



Creative Well Report (Version 1, published October 2021.)

Introduction

This short report presents learning and reflections from Creative Well, a pilot self-care programme for practitioners, which was delivered remotely during Autumn 2020 to support a small cohort of culture, health and wellbeing practitioners from across the Yorkshire and Humber region.

The programme was funded by Arts Council England through its support for the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) and overseen by the Yorkshire and Humber CHWA Regional Champions, Deborah Munt and Sue Mackay and the CHWA Coordinator, Hayley Youell.

Integrative arts psychotherapist, Roshmi Lovatt, [BodhiSpace](#), was engaged to co-design and deliver the programme with facilitation support from Deborah Munt and logistical and technical support from Hayley Youell.

This report has been co-authored by Hayley, Deborah, Sue and Roshmi, with feedback from the Creative Well participants.

Background

The Creative Well programme was developed in response to a series of fortnightly regional conversations, *Tea &...*, hosted by regional champions, Deborah Munt and Sue Mackay during May and June 2020. The aim of these sessions was to create space for practitioners to come together to collectively explore issues impacting practice during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Read more about the *Tea &...Sessions* [here](#).

Many important challenges surfaced, including the emotional labour involved in facilitating culture, health and wellbeing work, and the subsequent professional and personal toll this takes on facilitators. Professionals shared how unsupported and exhausted they felt in dealing with difficult conversations; the fragmentation of roles/identities in responding to needs of the communities they serve; and fielding the pressures of the uncertainty and precarity of their work. Sitting within a wider acknowledgement, that support for professionals in the field is often lacking, particularly the affective support relating to moods, feelings and attitudes that is highlighted by Nicola Naismith in her *Practising Well* report, the Yorkshire champions proposed developing a pilot programme to provide a small cohort of practitioners with self-care strategies and tools to support their own practice and to model to peers, colleagues and participants.

The Participants

In collaboration with Roshmi Lovatt, CHWA published and promoted a [call out](#) and short application process in July 2020. The programme attracted interest from practitioners from across the region, from a mix of art-forms and cultural practices with varying levels of experience and at different stages in their careers. All applicants were white females, with 85% of applicants practising as freelancers and over 50% with additional caring responsibilities.

9 applicants were selected to take part in the pilot programme with representation of socially engaged practice from across museums, theatre, dance, visual/textile arts and music with intersections of research, creative therapies and arts management disciplines. Many practitioners had multiple professional roles and identities. The group expressed and presented shared experiences of burnout, isolation, pressurised workloads, blurred role boundaries and responsibilities, and the need for support for themselves with the hope to support others, both colleagues and participants.

The cohort committed to attend all sessions at sign-up. Programme attendance and retainment was high. One participant stepped back from the project due to family and work commitments in week 3 and one participant missed a session due to an on-going commitment.

The Programme

Structure and Design

“I wouldn’t have signed up for anything that was more frequent, due to other commitments. A bit of space in between, allows you to sit with things before you come back in.”

The programme was designed to take place over 4 x 3 hour sessions (with a break) from Thursday 10 September to 5 November 2020. Sessions were purposefully scheduled with breaks in-between sessions (2-3 weeks in length) to allow for reflection and processing.

“Negotiating cover, spacing allowed for that. Time in between was good to allow things to settle.”

Content

The call out outlined a series of themes and approaches that were intended to be explored at the sessions. Working with Roshmi’s integrative and person-centred approach, the shape of the sessions and planning was influenced by the needs, challenges and aims of the participants.

“Roshmi really listened to participants sharing helpful responses and allowing time and consideration to everyone”

Below is a description of the content and approach of the programme shared by Roshmi Lovatt, in her presentation as part of the ‘Mutual Support’ Panel at [A Culture of Care, CHWA National Conference, April 2021](#).

I facilitated a series of workshops working with culture and arts professionals enquiring into practitioner wellbeing. The three key strands which emerged organically in the work were:

- 1. Practitioner self-care*
- 2. Practitioner identity*
- 3. Practitioner authenticity and resilience*

Through creative and embodied methods, including movement and body tracking, we began to unpick the specifics of stress and trauma patterns as they emerged as stories from the body. This method of working bottom up from the body to the emotions to the thinking, rather than top down, highlighted some painful truths about how much practitioners absorb and carry in their daily lives. The transfer of trauma and stress from the bodies of the participants to the bodies of the practitioners became apparent as we began to unravel the emotional labour involved in working with vulnerable people. The long-term carrying of this emotional labour results in practitioner's vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and eventual burnout.

*Exploring practitioner identity, we highlighted ongoing identity based trauma in participants where their core sense of self as an artist and practitioner had become eroded and even invalidated due to the undervaluing of them as artists in the society in which we live. This resulted in loss of boundaries, loss of clear role definition and a sense of being '**bent out of shape**' in order to fit.*

Being bent out of shape had a direct impact on how practitioners were able to authentically hold their worth, and their bodies told the story of this with poor postures and defensive physical patterning.

When we looked at practitioner self-care, we discovered that there is no 'one size fits all' – individual meanings around self-care differ, and yet sharing these meanings in a group brought a sense of support which was greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Group framing and safety

In the first session, guidelines around individual and group safety were discussed. It was made clear that whilst this was not a therapy group, that in working deeply with issues around self-care that emotional material might emerge. With this in mind the group members were reminded, within and between session, of resources should the need arise. However, one learning from the sessions is that there needs to be a little more understanding of 'trigger points' for participants and what to do when the session material activates triggering material for any individual.

Evaluation and Feedback from Participants

Evaluation Techniques

7 out of 8 participants responded to the short post project evaluation survey, which was a series of open-ended questions; *What has your experience been? What have you learnt? What's been unexpected?*

There was also a follow up reflection session via Zoom to provide space for additional reflections. This session was facilitated on 14 January 2021 and attended by 6 participants. This included further questions about the structure of the programme, asking participants to reflect on how they would describe the offer to others and also to consider the potential sustainability of the programme.

Participants were prompted to journal throughout the programme for their own reflective processes.

Experience

The Creative Well programme has been regularly described as a safe place, *"a space that was safe and welcoming, and allowed us all to work through and discuss a lot of things."* *"Everybody was so friendly and kind, it felt like a very thoughtful, well organised and facilitated programme"*.

"Even though the programme is a pilot, it never felt at any stage to be rehearsed or experimental, it was very well considered and facilitated to a really high standard by Roshmi, who was incredibly professional and inspiring."

Participants often described elements of the programme as *difficult, daunting, challenging* and *exhausting*. Many referring to the pushing of comfort zones, boundaries, especially when faced with the embodied practice or movement exercises. These reflections were always framed within a context of positive learning, sharing and personal growth.

"It was a wholly positive experience, even the difficult bits!

I felt an enormous sense of relief: we are a group of practitioners with a very wide range of skills and experience and working in different circumstances, but there was an immediate understanding of the pressures and issues that had brought us there. It felt extremely safe, held. I trusted that we could talk about difficult issues safely.

I found the movement initially difficult, it's out of my comfort zone and I felt self conscious doing it in my home, but as I started to relax, I began to be aware of how I was holding the stress and anxiety in my body. I also started to be more aware of my studio space, which had also become my workspace, and to change it and make it a better designed and more comfortable space to work in and make artwork in. "

Creative Well Participant

A key theme that ran through all sets of evaluation was the importance of the group holding as being central to the process of healing. To be offered a safe space where practitioners are not judged, devalued, or feel the need to bend out of shape. To offer support to explore the impacts of their work on their bodies, emotions and minds. To be curious about the bodies' capacities to store and let go of trauma. To become aware of one's own stress and trauma patterning and be able to spot early signs of overwhelm. To be offered the opportunity to be held and contained, when usually you are the one doing that for others. To be truly heard without it being a lip service to wellbeing.

"In my work I am regularly the one holding space for others, during this program it was so useful and appreciated to have space held for me, allowing me to regenerate and renew my energy to be able to continue to support others healthily, it felt like a balance was restored."

Creative Well Participant

Reflections on facilitation

It is important to note that the intention of these sessions was to address wellbeing and self-care from the inside, rather than offer a top down approach or list of do's and don'ts. The impact of having a psychotherapist facilitate these sessions is that this inside out approach can be safely navigated and contained. However, we also had to be careful that this did not become a therapy group. The balance was always between having a deeper experience without opening up more complex psychological material.

Key outcomes reported by participants

Increased sense of community, feeling less isolated in practice

"The nature of working freelance as an independent artist and wellbeing practitioner I often feel a lack of support. During this experience I have really valued being a part of a friendly and supportive community. I felt a real sense of connection and unity in our shared challenges in this industry"

"It felt brilliant to have a space to talk to people who just "get it", who understand the sector and understand the emotional labour that is part of it."

Increased knowledge and understanding of the impact of stress/trauma and how to recognise that in self and others

"The neurological explanations for feelings of anxiety were very helpful, particularly in terms of responses to the continuous sense of crisis, and connecting this with my own personal narrative. I have also been able to think more specifically about what self-care means for me, and been able to talk more clearly about self-care with colleagues. "

"By learning about how the brain functions, I've been able to discover how this can relate to my every day and has enabled me to start trying to understand what is going on and taking place inside of us, on a deeper level. "

“I came away with practical tools to be able to support myself and other's mental health and wellbeing, for example spotting early signs of stress.”

“I didn't see that coming, that it would help to unpick how my son was feeling, helped me to realise how I deal with trauma and how he does, and it allowed me to let go of stuff and be really honest and try not to put on a show, entertain people. An opportunity to be honest- such an impact. Looking for trigger points in him and myself- using stretch and movement to support this process.”

Increased self-awareness and autonomy relating to own self-care and building into everyday practices

“I also learnt a lot more about my relationship with self-care- I know realise more clearly what I need to do, and can do, to nourish and look after myself. “

“Overall learning from the course to take time for myself, its ok to not feel ok!”

One participant expressed in response to what's been unexpected about the programme:

“How quickly I began embedding the self-care practice and applying it to everyday routine and trying to find a more balanced input output in my everyday life.”

Modelling self-care and reflective practice and sharing learning with others

The Creative Well team were keen that the learning and experience from the programme would benefit the wider membership and workforce in Yorkshire and Humber. A participant shared how the experience inspired changes within in her working practice.

“It was really useful to know that I had this touch zone, to come back as a group to share and to talk and to use our own practices to look after ourselves and it is something I have consciously tried to keep re-applying – not just with myself but within my team, such as at our staff meetings, exploring ways we can use our practice to reflect and also build in reflective time. “

“Making artwork in response to the movement was particularly powerful, and I've used this in a session with colleagues. “

Learning for next time

- Introduce workbooks to support learning and to test out different tasks outside of session times
- Extra clarity about how to feedback any challenging emotions, experiences or discussions in breakout sessions at the top of each session

Quotes demonstrating need and ambition for future work

"I need to seek out more shared spaces that invite an equitable community space and genuine connection."

"That wellbeing support for the wider cultural sector is as poor as it is in the theatre industry."

"I would sign up for another programme like this, in a blink of an eye, if it was delivered in a very similar way. I hope that this can be developed further and be made available on a longer-term basis. Ongoing support would also have been incredibly beneficial, as I now feel informed but seeking out further opportunity to participate in programmes like this, with no luck of finding any?!"

"I'd be really interested in finding out what the next steps for this programme may be, and how CHWA may run similar workshops in the future for other people. I'd be really interested in being part of the process. "

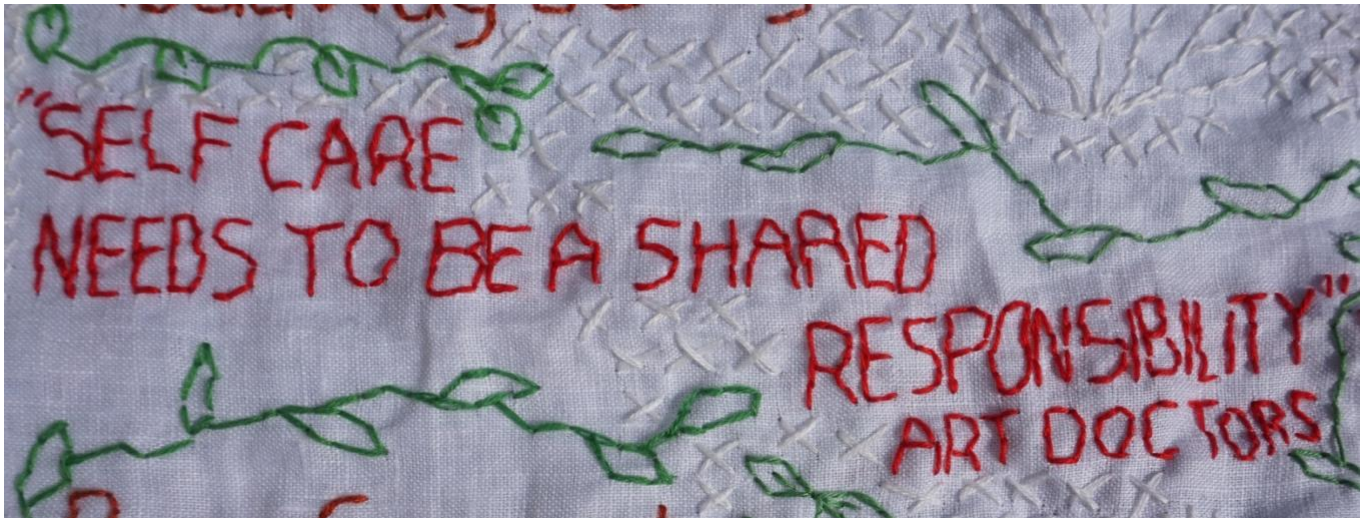


Image Credit: Geraldine Montgomerie (LAHWN) artwork in response to CHW21 Culture of Care Conference

A few reflections: Building a culture of care and mutual support

Diversifying the sector and the understanding of the work

Firstly, we recognise that the cohort group for this project was not fully representative of the sector or the communities it serves in Yorkshire and Humber. This pulls focus to the anecdotal feedback that many practitioners working in this field do not always identify themselves with the sector and at times do not recognise or prioritise the need for support as part of their practice. The use of language and how we frame this work is also regularly flagged as a possible barrier for reaching practitioners.

This highlights the need for additional investment and infrastructure to support regional development and a layered and nuanced approach to the diversification of the membership. We need more understanding about the barriers to accessing support and connecting with the CHWA community as a whole.

Read CHWA's roadmap to a more equal and representative alliance [here](#).

Sustainability of support offers

Like Creative Well, programmes and networks are often very impactful for individuals yet they are short-term funded or reliant on volunteers/champions to sustain if they are not embedded within organisational or funding structures. Participants of the Creative Well programme were keen to see the work continue and for it to be offered to more people, yet without resource or a model of infrastructure or organisation (formal or informal) this can be challenging. [Thriving Facilitators](#), a shortlistee for the CHWA2021 Practising Well Award, presents a potential model of how communities of support can be sustained through individuals making regular financial contributions.

Structural/ System Change

In our final feedback session, a participant drew focus to how the project had in some ways highlighted the slow pace of development and change in practitioner wellbeing and support during her career. Together the group reflected that a more systematic shift in the way work is conceived, funded and commissioned is needed to embed consistent investment; financially and at an organisational and individual level.

“For freelancers and for people running projects in small organisations, there is still the problem of these very ad-hoc arrangements, if any, and no option to go and discuss things with a line manager and that not being built in. There needs to be some structural stuff around practitioner wellbeing (p/w) that the grant managers and funders should be putting in as an absolute essential. I am still not seeing it- 20 years in and a lot of talk about p/w. It's not coming through.”

In response, Roshmi posed the question, “What’s the correlation between practitioner wellbeing and public engagement?”, proposing that perhaps we need to make the case for the impact on public engagement and quality of practice, if practitioners and the workforce are not supported, valued and invested in. Could this be an important hypothesis to test?

Roshmi’s proposition sparked a conversation amongst participants in the session and also resonated with the broader, recurring conversations we are hearing across the sector about the need to align and not separate the issue of practitioner wellbeing with priorities such as quality and sustainability of practice.

Since the Creative Well programme, CHWA has been engaged in a research project with The Barings Foundation to explore [sustainable practice in arts and mental health](#). Not surprisingly, many of the impacts and themes explored in this work, such as language/ identity, historical/systemic trauma and the relationship between funding and practitioner support, have all come to the fore.

The sector itself has also responded to the need for more practitioner support in the light of the pandemic's impact, which has both exacerbated existing needs and challenges for some practitioners and for others propelled them into new roles with weighty expectations and responsibilities. One Creative Well participant shared in her application to the course, *"Our service typically doesn't work with those in crisis, but covid-19 meant that this changed"*. The emergence of new programmes of support with and for specific communities, be it of communities practice such as [GLAM Cares](#); A care and support network for Gallery, Library, Archives and Museum community engagement professionals, demonstrate the need for and potential of bringing together peers with shared experience to make a difference.

At a recent Yorkshire and Humber get together in July 2021, the need for support for Senior Managers/Leaders within the field was highlighted. This identified a gap in provision, whilst also presenting a reminder of how the silo-ing of practice /roles in this sector and assumptions about who needs support most could challenge the conditions needed to create a culture of mutual care and respect, that nurtures, enables and sustains all. How do we acknowledge and balance individual and collective needs, challenges and traumas across our practice and still grow a broader culture of care?

"If self-care is about the individual, then a culture of care is about the collective. Wellbeing in this context involves working with the individual as well as the collective trauma in the industry. By doing this, we stand a chance of moving from surviving to thriving. "

Roshmi Lovatt

Learn more about other examples and opportunities for practitioner support and wellbeing on the Practitioner Support Resource on the CHWA website, [here](#).