

Capacitar Practices with a multicultural women's support group

I have used Capacitar Techniques in a variety of ways

- As part of my personal daily de-stressor programme
- As part of the Interpreter Supervision and Support Programme in the Centre for the Care of Survivors of Torture
- As a 'Stress Buster' hour, once weekly for six weeks, offered to staff in the Centre
- To individual clients as a way of promoting self-care and empowerment
- As a way of de-stressing for clients who were going through the lengthy asylum process which is a time of added uncertainty and insecurity in their lives.
- As part of a Multicultural Women's Support Group Programme in the Centre.

The Multicultural Women's Support Group

The Women's Support Group that I co-facilitated with a group therapist was an ongoing one that met weekly, initially for three months. We then met monthly. It was a multicultural group and the women, about 12 in total, come from different African countries – Sudan, Nigeria, Togo, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa – and from Albania, Romania and Croatia in Eastern Europe. They came from various traditions, cultures, tribes and religions. All had enough English to participate in the group. All had experienced torture in their own countries. All were displaced women. All were in exile.

While the majority were seeking asylum and were in a lengthy process that can take years, and a minority had refugee status, all experienced high levels of continuous stress and sometimes distress in their daily lives.

So, part of the challenge of the group for us was to meet the women's needs in a holistic way in the uncertain, insecure place they now found themselves in, a country not of their choosing. The aim of the group was to provide 'containment', a safe space in which to 'be' and share experiences, to offer Capacitar body-based skills to manage anxiety, tension and stress and a place where they could begin to trust themselves and perhaps others again.

Group Activities

The two-hour programme consisted of

- Gathering together
- Time for reflecting on the challenges of the past week
- Capacitar de-stressor techniques
- Crafts – knitting, crochet, sewing, painting, drawing and clay work
- 'Check in' on any questions, clarifications, or any anxiety or difficulty that may have arisen during the group session
- Namaste Salutation concluded each group meeting.

The 'Gathering together' consisted of T'ai Chi movements to music. Then, after some discussion and reflection with the group therapist on the previous week's challenges as well as any positive experiences they had, the women were invited to participate in the Abdominal Breathing Exercise. Following this, the previous week's Capacitar Technique was revised, with particular attention to any difficulties they had practising it, or in its regular repetition as part of their self-care programme. All were then invited to experience another Capacitar technique and hand-outs were offered. Among the techniques offered were the Finger Holds, EFT, Head, Neck and Shoulder Release, Immune System Boost, Drum Massage, Hand Massage and Acupressure Points to address specific somatic symptoms. After the craft section and check-in the group concluded with the Namaste Salutation.

Summary of Outcomes

T'ai Chi movements to music helped relax, focus and bring the women into the present. The de-stressor techniques 'when done regularly' helped reduce stress, thus allowing the women re-learn how to relax. They also helped separate the past from the present so the women gradually learned to cope better with the present stressors in their lives. Acupressure Points and Head, Neck and Shoulder

Release were found to be particularly useful in managing their post-traumatic somatic symptoms. The women found their sleep and appetite improved. They also said that they were slowly beginning to trust again.

Evaluation of Work

Inclusion of Capacitar de-stressor techniques in the Women's Support Group helped focus and give structure to the two-hour programme. For those with a poor grasp of English in the group these techniques were invaluable as they cut through any communication difficulties. As the women were eager to learn ways to manage stress and their somatic symptoms, they found the techniques as 'tools to help in coping with stress' one of the most beneficial outcomes of the group. They also felt 'the group exercises helped them relax'. They felt 'supported' by and 'connected' to each other through 'movement', sharing and identifying with aspects of one another's experiences. In saluting each other in the Namaste Salutation at the end of the group, each woman's traditions, culture and religion were respected and each woman's experiences, wisdom and courage recognised.

One woman related how her previous experience of her tribunal hearing for refugee status had been very traumatic. She was very stressed as the date for the next hearing approached. She did the de-stressor techniques frequently every day as part of her preparation for it. On the day of the Tribunal she did the Finger Hold Technique as she waited and at the hearing itself. Though it was difficult, she was 'calmer' and 'not at all as nervous' and was 'happy with how I answered the questions'. She subsequently received her Refugee Status and continued to practice the techniques daily.

Personal Bio

I am a Complementary Therapist with professional qualifications in Reflexology, Reiki, Integrated Energy Therapy, Focusing and Jin Shin Jyutsu. I have a background in Nursing, Midwifery, and Supervision of Nurses. I have nursed in Ireland and have multicultural experience as a nurse in post-war Bangladesh, in the USA and as Nurse Midwife in the Middle East. I also hold a postgraduate Diploma in Holistic Development Studies.

I worked in and was part of the multidisciplinary team in the Centre for Survivors of Torture in Dublin for several years. During this time the Capacitar programme was integrated into and remains part of the multifaceted holistic model of care offered to this client group.

I continue to work as a Complementary Therapist facilitating both group and individual sessions. I also co-facilitate Capacitar Introductory Days.