

Freedom to Fly: Reflections on a psychodrama group for women impacted by sexual abuse

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Key words: auxiliary, compassion, connection, empathy, group therapy, healing process, perpetrator, tele, trauma, sexual abuse, shame, shared experience

As I grew up I often heard my mother say, “A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind”. This quote from the early 18th century English poet Alexander Pope underscores the power of empathy and how shared common experience and understanding produce a remarkable sense of kindness and compassion. With fellow feeling generated by shared experience and mutual tele, the understanding of the other’s feelings extends to include caring for the other’s well-being, usually expressed in a strong desire to be helpful companions to one another. For 25 years the Freedom to Fly Group has embodied this profound experience of spirit and solidarity.

In this article I describe key aspects of the group and highlight what is unique about it. Case examples provide windows into the work in which the power of the ‘wondrous others’ can be seen in the healing of sexual abuse.

Shoulders on which we stand

The Freedom to Fly group stands on the shoulders of the Therapeutic Spiral Model (TSM™) which was developed and brought to New Zealand by Dr Kate Hudgins and Francesca Toscani from the United States in the late 1990’s. Psychodramatist and psychologist Estelle Mendelsohn and I originally developed groups for women effected by sexual abuse. We incorporated our existing training in psychodrama with our learning in the TSM™ about how to work with trauma using psychodrama. Over the years we have been fortunate in having government funding from the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)¹ make it possible for the majority of clients to attend the groups. So why was this group created?

¹ ACC is a government owned entity which provides compulsory insurance cover for personal injury for everyone in New Zealand. Through the Sensitive Claims Service a range of services are available including counselling for anyone who has experienced sexual violence.

The legacy of sexual abuse

After over 40 years of therapeutic work in this area I have an acute awareness of the legacy of sexual abuse trauma. The major impacts show up as themes arising from some of the following areas of difficulty: Trusting others, setting and maintaining boundaries, identifying and expressing feelings, being self-compassionate, being in one's body, being true to oneself, and feeling good about oneself. It is not uncommon for those who attend the groups to experience being so competent in the outside world, while simultaneously feeling so vulnerable inside.

Sexual abuse triggers shame which can be extremely painful and crippling to one's sense of self, thwarting one's ability to take their place in the world. Shame is triggered by the powerlessness inherent in sexual abuse. Almost always we hear the belief expressed, "It was my fault," a shame reaction. Coupled with this, shame has a tendency to bind with other emotions and thus prevent their normal expression. So rather than grieving and letting go, shame keeps the reaction to sexual abuse very much alive in the present. Perhaps though, the most potent impact is the profound sense of 'aleness' the survivor experiences.

The camaraderie in the group mitigates the sense of aleness that lies deep within each woman living with the impacts of sexual abuse. Alice's² description of her experience of the group highlights this phenomenon:

'There is a safety in knowing people have been through a similar journey. You feel you belong to a group even though it is coming from trauma. You realise you are not alone as you sit with these wonderful people who have these complex lives. They carry on with their lives then they are brave enough to heal, because it is not easy work. Knowing how it feels when you get that growth, you can't beat that feeling.'

There are many potential benefits for clients attending the groups. These include: the alleviation of shame and guilt, reduction of isolation, increasing the ability to experience a range of emotions, learning to identify and express needs and set limits, building a solid sense of self and developing trusting relationships. All of these outcomes support the client to live their lives out of their authentic self, the inner stage of who they really are, rather than living on an externally based stage in reaction to the trauma, preoccupied with the environment and ensuring safety. I discovered psychodrama is a potent method in the facilitation of this transition. So who are the women who come to the groups?

Who attends?

Clients who attend the group need to have a 'readiness' to do so. This means

² All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

that they need to have sufficient ego strength to maintain themselves in the group setting. The group is not for everyone. For some the very idea of the group feels too exposing, anxiety provoking and too much out of their comfort zone. Typically, clients come to the group in the later stage of their sexual abuse therapy, although this is not always the case.

The majority of clients who attend the group have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), most often with associated attachment disturbances. There are a range of other DSM V³ diagnoses that clients present with. These include: major depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, attachment disorders, substance abuse, borderline personality disorder and dissociative disorders.

Referring therapists are increasingly more aware of the value of concurrent individual and group therapy and see the group as a useful adjunct to their ongoing therapeutic work with clients. Sometimes therapists refer clients to the group reporting a sense of 'stuckness' in individual therapy. Their therapist considers they would benefit from the reduction of isolation that meaningful encounter with other women impacted by sexual abuse can bring. The group can be useful in providing a roadmap for participants in terms of learning what is possible in the realm of healing, and how they can do their therapeutic work.

Uniqueness of the group

The weekend therapeutic group is unique in a number of ways: first, in its leadership which involves a team approach of two leaders and three trained auxiliaries, second, in the engagement with each individual referring therapist prior to and after the group, and third, in the tailoring of the psychodrama method to meet the specific needs of those living with the effects of sexual abuse.

We knew the TSM™ concept of having a team to hold the complexity and inherent demands of trauma work has a lot of merit. There are many aspects of the group that require firm consistent holding: the space, relationships, wellbeing of the participants, the group's structure as well as nourishment at mealtimes. These are all the tasks a 'good enough mother' would perform. I see the team as the 'heart of the group'.

In the active practice of manaakitanga, clients are warmly welcomed into the group by team members and their needs are seen as paramount. From the outset the auxiliaries wholeheartedly signal their availability for support of individuals when needed. As well, auxiliaries enact the more challenging roles involving perpetrators and/or wounded children, if the leaders assess the participant is not ready to experience these.

3 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* by The American Psychiatric Association

In a sense the referring therapist is also a team member, facilitating the client's warm up to the group and holding the client beyond the group. Engagement in individual therapy is a requirement for attendance of the group. Typically, it is the therapist who begins the process of warming up their client to the group. Together they are invited to complete a brief preparation form identifying goals, a support person for the client and any relevant health details. In speaking with the therapist prior to the group, an introduction to the client is given, which includes a brief history, goals, current therapeutic work and anything we may need to be aware of. The therapist's assessment of the client's readiness is critical to us as a team. There is, however, another form of assessment.

Over the past couple of years, I have met with all attending clients online, or in person, prior to the group to assist in their preparation for the group, as well as ensuring their readiness to attend. Most importantly this encounter means the client has one familiar face to help ease their transition into the group.

After the group, how the client fared is shared with the therapist by way of a written summary and most often, a verbal account as well.

Let's now see how the group unfolds and discover some ways in which psychodrama is tailored to meet the needs of this client group.

Journey through the weekend

Agnes is a courageous adventurer as she enters the group room on Friday night, quite frankly, she is terrified. As she takes her seat she feels completely naked. At a very basic level simply by being there, she is admitting to herself and everyone else, that she had been sexually abused. As she listens, she struggles to get any words out. Yet she experiences "an incredible connection" with the other women. Simultaneously, she feels exposed, in part this is mitigated by her experience of the group allowing her "to wrap herself in the curtains in the wings". For Agnes just being there was so painful, and yet so oddly comforting. Her brain struggled to make sense of the profound impact of the fellow feeling, the acceptance, and support. It was a night never to be forgotten, Agnes had made a foray out of a lifetime of isolation.

Circle of scarves

Early in the group moving into action helps alleviate the palpable anxiety in the room. The TSM™'s 'circle of scarves' is a creative way of achieving this movement. Each group member is invited to introduce themselves and concretise with a scarf(s) a strength role, or resource that they bring to the group. Examples of internal strengths include: *The courageous explorer*, *determined truth speaker* and *compassionate heart*. Interpersonal strengths can be concretised, for example, a friend, grandmother, wahine toa (a female

warrior), as well as spiritual, and/or cultural strengths. The scarves are linked to form a circle which remains for the duration of the group. The circle reflects colour, flow, creativity, kindness, optimism, courage and hope. It delineates the stage, symbolically mirroring the holding of the group.

The circle of scarves reflects an important principle of the work; the need for each participant to connect with roles that are restorative and empowering in trauma work. It is vital the participant is not retraumatised in the process of the groupwork.

At the beginning of all psychodrama enactments a team of strength roles are chosen which, in addition to the above, may include friends, cats, partners, the sea, tupuna (ancestors), all of whom help maintain the participant's presence and groundedness.

Artwork

Next in the two hour opening session, artwork provides a time in which the participants can be with themselves and be intentional, depicting their goals and hopes for the group. Over the years a range of media have been used including clay, painting, collage, drawing and sandtrays. Occasionally group members choose to express themselves through other means like poetry. As group members depict their goals and anchor additional strengths and resources on their page, they are assured there are no prizes for artists.

The question of "Who's here?" is revealed on another level through each person's expression and what they choose to share. The artwork is revisited at the end of the group and the transformation is portrayed. Many clients choose to share their art with their therapists to assist in the integration of the workshop. The next day the second group session begins with an opportunity for embodied expression.

Soliloquys

Participants are warmed up to experience being in their bodies, connecting with feelings and thoughts and expressing these as they become aware of them. At the outset a team member is invited to walk the circle on stage with a containing double⁴ (CD) beside them, expressing their moment-to-moment experience to the universe. This expression of the person's stream

4 This adaption of the classical psychodrama double was developed in the TSM™ to ensure stability and presence in the here and now. From the outset the CD aims to create a warm empathic bond with the protagonist, so she knows someone is with her supporting her through the work. Always speaking as "I" the CD has three tasks that facilitate containment: An empathic reflective statement of what the client is experiencing; a containing statement that connects the client with their ability to cope and hold themselves and a statement anchoring the client in the here and now. The CD spontaneously adapts to the specific needs of the client and the moment in making these statements.

of consciousness is permission giving in modelling the honouring of one's authentic feelings and free expression of truth. It is empowering for the participants to observe members of the leadership team sharing their vulnerability as human beings and to experience this as strength, rather than weakness.

In this session group members are invited to make a sociometric choice of a team member to be a CD for them who will walk the circle with them. Tele informs them who will attune best to them. Many clients speak of hiding who they really are in the world. The implicit message in this group setting is, "Here is a place we can truly be who we are today." It is common to experience a sense of 'exposure' as the participant steps onto the stage. This is mitigated by the solid presence of the CD, the compassion of the 'wonderous kind' and the participant's courage in seeking a new experience of themselves out of the shadows. Also, it seems there is something about the movement around the stage that assists participants in keeping connected with their experience. For both participants and the leadership team, witnessing the gentle revealing of who each person is creates true magic.

Psychodramas

Over the remainder of the weekend there are a number of protagonist centered psychodrama sessions interspersed with group processing. The following description and discussion of three of these sessions aims to illuminate some of the ways in which the psychodrama method is adapted to this specific client group.

Fran

Fran is a 40-year old woman who is capable and strong. Between the ages of 9 and 11 years she endured sustained and prolonged sexual abuse by a young male from her church who was employed as a weekly child minder for her and her two siblings. The abuse stopped when the perpetrator moved to another area. After a long illness Fran's mother died when she was 12 years old. At age 17, Fran was violently sexually assaulted by a trusted male family friend with whom she was living. Fran rejected her younger self with intensity, for she held all the painful feelings that Fran was terrified of experiencing. The following accounts are from two psychodrama sessions with Fran a year apart.

In Fran's first psychodrama her purpose was to shift the blame for the sexual abuse onto the perpetrator. She assembled her team to support her which included her lion who holds the strength and courage for her that she can't hold herself. The auxiliary in the lion's role was instructed to jump out and protect Fran when she saw she couldn't protect herself. As

Fran said, “Who is going to mess with a lion.” Her close friend Janice, who is wise and compassionate formed another vital part of Fran’s support team.

In a first scene Fran worked to create some openness and warmth towards her 17-year-old self. As she faced her the intensity of feeling struck panic in Fran and she began to hyperventilate. I helped her coregulate by taking her hands, looking into her eyes, asking her to slow her breathing and to breathe with me. Fran grounded herself, bringing herself back into the present moment with her team. Her terror subsided and there was a softening in her as she shifted towards some acceptance of her younger self. This shift allowed Fran’s movement into a second scene.

In this scene Fran sought to desensitise herself to the perpetrator, diminishing what she experienced as his monster-like power over her. She chose a team member to be the perpetrator, who she placed behind a glass wall at the far end of the stage. Two security guards were engaged to keep him contained. The team member enacting the perpetrator did an exquisite portrayal using a deep voice and an accurate tone, as the words, “It wasn’t your fault. I would have done it (the sexual assault) anyway” are repeated over and over. Finally, Fran allows those words to land in her and she realises there wasn’t anything she could have done to make the assault not happen.

Fran needed the perpetrator to take responsibility and remove all the responsibility from her. I made the assessment that achieving this shift through role reversal was not an option, as Fran could not have tolerated this. However, the image of the perpetrator being contained, together with the auditory input of his words produce the change. Shedding her sense of responsibility freed Fran to experience previously dissociated feelings and to begin to mourn her loss. In another session in a longer residential Freedom to Fly group a year later, Fran engaged in a psychodrama shifting a further layer of responsibility. She was supported by the same key strength roles, as in her earlier psychodrama.

To survive her earlier sexual abuse Fran created a rich imaginal world of an intricate system of beings, or “parts” as she called them, that enabled her survival. Initially Fran chose to meet on stage with ‘the central organiser’ who was the leader of all the others. This role had been her strength all through the earlier years of sexual abuse. However, six years later with a different perpetrator, ‘the central organiser’ could no longer protect Fran by giving her a place to go in her imagination to hold herself through the sexual assault. This failure had been an enormous grief to Fran who saw this as a weakness. Other beings in the system were concretised on stage, all had believed if they worked together, they could block out reality. Fran named one of her beings *the great pretender* who reported having a 1000 masks to hide the sexual abuse from the others.

'The preparer' protected and numbed Fran to the impending doom, telling her what to do.

Fran began by blaming the 'central organiser' for failing to protect her, leaving her to experience the rawness and pain of the sexual assault. A number of audience members appeared aghast at the extreme expectation Fran had of herself. After several role reversals Fran softened and began to accept that she is a human being with limits. She acknowledged her truth, "I survived one monster but couldn't adapt to another." She knew it was time to forgive herself for not being able to go behind the shield that one last time.

Spontaneously Fran invited her mother onto the stage and for the first time disclosed the sexual abuse to her. There was relief and sadness in Fran as the words finally found their way out of her mouth. She melted into a hug with her mother. Then Fran introduced her mother to all those on stage who had protected her and asked her mother to take care of them. Fran made a sculpture of all the beings held by her mother and it was obvious she was satisfied with what she had created.

Fran acted in new ways in old situations. She could finally let go of self-reproach for not keeping her protective system going. She naturally and easily warmed up finding her spontaneity to create a new relationship with her mother.

The minute she told her mother of the sexual abuse she could let go of her protective system, asking mother to hold all of that in the afterworld.

Aurora

In the group Aurora had been in what she describes as a "dark place" all weekend. She identified that she wanted to express her anger, but she is not sure how to, or who to. Aurora let us know that anger was "a really scary place" for her. She made two excellent sociometric choices of group members for support roles in her drama. The first member was invited to be herself. Aurora's brief for her was to make spontaneous quips to bring light into the darkness as the drama unfolded. She was a *quick witted comedian*. The second group member was chosen for her capacity to feel and express anger. Aurora knew exactly how to pick the right person who became a maximising double, enlivening the protagonist in her expression of her affect in its pure form. The double enlisted the help of a team member to assist her in being fully effective in her role.

As Aurora warmed up to the expression of her anger she was swamped and bound up in shame. She named her adoptive parents as the perpetrators who she wanted to address and chose team members for these roles. A reversal of the power dynamic occurred with Aurora looking at them in the eye, rather than vice versa, as it had always been. She silenced them

with gags as she named some of the horrific traumas they had inflicted.

The maximising double's modelling of the expression of anger gave Aurora the necessary permission to keep fighting, in doing so lifting the shame. The whole group were witnesses and allies as Aurora worked up to sustained potent expression of her anger, interspersed with sadness. Humorous quips created the much needed pendulation towards and away from the intense darkness. In a final act the person chosen to be the comedian created giant sculptures of two mouths, one for each perpetrator. All the demeaning and contemptuous words they had used to shame Aurora were literally shoved back into the mouths of the perpetrators, using soft toys as props. For the protagonist and all her auxiliaries on and off stage, this enactment was enormously satisfying and freeing.

The auxiliaries knew how to enact the roles of the perpetrators from what they had learned from Aurora's story, their own spontaneity and personal knowledge. The auxiliaries benefitted from the experience, as we learned later in the sharing. It was excellent for Aurora not to need to step into their roles as she was already over identified with these perpetrators. They had imposed themselves on her all her 49 years of life and now she needed to experience herself. However, as seen in the drama she could not do this alone.

For those impacted by sexual abuse trauma Davis (1991) referred to anger as the backbone of healing and she underscored the importance of directing anger to the perpetrators and those who failed to protect them. A week after her psychodrama Aurora reported that she had begun to feel quite good about her anger and that now she had no need to apologise to herself for being angry.

There are two key roles involved in the healing of trauma in the described psychodrama and in fact in the entire work of the group: the witness and the ally.

Genevieve

The witness and ally are critical in mitigating the aloneness I referred to earlier. There are many witnesses and allies supporting the client in their healing and these are located both outside and inside the group. These include ACC, the therapist, support person(s) outside the group, together with the team and other participants inside the group. In turn, the participant is a witness and ally to herself. Through her adult eyes she can bring a new perspective, understanding and empathy to her younger self. The power of the impact of the external and internal witnesses and allies is illustrated in Genevieve's nuanced account of her experience in the group over time:

'Each time I could show a little bit more of myself, to my inner world as well as the group, because they kept me cocooned in the wings for as long as I needed. They saw me, my pain and horror, without knowing it in detail, and that allowed me to be able to see myself. They also saw things I couldn't, strengths, kindness, etc. That quote from Moreno about plucking your eyes out and seeing from another's, it was much safer to see from theirs and go away and have their sight percolate away for months after, still today.'

What Genevieve is describing is empathic attuned witnessing. The pioneer of a body-centered psychological approach to trauma Peter Levine said, "Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness" (Levine, 2010, p.xii). This emphasises the importance of having someone who can truly understand and validate our experiences. Together with the *empathetic attuned witness*, the ally is present and all ears. The term *active ally* seems fitting as the role requires genuine personal effort and attention.

In the group we all make a conscious choice to show up and listen and be with uncomfortable stories and feelings.

Why I love this work

The group embodies the best human experience of being in community and enacting values of empathy, kindness and generosity. I experience the generosity of spirit as incredibly moving at times. I enjoy the laughter that spontaneously erupts on occasion throughout the group. In the group I often reference Max Clayton who said, "Someone who can cry and laugh at the same time is a mentally healthy person."

The group is powerful as a multi-dimensional encounter, a tapestry of rich nuanced responses from both team and participants. Therapeutically a lot of ground is covered, and the whole experience is very intense. A previous attendee once likened individual therapy to black and white television and the Freedom to Fly group to colour television.

I am grateful to all the brave souls who have put their 'trust in the process'. I have loved witnessing their compassion with women who most often they have only just met. The healing outcomes are achieved through empathy and a profound level of understanding from shared experiences. I believe the group is a testimony to the power of teamwork. These sentiments are reflected in the following feedback from two participants:

'In these workshops, I can cry, releasing a lot of what I cannot allow myself to feel in the outside world. A lot of the chaos that goes on in my head, is exhaled inside a structure that is safe. One-on-one therapy is great, especially with my therapist, but coming into contact with other women that know how I feel and can often mirror my own experiences is such

a power tool in my healing. It makes me feel less crazy, less alone in my trauma and just that little more connected.'

'This group has been transformative for me. The compassion and acceptance here have allowed me to deal with things I have carried too long. It is a place where real change happens.'

I have a deep appreciation of the co-leaders and team auxiliaries I have worked with over the years. Their commitment to the group is always very moving. In the service of the protagonist and the whole group difficult roles are enacted with willingness and spontaneity. They are truly the *wonderous kind*.

Conclusion

In the Freedom to Fly group, women meet women who have experiences of sexual abuse that resonate with their own. In the presence of a five strong leadership team, a group culture is co-created that is characterised by non-judgmental acceptance and compassion. Such a group environment is ideal for healing the inevitable shame that accompanies the participants. Typically, avoidance of feeling and in fact anything to do with the trauma, creates challenges in trauma therapy. The implicit message of PTSD is "Let's not go this way again." In connecting with and expressing feelings and addressing traumatic material normally avoided, the group offers participants a memorable authentic experience of themselves. They see and experience themselves in a new light. Inherent in the group functioning is permission to feel, for there is no need to don the mask worn in the outside world. Psychodrama, the 'theatre of truth' actively calls out authentic expression of self. The Freedom to Fly group offers those who attend, through all their fragility, a way to lower their guard gradually and experience a precious new way of being in the world. Each woman is invited to push past feelings of exposure and awkwardness as she arrives on stage and stretches into new areas of role development, she is celebrated by a group of witnesses and allies every step of the way. Often the weekend is described as "life changing."

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