

Lynn Van Hoof & Nadia Vossen – NATURE (Belgium)

Workshop “The tree of life”

1. What is it?

This is the workshop we provided for the rest of the partnership group during our second meeting in The Netherlands.

A: Visualization exercise (exercise of grounding)

1. Sit or stand comfortably and close your eyes. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. If you want, you can put your hand on your belly. And as you breath in, you feel that your belly expands, gets bigger as you slowly breath out you feel your belly getting thinner. Repeat this for several times as you feel your body relaxing more and more ...

Concentrate your awareness around your center of gravity, in the middle of your body. Visualize a seed or sapling there, ready to take root. Become aware of where your feet are connected to the earth, and imagine yourself as the sapling young tree, taking root through your connection to the earth.

As you breath in, feel yourself gathering your energy, and as you breathe out, let your roots dig deeper into the soil. They tunnel down and spread out as they grow. Feel yourself connecting with the dirt and stones and even the water table, deep below you. With each breath, push your roots a little bit further, gently, because roots will find their way around and through any obstacles that present themselves. As you get down to the bedrock, feel your roots touch the stones, and connect with the veins in the stones themselves, so that your roots go down into the very bones, the center of the earth.

Pause there for a moment and let that connection strengthen. Let whatever is bothering you flow down and out into the earth and be diffused, and draw up from your roots whatever energy and sustenance you need. Feel the stability that your roots give you, so that you are balanced and steady.

Now, when you take a breath in, draw that flow up into yourself, into your trunk, and as you breathe out, start to put out leaves and branches. Breathe in, and feel the energy of the earth combine with your own, to feed those branches, and as you breathe out, feel them grow, reaching up through the sky. Let them divide and spread, so that some are thick and strong, and others end in delicate twigs that sway smoothly as the wind blows through them. Feel your leaves seeking out the sun's energy, or the moon's, or both. That energy flows into you, and mingles, mixes with what's already there, strengthening your trunk and feeding you all the way down to your roots, too.

Rest there, letting the energy flow into you and through you, letting it nourish you, heal you, and replenish you.

When you're ready, gently draw your roots and branches back in. You can do this by visualizing them shrinking back into you as you breathe in. You know they will always be there, and that you can extend them again, and connect with your environment again, at any time. For now, let them retract into you, so that you gradually become aware of the shape of your own body again.

2. When you're ready, you turn around facing the outside of the circle. Keep your eyes closed and try to stay in contact with yourself and in silence.

B: Solo

... Receive the following instructions: go on a little solo walk here in the environment, on the big field we are on and search for a tree (or a spot) that reminds you of your childhood. A tree that triggers something in you, touches you in some way or feels familiar.....that reminds you of how it was for you as a child. You walk around and you take the time to find your tree that connects with you and your childhood (with this instruction: creation of an atmosphere). When you have found this tree you get a closer look and find a spot (sitting/ lying down/...) where you get a good image, an image that touches you in some way. See what comes to your mind when sitting/ lying there. Take the time. When you're done, turn your attention inside and see how you feel. Try to create an image that matches your feeling of this moment with natural materials that you can find in your surroundings and place it next to the tree.

You can take more or less about 40 minutes time and when the DRUM goes, you come back to the circle (maybe gently using the drum at that moment so that they recognize the sound..).

C: Showing partners your tree + writing exercise

When the drum goes, come back to the circle – in silence. There is a candle in the middle and everyone is calm and silent. Instructions are given of taking your right neighbor so that you pair up with another person, then to blindfold one person of the duo. The other one takes him to his spot/ tree. When arrived, he can take off his blindfold and you tell him everything about your spot. Tell him how you found it, which thoughts came to your mind, which associations you've made, what is the story behind it, how you felt and why. The partner listens carefully.

When the story is finished, your partner will tell you what touched him in your story. He will also change something/ add something to the image you have created next to the tree (without knowing what it is). You don't need to talk about the changing of the image, just feel what it does to you.

After this, each person goes back to their own tree, takes a pen and booklet with him and opens the envelope. There are some writing instructions in it: write a letter from the perspective of the tree (or the spot) towards:

- the child that you were
- the person you are now

→ you can choose between these last two, whatever feels most helping/ supportive for you

When you hear the drum you can say goodbye to the tree.

D: Sharing in the big group

Go back to the circle facing each other (and sit down). Who wants to say something about their experience? Who wants to read out loud his/ her letter – in their own language? What does this do with him/ her, with the group? What do you need?

E: Ending game

Shake your body, your arms, legs, neck, head,... Then form a circle close to each other. Put your two hands in the air and turn 90 degrees to the right. "And then we say: 'Well done Nadia'" Whilst rubbing the upper arms of the person in front of you (in a caring, loving way). Then again two arms in

the air and turn 180 degrees to the left. “And then we say: ‘Well done Susana’” Whilst rubbing the upper arms of the person in front of you (in a caring, loving way). Then again two arms in the air, facing the middle of the circle. Last, but not least we say ‘Well done Lynn’ (to yourself, in the same way).

2. Who is the target group?

Up until now we’ve done this with young adults, adults and families. But we’ve also used some parts of the workshop with youth-at-risk and with Youth at risk and their family. You should simplify a little and not give all instructions at once.

3. Who are the trainers/educators? What are their competences?

Therapists who don’t need any specific outdoor skills.

Trainers need to be able to create a reflective space and to slow down the participants. They need to be good at facilitating group processes and discussions as well as the individual therapeutic process of the participants.

Trainers also need to be able to explain safety issues and guidelines regarding where to walk, what to wear, what to bring and the rules of leave no trace.

For a group of max. 14 participants, one trainer can be enough to facilitate it, although two might be more interesting regarding the group facilitation: if something happens with a participant and the other trainer needs to leave.

4. What kind of methodologies do you use in this workshop?

Influences from:

- Experiential and client-centered therapy – *In the exercise and in the core conditions of the therapist (see G. references from Rogers): congruence, empathy, unconditional positive regard*
- Emotion-focused Therapy – *In the reflection of the sharing part + in the questions asked*

- Systemic/ contextual therapy (biographical work) - *If you connect with childhood, it's important to have respect for existential loyalty to the parents and family and for "relational ethics" in the way you reflect and handle those issues.*
- Group dynamics and group therapy in general (for the sharing part)

5. Why do you use this practice?

Because this sequence of activities facilitates and gives the opportunity to stand face to face with yourself through the metaphor of the tree that is linked to your own childhood and life now, with the opportunity to heal emotional issues. Standing face to face with the triggering tree your childhood and life appears and crystalizes itself in the tree: in the form of the tree, the smell and every sensation that you feel in that moment. Sometimes going back to childhood is needed to heal in the here and now. But it's not just digging into the past; it is making the link with the person you are now and in relation to others and using the group as a mutual healing source.

Of course we don't use the same workshop every time again. You adapt it to what is going on in the group.

So it is a good combination between group processes and space for individual therapeutic process. In between there is the possibility to share issues and themes about their childhood first in a smaller group. This step before the group sharing part, may create more safety to share feelings. Later they can share it in the big group. Challenge by choice is obviously very important for this activity.

A lot of our youngsters or even adults rush through life and through the programs without taking the time to slow down and even stand still to be more aware and feel what is going on. The solo with the tree gives them the opportunity to focus (without distraction by others and other input channels), to stop running, to encounter themselves, take the time...

Participants, especially vulnerable youngsters, have often not only lost connection to the outside world (and to nature) but also the connection to their own inner world. The 'solo with the tree' can help them in an indirect way to come closer to what really matters to them/ what keeps them busy by describing something outside of themselves (nature/ tree).

Feedback from youth at risk (12 years) showing his spot with tree to his family: *“in my child hood I have two kinds of trees: a bunch of dead wood al messed up and chaotic and beside a very beautiful tree. This is how I feel about my childhood but this is also how it goes in our family: we have very good and connected moments and we have also a lot of fights and then it’s a mess”. “I would like to build together as a family strong foundation from the messy wood, so that we can live in harmony as a family and that’s why I think we need help.”*

6. What are the Adventure Therapy components in this workshop?

This activity is always imbedded in a larger (adventure) therapy program and is at its best when the group has gone together through a whole process, not at the first days when they are still in the group dynamic phase of inclusion or too much focus on the influence and roles. Therefor we do it more towards the end of a program, but with enough space afterwards to process. Off course we put emphasis on the experiential learning philosophy of “challenge by choice”. Keep in mind the grading principle. You do the exercise at the moment the participants had the chance to grade up to the step.

We try to create a therapeutic environment linking natural elements as trees, air, wind, ... to issues, moments, emotions in your life connected to childhood issues that you want to, you choose to let go. It provides a frame and a playground to activate emotional (dysfunctional) schemes and gives an opportunity to take a step towards a change in more functional schemes (where do you want to go to). Given the fact that you can only change an emotional scheme when it is activated. This activity has the potential to give a fertile soil for change, for the process of activation and facilitation of the creation of new and functional schemes. Every participant can link his own personal significance into the tree. You can help the participants to ‘grade’ the challenge to their level of engagement and readiness for action (upgrade downgrade). The role of the facilitator, therapist is very important: in guiding the client and the group through this process.

The fact that you also include other participants in parts of the activity (duos, group reflection) can provide a strong connection between them. They are actually part of the story of your childhood tree and the process of the one that is face to face with it, and can be a 'source of help' in the individual healing processes. The fact that you also include other participants in framing a "challenge" and that you reflect back on the solo, sharing in pairs, writing the letter with the whole group, provides a strong connection between them and makes other participants 'co-facilitators' in all individual processes. The group can support the participant in taking the challenge and reacting on what the participant brings.

First through the visualization exercise you open a gate of grounded self-awareness. Then you start to use that very strong Metaphoric component of the tree. It is very important to create a safe space and take enough time to be able to "contain" emotional reactions. Some screening before can be recommended (suicidal, psychotic reactions...).

It is an activity that brings the clients into a situation of stretch. It is important that the therapist recognizes and distinguishes stretch from panic. Because when the participant enters in panic, he/she will not learn and grow/heal anymore.

'Find your tree' has the potential of un-doing a projection linked to childhood. We all make projections when we 'project' something we ourselves feel uncomfortable about on someone or something else or even on a group. It can manifest itself by feeling irritation towards that person/thing, by feeling excessive admiration or sometimes even by having an inappropriate good feeling.

The tree gives the opportunity to get aware of the possible (mostly unconscious) projection participants are invited to make on the tree that 'touches' them. By asking questions about what 'strikes' them, the projection might get clearer.

The tree can also provide a frame that can activate emotional (dysfunctional) schemes and has the potential to be a motivator or trigger towards a (wish to) change in more functional schemes (where do you want to go to).

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