

STEPS TO RECOVERY: ART THERAPY AND
SELF-HELP WITH WAR-TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN.
1991-95 CROATIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of major goals and results of a self-help mutual aid program in helping traumatized children, families, and communities of war-affected areas of former Yugoslavia via art therapies as one of basic means for personal reconciliation, group solidarity, and effective coping.

BACKGROUND

The military, para-military, political violence, and mass destruction in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina during the recent Balkan War have produced life-long handicaps of multiple origin in nearly four million civilians, that is about one-fourth of the total population of ex-Yugoslavia, according to 1991 census (see Barath, 1995).

Statistical data obtained during the war in Croatia suggest that about 2,200 children have lost one or both parents, and that children—a third of whom are of elementary school age—constitute about 55 percent of the total number of refugees and displaced persons (Stuvland, Barath, & Kuterovec, 1994).

Since the very onset of the war time in Croatia (summer 1991), efforts were made by the present author and a few associates to invent such large-scale early preventive, out-reach programs that, based on public health models, may help thousands of children to cope with traumatic war experiences in a constructive and creative way. The decision was made to combine art therapy with the self-help approach, i.e., the two helping strategies for both of which we have had

fair enough experience from pre-war times (see Barath, 1991; Karlavaris, Barath, & Kamenov, 1989).

In the rest of this article we shall give a short account on how we met this challenge, and what are the major outcomes.

METHODS

Programs

Early Crisis Intervention

In the early fall of 1991 we developed and offered to Croatia's Ministry of Education, Department Schooling, a special series of creative visual art activities (Barath, 1996). The program consisted of *seven* creativity workshops as the backbone to self-help and mutual aid of children and their "natural" helpers: local teachers, school psychologists, pedagogists, parents, social workers, and more. The program focused on a series of expected cognitive, emotional, and moral impairments of children in the midst of ongoing war. It was titled by the symbolic name: *Images of My Childhood from Croatia, Since Summer 1991* (Barath et al., 1993). They consisted of a teachers' handbook and an audio tape for acute stress management and relief. Table 1 outlines the central themes, and the specific (psychological) goals of the program.

The program was run nationwide at the beginning of the next school year (September 1992), when it became a component part of the UNICEF's first large-scale psychosocial programs of this kind for Croatia, known as the "School Programme," and later on in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Mostar).

Secondary Prevention of Lasting Emotional Injuries (1993-95)

Early experience with the above described first-wave program has shown that the schools themselves needed extended support and shared role-taking with other local cultural institutions, where children usually go and engage themselves with a large variety of extracurricular activities, such as public libraries, sport clubs, children theaters, and the like. With these considerations in mind, in late 1993 we started developing a second-wave complex arts therapy program, under the symbolic title: *Step by Step to Recovery; Creative Encounters with Children in War Time and After* (Barath, Matul, & Sabljak, 1996a). Table 2 outlines the thematic structure and specific goals of this second-wave.

This particular program was deliberately built upon the thematic structure and tradition of the 12-step approach to recovery from lasting stressful life events, including self-destructive tendencies. However, to some extent we removed the whole paradigm from the context of clinical practice. Instead, we transposed its core themes onto a series of twelve-step creative activities workshops, and made it acceptable and flexible for large-scale use even by para-professional helpers and volunteers, such as teachers, art teachers, librarians, and independent

Table 1. Thematic Flow and Specific Goals of the First-Wave Art Therapy Program for Croatia: “Images of My Childhood from Croatia, Since Summer 1991” (UNICEF’s “School Programme,” 1992-93)

Workshops	Main Titles, Leads, and Specific Goals
Workshop 1.	<p>MEMORIES “The paths of my life . . .” Goal: Empower positive memories from pre-war times</p>
Workshop 2.	<p>SPACES “Where am I, and how I feel . . . ?” Goal: Improved sense of security “here-and-now”</p>
Workshop 3.	<p>TIME “What all happened to me since . . . ?” Goal: Normalize biased attributions to personal events (disasters, e.g., fleeing home)</p>
Workshop 4.	<p>WAR “What is the smell, touch, colour of this war . . . ?” Goal: Promote idiosyncratic (metaphoric) thinking on war</p>
Workshop 5.	<p>FEAR “What I am scared of, and how I cope . . . ?” Goal: Promote body awareness and skills for stress reduction</p>
Workshop 6.	<p>MESSAGES TO THE WORLD “My dove of peace . . . !” Goal: Promote constructive feelings and attitudes for communal life</p>
Workshop 7.	<p>WISHES “If I had a magic wand . . .” Goal: Promote creative imagery and self-empowerment for future</p>

professional artists. In Croatia, the program was run nationwide via the network of some forty-five public libraries, in engaging trained librarians for its implementation. Later at other worksites, such as refugee camps in Slovenia, we engaged social workers as program implementers.

Table 2. Thematic Flow and Specific Goals of the Second-Wave Art Therapy Program for Croatia: "Step-by-Step to Recovery" (UNICEF's "Library Programme," 1993-95)

Workshops	Main Titles, Leads, and Specific Goals
Workshop 1.	POWER vs. POWERLESSNESS Goal: Promote self-empowerment and self-control
Workshop 2.	MEANING vs. MEANINGLESSNESS Goal: Promote active coping with mental confusion
Workshop 3.	TRUST vs. SHAME & DOUBT Goal: Recovery from fear from unknown others
Workshop 4.	"GOOD vs. BAD ME" (SELF-INVENTORY) Goal: Promote self-insight and critical thinking
Workshop 5.	BENEVOLENCE vs. ANGER Goal: Promote impulse-control (acting-out) in anger
Workshop 6.	SAFETY vs. FEAR Goal: Promote active coping with anxiety and fear
Workshop 7.	INNOCENCE vs. GUILT Goal: Promote early (healthy) moral reasoning
Workshop 8.	PLEASURE vs. PAIN and GRIEF Goal: Promote subjective well-being "here-and-now"
Workshop 9.	LIFE vs. DEATH Goal: Promote positive thinking about losses
Workshop 10.	JUSTICE vs. REVENGE Goal: Promote sense for social justice
Workshop 11.	HOPE vs. HOPELESSNESS Goal: Search for personal purposes and goals
Workshop 12.	LOVE vs. HATE Goal: Promote love and tolerance for others

Third-Wave Intervention in Peace Time (1996-Present)

The rationale for undertaking a third-wave trauma recovery program should be evident from the following: First, many children simply “born onto” the time of war catastrophe on these territories still suffer, and surely stay as life-long victims of war. Second, many of them still shall become victims of predictable increase of traumatic life events that are “typical” for post-war times and social conditions, including disturbed family life and rise of juvenile delinquency in urban settings, to name a few. We named it: *Paths to the Future: Helping Traumatized Children to Resume Health and Creative Growth*. The basic goals and methods of this subsequent program known in the earlier educational literature as *the* paradigm to Creative Problem Solving (CPS), and more recently education for *visionizing* the future (Barath, Matul, & Sabljak, 1996b). With this program, in many ways we shall return to our creative education programs from the pre-war times on these territories, taking into account the dramatic changes in

Table 3. Thematic Flow and Specific Goals of the Third-Wave Art Therapy Program for Croatia: “Paths to the Future” (UNICEF’s “Library Project,” Part II (in Progress))

Workshops	Main Titles, Leads, and Specific Goals
Workshop 1. Goal:	PERCEPTIONS: “Order vs. Chaos” Improve perception, including body awareness
Workshop 2. Goal:	FEELINGS: “Man vs. Machine” Improve healthy emotional functioning
Workshop 3. Goal:	THINKING: “Known vs. Unknown” Promote effective (integrative) thinking
Workshop 4. Goal:	IMAGERY: “Dream vs. Reality” Improve mental skills for dream-work
Workshop 5. Goal:	IDEATION: “Abundance vs. Poverty” Improve mental skills for idea-generation
Workshop 6. Goal:	CREATION: “Building vs. Destruction” Build sense for creative work (effort)
Workshop 7. Goal:	EVALUATION: “Success vs. Failure” Promote active coping with “audience”
Workshop 8. Goal:	HELPING: “You vs. Me” Teaching basics of mutual helping

the mental health needs of children specific to the onset and outlets of war. Table 3 summarizes the flow of the first eight central themes of this third-wave program scheduled for implementation in months and years to come, both in Croatia and elsewhere.

Population Coverage

The following statistics would approximate the total number of *primary* beneficiaries targeted effectively by these programs in the last four years or so: pre-school and elementary school age children; high school age children (adolescents) and young people; school practitioners (teachers and art teachers); local mental health professionals, including psychologists; public health librarians and their associates; lay helpers, including parents and local volunteers. The approximated total number of beneficiaries thus far is 150,000 individuals.

Table 4. Estimated Population Rates of Children in Croatia, in Standardized Measures for PTSD Before (T1) and after (T2) the Application of the First-Wave Crisis Intervention Program (1992-93)

Criterion Groups in Follow-Up	Population Rates (%)	Test on Change		
		D-score	t-test	(p)
High PTSD-Intrusion scores before (T1)	27.1			
High PTSD-Intrusion scores after (T2)	17.4			
Change		-35.8	23.7	0.001
High PTSD-Avoidance scores before (T1)	20.5			
High PTSD-Avoidance scores after (T2)	16.4			
Change		-20.0	14.7	0.001
Low PTSD-Intrusion scores before (T1)	9.7			
Low PTSD-Intrusion scores after (T2)	8.2			
Change		-15.5	10.3	0.001
Low PTSD-Avoidance score before (T1)	11.3			
Low PTSD-Avoidance score after (T2)	12.7			
Change		+12.4	6.0	0.001

RESULTS

First-Wave Interventions

Table 4 summarizes the major findings on the effectiveness of the first-wave crisis intervention program in Croatia (UNICEF “School Programme” for Croatia, 1992-93).

These summary findings ought to be regarded as of nationwide significance because, at the time being, they were drawn on nationwide representative samples of children both from “high-risk” and “low-risk” areas. As expected, the program has resulted with an early decrease of the population of children with heightened risk to develop PTSD. Some one-third of children (35%) with initial high-level scores for psychological impairment (high-IES pre-test scores) on standardized screening scales for PTSD, gained relief from this early prevention program.

Second-Wave Interventions

In the rest of this section we shall deal with empirical findings drawn on the effectiveness of the 12-step art therapy program at different sites of its applications, and with different groups of targeted beneficiaries. Table 5 summarizes the global evaluation scores on effectiveness of this program from (Novo Mesto),

Table 5. Summary Evaluation Scores on the Effectiveness of the Second-Wave Art Therapy Program with Mixed Bosnian Refugee and Domicile Groups in Ia (Novo Mesto, 1994-95)

PTSD-12 Scales	Mean Scores/Therapy		Tests on Change:	
	Before (T1)	After (T2)	(t-test)	(p)
1. Powerlessness	3.81	2.60	5.82	0.00
2. Meaninglessness	4.83	3.08	5.46	0.00
3. Distrust in others	3.70	2.83	3.34	0.00
4. Self-esteem (-)	3.45	2.94	2.00	0.00
5. Anger	4.30	3.66	2.22	0.00
6. Anxiety/fear	3.81	3.02	3.64	0.00
7. Guilt	3.00	2.49	1.91	0.05
8. Grief	3.38	2.13	5.88	0.00
9. Death concern	3.11	2.36	3.45	0.00
10. Revenge	3.64	2.83	3.41	0.00
11. Hopelessness	3.64	2.60	4.93	0.00
12. Hate	4.31	3.06	4.73	0.00
Total PTSD-12	40.45	28.44	6.97	.00

with mixed groups of Bosnian refugee children, their teachers and parents, merged with domicile participants.

Third-Wave Interventions

Empirical evaluation of the program outcomes is in progress.

CONCLUSIONS

The series of large-scale art therapy action projects invented for helping large numbers of child victims of war in Croatia and other parts of former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina), including refugees to other countries, may be regarded as a model-building exercise for early diagnosis and prevention of a multitude of adjustment problems among them due to traumatic experiences either from the acute war time or rooted in disrupted social conditions after the war. Organized arts activities with children, even at times of acute military operations, may prove to be therapeutically valid and socially acceptable both by children and their natural helpers. Large-scale outreach programs for times after the acute mass catastrophe seem justified. Large numbers of both lay helpers and professionals may be mobilized and trained in a relatively short time for an integrative and effective use of creative therapies as tools for communication, education, and helping large numbers of distressed children at the time of war and after.

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