learned to respect their own abilities to write and speak about their lived experiences. We learned that our contributions in this workshop would be respected and appreciated. This could inspire the confidence to share our stories beyond the workshop. We have a growing appreciation for what we can bring to the table when discussions about LTC take place.

The workshop has now ended leaving a cohesive writing group to continue the writing and, for some, the advocacy for a transformation of the LTC sector. I recommend that FCO and its partners support the continuation of such a workshop for its therapeutic benefits and personal development. This will strengthen family voices so that they may play a stronger role, even a dominant

role, in reforming the LTC sector and in bringing quality care to our elders living in LTC and to those elders who are able to live in the community.

## **Ottawa**

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### **3) G.K.** Toronto Writers Collective & Family Councils Ontario Workshop Series

The Writers Workshop was a welcome reprieve from the harsh realities of life. It provided a safe environment for those sharing a common painful experience to focus on other matters. It developed and allowed self expression in a writers creative world. The facilitator was a skilled communicator who fostered a positive environment, maintained our focus and generated constructive group feedback on each piece. Shelley Lepp enabled the writers to relax, focus their minds and produce well written works. The Workshop enhanced our mental health and made everyone a better writer. It was a success! We want more. You have fostered the interest and talents of a budding group of writers. Thank you to FCO for this amazing opportunity. I strongly encourage you to consider continuing this worthwhile effort. Please don't let us down.

## **Deep River, Ontario**

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### **4) W.M.:** Toronto Writers Collective & Family Councils Ontario Workshop Series

I don't think anyone ever plans to become a Care Giver, but when we are thrust into that role we are faced with a kaleidoscope of emotions we never experienced before. How does a grown man care for his elderly mother who is no longer rational. How does he cope with family members who offer their opinions, but don't want to be involved personally. What should he say when his mother accuses him of stealing her money and threatens to call the police. These are only a few of the stress related situations I had to deal with that put me in the hospital with a heart attack. Who could I talk to – who would understand what I was going through?

The best therapy for dealing with a situation like this is creative writing where you are forced to put your feelings into words. I found myself reaching into the caverns of my soul to unearth emotions I had suppressed because they didn't

seem appropriate. At the Writer's Workshop I discovered that others who were going through similar situations were experiencing the same emotions. This was comforting to know that I had not lost touch with reality. I attended all 10 sessions which gave me the opportunity to write 20 articles in response to the prompts our facilitator gave us. The most encouraging part was when the other participants would give me their feedback on the feelings I had expressed in my article. This program is one step above a support group and should be available for all Care Givers who are caring for a loved one.

Our facilitator Shelley Lepp was amazing with her keen insight into what our words were really saying. Very grateful to Samantha and FCO for making this program available to us.

### **Oakville, Ontario**

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#### **5) N.B.:** Why I want to continue with the Toronto Writer's Collective?

Attending the Toronto Writer's Collective Monday's evenings was beneficial in many ways. Foremost, these listening and writing exercises allowed me to get my mind off Covid-19 and politics. Personally, I felt very privileged to share my impromptu writing with other friendly persons who share the same goals: keeping up with writing at whatever level one can achieve. It, also, certainly decrease the feeling of loneliness during the confinement period. Listening to the stories help me learn to refine my writing skills. Giving feedback provided the means to voice what was meaningful to me. Some stories facilitated reminiscing on certain common life experiences. Shelley, the facilitator, was the glue creating the friendship and fraternity as well as the stimulation of the secretion of the creativity juice.

### **Sturgeon Falls, Ontario**

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#### **6) J.M.:** What the Toronto Writers Collective course meant to me.

I'm not a writer, maybe I am...

When the Expressive Writing Course, facilitated by the Toronto Writers Collective, was offered in an email sent by the Family Council of Ontario, I registered in a 'why not' sort of moment.

What I discovered over the next 10 weeks was a personal awareness awakening. It changed me. This course was well beyond any expectations I had, and my hope is that it will become a mainstay following an anticipated post COVID-19 new normal, whatever that looks like. The course was about giving people room to express themselves on what the impact has been on Family Caregivers and their loved ones during COVID-19. It allowed us to share our experiences about the effects the lockdown and isolation had, and continues to have, on our loved ones and each of us.

Each session was two hours long which could easily have gone for another two, and most likely no one would leave unless they had to. Time actually did fly by.

Now, Shelly, our course facilitator. She was simply amazing. She just was. She made each of us feel safe among a group of other writers who didn't know one another. It was done through Zoom and we met weekly. We did not need to know what a verb was, or a conjunction, an adjective, or when to use or when not to use a semi-colon or a colon. If this course had been in a regular class setting it would not have worked for me. I would have been intimidated to express myself – so technology can and does work. Too old to learn does not apply here; nor does; can't teach an old dog new tricks - not true either.

I am a guy. My first thought was I would be the only one in the room. I was wrong, as others showed up too – and wow, could they write in their own unique styles. There seems to be this prevailing sense that men don't share their feelings easily, and while that may be true, I can attest that there is no absence of emotion. So, if I were to offer advice to my gender, I would say, take the plunge, take the course, and I hope you experience something you possibly never have.

There were some in my group that said they heard poetry in my writings. My first reaction was what – me a poet, come on? If I told this to people in my hometown that I was taking an expressive writing course, a long deafening silence would have ensued. People/ Caregivers need a place to let it out. This works – simple as that.

## Ottawa

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### 6) C.N.: Why the writer's workshop was important to me?)

There is a transformational power in being heard. That's what I rediscovered in the TWC writing workshop. "Rediscovered" because I know this is true. When people speak and are heard, it is the beginning of change. It is time for a transformation in our community of family members.

I'm an advocate by profession, I speak for others. I know this power. But, my own personal voice is lost. Cobbler's shoes? There could be many reasons, but I needed to hear my voice not bouncing around in this empty head.

You would be surprised at what we wrote about. Nature, colours, hopes, dreams, love. Stories that took you back in time, made you laugh, cry, or nod in reflection. We learned to listen to one another, give positive feedback and we found the power of our voices.

Here are my takeaways:

Peace, Community and Strength. It feels like something has started. We are already taking the spirit of our Monday night's and weaving that into a new community.

In the next year, family members will be asked to provide their voice in many forums. We need to be at the table and ready to use our voice. These workshops helped us start.

This is a very valuable workshop to helping family member's use their voices in a way that they will be heard, finally. We still feel like, other than FCO, no one is really listening to us. The public thinks, "Well, you can go visit now, all is OK. No?" Or, it was only really the five private homes in Ontario". They haven't heard anything yet. Nor, will they if family members, don't speak up or don't know how.

There will be no real change in long term care, if they don't hear family members. There are fifteen years of reports, studies and recommendations. It's time for us to speak our truth. We are not accepting this lousy product anymore. We are Canadians, we don't like to complain much.

FCO, TWC and Shelly in particular, a fantastic facilitator, gave us the ability to use our voice. She taught us how to fish. Please continue to help us and other family members with the fishing gear, lessons and practice. It is essential. (Okay, gotta work on those bad metaphors and puns, next).

**Oakville, Ontario**