

Finding Your Feet

‘...young people are resources to be developed, not problems to be solved... never, ever give up on a young person...’

(Resnick, CAH Short Course, June 1999)

The ‘Finding Your Feet Project’ came out of the realization that working with young people, in relation to drug and alcohol abuse and the use of creative arts, needed a new approach. In focusing directly on the abuse of drugs and alcohol and the visual images that came out of this, a negative response was often provoked. Some of the young people made comments such as “it made them feel depressed and more likely to want to use”. Given that ‘adolescents often need to believe things absolutely,’ so that ‘stories of woe and despair are presented as if unconquerable’ (Fuller, 98, p.47), it became clear that by focusing on the problem saturated topic of drug and alcohol abuse, negativity was reinforced rather than relieved. This perception is given credence by research that shows that those programs that don’t mention drugs, and instead promote youth development and life skills, are found to be more effective (Fuller, 1998). Some young people had in fact not had experiences with drugs, which contributed to a sense of alienation from the limited focus on drug and alcohol abuse. Using the creative arts as a therapeutic intervention to focus on the development of mental well-being and resilient factors was a new course of action. By focusing on these areas, the idea was either the prevention of young people getting caught up in the abuse/addiction cycle, or aiding in breaking the cycle they are already caught in.

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A Sense of Connection, Hope and Meaning

One of the main topics to arise out of discussions with the young people in relation to causal factors contributing to drug and alcohol abuse, was the issue of disconnection; that in not feeling connected either with oneself, others, the future etc. there was more reason to want to escape due to a sense of hopelessness. This sense of hopelessness could be perceived as modern western society's failure to provide an adequate framework of hope, values, meaning, purpose and belonging both socially and spiritually (Eckersley, 1995). It is also important to note that there is much evidence showing that caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health of young people (Resnick, CAH Short Course, June 1999).

An important premise in the creation of a new direction for a group involving young people, was to have a focus of hope, to explore a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and to develop a sense of connection in order to evoke positive outcomes in relation to drug and alcohol abuse, especially since 'drug use can be a real solution to real problems, and a means of dealing with the existential questions and struggles, which face us all' (Phillips & Labrow, 2000, p.279).

Addressing factors related to a sense of connection was also perceived as important since according to research, it cannot be valued highly enough- a sense of belonging either at school, with family, or an important person outside the family all contribute to resilience in the young person (Fuller, 1998)- resilience being 'the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticized rope around them to rebound when things get

low and to maintain their sense of who they are as a person', (Fuller, 98, p.75).

Furthermore, creating a group that nurtured connection amongst its participants was important from the point of view that a positive peer group also provides resilience and therefore a protective factor in terms of risk taking behaviours. This is significant since adolescent peers inform one of what is normal, instill a particular perspective of society's norms, help develop one's identity, teach ways of cooperation and generally offer a model for adult relationships (Dusek, 1996) -

Resilient Factors

Aside from the importance of creating a culture of connection, hope and meaning, and a positive peer group, other protective factors contributing to young peoples' resilience and therefore mental well-being were also considered in the designing of the groups' direction. This approach was perceived as appropriate since the 'The overall message from prevention research is that schools can prevent the onset, severity and duration of substance abuse... by undertaking a process of developing a culture that promotes resilience... (thus) Increasing connectedness and reducing risk taking behaviours overall appears to be a worthwhile approach' (Fuller, 1998, p.166). The protective factors thought to be relevant and contributing towards resilience, and able to be addressed in this particular group situation were aspects such as:

- The promotion of self esteem
- The development of a positive peer support group and a culture of cooperation

- The provision of a forum in which to express issues that have been otherwise difficult to express- so discovering constructive and creative ways of communication
- The creation of good relationships with adults outside the family ie. the group facilitator and support workers, as well as positive peer influence and reinforcement
- The development of an awareness of valued skills that may have been previously overlooked such as strong empathic and intuitive abilities, sense of humour, competence and creativity- factors that can be recognized and reinforced in a group situation

Use of Creative Art Therapy

In order to promote these resilient factors in the young people participating in the Finding Your Feet Project, a creative art therapy approach offered the appropriate vehicle. By their nature the creative arts, that is: poetry, story making, performance poetry, visual arts and drama, offer the possibility of exploring issues through the use of symbol and metaphor. As Einstein observed ‘You cannot solve the problem with the same kind of thinking that has created the problem’. Creative art therapy also offers a multi-leveled approach

- It allows for distance from the subject matter therefore giving objectivity and the possibility of different perspectives and perceptions
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- It allows for the expression of certain themes that can be initially evasive in terms of words- resulting in verbal expression becoming

more available thus making the subject matter more accessible to the participant and their peers

- Symbols and metaphor aid in circumventing a linear form of expression so allowing for a greater depth of verbalizing a complex issue
- The use of colour and form can have an elevating effect on the spirits
- A creative approach is offered to problem solving so enabling different perspectives

And possibly most importantly the creative arts, through the above factors, offers a celebration of life that can in turn catalyze a curiosity and zest for life. These factors are also viewed as contributing to resilience and could be seen as rare commodities when cynicism is rife among young people due to a lack of optimism in their future. 'In investing so much meaning in the individual "self", we have left it dangerously exposed and isolated, because we have weakened the enduring personal, social and spiritual relationships that give deeper meaning and purpose to our lives' (Eckersley, 1997, p. 423).

The Group Format

Underpinning the project was the idea of it being an inclusive rather than exclusive group, where young people of varying backgrounds and issues could come together to discover commonality of experience. Having this diversity of life experience would also provide different sources of wisdom, knowledge, and a reframing of certain perceptions due to varying life

experiences. In order to ensure that these processes could be properly expressed, it was important that the group operate in an atmosphere where trust, respect, collaboration and risk taking could be encountered.

Through group discussion, the content and activities of the project, it was hoped that individuals would discover unrealized potentials, strengths, and special gifts that could contribute to greater self knowledge, self confidence, self esteem, and mental well-being. Research has shown a high correlation between mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse (Patton, 1997)- it seemed logical that a group that promotes well-being through a number of methods would be an appropriate avenue to take.

The group itself ran for seven weeks attracting participants between the ages of 18 and 26, with a range of issues: homelessness, mental health issues, disconnection from a peer group and drug issues. Altogether 12 young people attended, with an average of 8 young people attending regularly. They explored issues such as: personal potentials, current successes, factors that hold them back from realizing their potentials, and factors that support them in their endeavors. This was done within guidelines that the participants themselves set. It was initially envisaged that, through a culture of collaboration, participants would be largely responsible for the direction of the group and that my role would be as a facilitator rather than leader. This approach aimed to engender a sense of being empowered.

Evaluation

Eight of the participants who took part in the Finding Your Feet project completed the evaluation sheets. These sheets asked questions in relation to what they felt they got out of the group, what was not successful, how their

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knowledge of themselves and personal strengths may have been expanded, what was most useful and the most enjoyable. The group also made the

decision that work done within the group such as pictures, poems, stories and small performances, should not be product oriented. In other words not

showcased, since this would take away the significance of the process and context the work was done in.

The discussions, sharing, listening to others and being listened to were all listed as being significant factors that group members enjoyed. Participants spoke of the usefulness of expressing not only opinions but thoughts and feelings as well. As one young person wrote “I found it helped re-intro-duce positive attitudes about myself” and that “There is always something empowering about letting down defences and reaching out to the community”. Another observed that the thing they enjoyed most was “opening up because it relieves my own doubt about myself”.

A number of participants wrote that the gaining of confidence was another significant factor that they gained from the group, and that they now felt, in the words of one young person, “strong enough to take some of those previously seemingly ‘unmakeable’ jumps/steps”, and that they were “stepping forward with more confidence/ more confidence in expanded personal boundaries-some of that anxiety being released”. Another observed that “Being pushed beyond my limits and learning how to push myself in new challenges in life” as being of significance, whilst another felt that “Finding my Feet was literally an experience of “Finding my Feet”- I have a greater sense of direction now and I have had some really good times with the people”. All participants also spoke of the enjoyment and importance of

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using creative mediums to express themselves since “actually doing practical work was extremely helpful and definitely most productive”.

Summary

In providing an environment that focused on a sense of community and respect in which young people could start to develop a sense of resilience through: connection, taking control of one’s life, feeling good about oneself, excitement and sense of meaning about life and the future-mental well-being was achieved on some level- at least the seeds of it. Research has shown there to be a high correlation between drug and alcohol abuse and adverse mental health so by taking the above approach there will hopefully be a contribution to a sense of mental well-being in order to either prevent or contribute to breaking the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. Using a creative art therapy approach was significant in the above process, as it provided an atmosphere of colour, objectivity and creative new ways of perceiving life and its many layers.

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