

Workshop notes

Tree of Life Narrative Methodology

- **Part 1: Tree of Life**

The purpose of this part of the methodology is for people who have experienced hardships to be supported to step into the second stories of their lives. People who seek counselling often experience being trapped by the problem stories of their lives. Part 1 of the methodology seeks to help people to recognise traces of alternative stories which can introduce a new range of options that they can use to address life challenges.

STEPS

1. Begin by writing the following on a flip chart, board, power point slide etc
 - **Roots of your tree:** represent where you come from, family history, your origins, family name, ancestry etc
 - **Ground of your tree:** represents where you live, with whom you live with, what you like to do when you are at home, favourite place or hang out at home, favourite song or dance
 - **Trunk of you tree:** represents the things you are good at, talents, the things that people tell you are good at, special skills like caring for others, helping around at home, encouraging others etc
 - **Leaves of your tree:** represent the most important people in your life. These could be people who have supported you, provided love and encouragement and have been supportive of you in different ways
 - **Branches of your tree:** represent your hopes, dreams, wishes and aspirations. This could be both about the near and distant future
 - **Fruits of your tree:** represent the gifts that you have been given by others that have been helpful in your life. These do not need to be just tangible or physical gifts but they could include gifts of kindness, care, support, life skills taught or passed down to you etc
1. Ask the participants to draw their trees. Younger children, older persons, people living with disabilities etc may need to be assisted to do their drawings and to write responses to the above prompts
2. When drawing has been completed seat the group in a circle and explain how stories will be shared emphasising the need for respect, shared confidentiality, and supportive listening etc
3. Either counsellors could start by sharing his or her tree of life as a way to encourage the group
4. Group members can take turns to stand and share their stories with the rest of the group
5. The assisting counsellor in the group should take notes about the skills, hopes and dreams as well as the important people that are mentioned by each person who presents. Care needs to be taken to ensure that notes are taken to capture the very words and sentiments expressed by the people who present their trees. These notes will be used for the certificates later on.
6. As the individuals in the group talk about the different parts of their trees, the lead counsellor can support the thickening of the second stories by asking some of the following questions:

- **Trunk**
 - Where did you get these skills?
 - Who in your life passed these skills on to you?
 - Tell me a story about how they passed these skills onto you?
 - What do you think made this person or these people to pass these skills onto you?
 - How do you think this person or these people would feel knowing that you are putting to use the skills that they passed onto you?

- **Fruits**
 - Who gave you these gifts?
 - Why do you think that they give you these gifts?
 - What is it that these people saw in you that made them want to give you these gifts?
 - What did they appreciate about you?
 - What gift did you give to them or other people in your life?
 - How do you plan to use the gifts that you have been given in your life?

- **Branches**
 - Who or what introduced you to these hopes and dreams?
 - What steps or actions are you taking to realize your hopes and dreams i.e. to make sure that they come true.
 - Who else in your life knows that you have these hopes and dreams? How do they know this?

- **Leaves**
 - What makes these people important to you?
 - What are their hopes for your life?
 - How does knowing that you are important to these people make you feel?
 - If they were hear today what do you think they would say about what makes you important to them?
 - Tell me a story about what they have done for you or with you that shows that you are important to them?

- **Part 2: Forest of Life**

When participants have shared their stories, they are asked to stick them up on a wall to produce a beautiful forest. The Forest of Life is a visual image of the collective stories of the participants' histories, skills, hopes, dreams, gifts received and important relationships. It can be used in a very powerful and meaningful ways to retell the second stories that have been expressed by the group. I have also occasionally extended the metaphor to honour the beauty and uniqueness of each tree and the strength of a forest when all the different trees come together.

STEPS

1. Participants to stick their trees on a wall to form a forest
2. Referring to the notes written down by the assisting counsellor, the lead counsellor does a retelling of the second stories witnessed in the groups. These are the stories of skills, hopes and dreams, gifts received and important relationships.
 - Care should be taken to use people's exact words when doing the retelling.
 - The lead counsellor can speak about the strong roots that people have mentioning examples of the stories about the group's histories, culture and origins. The hopes and dreams mentioned as well as the important people talked about should also be featured in the retelling.
 - Specific examples of some of the people can be given e.g. parents, aunts, grandparents, neighbours, preachers, coaches etc.
 - During the retelling it is important to acknowledge that some of the precious people have died but that these people have an important place in our hearts and we continue to find encouragement and support from having shared good times with them.
3. Ask participants to write words of encouragement on each other's trees based on what they heard their group members express as skills, hopes, dreams etc. It is important to ensure that everyone gets a message of encouragement. I usually ask that each group member writes a message for every other group person in the group. This is usually a very fun filled activity that most people enjoy. It is however important to observe what is acceptable in different cultures as other people may experience people writing on their trees as intrusive. In some contexts, practitioners have used sticky notes for the messages; this provides an option for not writing directly on people's trees.

- **Part 3: Storms of Life**

The Storms of Life metaphor is applied to support people to name and explore broadly the effects that problems have on their lives. Care is taken to ensure that problems are not discussed without acknowledging how people respond to them. I have found that the metaphor is particularly supportive to children as it provides a safe entry point into discussing the problems of life. Naming problems collectively is supportive to people as they do not have the burden to deal with these issues individually. The knowledge and skills that people have to address problems becomes very evident in this part of the methodology. I have found that the metaphor works well for both children and adults.

STEPS

1. Invite people to hold on to the beauty of their trees and forest as they explore the storms of life
2. Talk about the hazards that trees in a forest face and encourage people to give examples of these (e.g. burning of trees, wood chopping, drought etc.)
3. Ask people to name the problems that they face. You may say, "We have likened our lives to beautiful trees in a; as beautiful as our trees are, can we say that they are free from danger?"
4. Ask the group to think about how animals in a forest behave when there is a storm
5. Like animals respond to storms ask the people in the group to talk about how they respond to the storms of life

6. You could also discuss the following questions:
 - Are storms always present in life
 - What would they like to share with other people who could be going through storms or going through hard times?
 - What did you notice others do during the storms and who stood out for you?
 - Do you know when a storm is imminent?
 - What can you do during the storm to protect yourself and others?
 - Who does it make sense to be talking to during hard stormy times?
 - Who do you see standing with you during stormy times?
 - What do you do when storms have passed?
7. It is important to let people know that it is not their fault that they have gone through difficult times and that the problems that are experienced in life are often influenced by history, culture, politics and other elements that are beyond our doing.
8. When I complete the session on the storms of life, I usually ask participants the following type of questions:
 - How has it been for you so far?
 - What has been particularly important for you?
 - What has the Tree of Life offered you?
 - What new knowledges and insights about yourself, your life and others have you developed as a result of doing the Tree of Life?
 - What new steps do you see yourself taking to address the challenges that you have been facing?
 - Who would you want to share this experience with?
9. You can invite participants to write a letter to someone that they would like to share their experience with sharing how they were particularly touched by the experience
10. End with a discussion about what happens to the beautiful drawings e.g. do they remain as an exhibition, does each person take their drawing home. This is really up to each person to decide what works for them

- **Part 4: Certificates**

We are now ready to celebrate. The Tree of Life ends with a celebration and honouring of people's skills knowledge, hopes and dreams and the important relationships that they have in their lives. A lot of preparations need to be made for the certificate ceremony including:

STEPS

1. Completing the blank certificates using the notes that the assistant counsellor has been taking
2. Inviting community members, friends, family members, peers etc. to come and witness the awarding of the certificates
3. Preparing a Tree of Life song or dance that will be presented during the ceremony
4. Preparing snacks or little treats that can be shared during the ceremony (optional)