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Face-to-face with young people Make it fun, make it real, make it relevant

**Workshop presented at the
'Creating Synergy' Conference
Wollongong NSW Australia
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Workshop outline

How do we help young people look at the worlds in which they live, the risks they face and how they might both survive and thrive?

What's new? Stimulation everywhere, Block-busters and amazing video games, Face book, Youtube and Twitter! All of which might just make face-to-face contact quite unique in a world of distance, animation and special effects. Conversations are still good. They can be based on questions, dilemmas, problems to be solved, dreams to be pursued, and hopes to be nurtured. And they can include moments of private thought, a drawing on a scrap of paper or a finger in the sand; or they might include moments of physical movement. All matching the style and the mood of the person, the class or the group.

And particularly for groups, the world of theatre has much to offer. Based on story-telling, about adversity and victories, it can help us look at our lives and prepare for the next step. Theatre is about telling stories; and about putting on a show that is fun. It is about both performers and audience, which means there is room for everyone, the noisy and the quiet, the more active and the more sit-back. And if the theatre we create is not only fun but real and relevant, and possibly unusual, we might also just be 'educational'. And this is not about Theatre with a capital T...it's about taking the ideas and techniques and adapting them to (quickly) create interesting, powerful and moving moments of importance.

And especially for those who have been around the health/welfare systems for a while or who are wrapped up in a tough life, moments of joy and hope are much in need.

The workshop

The activities detailed below, as useful as they are, represent strategies which are underpinned by certain principles, certain ways of understanding substance use, ways of looking at, making sense of and responding to, people's use of alcohol or any other drug, or indeed any other anything. It is these background ideas which are, in many ways, much more important because they will determine what strategies we use and how we use them.

Background thinking

Idea 1

Drug use is a response...which tends to beg the question: A response to what?

Idea 2

At the point where our inner world touches our outer world...

...drug use becomes a

possibility.

Idea 3

We are looking at:

- Two worlds:
- The inner
- The outer
- Two approaches, two places to focus our attention:
- On damaging substance use
- What leads to it...or elsewhere.

Idea 4

As people on planet earth, to flourish, we need certain things. A shorthand list of these would include:

- Security and belonging
- A solid sense of self and identity
- Being in charge of yourself and life
- Good solid relationships.

The activities

Each of the activities below, as playful and as active as each may be, is about looking at:

- A person's internal world
- A person's external world
- Moments of interaction between the two.

Theatre (almost) activities

Activities such as those that appear below really require very little. They require only:

- People who will jump up and 'act'
- An audience
- A facilitator who can get an audience involved, and at times ask interesting, useful and occasionally provocative questions.

1. CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

A person sits in a chair. They are themselves, at least a bit, and something like when they were about 15 years of age...they are about to be subjected to MANY INFLUENCES....

CAUTION

This activity does tend to replicate a sense of 'voices in the mind'. So be careful and mindful about how you use it. It does not aim to replicate what people might experience when they hear voices, as in what is commonly called a 'psychotic episode'. It aims to represent the voices to which we are all constantly exposed.

Voice 1 represents the larger world and all that it says to all of us

Voice 2 represents all the messages of the world that are constantly directed specifically to young people

Voice 3 represents a third and closer circle of friends and family, who may well send positive and/or negative messages to the young person.

We hear from each voice one at a time. Then collectively...

Voice 4 enters and represents what we shall call: 'available substance.' A legal or illegal substance, real or imagined, introduces itself to the person in the chair and tells them just what it can offer them.

Voices 5 and 6 place themselves either side of the young person. These are the competing internal voices; one saying 'yeah go on. Take it!'. The other voice counsels caution: 'This is dangerous.'

And so it goes for a moment or two...and then we all voices speak simultaneously with the expected impact. After a moment of what is likely to be a noisy, possibly disturbing, probably chaotic sound barrage, we ask the young person what they are likely to do at this point. And why.

Purpose

To highlight the influences people are exposed to and to introduce the idea of inner and outer worlds and how they might intersect, and just what this means for substance use.

2. THINK OF A DAY...SIT IN A SEAT...

A group member sits in a seat while thinking of any day in their life. Others try to guess what sort of day the person has had. Make sure the person ONLY thinks of something they really are happy to fill their mind with right now. Audience members try to guess what sort of day the person had. We check to see how accurate the audience guesses are. We may, or may not, find out just what the person was thinking about.

Purpose

To look at the impact our lives have on our bodies and how we might communicate, unconsciously or consciously, what our lives are like.

3. BACK TO BACK

Two people stand back to back. They imagine a time six months from now when they bump into each other in the street. On the count of 1,2, 3...they turn and freeze in a 'photo' of that moment.

Secondly, the pair is asked to imagine that there was some minor and unresolved tension between them when they last met. Repeat the action...1,2, 3...and note the differences.

A third and final 'photo'. Each person is to decide, in this mini piece of theatre, whether they would like to try and sort out the tension; and to show this in the final photo.

Purpose

To explore non-verbal communication and look at what each of us 'projects', and to start to look at how we can decide quite deliberately what we project into the world.

4. THE MEETING. A WORDLESS PIECE OF THEATRE

A meeting between two people. A piece of mime. With the help of the group, build the scene. It takes place:

- Where?
- When?
- What is the weather like?
- What sex and age is each person?

The show starts:

- Character one enters
- Character two enters
- They notice each other
- The action is frozen
- What do audience members notice? What guesses can be made?
- One character remains frozen and the other 'advances' the action and freezes again...
- What has changed? What is the feel now?
- The second character 'advances' the action and freezes?
- What is the feel now? What is in the minds of each of the characters?

Continue with the story until it feels like it has run long enough. Bring it to a close with final actions from each character. Have a chat with them about, what an actor would call their 'motivation.' What did they have in mind? What were they acting out?

Purpose

- Building the scene together is useful in establishing a democratic process, a climate of contribution and acceptance
- The theatre itself helps to explore the ideas of 'intention' and 'reception'. That is, what does one person intend by an action and how is it received by another? And secondly, to look at how we see ourselves, how we read others and how we would like to present ourselves to the world.

5. POWER PLAY

Give two people a script to read. No more than something like:

A: Hello

B: Hello

A: Where have you been?

B: Just out.

Then give each person a number between 1 and 10 (or they choose their own numbers) where 1 is a person with very little personal power, and 10 represents someone with high personal power. That is, confident yet contained, assertive yet personable; however you would define 'Personally powerful.'

Ask the 'actors' to read their script according to the number they have chosen or been given. Ask audience members to guess what number each person is. Do this two or three times, giving people scenarios such as teacher/pupil, friends going to the cinema or boss/employee.

To extend the theatre, add two or more new characters. Ask each person to choose their own number. Then ad-lib any scene. A dentist's waiting room, a queue for a bus, shopping at the supermarket.

Purpose

To explore what a personally powerful person is, and what such a person 'looks like.' And how each person, whatever their personal power, interacts with others in the world.

6. WRITE A SCRIPT

People work in pairs and write a script about the two of them meeting in six months time. Keep it short.

People then read their scripts once to the group.

The facilitator adds 'something' to the theatre. Something fun, provocative, entertaining, insightful. Such as directing (quietly) one person to imagine that they are super contagious with the flu and to keep backing away from the other person. Or that they are secretly in love with them. Anything!

Purpose

To look at relationships and what we bring to them; spoken and unspoken; on the surface and visible and the deeper stuff, the less visible.

Writing and drawing

7. A MOMENT OF CRAZINESS

Think of a moment of craziness in your life and use language, or use words or pictures to indicate your response to the question: What contributed to you acting in that crazy way?

- And are you the same person now as you were then?
- If yes, then how come?
- If no, then how are you different? And how come?

Purpose

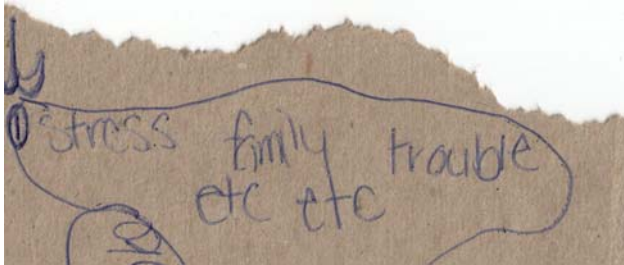
To start to have a conversation about a person's life. And to start to do this by:

- Allowing time for a person to think, without the distraction of conversation
- To ensure privacy and choice in responding to a question without the pressure of conversation
- To start to think about who we are, how we get by, how we possibly do more than get by...

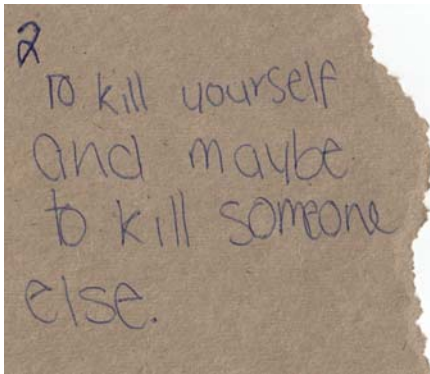
Below are three written responses from a young person in response to the three questions you see below.

In answer to somewhat different questions, a young teenage boy I was talking with, came up with these responses:

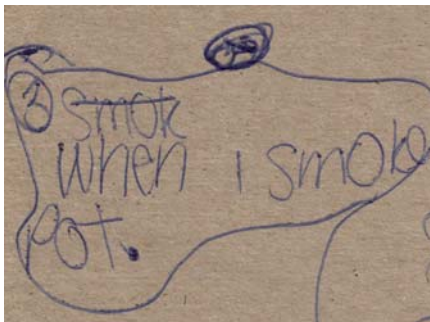
The first question was: why would a person use a substance at all?
And his written answer, on a scrap of cardboard was this:



The second question was: why would someone use a drug in a way which might be dangerous? And this was his answer:



And my third question was: when do you feel wonderful?



Clearly, and importantly, these answers give us the basis for a conversation. And in amongst the opinions, values and positions I might hold about substance use, and keep in the background of any interaction; I am prepared to say in this case that I think it a shame if the only time this young man feels wonderful is when he smokes dope. And we can have a conversation about this...

And then in discussion:

- What made the moment so wonderful?
- Did you make it happen or did it just happen?
- Was it wonderful just to you? Or would it be wonderful for anyone? And how come?

Purpose

To start to identify what lifts our spirits. What inspires us, sustains us, lifts us up and helps us feel wonderful and connected to life.

A comment on questions

Interesting and/or unique questions can help people access forgotten thoughts and feelings, or respond with new ones. Questions can simply be asked as questions usually are, or be part of an activity which raises questions, such as through drawing or theatre activities. Questions can be asked and answers simply reflected on, or written down or discussed. Or responses to questions may be kept private as a lead into an open discussion of a more general topic. Everything in this workshop is really based on asking questions.

A comment on these activities and the process

Everything that appears here is a way to have a conversation with a young person about who they are and the world or worlds they live in. The aim is to be fun, playful, interactive, and conversational. My starting point has been that substance use can be understood as the behaviour that occurs when a person's inner world meets their outer world. At the point where a person's needs and desires, their experiences, their fears and troubles, their hopes and dreams, all that they are, intersect with the all that surrounds them; that is, their time in history, their country, the society they live in, their neighbourhood, and the people, friends and family who they come into contact with; at this point many things are possible. Drug use, and damaging drug use, is one of them., Whether a person harms themselves or others, by the 'choices' they make or seem to make, at these points of intersection, will be determined by the combinations of these elements. And this is where we can look for an understanding of the person's behaviour. And once we have some understanding, we might then decide what it is that we do next.