



ARTS FOR THE BLUES

An evidence-based creative psychological therapy for children and young people

A collaborative partnership between
Edge Hill University and the University of Salford



University of
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Funders



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Liverpool Clinical
Commissioning Group



Arts Council England



NHS Greater Manchester
Mental Health Trust

Leadership Team



Professor Vicky Karkou
Arts Psychotherapist,
Edge Hill University



Dr Joanna
Omylinska-Thurston
Counselling
Psychologist GMMH,
University of Salford



Professor Scott Thurston
Poet, University
of Salford

Training Team



Leigh Gardner
Creative Counsellor
with Children, Young
People and Adults



Claire Quigley
Dramatherapist
working with children
with social emotional
mental health needs



Shirley Brocklehurst
Movement
Psychotherapist with
clients with trauma

Rationale

One in five children and young people (CYP) are currently experiencing poor mental health (MH). This constitutes a MH crisis that is alarming, raising concerns around the MH of future generations and the long-term consequences of poor early intervention.

MH is one of five priorities in the NHS Long Term Plan for 2019-2024; recent policy documents from Core20Plus5 reinforce the need to improve access to MH services for 0-17 year olds.

When treatment becomes available, NICE guidelines propose group Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), group non-directive supportive therapy (NDST) and group interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), as well as attachment family therapy or individual therapy.

However, these interventions rely on verbal interactions, and many CYP are unable or unwilling to talk about their thoughts and feelings. As a result, research suggests that drop-out rates in youth MH services may be as high as 30% to 40%. Talking therapies clearly are not meeting the MH needs of a large proportion of CYP.

Evidence suggests that the arts can tackle some of these concerns by, e.g., reducing depression, improving wellbeing and supporting social cohesion. For CYP and their families in particular, evidence of the benefits of arts activities was recognised in a Wellcome Trust scoping review, by systematic reviews of arts therapies and other research.

A pilot randomised controlled study we completed with 62 children, aged 9-11, attending primary schools in the North West showed life functioning (CORS) was improved after eight sessions of arts therapy. Change was sustained over a year, and the quality of children's sleep improved, as indicated by activity watch scores (Moula, Powell and Karkou, 2020). Positive results were also found in a study with 26 neurodivergent CYP: social communication (SCQ) and emotional and behavioural (SDQ) scores improved after a dance movement psychotherapy group (Aithal, Powell, Makris, Karaminis and Karkou, 2022).

Despite the value of these interventions for CYP, and overwhelming requests from CYP themselves for creative approaches to support their MH, opportunities for creative engagement remain limited, especially in deprived areas in the North West.



Background and Development

The leadership team have been developing Arts for the Blues since 2015, beginning with a study (thematic synthesis) of 78 papers on client and therapist-reported helpful factors and outcome studies (Omylinska-Thurston et al, 2020) which was conducted alongside the devising of Dancing the Blues, a creative performance exploring the research outcomes which toured in the UK and overseas (Thurston et al, 2022).

The resulting model has been piloted in-person with the NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) / Greater Manchester Mental Health trust (GMMH) and in the community (e.g. with Cult Survivors) and explored via a further creative performance funded by Arts Council England (Together Un/Tethered, 2023). Recently the team has been delivering Arts for the Blues with doctors in the Liverpool Royal Hospital as part of a staff well-being initiative and with service users in the community asset Liverpool Lighthouse.

During the Spring of 2020, the team delivered an online version of the Arts for the Blues therapy with MIND in Tameside, Oldham and Glossop that was funded by an NHS Clinical Commissioning Group. The team delivered this using a number of creative materials adapted for online use.

A short film featuring the participants in the MIND project and members of the research and delivery team was funded by the UK Council for Psychotherapy and shown at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2021 as part of the Healing Arts New York series of events organised by the World Health Organisation.

In December 2021, we obtained a £180k grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) UK Research and Innovation scheme 'Scale up health inequality prevention and intervention strategies'. Throughout 2022, we organised stakeholder and training events, attended by over 300 people, and received a 6-month extension for the first half of 2023. This work generated significant interest in implementing the model in local services, and this is being developed currently with 1 Point (Bolton) and 6 Degrees (Salford) – a Community Benefit Society and Social Enterprise.

This work fed directly into our successful follow-on bid to the AHRC's new commercialisation fund to focus on developing our training materials as a Continuing Professional Development package.

Please see our website for more information about our research and projects including short films, links to publications and much more: <https://artsfortheblues.com>

Groupwork

GROUP THEORY

Definition

According to Barnes (1999), a group is defined as a collection of people coming together with a common aim. The group tends to have boundaries to create safety.

In the Arts for the Blues model, for the group to become a safe place to work, an initial contract is set up. The contract is normally co-designed with the group participants and should include:

- Information about experiential learning
- Confidentiality and its limits
- Agreements on ensuring emotional and physical safety

Classification

There are different ways of classifying therapy groups. Whitaker (1985) classifies groups according to:

- Characteristics of the group participants (e.g., clients with depression or workplace staff)
- Purpose of the group (e.g., self-development, peer-support, therapy)
- Shape of the group (e.g., short-term, long-term, closed, open, show-open)
- Theoretical orientation (e.g., pluralistic, humanistic, CBT, psychodynamic, action-orientated)

The Arts for the Blues group is normally offered as a closed therapy group for children and young people with symptoms or diagnosis of depression. It has a pluralistic character with strong theoretical and practical influences from arts psychotherapies but also from group analytic and humanistic group psychotherapy ideas.

Strengths in working in groups

There are several advantages in working in groups, articulated in talking psychotherapy literature as therapeutic factors (Yalom and Leszcz, 2020):

- Instillation of hope
- Universality
- Imparting information
- Altruism
- Corrective recapitulation of the primary family group
- Development of socialising techniques
- Imitative behaviours
- Interpersonal learning
- Group cohesiveness
- Catharsis
- Existential factors



Therapeutic factors are also extensively discussed in the arts psychotherapies literature with a scoping review of research studies completed on this topic (De Witte et al., 2021) outlining the following domains:

- Embodiment
- Concretisation
- Symbolism and metaphor
- Active engagement
- Creativity
- Non-verbal expression
- Modulating time and space
- Artistic pleasure
- Artistic agency



Arts for the Blues groups, drawing from both talking and arts psychotherapies theory and practice, can therefore offer advantages to participants, particularly apparent amongst children and young people who may take advantage from peer interaction and support alongside the presence of therapists/facilitators and interaction with arts materials and structures.

Difficulties in running groups

Anxiety:

However groups can also generate anxiety in their participants. Thornton (2016) summarises when anxiety can be generated and how it may manifest.

Anxiety is generated when:

- The group is larger than 10 people
- When members do not know each other well
- Meeting infrequently/inconsistent memberships
- No clear structure/accepted way of doing things
- The group can't achieve aims or there is disagreement about aims and how to achieve them

Anxiety can manifest as:

- Lateness/excessive earliness
- Talking too much/too little
- Inappropriate contributions
- Whispering to neighbours
- Smoothing over difficulties
- Continually apologising
- Finding fault with everything
- Looking bored, restless, disengaged

Dysfunctional patterns in groups and how to manage them:

Psychodynamic literature outlines several destructive forces that might be in operation in groups, stopping them from achieving their core task and/or aim:

- Projection and fixed role-taking (Foulkes, 2018)
- Basic assumptions: dependency; pairing; fight/flight (Bion, 1998)
- The anti-group: leadership, rivalry, envy, secrets, individual vs group orientation (Nitsun, 2014)



Ways to manage them:

- Working with the group as a whole
- Being curious about what is happening
- Offering containment that allows for destructive forces to turn into creative ones

It is likely that facilitators of Arts for the Blues groups will be faced with similar difficulties as talking psychotherapies, but may also have additional challenges associated with the use of the arts. It will be important that if the group or participants in the group show signs of anxiety, the facilitators:

- Propose simple, playful and clearly structured creative activities
- Model arts-making activities
- Encourage participants to repeat what was modeled if new ideas are not forthcoming
- Offer a clear time frame and associated count down (ie 10 minutes more, 5 minutes more. Or three more times, two more times etc)

Practical considerations

When setting up a group, one needs to consider the group composition, including:

- The number of participants (no more than 10; but may need to interview more to allow for a healthy number of group participants, i.e. 6-8)
- Similar needs, concerns, goals
- Consider composition in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, diagnosis



Some practical tips when planning and facilitating groups include:

- Time: regular, fixed, convenient
- Place: constant, comfortable, clean, light, spacious
- Facilitator's conduct: regularity, punctuality, maintenance of boundaries
- Maintenance of boundaries provides 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 2005) involving a safe and containing space (Bion, 1998)
- Facilitators are observing their own thoughts and feelings (counter-transference)

In an Arts for the Blues group, additional considerations are needed around the use of creative material and structures:

- Artistic skill: prior to groups starting, it will be important that participants (and their referrers) are made clear that artistic skills are not required. This can be re-enforced during the beginning of the group.
- Type of creative material: diverse qualities and colours, material that can be easily replaced,
- Longevity of creative material: consistently present, agreement of what happens to them from session to session and after the group is finished.

Session structure

The session structure consists of:

- Warm up/ goal setting
- Preparatory creative activity
- Main creative activity
- Pair and group reflection and sharing
- Closure

Group phases

The group goes through four phases as follows:

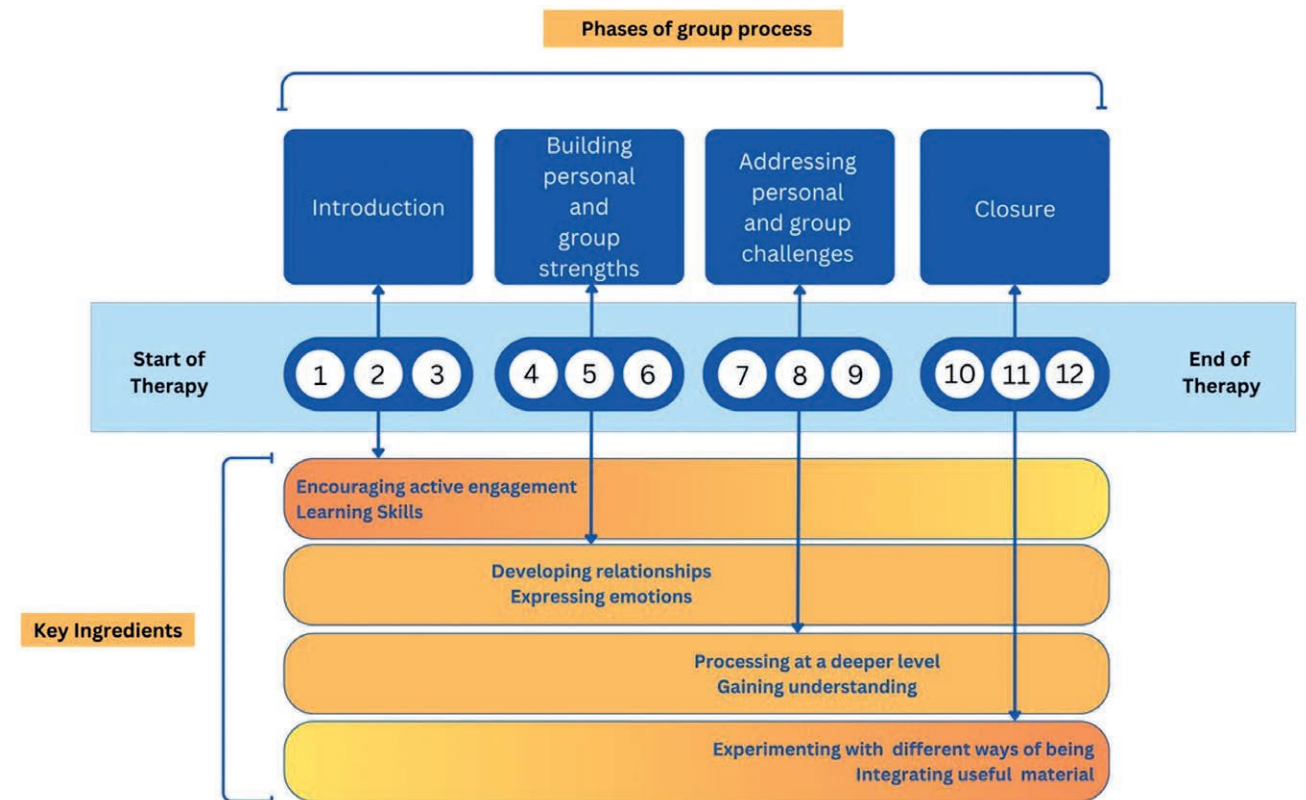
1. Introduction ('in or out') – encouraging active engagement and learning skills
2. Building personal and group strengths and resources ('near or far') – developing relationships, expressing emotions
3. Addressing personal and group challenges ('top or bottom') – processing at a deeper level and gaining understanding
4. Closure ('in or out') – experimenting with different ways of being and integrating useful material

Arts for the Blues support

Support for running Arts for the Blues groups consists of:

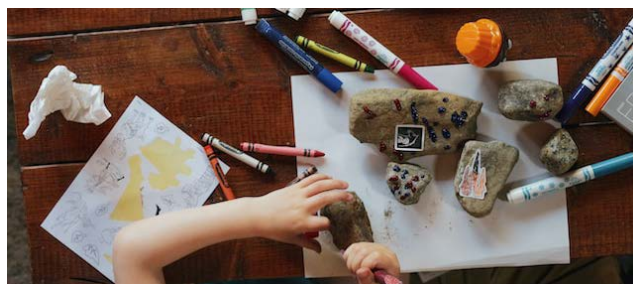
- Training
- Supervision
- Reflective practice
- Resources

The Arts for the Blues Model



The Eight Key Ingredients and Four Phases of Group Process

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



PHASE ONE: INTRODUCTION (SESSIONS 1-3)

KEY INGREDIENT 1: ENCOURAGING ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

e.g. check-ins; mandalas; musical call and response; using objects; drawing

KEY INGREDIENT 2: LEARNING SKILLS

e.g. mindful movement; playing a tune; Grandma's footsteps; mindful colouring; acrostic poem



PHASE TWO: BUILDING STRENGTHS (SESSIONS 4-6)

KEY INGREDIENT 3: DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

e.g. mirroring exercises; group soundscape; puppet master; squiggle game

KEY INGREDIENT 4: EXPRESSING EMOTIONS

e.g. using puppets; sharing a song; showing feelings in gestures, drawing, poetry



PHASE THREE: ADDRESSING CHALLENGES (SESSIONS 7-9)

KEY INGREDIENT 5: PROCESSING AT A DEEPER LEVEL

e.g. authentic movement (witnessing); adding percussion and rhythm to movement

KEY INGREDIENT 6: GAINING UNDERSTANDING

e.g. creative writing; telling stories with gestures; viewing drawings differently; a group mural



PHASE FOUR: CLOSURE (SESSIONS 10-12)

KEY INGREDIENT 7: EXPERIMENTING WITH DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING

e.g. role play; experimenting with new ways of moving, making sounds and making marks

KEY INGREDIENT 8: INTEGRATING USEFUL MATERIAL

e.g. the Sankofa bird; using music, movement and collage to represent relationship to the past and future

Example Activities

PHASE ONE: Sessions 1-3

Introduction ('in or out')

ENCOURAGING ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT: MANDALA (see video on website)

The Mandala offers a metaphor for being both an individual as well as part of a larger community. Each participant offers a simple shape which is incorporated into the piece. The activity can be undertaken as an individual exercise, so each group member has their own mandala, or on a larger piece of paper where everyone turn takes.

Participants are invited to take their mandala with them (or to take a photo of the group creation), which represents their collaborative and individual identity during their time within the group process. After the mandala is complete, the group reflect to allow active engagement, connection and sharing of insights.

Other examples:

Music: call and response game using musical instruments, voice clapping, stomping etc, to create a rhythmic group piece.

Drama: using objects to represent, describe and identify self; these can include toys, fabrics, shells etc.

Art: using the hand to be drawn around and coloured in, share 5 facts that they want others in the group to know.

LEARNING SKILLS: MINDFUL MOVEMENT (see video on website)

Mindful movement allows participants to check in with their bodies and get moving in a way that can help to lower stress, release stagnant energy, and strengthen the mind-body connection.

The principles of mindful movement are the same as other mindful practices. The aim is to bring full attention to the present moment and experience the here and now, by bringing participants' awareness to their movement and focus on their breath or the way their body feels as it moves. When our mind wanders, we bring our attention back to the practice, to our breath, to our body.

Other examples:

Music: Learning to play a simple tune on an instrument/drumming circle playing with volume, rhythm and tempo.

Drama: Grandma's footsteps game: encouraging teamwork, balance, and observation skills.

Art: Mindful colouring: using templates to encourage and help participants focus on the present moment.

Creative Writing: Acrostic poem using the participant's name to spell out a word, describing personal traits.

Example Activities

PHASE TWO: Sessions 4-6

Building personal and group strengths and resources ('near or far')

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS: MIRRORING (see video on website)

Participants are invited to offer a gesture to the group which is then mirrored back to them by the other members.

Depending upon the needs and confidence of the group, this activity can be laddered to start off with very small movements i.e., a finger wiggle, and can be built up to using the full body.

Witnessing is a very powerful and essential part of group dynamics; to see and be seen by another helps to build safety and containment within the group process. It also allows participants to engage in humour which promotes play, enquiry and resilience.

Other examples:

Music: group soundscape: each member adds in their own sound/ rhythm to create an ensemble piece of music.

Drama: puppet master: in pairs or threes, participants take turns to control the movement, facial expressions of the others.

Art: squiggle game: pairs or threes doodling together – taking turns to add marks, lines etc, to create images.

EXPRESSING EMOTIONS: PUPPET (see video on website)

Puppets can be a very powerful projective tool to communicate difficult thoughts and feelings. The puppet acts as a medium to safely express these uncomfortable or challenging states of feeling; by using aesthetic distance, participants can start to feel able to share and be present with emotions which may have felt too difficult to encounter.

The puppet works as a literal 'prop' and a metaphorical prop to support enquiry and expression.

Other examples:

Music: sharing a song / music from phone to the group.

Movement: express different feelings using bodily gestures.

Art: concretising difficult feelings – what does my most difficult feeling look like?

Creative writing: write a poem or use spontaneous writing to communicate about emotions / feelings.



Example Activities

PHASE THREE: Sessions 7-9

Addressing personal and group challenges ('top or bottom')

PROCESSING AT A DEEPER LEVEL: TREE OF LIFE (see video on website)

Trees are a powerful metaphor, offering many rich layers of symbolism. The Tree of Life activity allows participants to use different parts of the tree to represent different areas of their lives and themselves, which can be very revealing and at times profound.

The activity is initially undertaken as a solo exercise, then the group will work in pairs or threes, before a whole group reflection to allow synthesis, connection and deeper processing of insights.

Other creative examples:

Movement: use Authentic Movement in pairs or threes, each participant taking turns to be witnessed.

Music: percussion and rhythm is integrated with movement in a free-improvised session.



GAINING UNDERSTANDING: CREATIVE WRITING (see video on website)

Reflecting over the sessions so far using creative writing – this can be in the form of poetry, prose, automatic writing or any other creative, expressive written approach. Participants can use the key ingredients for the sessions as inspiration.

The activity is initially undertaken as a solo exercise, then the group will reflect and share in pairs or threes, before a whole group reflection, with the invitation to share their creative expressions to allow synthesis, connection and deeper processing of insights.

Other creative examples:

Drama / Movement: using embodiment, and nonverbal communication: inviting participants to select a gesture/ physical shape/ noise to reflect how they felt at the very beginning of this process, when they were halfway through and now nearing the end. The group can take turns to witness and perform each stage, and then offer feedback and reflection together.

Art: viewing previous creations in sessions literally from different perspectives: above, below, upside down etc, to allow any new insights and connections.

Group collaborative piece: invite participants to make a group mural / art piece around the theme of reflection.

Example Activities

PHASE FOUR: Sessions 10-12

Closure ('in or out')

EXPERIMENTING WITH DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING: ROLE PLAY (see video on website)

Role play is incredibly empowering as it gives participants the opportunity to experiment with different ways of being which can foster deeper understanding of their relational dynamics towards self and others within the safety of the therapeutic space.

Group members are encouraged to experiment and witness each other using a choice of ladder games and activities suggested by the facilitator and even the group itself.

Fabrics, hats and a variety of accessories can be provided to help the group create their roles. After this interactive session, participants would spend time in collective and individual reflection.

Other examples:

Movement: trying out new ways of moving that have not been attempted before – i.e. different speeds, levels, leading with different body parts in the space, group or solo work.

Music: creating new rhythms not previously undertaken – experimenting with pitch, noises etc.

Art: using different media and approaches that participants have not yet explored i.e. collaging, using fingers/ feet, eyes closed etc.

INTEGRATING USEFUL MATERIAL: THE SANKOFA BIRD (see video on website)

The mythical Sankofa Bird represents the cycle of reflection and integration of useful past experiences.

Group members are invited to look back over their past, which also includes previous sessions, and notice any changes they feel personally and in what the group has experienced. Participants are encouraged also to reflect on any useful material from sessions which they can take with them moving forward. This exercise is initially an individual task, which is then open to group reflection for group members to share.

Other examples, using Sankofa:

Music and Movement: initially listening to music around the theme of Sankofa and the invitation to follow this choreography...

Stand and face forward – arms reaching towards the future. Move your arms behind you and retrieve that which is useful, reclaim that which is meaningful. Bring your arms back to the present and step forward.

Allow participants to bring their own unique movements and rhythm based on the theme of integration.

Art: creating a piece using a wide variety of materials including written words to reflect their past, previous sessions and to represent useful material which can be integrated.

Who is the group for?

There are several inclusion and exclusion criteria that need to be considered on top of routine initial assessment:

INCLUSION CRITERIA

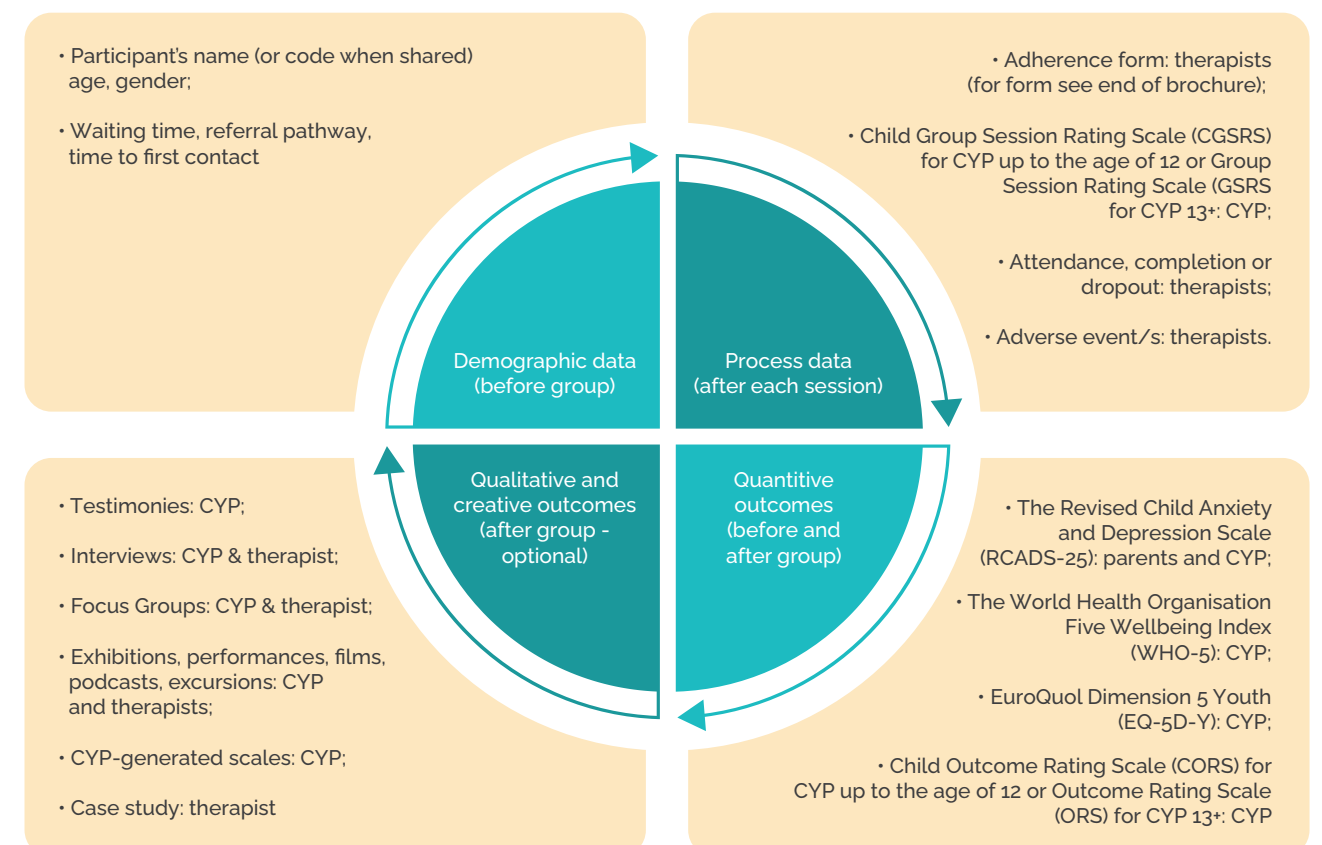
- Children and young people 7-16
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total scores 12-19; emotion subscale of 5+
- Symptoms of depression and anxiety (RCADS-47>65 if available)
- Interested and willing to take part in group work
- Interested and willing to take part in the creative interventions

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- At risk of harming themselves or others
- Comorbid MH problems (e.g., severe eating disorders, learning disabilities and/or autism)
- Other difficulties that would make attending a group difficult.

Assessment and Evaluation

Before, during and after the group ends, these are some proposed ways of evaluating the group:



References

Background work:

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- Karkou V, Omylinska-Thurston J, Thurston S. Clark B, Perris E. Kaehne A and Pearson M (2023) Scaling up place-based arts initiatives that support mental health and wellbeing Research-informed strategic commitments and recommendations using the Arts for the Blues as a case example.

Work with children:

- Moula, Z., Powell, J., & Karkou, V. (2022). Qualitative and Arts-Based Evidence from Children Participating in a Pilot Randomised Controlled Study of School-Based Arts Therapies. *Children*, 9(6), 890. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9060890>
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Groupwork:

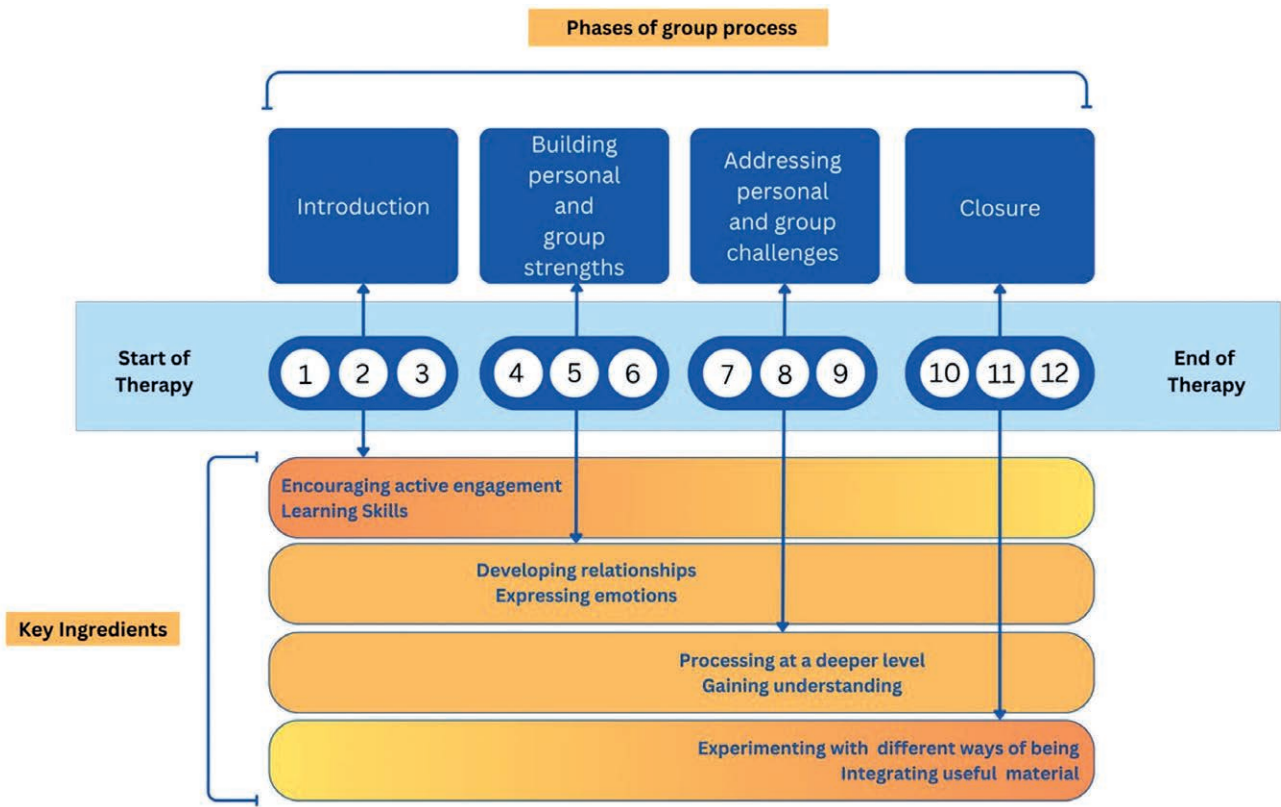
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Notes

Arts for the Blues: Adherence Form

Children and Young People



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

Topics	Rating on adherence
Add ratings after each session:	
FUNDAMENTAL THERAPEUTIC FRAMING	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Framework is structured	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Content is flexible	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
There is a range of creative activities	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Tasks evolve gradually	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
There are take-home tasks	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Comments:	
TAILORING PROGRAMME TO CLIENT GROUP AND CLIENT	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Activities proposed are suitable to client group	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Language used is suitable to client group	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Clients are encouraged to work with their individual goals	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Comments:	
SESSION STRUCTURE	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Beginning: participants' feelings/thoughts	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Beginning: warm up	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Middle: preparatory activity (optional)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Middle: main activity	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Middle: reflection	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
End: participants' feelings/thoughts	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
End: session rating	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Comments:	

Add ratings after sessions 1-3	
OFFERING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT FOR GROUP TO FORM	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Encouraging active engagement (e.g. check-ins; mandalas; musical call and response; objects; drawing)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Learning skills to manage self (e.g. mindful movement; playing a tune; Grandma's footsteps; mindful colouring; acrostic poem)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Comments:	

Add ratings after sessions 4-6	
BUILDING PERSONAL AND GROUP STRENGTHS	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Developing relationships (e.g. mirroring exercises; group soundscape; puppet master; squiggle game)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Expressing emotions (e.g. using puppets; sharing a song; showing feelings in gestures, drawing, poetry)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Comments:	

Add ratings after sessions 7-9	
ADDRESSING PERSONAL AND GROUP CHALLENGES	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Processing at a deeper level (e.g. authentic movement (witnessing); adding percussion and rhythm to movement)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Gaining understanding (e.g. creative writing; telling stories with gestures; viewing drawings differently; a group mural)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Comments:	

Add ratings after sessions 10-12	
OFFERING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT FOR GROUP TO END	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Experimenting with different ways of being (e.g. role play; experimenting with new ways of moving, making sounds and making marks)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Integrating useful material (e.g. the Sankofa bird; using music, movement and collage to represent relationship to the past and future)	Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 very good or N/A
Examples:	
Comments:	

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