



'Virtual Cuppa'

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Description

'Virtual Cuppa' (VC) was a daily online peer led virtual support group for Art Psychotherapists during the Covid pandemic. Evolving as a safe virtual space for connectivity to meet the needs of therapists and clients alike, following radical changes to work practices in response to Public Health Guidelines at the onset of lockdown.

The UK Allied Health Professions Public Health Strategic Framework has 5 goals one of which is "Health and well-being of the workforce: The expertise of AHPs will be used to protect and improve the health and well-being of the health and care workforce" (Hindle and Charlesworth, 2019). This project demonstrates a response that meets this goal. 'Virtual Cuppa' evolved as a safe virtual space of connectivity, learning and emotional holding for Art Psychotherapists' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Image by Sue Ellis

Context

The pandemic created a unique dual experience affecting both the client and therapist alike, with isolation at an unprecedented level, directly impacting on their mental health, "Nearly a third of healthcare workers reported moderate to severe levels of anxiety and depression, and the number reporting very high symptoms was more than quadruple that pre-COVID-19" (Gulleen J, 2021).

The aim of VC was to support Art Therapists on two levels; first by creating a safe environment to support their mental health, secondly to create an environment for shared learning and professional development. Capturing the learning to create a new framework of online art therapy as a credible alternative to face-to-face interventions and enhance its capabilities by widening the scope of clients who find face-to-face models of therapy problematic.

By expanding our professional knowledge and skill base, Art Therapists are meeting the objective of the Royal Society of Public Health Strategic Plan 2022-2027 "A skilled and well-trained workforce is essential for better Public Health".

Method

VC was available free of charge, accessed through an invite from Zoom video conferencing platform:

- Every weekday morning from 7.30-9.30 am
- Once a month evening sessions were offered
- Cyber Open Studio on Sundays, 4 hours of restorative creativity

VC delivered over 400 hours of support with an average of 3 people attending per session and a maximum of 12, and only a small quantity of sessions with no attendance. 12 evening sessions ran for 2 hours, average attendance 6 maximum 9. The Cyber Open Studio Sessions on Sundays delivered 100 hours with an average of 8 people in sessions and a maximum of 15.

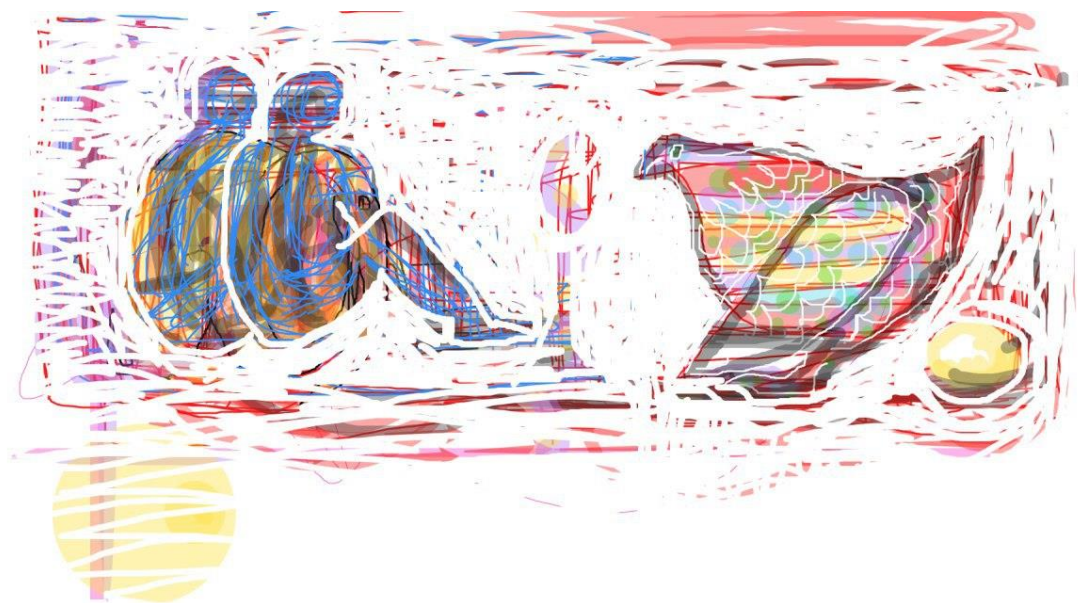


Image: by Sue Ellis in collaboration with another Art Therapist on the Zoom whiteboard

As time progressed, themes started to emerge and focused themed sessions were created to explore these further, inviting other professions/AHPs:

- Setting up our online studio space to look familiar to the art therapy space.
- Organising the technology, internet, camera, thinking about height to eye levels so the client did not feel you were looking down or up at them. Using one or two cameras, exploring lighting to create an authentic experience.
- Discussion around Arts for Health and art therapy online.
- Using Music, Drama, Movement and Poetry in therapy to support a less static and more sensory response to being in front of the screen.
- Using technology, photography, videography, VR, Minecraft and virtual games.
- Co-created Art in therapy – using the Whiteboard in Zoom creatively.
- Using a ‘transitional object’ to support connectivity with the client – sending letters and art projects out to clients with their name on the envelope, reinforcing their sense of self as a positive experience.
- Confidence – Imposter Syndrome.

- Going back to face-to-face working, taking forward our learning and experience of online working.

VC was Initially to support Art Therapists in the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) region 11 Yorkshire and Humber region. It expanded to include other BAAT regions and other Creative Therapists wanting to share their learning and experiences.

Although mainly attendees originated from Yorkshire, this grew over time to cover the length and breadth of the UK from Devon and Cornwall right up to the Orkney Islands and expanding across the globe with international colleagues from Europe, Canada, America, Australia, South Africa, South America and Israel.

Outcomes

VC showed we could successfully take art therapy online, following the early examples the USA Telehealth research, highlighted a credible option, 'a plausible best method of therapy for some clients' (Collie & Čubranić, 1999) cited in (Malchiodi, 2018). "A growing body of literature now suggests that use of telepsychiatry to provide mental health services has the potential to solve the workforce shortage problem that directly affects access to care, especially in remote and underserved areas." (Antonacci DJ, 2008) (Rees & Haythornwaite, 2004). In their study Day and Schneider compared "psychotherapy: face-to-face, real-time video conference, and 2-way audio (analogous to telephone)" and suggested that "differences in process and outcome among the 3 treatments were small" (Day & Schneider, 2020).

To support the most commonly ask questions and pull together our learning we produced E-Booklets:

- Art therapist working online
- Clients introduction to online art therapy with safety plans
- Student Art Therapist E-Booklet

Feedback:

"I so wish that I had come across the 'Virtual Cuppa' sooner I have found it invaluable and am very grateful for the new connections I have made, practice discussions and shared learning resources. Through one of our discussions around appropriate adolescent referrals to therapy Sue kindly shared her 'Venn Detective', a creative assessment tool that can help practitioners identify areas of difficulty at home and school as well as hopes and aspirations. I have been able to use this already online. My interest in working creatively, ongoing personal learning and future development of my practice has been rekindled by meeting with so many like-minded, experienced, passionate and enthusiastic professionals. Thank you so much". (Play Therapist and Creative Arts Counsellor for Children and Young People).

"How curious would Donald Winnicott be to see the use of his theory of the 'potential space' introduced to the world in 1953 being used 67 years later within cyber based therapies in 2020", (Art Therapist, 2020 in discussion in VC session).

"I've found the group to be the invaluable support I need as an early-career AT. Very inspiring conversations, with wise souls encouraging me to do my best out there! Hugely grateful" (message taken from VC Telegram page 2020).

“I like how Virtual Cuppa helps people, to work together and relate to one another using art and technology. Whilst at the same time supports learning and wider discussions, enabling people to know more about their process so partnerships can begin.” (Media Psychologist)

“Virtual Cuppa was my lifeline during the pandemic. In March 2020, I was naturally preparing to end work with several adolescents in alternative provisions. I had just been informed that my mother, who lived in a distant county, was terminally ill. Lock-down happened. Everything came to an abrupt stop. No proper endings. Wherever I was, Virtual Cuppa held me each morning before I started my day” (Art Therapist).

“I wasn't always able to make sessions but knowing you were there holding the space helped me feel held during my days especially when I have times of feeling overwhelmed” (Comment made in VC discussion).

Key learning points

The key learning points were the importance of holding the professionals and looking after their health and mental health in order that clients were safely held. The COVID-19 pandemic, fast forward the learning essential to place art therapy online in doing so, showed that distance need not be an exclusion for therapy.

We supported each other in dealing with the following:

- The extreme tiredness of online working
- Hitting the brick wall of Covid
- Emotional and practical complexities of online working with clients such as:
 - Regressive behaviors experienced by both client and therapist
 - Disinhibition effect on therapy and disclosures
 - When the clients turn off the screen - holding the empty space
 - Dealing with technical issues and backup plans
 - Determining the levels of appropriate space for talking and silence
 - Dissociation and emotional dysregulation

Members worked collaboratively to create a ‘heightened attuned response’ across this new dual therapeutic space, developing:

- Safety plans written with clients prior to the commencement of session.
- Maximising the creative potential of Zoom by using the Whiteboard for co-created artwork.
- Dyadic Art Therapy approaches designed to hold children safe with distance working.
- The change in power dynamics with parents, helping parents through psychoeducation to have the confidence to position themselves in their child’s healing, helping the parent be the hero.
- The powerful dynamic way of co-working with the clients and families became part of the new normal. That supported the transition from online working within their home back to their home as their lived environment.
- Learning to hold the chaos over distance.

Emerging themes over the course of lockdowns:

- Working in isolation, away from professional teams.

- The loss of professional voice and practiced narrative; the emerging domestic narrative taking precedence started to coincide with loss of professional confidence.
- VC reach has been wide and varied from embracing the challenges that this pandemic has brought on all levels of personal and professional identity. It has been integral in providing emotional support for therapists to sit with each other in times of darkness, despair, and sadness.
- VC became that safe space to be held, re-gather and regain perspective to gain strength and carry on. For some it was a lifeline.

The response for support needed to be swift at this most challenging of times, it is hard to see how this level of intense support would be needed as we regain our normal ways of working.

Doing things differently would be to take the essence of this learning into our new every day with a hope that it is not lost. Providing online art therapy as a credible option for our clients that was not thought possible pre-Covid.

This was a unique time in our history, the lessons we can take forward is art therapy can be done successfully online and can become part of the blended approaches to meet the needs of our clients in the future, distance is no longer an issue for clients to access mental health support.

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