



DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
City of Los Angeles

**HEALING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS THROUGH IMAGINATIVE PLAY:
AN EVALUATION OF A 7 MONTH and ONGOING IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE
and PLAYWRIGHTING WORKSHOP FOR VETERANS**

Victoria Stevens, PhD

“Imagination is absolutely critical to the quality of our lives. Our imagination enables us to leave our routine everyday existence by fantasizing about travel, food, sex, falling in love, or having the last word—all the things that make life interesting.

Imagination gives us the opportunity to envision new possibilities—it is an essential launchpad for making our hopes come true. It fires our creativity, relieves our boredom, alleviates our pain, enhances our pleasure, and enriches our most intimate relationships. When people are compulsively and constantly pulled back to the past, to the last time they felt intense involvement and deep emotions, they suffer from a failure of imagination, a loss of mental flexibility.

Without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, and no goal to reach.

Beneath the surface of the protective parts of trauma survivors there exists an undamaged essence, a Self that is confident, curious, and calm, a Self that has been sheltered from destruction by the various protectors that have emerged in their efforts to ensure survival. Once those protectors trust that it is safe to separate, the Self will spontaneously emerge, and the parts can be enlisted in the healing process.”¹

Abstract

After a successful pilot program of 10 weeks with women in the New Directions for Veterans program in 2016, an expanded program of 20 weeks with both male and female veterans in 2017 -18, and another 20 week expanded program including both male and female veterans through their partnership with New Directions in 2018-19, The Imagination Workshop continued to work with New Directions with a group starting in the November 2019.

The date set for the performance of the play was April 18, however everything went on hold as of the lockdown in California in March 2020. After about 4 weeks, the team came back to the VA after being asked by the administration as the program is considered essential for the mental health of the veterans

and therefore essential. All the residents had tested negative and the building was isolated. Imagination Workshop has been one of the only groups New Directions has had during the lockdown.

Captain Cuadrado, COO of New Directions said the Imagination Workshop was “keeping the guys from going stir crazy”. The sessions have continued since April and are still continuing. The tentative date for the performance of the play is September 2020 depending on the Covid-19 situation in California.

¹ Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. (p. 17) Penguin Books, NY: NY

I have been evaluating the program since 2016 with the goal of not only assessing the efficacy of the series of sessions with this group, but also the goal of understanding the uniqueness of this specific form of theatre workshop in the context of current research on post-traumatic stress. I was also a participant in the entire process including playing a part in the play. A discussion will be offered regarding the therapeutic value of this program and why it can be seen as an important addition to the care, healing and treatment of individuals in groups suffering from the effects of trauma or mental illness in other contexts.

This report evaluates where this program is as of the end of June 2020. The group participated in weekly improvisational sessions which evolved into character development, writing individually, then in small groups, and then as a large group, culminating in a full-length one-act play, which they are still writing and which will be performed for the public as well as all participants in the New Directions for Veterans Program. The play is being created completely in their own words and out of their own imagination. A Pre-Test was given, but will not be assessed until the completion of the program which will include the performance of their play. As of now there were questions asked about the process thus far and those are included here. In addition, continues to be an overwhelming positive response from the participants themselves and the directors of the program. An overview of the New Directions program and the Imagination Workshop is followed by an overview of the 7 ½ months, observations, written responses, discussion, writing samples from the play, and recommendations for the future.

Introduction

The Power of Theatrical Improvisation for Healing

The arts are powerful tools for healing trauma as is generally known. How they are utilized for the most part is to provide a way to reengage with emotions and the story of actual trauma that has occurred, leading to integration and freedom from the memories of the events that were devastating and overwhelming. This is the typical role of art and drama therapy in rehabilitation.

Improvisation in the way it is presented by the Imagination Workshop is not focused on healing the past by directly working through it, but by being able to play in the realm of imagination – being able to imagine a life and identity *beyond* the trauma and beyond being a victim of it.

As Margaret Ladd, the Artistic Director of the Imagination Workshop says, “The ability of the human brain to create metaphors and actually inhabit them, which is the essence of the art of acting – of theatre in fact – contains within it what we feel is a secret antibody to mental illness and despair. It does not touch its causes or its cure. But it allows the brain to reconsider life from a different perspective... This redirection through the imagination, through metaphors, through characters then begins to lead one out of isolation to begin to socialize in positive ways.”

Most people think of improvisation as related to comedy, performance and being quick-witted, but the healing power of improvisation is because at its core, improvisation is about being obvious, and saying or doing the next logical thing; it's about being authentic. At its essence it is about exploring what it means to be human. Improvisation is an unconditional welcoming of the present moment, full of possibility and hope. This form of improvisation involves the act of seeing through the eyes of someone different than yourself and this is an integral part of working through conflict.

The skills that are developed and facilitated by this kind of group improvisation are, among others:

- **Attentive listening**
- **Being present in the moment**
- **Expanding awareness and observation**
- **Letting go of the need to control - or even know - what happens next**
- **Adaptability to change; flexibility**
- **Being open to noticing and receiving what the situation is offering**
- **Taking emotional risks and being vulnerable**
- **Responding in a way that is supportive and attuned to others, and promotes self-esteem**
- **Acknowledging interdependence**
- **Empathy and perspective-taking**
- **Opening up to previously unimagined possibilities**
- **Creative thinking and imaginative play**
- **Experiencing, embracing, and expressing joy**

Current research is validating what many practitioners in mental health, as well as artists and teachers who work with traumatized children and adults have known for decades, and that is that mainstream treatments for traumatic stress in general and for military veterans in particular, are largely inadequate for holistic healing and trauma recovery. Ali and Wolfert (2016) state, “There is thus a need for innovative treatment models for traumatic stress that acknowledge potential sources of resilience and healing in veterans’ existing communities. In particular, there is growing evidence that the arts can play an important role in supporting veterans’ recovery from trauma.” (p. 58)

In addition to inadequate treatment for traumatic stress, veterans observe that “the military does an extremely effective job in training them to operate within the military, and an extremely poor job of reversing that training or preparing them before sending them back to civilian life. The basic idea that veterans must embark on a “transition” as they move from military to civilian life has been central for researchers, doctors, policy-makers, and activists thinking about the physical, emotional, and social experiences of post 9/11 veterans.” (Zogas, 2017 p.1)

The Imagination Workshop offers an innovative and effective solution to both of these pressing issues by providing a space for healing traumatic stress, developing needed skills that will contribute to success in civilian life, and offering an opportunity to discover, write, and live a new story of who they are beyond that of their military identity, and being defined by their trauma.

While the Imagination Workshop is definitely not drama therapy per se, it is therapeutic and develops the core skills Nisha Sajjani, Research Director of the As Performance: Theatre and Health Lab states as crucial outcomes of drama therapy in general in her discussion of about the power of drama therapy,

“When we go through highly stressful experiences such as chronic poverty, domestic violence, neglect, racism, or singular events like sexual assault or an unexpected loss, we may experience a disruption in our sense of identity, safety, and connection to others. These ruptures can contribute to anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation which may, in turn, prompt helpful or harmful coping strategies such as avoidance and social isolation.

Drama therapy can offer survivors of trauma opportunities to use skills related to acting, such as breath and movement, enrolling and de-rolling, to practice regulating emotional experience and returning to present experience. Through theatre games and exercises, participants are able to take creative risks in a less threatening environment and rehearse challenging social situations.

When conducted in a group, drama therapy can offer children, adolescents, and adults opportunities to experience joy, validation, and connection with others again while making meaning of difficult events.” (2018)

In conclusion, The Imagination Workshop joins other modalities that offer the relational reparative, and creative experiences that are now being identified as crucial for the integration and diminution of the effects of traumatic experiences on the lives of those who are suffering:

“When addressing the problem of traumatized people who, in a myriad of ways, continue to react to current experience as a replay of the past, there is a need for therapeutic methods that do not depend exclusively on drugs, talk therapy, cognitive insight or cognitive understanding. We have learned that most experience is automatically processed on a subcortical level of the brain, i.e., by the unconscious – in interpretations that take place outside of conscious awareness. Insight and good intentions have only a limited influence on the operation of subcortical processes, but synchrony, movement, and reparative relational experiences do.”
Center for Trauma Research, Bessel Van der Kolk

New Directions for Veterans

The New Directions for Veterans program states that Los Angeles has the largest population of homeless military veterans in the nation. The LA Homeless Services Authority estimates that more than 4,000 homeless veterans live on our streets. Many of these men and women suffer from Co-Occurring Disorders, including substance abuse, mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as chronic medical problems.

Since 1992, New Directions for Veterans (NDVets) has provided comprehensive services to thousands of veterans in Los Angeles County. Founded by two formerly homeless Vietnam veterans and a local advocate for homeless persons, NDVets initially operated out of a five-bedroom home serving eight homeless Vietnam War veterans. They now operate four Transitional Housing Programs, a rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention program called Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), and four Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) facilities in Los Angeles County, with additional projects in the pipeline.

NDVets offers a wide array of services. These include substance abuse treatment, counseling, remedial education, job training and placement, as well as parenting and money management classes. Legal and tax assistance are available, as is an active aftercare program and resources for alumni. Veterans leave NDVets with a savings account, housing, a job or other income, computer skills, renewed self-confidence and the support of mentors and peers. Such a transformation takes hard work, motivation and accountability, but the results are life altering—and for many veterans, life-saving.²

The Veteran Opportunity Center (VOC) houses up to 156 men at a time and is an assessment and transitional housing program for homeless veterans offering comprehensive services for men with Co-Occurring Disorders with fully equipped classrooms for computer training and Adult Basic Education. It is a one-stop vocational rehabilitation center providing employment services, vocational assessment and career counseling.

²<https://ndvets.org>

The New Directions Oasis for Veteran Women is part of this long-term transitional program and is for female veterans who have served in any branch of the armed forces and who are dealing with issues of homelessness, post-traumatic stress and addiction in addition to other Co-Occurring Disorders such as mental illness and chronic medical problems. It was the first program in the United States designed specifically for female veterans dealing with these issues. Los Angeles has the largest population of homeless military veterans in the nation. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimates that more than 4,000 homeless veterans live on the streets of Los Angeles. While the women served in this program may have a wide range of issues, the only determining factors for participation are being a veteran and being homeless.

The program for the women is divided into two phases, the first is an emergency house where residents may stay for up to 90 days and receive therapy individually and in groups, as well as anger management, parenting, computer and other classes. The second is a residence designed for veterans who are employed or going to school.

Background

The only criteria for being a part of the New Directions Program for Men and the Oasis for Veteran Women are being a veteran and having been homeless. There were no discussions about any individual's diagnosis or personal history before or during The Imagination Workshop, however it is important contextually to make note of the physical and psychological reality of the participants in the program. This is especially important when exploring the nature of the effectiveness of this program.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was only formally recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 largely due to the efforts of those working with Vietnam veterans. Since then research on all aspects of PTSD has grown exponentially and as a general diagnostic category, it has been a way of understanding the range of responses to traumatic events including child abuse, rape, domestic violence, terror and war.

The ubiquity of trauma is all too well-known now,

“Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.”³

³ Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. (p. 1) Penguin Books, NY: NY

Psychological trauma is characterized by helplessness, powerlessness, fear and loss of control in the face of events that are outside the range of usual human experience. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress that occur in reaction to traumatic events generally fall into three major categories: hyperarousal – the unshakable expectation of threat or danger; intrusive sensory, bodily, emotional and narrative memories of the trauma; and constriction – the protective numbing and dissociation in the face of terror and isolation. These responses vary with each person’s unique life experiences in total and the nature of their social support or lack thereof.

According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states that the nation’s homeless veterans are predominantly male, with roughly 9% being female. The majority are single; live in urban areas; and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. About 11% of the adult homeless population are veterans. Roughly 45% of all homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic, despite only accounting for 10.4% and 3.4% of the U.S. veteran population, respectively.

Homeless veterans are younger on average than the total veteran population. Approximately 9% are between the ages of 18 and 30, and 41% are between the ages of 31 and 50. Conversely, only 5% of all veterans are between the ages of 18 and 30, and less than 23% are between 31 and 50.

America’s homeless veterans have served in World War II, the Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq (OEF/OIF), and the military’s anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America. Nearly half of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam era. Two-thirds served our country for at least three years, and one-third were stationed in a war zone.

About 1.4 million other veterans, meanwhile, are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing. Due to veterans’ military service, this population is at higher risk of experiencing traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), both of which have been found to be among the most substantial risk factors for homelessness

81-93 % of female veterans have been exposed to some type of trauma – a significantly higher number than within the nonveteran, civilian population. More than half of female veterans surveyed experienced some type of trauma or abuse before joining the military, indicating that the problem extends far beyond the veteran population. Twenty-seven to 49% experienced childhood sexual abuse and 35% experienced childhood physical abuse.

For many, these traumas extended into adulthood, with 29-40% of female veterans reporting sexual assault and about half experiencing physical assault. About 19% of female veterans have experienced some type of domestic violence.

Military sexual trauma (MST) in the form of sexual harassment and assault remains a significant concern for female soldiers. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, an alarming 20% of female veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been identified as experiencing MST. According to the U.S. Department of

Defense, approximately one in three military women has been sexually assaulted compared to one in six civilians.⁴

In addition, a new study (Burks, 2011) has found that military veterans who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are twice as likely to experience incidents of sexual assault while on active duty compared to non-LGB service members. Specifically, current trends from those surveyed in the study indicate that while on active duty, 32.7 percent of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population – male and female – experienced some form of sexual assault, compared to 16.4 percent of non-LGB personnel.

Of the lesbian and bisexual female veterans who participated in the study, 57.5 percent reported experiencing sexual assault, compared to 37.4 percent of non-LGB female veterans. About 16 percent of gay and bisexual male veteran participants reported at least one incident of sexual assault while on active duty, compared to 3.5 percent of heterosexual male vets.

The experience of trauma prior to enlistment, coupled with trauma experienced while in uniform, make abuse a common denominator among homeless female veterans. The impact of MST is especially pronounced. Female veterans assaulted in the military are nine times more likely to exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms; are more likely to have problems with alcohol or drugs; have lower economic and educational outcomes; and experience difficulty maintaining relationships, housing, and employment. Even though the female homeless veteran population has tremendous service needs, many of these are going unmet.

According to the pioneering trauma expert Judith Herman, recovery unfolds in three stages:

1. The establishment of safety in terms of being safe in one's own body, in the world and in relationship with others which includes restoring a sense of personal power and control;
2. Remembrance and mourning involving reconstructing the trauma through telling the story until it loses its power;
3. Reconnection with others and the world, moving toward the future.⁵

Treatment of PTSD and co-morbid symptoms is complex and multi-layered and most programs including New Directions address all three stages in a variety of ways: medication to balance the neurochemical responses to trauma; top-down methods using talking and sharing stories to experience support, relief, to gain insight, perspective and resolution through individual or group therapy; and bottom-up methods focusing on somatic memories and reconnecting with the body and emotions. These are often integrated with educational and vocational training and many other forms of training and support. Art therapies have been firmly established for years in integrated treatment programs. This includes drama therapy, which has and continues to be utilized effectively, usually focusing on dramatic role-playing and creating dramatizations based upon their experiences.

Given the recent advances in understanding the effects of trauma on the brain, mind, and body, there is a shift in emphasis from talking through and about the past predominantly to bodily-based here-and-now methodologies for fully integrated healing and repair.

In the words of the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, a leading researcher on the current state of trauma:

“Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.

We have discovered the helping victims of trauma find word to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but it is not enough. The act of telling the story doesn’t necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time.

For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present. Our search to understand trauma has led us to think differently not only about the structure of the mind but also the processes by which it heals.”⁶

⁴ [The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report \(AHAR\) to Congress](#)

⁵ Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic violence to political terror*. Basic Books, NY: NY

⁶ Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. (p. 21) Penguin Books, NY: NY

The Imagination Workshop

Imagination Workshop (IW) is a non-profit theater arts organization committed to using the unique power of the theater and the mentoring of theatre arts professionals (actors, writers, and directors) to provide life-changing artistic opportunities to those suffering from a broad spectrum of mental and emotional disorders. IW programs give those suffering from mental illness, frequently alienated or overlooked by society, a safe way to express themselves and gain insights that increase the quality of their lives and often help make their lives more successful.

Founded in 1969, IW is the longest-running theater program of its kind. For more than forty years, hundreds of actors and writers from Broadway, film and television, including such well-known names as Susan Sarandon, Ted Danson and Sam Waterston, have, through IW, worked on stage with more than forty-five thousand people suffering mental illness, most of whom have never before experienced theater's ability to transcend real life.

On stage, those who have difficulty dealing with even the simplest aspects of life suddenly discover that, as a fictional character, they can do all that they ever imagined and more. Through imagination and play the participants develop the ability to imagine multiple versions of any particular story or situation, to be able to see alternate possibilities and to project into the future what possibilities might happen and what the consequences of those outcomes might be. This includes the ability to imagine things being different than they are and to be able to conceptualize what would happen "if" things were different.

The Imagination Workshop program is not therapy formally in any way, but it is therapeutic in the sense of being healing, health-giving, and restorative. By imaginatively creating characters and embodying them there is, in the words of IW founder and artistic director, Margaret Ladd, "redirection through the imagination, through metaphors, through characters that begin to lead one out of isolation and to begin to socialize in positive ways."

IW helps homeless veterans, psychiatric patients, at-risk youth and other disenfranchised individuals synthesize thoughts and feelings in the realm of metaphor through creating and portraying fictional characters far removed from themselves under the direction of specially trained professional theatre artists. It provides a safe place for adults to play imaginatively as they did when children and because it is only "make-believe", participants feel free to do and say things in the guise of a character that they may be afraid or unable to express as themselves.

Improvisation is directly linked to the development of imagination and is especially difficult for traumatized individuals. Responding in the moment can be threatening to the brain/body system and can create reactions such as hyperarousal, dissociation or freezing. Over time, imaginative play opens up states of both emotional regulation and mindfulness, with pleasure in moment-to-moment creative expression from themselves and in interaction with others.

In addition to all of the above, I have identified specific skills that are developed. These include the following:

- Imaginative Play with Joy, Fun and Humor
- Emotional Self-Regulation and Body Awareness
- Personal Agency
- Thoughtful Risk-Taking
- Patience and Persistence
- Introspection and Self-Reflective Thinking
- Self-Expression
- Empathy and Perspective-Taking
- Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Free Self-Expression
- Leadership and Group Participation
- Creative Thinking

Imagination Workshop Sequence and Methodology

The program normally consists of weekly 1 hour workshops facilitated by two or three theatre professionals of the course of 20 weeks. In this case it has been over 7 ½ months and is ongoing.

Overview of the Process:

The facilitators take turns leading various exercises and all facilitators participate in every exercise along with the workshop participants. I was there to observe (which I explained on the first day) but I also participated in every exercise. This is an important point, in that while there are facilitators and structure, everyone who is there is equally participating fully creating both safety and a lack of hierarchy or the feeling of a teacher-student class dynamic. It is clearly a safe space for play without judgment.

Every session begins in a circle with physical warm-ups and movements, then moves into some form of sound and movement based on a theme where each person does something and then all do what the person created. One of the facilitators would start off with the sound and movement as an example every time. After the warm-up there is a “passing exercise” where one person will take the hand of another, look them in the eyes, and share with them something based on a prompt from the facilitator like, “If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to....” And then the person with whom they shared “does the same to the next person and in goes around until all have shared.

After that there is some form of creative exercise involving quickly and imaginatively creating characters, metaphors and descriptions and then interacting with the group in some form. These longer exercises always involve each person “performing” in front of the “audience” either alone or with another participant in an improvised dialogue.

The exercises are sequenced and become more complex as the sessions go forward. Everything is totally improvised and fully supported by the whole group with applause after each “performance”. Each person has their moment when the group is paying full attention to them and enjoying their imagination without judgment.

Each session closes back in a circle with each person stating their intention for how the rest of their day will go. After the first 5 weeks, writing was added to each session beginning with a group poem, and then into the writing of short scenes, evolving into character development, a group created story, and monologues. These are currently being developed into a coherent play that will be performed by the group. As a note, after 10 weeks the participants asked for more time to write and we were able to extend the session to 1 ½ hours per week. This speaks to their increased motivation and enjoyment of the process.

These sessions continue with a few group interactive improvisational exercises at the beginning of the session and then begin dividing into groups who are working on character development and scenes.

The storyline developed out of the characters they created through improvisation and this is a group process that is continuously evolving. It should be noted that given the longer amount of time and the nature of the New Directions Program there have been significant changes in the veterans who are participating week to week. Several have moved on to their own housing and jobs and new participants have come in. The story emerged from the creation of characters all of whom had a secret desire. These relationships were explored through improvisation and through individual and group writing. Eventually the group decided on a place where all of the characters were, a time of day/night, and a common problem they all had to face together.

The story emerged from brainstorming and ended up involving music, New Orleans, food (Gumbo), and magic.

The characters were all based on imagination as opposed to the reality of the participants themselves. In many cases they wrote for each other and took on the gender and role of another character. The scenes developed out of both improvisation and writing.

Ultimately the scenes are put together in a coherent narrative and the sessions become rehearsals until they have learned their lines and blocking.

WRITING SAMPLES FROM THE PLAY IN PROGRESS “GUMBO MAGIC”

RALPH

I would be disappointed if Mardi Gras was canceled. That and I will go on the top of a high building, which is the lighthouse, at the bayou. Where I live. Only members can get in, you need a secret code to get in. JoJo, you have the code, you must not give it away. There are people who believe in talking to the spirits and they are willing to spend money to get in to read the stars in the sky.

Yeah, but me and you must work together. As a team. For the spirits to go away we need to feed the homeless people. Be kind to each other, protect the children and the elderly. No fighting and killing each other. We must go and pray at the church. To get blessing from the spirits.

We have partied and now it is time to be thankful. We come together to give thanks for making it through the storm and know one was hurt or killed. Everyone seemed in good spirits helping each other out to get food together from the cook and helpers, the people who played instruments got together and made an awesome band but s everyone is together we still pray for well being of everyone. We have to acknowledge our higher power for keeping us strong and humble, willing to listen to everyone’s ideas of how to come together to d a big event like this. I am Mr. Lewis. I am a man who plays drums because the beats are mellow, and you can dance to them.

SKYE

What are you looking at me for? Yeah, my family’s rich. So? It’s not against the law. I’ve always done my best to keep up our family name, to be good to our fellow man and we are known in these parts as doing such. I was born into this wealth, I became a multimillionaire just because I turned 18. That's all I did it wasn't my choice to be born this way. I guess my challenge is to be a better man than my father. Now it nearly broke my heart to see these families in the ninth stranded up on the roofs, without any food or water for days. I just read an article about a Navy seal veteran who risked his life to save members of the community. Maybe I should look to be more like him.

DARRYL

January 29, 2020

William Dontaknow’

I’m trying to obtain two hundred pounds of shrimp for the Martis Gras. Plus, not having enough cooks. I’m a cook now who used to be a blacksmith. Because of where I worked I’d have to cook while at war and I gave some people samples and hey liked it. This went on for years and this is what made me decide, to start cooking. I’m very good at what I do, be it shoeing a horse or making gumbo, gator meat included.

PAUL

Sarge

Drifter saddled up on a Harley. Idling through South Rampart Street on Fat Tuesday before Lent. Worrying/straddling what has become a beast to stow away. Whistling a tune:

Too many people, too many damn squares
 All the pretenders, so many stares
 What will we do? Too many parking fares.
 So many ghosts, so many scares
 I'll be mine (theirs) too many dares
 Too many straights stumping their wares.

MELANIE 02-12-20

Electra

The spirits are unhappy due to how unkind we are toward one another. So, I think the best I can do is plant some roses and trees and possible some sunflowers. Maybe I even offer assistance to some of the neighbors; walking the dogs or making them some of my delicious gumbo, hot water cornbread or maybe I just write a check. That would be best. Awwa check it is. So today I decided that I would set aside my pride and go over to Ms. Hattie Raye Mae Johnston to bury the hatchet between us. I think it's long overdue. Its time I show her kindness. It's better than being a bitter sour lemon. This may make her hair stand up on end.

Scene with Ms. Hattie Rae Mae Johnston. Electra knocks on Hattie's door.

- Ms. H: girl what do you want. Ain't got time for you today. Busy trying to cleanup this house and fix some food.
- Electra: Ms. Hattie I came over to bury the Hatchet between us and offer some form of kindness towards you.
- Ms. H: don't want no kindness from you. Why don't you get your gumbo hot water cornbread ass off my doorstep?
- Electra: Ms. Hattie, why do you have to be so rude? All I want to do is an act of kindness. Besides you and I have been frenemies for far too long. Let's call it even and stop this foolishness right now!
- Ms. H: I guess you're right gal. It's been a while since we were friends. Since you drove all the way across town, I could get over the drama.
- Electra: thank you, cause it's hotter out here than grease getting ready for fish. You got some cold water for me to drink?
- Ms. H: come on in here before you look like a pink shrimp ready to be dipped in butter.

- Electra: thank you again. So happy we are friends again. Would you like to join us in the Mardi Gras, planning?
- Ms. H: yes, I would love to help out. Can y'all get Jimmy Jon and the boys to come play zydeco music cause I want to sake it down to the ground. Got to meet me a new husband. Mardi Gras is the perfect time for that.
- Electra: Ms. Hattie I didn't know you had it in you.

Results from Informal Assessment at 7 ½ Months

Observations

The following questions were asked to the participants:

1. What have you gained in this experience of Imagination Workshop?
2. What does this space we have created, the setting and world of our play, mean to you?
3. What have you gained from embodying this character you have created?
4. Any reflections, positive or negative, about working with the artist-leaders?

Here is a sample of their answers:

Daryl

1. Here's what I gain with this experience. This is an exciting experience to me, because I am not being myself, but acting as someone else.
2. This would be a place I would like to visit (New Orleans) just to see the culture and taste the food.
3. I've gained an outlook that people are different. Sometimes what people are is a result of who they are.
4. Working with everyone is showing me to be considerate and patient with others. Treat them as I would like to be treated.

Sky

1. As an actor, this experience has enabled me to work out my acting mojo that has been pretty much inactive these past view years during my addiction.
2. The space of New Orleans brings me back to the culture of the south, where I spent part of my childhood.
3. I have gained so much strength and confidence from working with my character.
4. Great teaching, patient, supportive.

Melanie

1. I have done this program a few times. Each time I have done it, I have learned new things about myself and those around me. This experience has been amazing.
2. I enjoy New Orleans, the food music and people are all unique and special. Each person brings their own flair to the project, which is great.
3. My character, Electra, brings a certain magic and she is enjoyable and sassy. I love her.
4. I like working with Imagination Workshop because the artists really love what they are doing and it's refreshing to work with people that are passionate about their work.

Ralph

1. At first not cool, I didn't understand the concept, now getting into it. I am more relaxed, and now I am seeing the vision, to be free of anxiety.
2. The play we created is fun, cool, exciting, different. We have a lot of experiences that are good for healthy living. All participants have made it fun. We all tried to do our best.
3. Acting is hard, but I'm surprised I like it.
4. The teachers are very good, professional, caring, and unique to what they do. They are very good at what their experience has to offer us.

Paul (no numbers)

What I have gained? RELEASE!! What a joy it has been to work with Big Jim, Christina, Gerald, and Marnie in this Imagination Workshop. In the trying times of Trump impeachment, Covid 19 incarceration, and general unrest, Imagination Workshop has proven the perfect pressure cooker release for this Marine Corps veteran!

Discussion

There are several critical aspects to the successful healing of the effects of trauma whether in individual or group work. Among them are those highlighted by the Imagination Workshop: safety and security; reconnection, connections and group support; and being in the here-and-now and imagination.

Safety – Security

As Herman says regarding the importance of safety,

“Trauma affects the entire human organism—body, mind, and brain. In PTSD the body continues to defend against a threat that belongs to the past. Healing from PTSD means being able to terminate this continued stress mobilization and restoring the entire organism to safety. Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.”⁷

The structure of each session and the way of being of the facilitators create a safe environment for individual participants to explore, play and stretch their imagination, as well as the safety to do this with others. A protected space allows fantasy to be freed and the freedom to translate that fantasy into action without fear of mistakes or looking foolish to others.

The creation of a security and safety then allows for the restoration of power and control and the development of a sense of agency. Agency here means the experience of having an effect on others and the world, of a personal sense of being seen and heard by others and of having something to do or say that makes a difference. Through the physical actions of improvising as created characters and interacting in imaginary scenarios, the participants have a safe way to practice and exercise this sense of agency and personal power, which is precisely what is taken from those that have suffered trauma.

Reconnection and Connections – Group Support

When a survivor is in the early stages of recovery and memories of the trauma are powerfully dominating, the imagination is limited and narrowed by helplessness, futility and hopelessness, the hallmarks of depression. Through the safety of a supportive environment created by others who are attuned, resonant and empathic, there is a lessening of the power of the traumatic memories and the ability to both reconnect with lost hopes and dreams and develop new ones. In addition there can be a reconnection with lost aspects of oneself and also the creation of a new sense of self.

The power of true group support cannot be underestimated. Groups provide a sense of belonging, being understood and mirrored by others empathically and is the opposite of the alienation, isolation and shame that accompanies trauma. One of the most telling signs of this kind of safety and reconnection is a decrease in rigidity and an increase in fluidity marked by increased humor, laughter, spontaneity and responsiveness.

The responses from this group clearly speak to the power of the group experience that is provided by the IW and the safety that is created by the facilitators, specifically the amount of laughter, humor and play.

⁷ Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic violence to political terror.* (p.157) Basic Books, NY: NY

“Social support is not the same as merely being in the presence of others. The critical issue is reciprocity: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else’s mind and heart. For our physiology to calm down, heal, and grow we need a visceral feeling of safety. No doctor can write a prescription for friendship and love: These are complex and hard-earned capacities.”⁸

Being in the reality of the present and Imagination

The findings from this study highlight the therapeutic importance of the right timing for a group that focuses on the here-and-now rather than the past or the future in any kind of directive way. Current research on trauma treatment is now focusing on methods that actively provide ways for the survivor in creatively and vitally express themselves, engage with others and explore in the present moment.

The IW games and exercises are continually and fully engaging all participants in the present moment. As one participant said, “there was never any dead air, it was always exciting and you didn’t know what was going to happen next”. It is from fully being engaged in the present that the imagination can be utilized not for creating scenarios of what might happen in the future driven by fear, paranoia or anxiety, by for creative free playing with pure possibilities.

This kind of imaginative combinatory play includes metaphor-making, empathic perspective-taking and placing oneself in another’s shoes or oneself in another possible way of being. The exercise of this skill expands the capacity for holding multiple possible ways of being and of seeing anything. It is also the essential skill in the creation of meaning for one’s life. There are very few places where the imagination is actually **exercised** deliberately and sequentially, even in all forms of arts learning and performance. The specific kinds of exercises that make up the IW program are specifically designed for this through improvisatory play.

As Bessel van der Kolk says,

“For a hundred years of more, every textbook of psychology and psychotherapy has advised that some method of talking about distressing feelings can resolve them. However, as we’ve seen, the experience of trauma itself gets in the way of doing that. No matter how much insight and

⁸ Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic violence to political terror.* (p.202) Basic Books, NY: NY

understanding we develop, the rational brain is impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality...Our scans have revealed how dread has persisted and could be triggered by multiple aspects of daily experience. They had not integrated their experiences into the ongoing stream of their life. The continued to be “there” and did not know how to be “here” – fully alive in the present.”⁹

And in the words of the philosopher and aesthician Maxine Greene,

“If we can link imagination to our sense of possibility and our ability to respond to other human beings, can we link it to the making of community as well? G.B. Madison, writing about the centrality of imagination, says that “it is through imagination, the realm of pure possibility that we freely make ourselves to be who or what we are, that we creatively and imaginatively become who we are, while in the process preserving the freedom and possibility to be yet otherwise than what we have become and merely are” (1988, p. 191)....Those who are labeled as deficient, fixed in that category as firmly as flies in amber, have little chance to feel they can be yet otherwise than what they have become. Marginalized, they are left to the experience of powerlessness unless (usually with support) they are enabled to explain their “shocks” and reach beyond.”¹⁰

Conclusion

When we go through highly stressful experiences such as abuse, war, chronic poverty, domestic violence, neglect, racism, or singular events like sexual assault or an unexpected loss, we may experience a disruption in our sense of identity, safety, and connection to others. These ruptures can contribute to anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation which may, in turn, prompt helpful or harmful coping strategies such as avoidance and social isolation.

Exercises, where two or more people improvise or role-play scenarios from another’s point of view, engage the psychological processes that contribute to empathy such as mirroring and Mentalization with a base of respect, a capacity for listening, an acknowledgment of perspectives other than our own, and a willingness to take personal and creative risks together towards a common goal.

Being able to make-believe gives people a chance to try out different possibilities and to create new storylines about their lives in a less risky environment. We can, in fact, rehearse the change we wish to be and see.

Art, and in this case improvisational theatre gives individuals a vital way to express and communicate inner experience which results in feeling less alone. This is important given that

⁹ Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. (p. 47) Penguin Books, NY: NY

¹⁰ Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change*, (p.38). Josse-Bass Inc., San Francisco: CA.

Social support is a critical factor in how we manage life's stressors, especially for those who have experienced trauma. Art can also bring visibility to people and concerns that we have neglected as a society. With its ability to engage, connect, and sustain us, art and artistic programs such as the Imagination Workshop show great promise in reducing isolation and helping people to recover their creativity, imagine a better future, put ideas into action, and feel alive again.

It is clear from the combination of findings from the pre and post-tests after the first 10 weeks, the observations of facilitators, audience members, and the statements from the participants themselves in combination with my own observations, the IW provides an important therapeutic experience for those that are recovering from any form of trauma.

Specifically, this program addresses the needs Judith Herman identified as phase one of recovery: The establishment of safety in terms of being safe in one's own body, in the world and in relationship with others which includes restoring a sense of personal power and control, and phase three: Reconnection with others and the world, moving toward the future.

Additionally, through the art of theatrical improvisation the IW sessions provide repeated experiences of being seen and heard by others; listening and responding to others; empathy and perspective-taking; play, spontaneity, fun, laughter, humor, metaphor-making, being and living in the present, and the development and exercising the imagination - free cognitive play with possibilities, hopes, ways of being and dreams.

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Biography – Victoria Stevens

Victoria Stevens, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, psychoanalyst, speaker, researcher and educator. She holds a BA with honors in philosophy, cello and theatre from the University of Kansas, an MA and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (CGI in Los Angeles) and specialized certifications in Hypnosis and the Treatment of Victims and Perpetrators of Violent Crimes. Her psychoanalytic certification is from the Psychoanalytic Center of California, and she has studied interpersonal affective neurobiology with Allan Schore for over 15 years.

Her research specialty is the study of the development and inhibition of creativity in children and adults, with an emphasis on the relationship between creative thinking, neurobiology, emotional development and affect regulation, trauma, the arts and cognitive processes. She has integrated her experience as a classically trained cellist, singer, actress and dancer with her expertise in psychology and pedagogical theory to develop innovative art education curricula and assessments, teacher training programs and trainings for mentors who work with foster children and “at-risk” youth. She created the curriculum framework and training for the Millennial High School for Arts and Technology in Salinas, California and the Center for Teaching and Learning (preK-12) in Abuja, Nigeria. She is a consultant for A Sense of Home, a non-profit providing homes for emancipated foster youth, and the Imagination Workshop, a non-profit providing theatre improvisation as a form of healing trauma for veterans, psychiatric patients and “at-risk” youth.

She is a founding faculty member of the California Institute of the Arts Teaching Artist Training Program and on the faculty of Antioch University Santa Barbara for the Masters in Clinical Psychology Program where she was the co-creator of the Somatic Psychology and Trauma concentration and certification programs at Antioch University Santa Barbara which started in the fall of 2017. She is on the faculty of the Graduate School of Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology at the University of California Santa Barbara, the PsyD and PhD Programs in Clinical Psychology, as well as the PhD in Integrated Healing Program focusing on integrated approaches to trauma at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She has been a faculty member at a number of institutions: California Institute of the Arts School of Critical Studies, Mount St. Mary’s College, and the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute for Infant and Child Development. She provides professional development training for teachers in public and private schools across the country on the subjects of creativity, the arts, emotional regulation, imagination, empathy, and metacognition as they relate to life- long learning, academic achievement, and personal fulfillment for all children.

