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Working Things Out: A Therapeutic Interactive CD-Rom Containing the Stories of Young People Dealing with Depression and other Mental Health Problems

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Abstract: *It is widely accepted that children and young people enjoy using computers. Seymour Papert¹ suggests that 'it is timely for school counsellors and child therapists to bridge the digital generation gap and innovate with computers in their work with children of the digital age.' Working Things Out (WTO) was developed in response to the growing need for computer-based resources for adolescents in therapy. It is an interactive CD ROM/DVD developed as a means of engaging adolescents about mental health issues by giving them information in the form of animated personal stories told by other young people dealing with problems such as depression, bullying, eating problems and self-harm. The CD-ROM/DVD is accompanied by a manual for professionals on how to use the resource.*

With the help of therapists, and in collaboration with graphic designers, animators and multimedia professionals, the 11 young people who participated in the project told their stories, narrated in their own voice and illustrated by graphics and animation. 'Working Things Out' is currently being used as an educational and therapeutic tool with other adolescents at risk of mental health problems, both as a way of engaging young people to reflect about mental health issues and as a means of inviting them to tell their own story. The paper describes the background and development of the 'Working Things Out' project, including samples from the stories and a description of how the CD-ROM/DVD can be used in psychotherapy.

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THERAPEUTIC STORY TELLING AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Telling and listening to stories is a fundamental human activity, both as a means of entertainment and communicating information. Whether we are listening to a personal anecdote, reading a novel or watching a soap opera, a 'good story' holds much greater appeal than a series of facts alone and is much more likely to engage our imagination and hold our attention. Personal stories that relate real-life accounts of peoples lives, and which have the mark of authenticity can hold a particular appeal to an audience, allowing special identification with the character and context. Further, personal stories can have

great meaning to the storytellers as well as the listeners in that the act of telling the story can shape and define their lives.

As a result psychotherapists are very interested in personal stories. Psychotherapy can be conceived as process of inviting clients to tell and retell their life story from a variety of perspectives with the aim of reaching a coherent and meaningful narrative at the end.² Within a strengths-based approach to psychotherapy the process can be conceived as helping clients shift from initially self-limiting and problem-focused accounts of their lives to more positive and strengths-oriented accounts that are more liberating and empowering.^{3,4} For example, a person may begin psychotherapy by telling the story of how he became depressed and how this damages his life and end therapy with a 'new' story of how he has coped with the depression and how this leads to new possibilities in his life. This is not simply a semantic differ-

ence: the act of retelling your story to an empathic listener, in a way that identifies new strengths-based 'plot lines' and that incorporates supportive 'characters' more centrally to the story, is in itself beneficial and transforming to ones personal identity.

Computers and digital media

Computers and digital media provide therapists with new means to engage clients and assist them in telling their life stories. Narrative structures and storylines are widely employed in many different types of digital media, including video game design, web-design, and e-learning. By including a narrative structure, this can increase the appeal for users and offer a context for creating meaning, thereby deepening their experiences of the information being presented. Abbe Don in an article entitled "Narrative and the Interface" argues that computers can play in modern society the role of the storyteller of oral cultures.^{5,6} The computer becomes the processor of the "told" information, the user/viewer takes on the information and interprets it in a way that is meaningful to them.

Digital storytelling techniques are particularly relevant in the context of psychotherapy. The computer provides novel means of both *expressing and listening* to therapeutic stories. The computer facilitates the expression of the therapeutic story by allowing the incorporation of sound, image, animation as well as text and verbal communication in the telling. Equally the computer facilitates the listening to the story, by providing interactive interfaces and databases that allow the listener to pace the story to their own need and to make choices about what is relevant. The Working Things Out project aimed to build on these twin key potentials that are afforded by digital media in therapeutic storytelling.

WTO PROJECT RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

The idea for the WTO project emerged during the 'Challenging Times' research study⁶ which looked at the incidence of depression and other mental health difficulties amongst the 12-15 year old population in secondary schools in the North Dublin City area. A subsequent qualita-

tive study⁸ engaged a smaller group of young people to share their stories of how they were coping and dealing with depression and other difficult life experiences. A key finding of the studies was the fact many young people in the community who suffered from depression did not access traditional professional mental health services.

The WTO project grew out of a desire to create an accessible means of providing mental health information as well as a means of engaging young people in professional services and psychotherapy. To ensure this was relevant to young people, participants from the study were invited to contribute to the making of the CD-ROM/DVD and to share their personal stories of dealing with a difficult life experience during adolescence. The inclusion of real young people's experiences in a story format makes the material much more real and relevant. A multimedia interactive CD-Rom was chosen as the format for the collection of stories as this motivated the young people tell their story, (many were keen to gain experience of creatively using digital media creatively) and also provided an engaging 'youth centred' format for future users.

The project was developed as a partnership between the Department of Child and family Psychiatry in the Mater Hospital, the charity Parents Plus (which will distribute the CD-Rom) and the Therapeutic Technologies Group in Media Lab Europe.

Development

Young people aged 13 to 16 who attended the Mater Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and/ or who participated in the Challenging Times research study above were invited to participate in the project. Specifically, they were asked to share their experience and stories in order to make a CD-ROM to help young people overcome problems in their lives. The altruistic nature of the project appealed to many of them, as much as the possibility of working with multimedia to tell their stories. After a series of general focus groups, eleven young people were selected to take part. The problems the young people were dealing with ranged from more 'everyday' issues such as bullying, conflict with

parents and school problems to more specialist problems such as self-harm, bereavement, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating problems.

To develop a 'script' for the stories, each young person attended a series of individual meetings with a therapist who through a process of listening and clarifying helped the young people begin to tell their story in a structured format. This structure focused not only on their experience of having a problem, but also how they coped and what supports and resources helped them. The final scripts for the short movies were co-authored by therapist and young person. Some young people were able to write the majority of the script themselves and others needed more support (e.g. the therapist would transcribe the main points from a recorded interview and re-read to the young person for approval).

The young people were also involved in the creative aspects of the production. Some were involved in the storyboarding of the scenes, the development of the graphics and the choice of images. Alongside the individual sessions, several workshops were conducted with the young people on animation, graphics, photography and digital audio. This helped each young person take ownership of his/her story both in its script and in how it would be animated and represented. A key aspect of this project was to ensure that the stories are personal and meaningful to the participating adolescents and their families. The introduction to the stories was written in conjunction with the young people and is as follows:

Welcome to 'Working Things Out' the stories of 11 young people who have gone through some difficult life experiences. By sharing our stories, our feelings and our ways of coping with our problems, we hope that others who might be going through a similar hard time will be reminded that they are not alone and that there are many different things you can do to make things better.

Telling our stories definitely made us feel better, it was good to get stuff off our chests. We hope that the very real experiences you hear will be a source of support and learning for you. Our stories are ongoing and not all our problems

have gone away but the way we understand and deal with them has changed. While we don't have all the answers, we might have some useful messages and information.

In developing the project we were keen to ensure that the final accounts were confidential meaning that we would not use any identifying material such as pictures or real names. Thus, in order to maintain the authenticity of the project, the young people themselves provided the 'voice over' recording to a script that had been co-written with the therapists. The final production includes ten mini-movies of the young people's stories and one recorded song written by one participant who preferred to share his experiences in lyrics and music.

Case Example – Michelle's Story

To illustrate the content and purpose of WTO we reproduce below the opening text for Michelle's story who had been referred to an adolescent mental health service due to her eating problems.

'Shocked Into Reality' - Other kids at school were calling me fat.

Other kids at school were calling me fat. I was only ten at the time. I started feeling fat and paranoid and thought everybody was looking at me. Like if I went shopping with the other girls in my class and one of them said to another "oh those jeans would fit you" I would think it was directed at me like, that she meant they wouldn't fit me. I used to think that comments like that were aimed at me, though they wouldn't be in reality. I started skipping breakfast purposefully and would try not to eat much at lunch. Like I'd eat half a cracker at break and the other half at lunch. I used to think that if I ate any more I'd get fat. Then I started exercising, doing sit ups and making a big effort in PE so I'd be thinner.

This was going on for a few months and my Mam noticed I was losing weight.

She took me to the doctor. The doctor talked to me about my food intake and told me I should be eating more. My Mam and my sister were telling me the same thing but I didn't listen to any of them. I still wanted to be thinner. I didn't

think I was losing weight myself. When I'd look in the mirror I used to see myself as bigger than I actually was. My friends started saying I was too skinny but I didn't believe them either. I would feel the hunger in my stomach but I ignored it because I was determined not to eat and I'd feel the cold even when it was sunny out.

Michelle's story is played as a movie and illustrated with line graphics that support her narration (fig 1). In later parts of the story she goes on to say how she and her mother finally sought help for her difficulties. A turning point comes when in her own words she is 'shocked into reality' by a medical report which highlights just how underweight and undernourished she is. At the end of the story she relays how she currently maintains her eating and health.

USING WTO AS AN EDUCATIONAL GUIDE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

As well as being beneficial to the participants, the WTO CD ROM has been designed as an educational guide for young people (and their families) who are experiencing similar problems. The current version of "Working Things Out" is designed to be used in a facilitated way by professionals working with young people either individually or with a small group of adolescents, in either a mental health or school setting. The aim is that on viewing the stories adolescents may feel a resonance or empathy

with the story teller helping them feel 'not alone' if similar issues affect them. In addition, viewing the story could provide an important focal point for discussion and also engage the adolescent to open up and share their own experience if that is appropriate.

The final version of the CD-ROM contains an introduction and a panoramic interface (fig 2), representing a street, which they can scroll across left and right to view the silhouette of eleven young people whose pseudonyms are given along with a title of their story. Selecting a story allows it to be played in a linear fashion from beginning to the end, with the options of pause, fast forward and rewind. The stories are illustrated by graphics and animation and narrated by the personal voice of the young person. In addition, each story is punctuated by several 'information points' which provide a commentary on some of the key points raised in the story as well as some sample questions for professionals to use to promote reflection and to facilitate the personalisation of the material. For example, the opening information point for Michelle's story above is as follows

Pressure to be thin

Like Michelle, many young people feel self-conscious about their appearance and body shape and feel under pressure to look a certain way and to be a certain weight. For Michelle it became a problem and she began to see herself as 'bigger than she actually was', and she

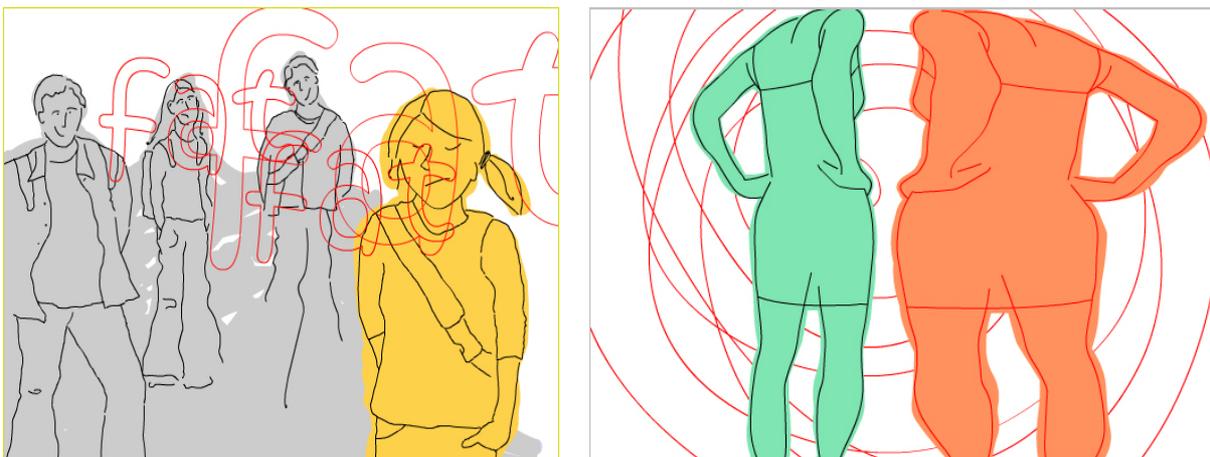


Figure 1. Graphics from Michelle's Story

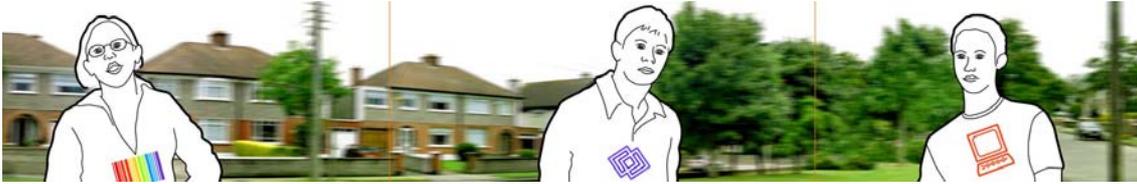


Figure 2. Panoramic Opening Interface

started controlling her food intake to the point where she ignored the hunger and cold. Like many people, Michelle was using control over food to cover up the upset, loneliness and sadness she was feeling. However, when a young person begins to ignore the reality of his/ her weight loss and discomfort and get obsessed about limiting food intake he/she is in danger of developing a serious eating disorder.

Questions

How real are the pressures on young people to diet so as to be thin?

If you were a friend of Michelle's what could you do to help her?

DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

Following completion of the Working Things Out Project the young people who participated in it took part in an evaluation of the process. They all reported it as a beneficial experience. Aside from it being therapeutic for them to tell their story in a creative form, it has also provided them with the opportunity to learn new skills and to use multimedia. For many, participation has also had positive impacts on their families. When parents have reviewed their children's story it has often opened up family communication. One mother described how proud she was of what her daughter had achieved and reviewing the story became a special moment of connection for them both. Finally, participation in the CD Rom has copper-fastened, for many of the young people, their coping skills and survival strategies. They have moved from being 'recipients' of mental health information to being 'teachers' and those who provide it.

The Working Things Out CD-Rom/DVD and Resource Manual was launched in February 2005. The package was field tested with young people attending the Mater Hospital both individually and in small groups.

Professionals who have used the stories with young people have found it a useful engagement tool with young people, inviting them to begin to talk about their own experience, particularly when the viewed story resonates with the particular experience of the adolescent. Initial cautions are to ensure that the story shown is relevant to the young persons concerns and context.

It is our experience that computers and multimedia can positively engage young people in coming to therapy. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the initial 'resistance' to coming to therapy often expressed by adolescents dissipates when the computer is used as an engagement tool.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

A further project has now developed out of the Working Things Out research. As part of the Therapeutic Technologies Research Group (University College Dublin/Mater Hospital) we are currently developing "Transforming Stories" which is a database driven multimedia storytelling tool delivered both online and on stand alone platform. The software currently being developed will allow the user to choose a story template and build up the story plot using customisable characters and background scenes adding in their own voiceover and animation. The user has a drag and drop facility for placing story objects and further features such as positioning tools, playback and story editing. Other options include building from seed stories where they can change the plotline and add in their own characters and dialogue. In the method, the therapist introduces the idea of making a story and shows examples of what is possible using the software. It can be a story tailored to a problem that needs resolution or a general story that brings about some positive change in the storyline. A key therapeutic feature is a notebook facility where the child and

therapist keep a log of their thoughts on the process and their analysis of the story. This allows for reflection and gives the therapist the opportunity to prompt new ideas for problem solving. Finally they can upload and share their stories to an online community. Over time it is hoped that a large database of stories will be build up as a shared resource that can be made available to young people struggling with problems as a source of support and reliable information.

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