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Organising an Art Group for Asylum Seekers



mieli

Lounais-Suomen
mielenterveys ry

Why organise an Art Group or take part in your local Art Group?

The life of an asylum seeker often includes numerous stress causing factors: difficult (traumatic) experiences, an unsure and burdensome situation and an everyday environment that has not been chosen by oneself. Long-lasting or excessive stress has numerous negative side effects:

- **Physical:** pain, illness, trouble sleeping etc.
- **Psychological:** mood drop, difficulties concentrating, memory problems, excessive substance use etc.
- **Social:** isolation, aggressive behaviour, difficulties with social relations etc.

These effects may be long-lasting and can continue even after the cause of stress has passed. The symptoms can be eased, and the long-term effects reduced by practicing relaxation. The best methods of relaxing often differ from person to person. In most cases, we relax when we do something we enjoy. Relaxation is not a skill that can be learnt quickly. The more you practice relaxation the more it helps.

One way to relax is by doing something creative with your hands. In the Art Group, we practice relaxation by increasing our sense of safety through creating an image of a safe and positive place.

The purpose of the Art Group

- To increase the sense of safety of the participants. Through action-based methods, we encourage the participants to create an image of a safe, positive place or thing. Afterwards, the participants can use this image as a mental refuge if they wish when they are faced with a difficult situation.
- To give the participants an opportunity to focus on hands-on creativity, momentarily taking them away from the hardships of the past and the worries of the future. Creating art can also function as a way to express bottled up emotions and thoughts, which can help the participant feel better and see their problems from a new perspective.
- To add a sense of community and peer support within asylum seekers. The Art Group works mostly on a non-verbal basis and a common language within the group is not necessary.

Participants

An ideal number of people for an Art Group meeting is 5-10, although it is possible to accommodate more people if required. The main restrictive element is the space available. It is possible for both adults and children to participate. We recommend for children to be accompanied by their own adult; when parents are responsible for their own children, the group instructors are able to focus on the whole group. We have most often organised open groups, but on certain occasions there have been gender-specific and family-oriented sessions. The idea of the Art Group can easily be modified to suit different types of groups.

Group instructors

We recommend that the group includes at least two instructors. The instructors take care of the practical implementation of group, show an example of working in the group and, if needed, engage in dialogue with the participants about their work. Group instructors can be volunteers, reception centre staff, students, or professionals from outside the reception centre, for example.

Group instructors do not need to have any special artistic skills or knowledge on art therapy. However, having a certain amount of group guidance experience, interaction skills and personal enthusiasm is beneficial. It is important for the instructors to understand the aim of the Art Group. The Art Group is meant specifically for the creation of an imaginary safe place; it is not a general arts and crafts workshop. Participants do not always understand that the purpose is to create an image of a safe place, and the instructors do not need to intervene in such cases – everyone is free to create the image they want. However, it is important that the instructors maintain to the agreed upon theme to avoid the group evolving into a general arts and crafts workshop. Such activities can be organised separately.

Facilities and materials

Examples of materials that can be used in the Art Group include:

- Watercolours, tempera paints, crayons, colouring pencils. Additionally, you will need at least two good quality papers per participant (A3 or A2), various sizes of paintbrushes, disposable plates/palettes, hand towels and water containers.

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- Magazines + scissors and glue
- Protective cloths for the tables + masking tape for attaching and newspapers for protecting the floor

Make sure to have enough table and floor space for working and drying the completed works. Additionally, wall and tables can be used for putting up picture cards of landscapes, newspaper clippings and art books that may serve as inspiration for the participants.

Additional requirements:

- Calm background music and a speaker/sound system for playing it. Appropriate music can be found by searching YouTube for “calm/relaxing music”
- A ball/mascot for introductory games
- Artwork created by the instructors depicting their own safe places

What goes on during the Art Group?

On arrival, instructors greet the participants personally and introduce themselves. Once everyone has arrived, the instructors briefly explain, using English, Finnish and/or body language, that in the group we will create an image by painting or by making a collage. This is followed by an introduction round where everyone gets the chance to introduce themselves by name. For this, a ball or mascot may be useful. If the group shares a common language, it is possible for each participant to tell more about themselves or to do another round with a different question, such as: “something you like/ your favourite food”. It is wise to not ask the participants about their home country as this may provoke uneasy reactions if the group includes previously unacquainted asylum seekers. In groups meeting regularly, there has been a tradition of doing a bodily warm-up with light stretches before starting the session.



After this, the instructors share their own imaginary safe places using English, Finnish and/or body language: where their safe place is located, what it looks like, what scents and smells are present, what does it feel like, what sounds can be heard, what it means to them, what feelings does it evoke etc. This works as a warm-up to the theme and provides a concrete example to the participants of what the process is about. The examples may also work in terms of orientating the participants to think about what their own safe place is like, what brings them a sense of comfort and safety. The act of sharing also adds to a sense of safety in the group; the instructors share something personal and by doing so lower the threshold to participate and share personal experiences. Ideally, the instructors' images are different in terms of style and the used technique. This way they don't create a fixed norm for what the image should be or look like. One of the instructors, for example, may show a collage, one a traditional representational image, and another a more abstract piece of work. It is also possible to showcase more than one image per person.

After this, work can begin. The participants are told how much time the group has to create their images. Peaceful music can be played in the background. The instructors demonstrate how to use different colours and materials. One instructor can start working on a new image to provide a working example. Cutting from magazines is an option, especially if someone clings on to the thought that they "don't know how to paint". Browsing through a magazine is also a good and leisurely way to start working. If necessary, the instructors can assist the participants with the materials and offer them more paper in case someone finishes their work

and wants to make another image. Otherwise, it is not necessary for the instructors to intervene in the process.

Occasionally, a participant may, despite the instructions, create an image that has to do with their own traumatic experience, or the process evokes feelings of loss and sorrow. If the participant wants to talk about their image and their emotions, it is good for the instructor to listen in a confirming manner but not to make further questions. This way the participant gets a sense of being heard and seen but is not drawn into an intense psychological process. The instructor may end such a discussion in a polite manner by saying something along the lines of: “sounds like you’ve gone through some very difficult experiences, but you are safe now” or “you survived”. Instructors should also refrain from making any interpretations concerning images made by participants.

At the end of the workshop, each participant can show their work to the group. In this way, everyone gets a chance to be seen and heard. If they wish, participants can also tell something about their work to the group. If there is no common language in the group, each image can be given a round of applause, for example. If making a joint round doesn’t feel suitable, it is important for the instructors to give individual attention to each participant and their work.

Sometimes, participants finish their work at a different pace. If possible, it is good to maintain to the joint timeframe, i.e., the group starts and finishes at the agreed upon times. If a participant finishes earlier than others, they can be offered a new paper and a chance to create another image. If the participant wants to leave anyway, their work should be acknowledged by either the group or by the instructors before leaving. Participants can be encouraged to take their images with them, to show to their friend, or to put up on their wall. However, many participants have preferred leaving their images with the instructors. If language allows, it is good to ask whether it is possible to show the image to others or take a picture of it and share it as an example of work done in the Art Group (without names or other identifiers, of course).

After the Art Group, the instructors write a short email to the coordinator of the group. The email includes details on how many people were present, how the group went, as well as the instructors’ own experiences and impressions. The idea is to give instructors the opportunity to share their experience and keep the coordinator informed of goings on in the group. Such communication and dialogue also support the instructors’ wellbeing.

If the Art Group is attended by the same participants on many consecutive times, instructions may be given with a specific theme in mind. Examples of different themes include:

- Favourite place in Finland/place of residence
- Things that make you smile/laugh
- Things that give you strength
- Things you are grateful for
- My safe place in different seasons

Variation can also be added to the group sessions by using different materials such as fabric, chalk, charcoal, materials found in nature, or by making collages.

