

Expressive Support: An Innovative, Person Centred Approach to Spiritual Assessment and Holistic Care

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Background and Introduction to the Project

The meaning of spirituality can vary from person to person, therefore the complexities surrounding the spiritual needs of those with life limiting illness has afforded much attention from government and professional institutions (Milligan, 2011). As far back as 1993, Saunders and Sykes defined 'the spirit' as the vital principle within a person, including 'thought' at the deepest level. It therefore follows that spiritual care is at the heart of all that we do and is not an added extra (Wright and Neuberger, 2013).

Against this backdrop, an Expressive Support Group pilot project was proposed and facilitated by a Palliative Care Community Nurse Specialist who extended her role.

The project was planned to focus on the patient as 'a person' and to adopt a person centred art therapy approach to help address spiritual needs within the context of overall holistic care.

Person-centred Art Therapy shares the conditions appropriate to Person-centred Counselling. In addition, it uses the right side of the brain to access creativity (Silverstone, 1997) (Rodgers, 1951).

The use of colour and imagery promotes spontaneity and can gain access to the sub-conscious, the here and now, imagination, intuition and inspiration.

Much of this reflects the spiritual or innermost being of the person and therefore demands the utmost respect and sensitivity on behalf of the facilitator who does not force, intrude or interpret.

Aims of the Project

- Encourage creativity and a therapeutic experience
- Determine the value of creativity as an aid to communication and facilitative skills
- Facilitate individual and group interaction, peer support and enjoyment
- Ascertain the overall benefit to the assessment, enhancement and quality of spiritual and holistic patient care
- Identify optimal referral to other services
- Help the participants to -
- Experience new forms of expression through various art forms, spontaneity and image making
- Explore the image and make sense of its message
- Re-establish uniqueness and acknowledge corporate identity
- Share silence and support in an atmosphere of mutual understanding
- Experience enjoyment and release from the pressure of anxiety and distress
- Consider their coping strategies, celebrate achievement and receive healing and growth

Process

'The Circus' generated much fun, laughter and during the group process the exercise demonstrated the way various aspects of the individual's character can predominate. Each person shared their perceived position within the group, circle of friends, family, throughout illness and 'life' in general. Discussion highlighted a plethora of contrasting thoughts, feelings, memories, surprises and self discovery.

The images and corresponding quotations demonstrate the power of creativity where bridges can be built from the subconscious (internal) to the external world.

Structure

The group was structured around Beginnings, Middles and Endings and an overview to include the purpose, format, activities and contract was discussed and agreed with the group at the first meeting.

Activities

- Guided fantasy
- Music
- Poetry
- Imagery
- Individual and Group exercises
- Journaling
- Tea and chat (informal)

Weekly activities were planned around the following themes, however, ongoing adjustment and changes were made in accordance with the group process and response.

- Self identity and uniqueness
- Corporate identity
- Change and adjustment
- Emotional responses and coping
- Self awareness
- Giving and receiving – a message of hope

Participants

- Five women and one man accepted the invitation to take part
- All were attending hospice services for life threatening conditions
- Their Palliative Performance scale ranged from 70% to 90%

The Lion and Elephant

'In the group, I was the elephant and didn't always say it as it is, however, at home I am like the lion, being strong, fighting to make things easier for my husband and children.'

Clown

'I had just completed my treatment and found a lump in my other breast. I was always scared of clowns and this image represented my fear.'

Clown

'I was always dragged to the circus and I hated it and the clowns. The picture highlights a loss of control back then and at this time in my life.'

Ring Master

'I like to be in control. I know it's not always possible where health is concerned but I will keep control of the things I can control.'

Ring of Fire

'Cancer is like a circuit, going round is part of the process. Jumping through the ring of fire can be thrilling or terrifying, the hoops can symbolise the whole of life. It can get easier and less fearful. Eventually the show will stop – you or the cancer will win – depending on how you survive'

The audience

'This was the second exercise that spoke to me about my loss of confidence. I always put myself to the back and alongside others rather than at the forefront of a group.'

Outcome of the Pilot Project

Evaluation included a ten point questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions, individual and group feedback.

- Everyone found the use of colour and imagery a useful aid to self expression.

The following quotes provide examples;

'highlighted negative emotions and hope'
'guided fantasy helped me to relax, I felt free'
'learned it was OK to open up and express my feelings'
'didn't recognise myself, I realised I had a persona'
'now having my first counselling appointment'
'a really helpful tool on my step to recovery – mix of personalities and illnesses was a great idea'

- They felt safe and experienced a sense of achievement, love, laughter and honesty
- Four people felt their confidence had improved as a result of the experience
- For the professional, working in a dual role, the experience highlighted the importance of maintaining boundaries and endorsed the validity of supervision
- All agreed that ten weeks would be more advantageous to help develop their friendships and the overall therapeutic experience

Sharing emotional and spiritual issues created a depth to their relationships and many felt a sense of loss at the end of the project. This was compounded through the sudden death of one of the group members.

Conclusion

The project demonstrated the powerful effect of creativity within a 'safe' space and the mystical way it highlights the multifaceted emotional and spiritual layers that capture the essence of the person. The person centred, non analytical approach helped the participants to relax, make sense of their art work, become self aware and take ownership of relevant issues. This provided the facilitator with valuable insight and an opportunity to introduce information booklets or refer to other members of the Multidisciplinary Team.

During the conclusive period the facilitator compared the participants to 'Tall Poppies'. Not the entire group felt like 'a tall poppy' all of the time but they identified with the concept.

All are unique, fragile, but are also resilient and have capacity for self maintenance, growth and change. Each person's story and their journey were both individual and collective. Sometimes their paths crossed or intertwined when they experienced an exchange of spiritual care; love, respect, understanding or when sharing their hope for a brighter future.

The encouraging results from the Pilot Project have provided an opportunity for further Expressive Support work within the hospice.



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