Using the ‘Tree of Life’
with people with
learning disabilities

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Overview

• Roots of the Tree of Life
• Overview of Narrative Therapy (NT)
• Stigma and learning disabilities
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• ‘Tree of Life’ as an example of NT
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• Description of tree of life parts: 2 - 4
• Applying the tree of life to work with people with LD
• How to involve others in the work
• Discussion
Oxleas NHS

The Roots of the ‘Tree of Life’

• Developed by Nczelo Ncube & David Denborough of the Dulwich Centre (2005/6)
• Nczelo works for a regional capacity organisation in East & Southern Africa to enhance the provision of psychosocial care & support to children affected by HIV/AIDS, poverty and conflict.
The ‘Tree of Life’ was developed initially:

To be used with children who have experienced significant losses, i.e. lost parents to HIV/AIDS

• To be used with groups of children that attend ‘skills camps’

• To respond to traumatic experiences in ways that are not re-traumatising

• To help bring to light children’s skills and knowledge

• Based on narrative therapy ideas and principles
Stigma and learning disabilities

• Having learning disabilities is a social inequality – people are often stigmatised by their label (Scior & Werner 2016)

• The tree of life supports the challenge of this stigma through creating communities and enabling people to make connections in their lives and with each other

• Stigma as a ‘storm’ which attacks ‘the forest’ – easier to withstand if standing within a forest of others rather than an individual alone
Overview of Narrative Therapy (NT)

- Everyone tells stories about their lives and experiences.

- Problem saturated stories are often the dominant story.

- Life is multi-storied not single storied- there is usually stock of lived experiences that is un-storied. Aim of NT to bring these subordinate story lines to the fore. They can be drawn on in the development of new preferred stories of people's lives.
Key assumptions of NT

• Our identities are formed in relationship to others
• Problems are separate from people
• Dominant stories are powerful:
  • they can be experienced as oppressive when they limit the perception of available choices
  • they can obscure abilities, competencies and reduce a sense of agency in a person’s life

How can we provide a context so that we can ‘thicken’ the sub-ordinate, preferred story lines to help re-shape lives and relationships?
‘Tree of Life’ as an example of NT

The Tree of Life is an example of the whole process of NT

• Externalisation by drawing of the tree

• Separating the person from their problems or ‘storms’

• Helping the person to thicken preferred stories of themselves by using the tree metaphor
The tree of life metaphor uses the tree as an analogy for the person’s life:

• Part One: Tree of life

• Part Two: Forest of life

• Part Three: When the storms come

• Part Four: Certificates, witnessing, creation, and connections
Part one: Tree of life

- Introduction to clients - Brief discussion about trees in general. Knowledge of trees will be used to talk about their life and experiences.
- Explanation that they will draw their own tree but that artistic ability is not necessary.
- Roots of the tree - heritage, family
- Ground – where they are at present
- Trunk- skills and abilities
- Branches - hopes, dreams and wishes
- Leaves - important people in their life
- Fruits – gifts they have been given
- Flowers- gifts you have given to others
Sharing of trees:

• Group setting - each person’s tree is displayed for other group members to look at and to add their positive feedback. Sharing stories of their trees in front of the group.

• Individual work – invite someone significant to attend a session to see the tree and to add any comments or preferably invite people who have done individual trees to a group to share their stories.
Part three: when the storms come

• Talking about potential hazards that trees might experience

• Naming problems and dangers that the person might face in life

• Effects of such hazards on the person’s life

• What the person can do when problems and storms come into their lives. Are there ways they can respond? Are there things that they can do? Do they try and protect themselves like animals do?
Storms

- Are trees always safe?
- What dangers do trees face?
- What storms can happen to people?
- What are the effects of storms on peoples lives?
- What do people do when there are storms or difficulties in peoples lives?
- Are the storms always there?
- Are our lives sometimes free of storms?
- What do we do when the storms have past?
- Who or what makes you happy or offers you support?
Applying the tree of life to people with LD

- Two-day group workshop
- For people who have mild/moderate LD
- Who like being in a group and talking with others
- Venue- team base and day centre
- Invitations- My life story
- Number of people in a group: 6 people max. plus one-to-one support from psychology staff and a facilitator who is familiar with NT
How the tree of life helps people with learning disabilities

- Asking questions which elicit skills, abilities, dreams and aspirations – a change from the usual!
- Thinking about the storms and what happens next – building on support systems
- Using 'post-it' notes as a therapeutic tool – notes represent skills, and having trees covered in 'skills' makes it concrete for people
- Outsider witness ceremonies, giving certificates with other important people present – a chance to focus on the good things and step out of problem focused stories
- People keep their trees – they do not need to rely on their memories
Outcome tool

• Two self-report questions about how they feel about themselves and how brave they felt - using a Likert scale

• Ask what they are looking forward to in the workshop and what they are not looking forward to

• At the end of the 2 days ask questions again but what they liked and disliked instead
How the person can share their experience of the ‘tree of life’ exercise with carers and/or family such as by writing letters:

• Ask who they would like to write to who cares for them (or ask the facilitator to write)

• Write about values, skills, hopes and dreams

• Acknowledge the contribution of the caregiver to their life and invite them to come and meet with the facilitator and them to talk more about the tree of life exercise.
Tree of Life Resources and References


