

Chapter 1

Digitising Creative Psychological Therapy: Arts for the Blues (A4B)


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ABSTRACT

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a need to adapt and develop psychological interventions that address the mental health of those in need. As a result, Arts for the Blues (A4B), an evidence-based creative group psychotherapy model, originally developed for in-person delivery to address the needs of clients with depression, was transformed into a remote therapy option. This chapter presents an overview of plans and steps so far and offers activities used online during a public workshop with 24 participants and training sessions with 70 psychotherapists (qualified and trainee). Concerns around safety, group sizes, time, and guidance/support are discussed, while the value of online work for clients with depression (adults and children) are explored. It is concluded that even when in-person delivery is possible, online versions will be useful since they encourage a wider reach and make interventions more accessible.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7991-6.ch001

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic encouraged us to revisit our professional practice and consider ways in which we can engage with digital platforms. As creative psychotherapists, we were challenged by the need to create safe relationships with our clients and to do this whilst continuing to use artmaking, movement, drama, music and creative writing. We needed to learn fast and respond quickly, often inventing and re-inventing the wheel in parallel with one another. The results of our learning process, however, have not been shared yet, making our discoveries unavailable to our colleagues and the wider professional community.

In this chapter we will explore ways in which the Arts for the Blues (A4B) team has adapted in-person psychotherapy work to suit remote delivery. A4B is an evidence-based group creative psychotherapy intervention that aims to tackle depression and improve wellbeing amongst adults and children. We believe that this model might be applied more broadly with other client populations and can be used by a range of different mental health workers.

This chapter aims to describe the work in transforming A4B from an in-person model into an online therapeutic offering in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including:

1. overview of plans and steps so far
2. examples of exercises used online
3. exploration of lessons learned and future directions

The work completed during an online public workshop as well as online workshops and training sessions with mental health practitioners will be used as our main reference point.

BACKGROUND

The Development of Arts for the Blues (A4B)

Arts for the Blues (A4B) is a structured psychotherapy model that uses different creative modalities such as movement, artmaking, music, drama and creative writing, as a means to tackle depression and improve wellbeing. As an evidence-based intervention, it grew out of a thematic synthesis of research findings around helpful factors in therapy for depression (Parsons et al 2019), evaluations from public workshops (Haslam et al 2019) and studio-based experimentations (Thurston et al under review). Pilot interventions began in primary care in the UK National Health Service (NHS) in Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services, and since then, has been used with adults and children in mental health charities (Karkou et al in preparation) and in schools (Moula et al 2020; Aithal et al 2021), yielding promising results. It is a multidisciplinary project involving collaborations from across a range of disciplines including performing and visual arts, literature, arts psychotherapies, psychology, counselling and psychotherapy (see <https://artsfortheblues.com/> for further information about the project).

The A4B model consists of eight key ingredients which participants are invited to engage with through the use of creative methods within a flexible structure (Omylinska-Thurston et al 2020). These ingredients include: (i) encouraging active engagement, (ii) learning skills, (iii) developing relationships, (iv) expressing emotions, (v) processing at a deeper level, (vi) gaining understanding, (vii) experimenting with different ways of being, and (viii) integrating useful material.

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