

## **Understandings of therapeutic risk – the skills of bush adventure therapy workers in identifying risk, knowledge in supporting participants through risk and the difference we hope this makes**

*This document describes the particular skills and knowledge of those interested in bush adventure therapy in awareness and support of the social and emotional risks taken by program participants. These were documented at the 2011 AABAT forum, in Berry, NSW. We hope these can be shared with others in this field of practice and beyond.*

### **Risky business**

In BAT programs, participants take may take many different risks. These might be risks of revelation, of opening themselves up to others and the risks of making oneself vulnerable to others in a group. There is potential for therapeutic processes to contribute to people feeling fragile. There might also be a risk of whether someone feels accepted or not in a group setting. In a group, people might also have to face giving up their sense of control and being more a part of group decisions.

People in BAT programs risk walking away with a sense of failure and of maybe disappointing others who have invested some hope and expectations for them. There is a great risk that this 'failure' may reinforce a sense of hopelessness in some people. There is also a risk that the decision to participate in a program might be one that is imposed on someone and not made by a participant. This might effect their engagement and resolve to meet the challenges of the program.

A therapeutic journey is one of change, and change in personal stories and change in identities can be very difficult. There can be fear that the new ways of feeling might not last or that change may mean moving away from what is familiar. There might also be a fear of committing to something that seems daunting. This is significant risk for many.

There can be fear of opening up to get to know others and developing positive relationships, and fear that these positive relationships may not endure. There is risk of this contributing to continued vulnerability and isolation.

There is also a risk that what happens in a BAT context may not reflect everyday life and that programs and disconnected from the 'real world'.

There is also fear that practitioner expectations or comfort in bush and therapeutic settings may place some stress on people.

### ***Our ideas and practices that might support people through these risks***

#### **At the start of programs**

In taking referrals for programs, we ensure that referrers are aware and informed of the details of our programs. Our intake processes take into account social, emotional and cultural considerations.

Part of this is managing expectations. We support people to have clear expectations of program content and their commitment in the programs. This includes thinking about their perceptions of success/failure and of their personal contribution to the program. We give people the choice of participating or not.

In an initial appointment, we are warm, friendly, non-clinical, approachable, use plain language and don't probe too much. We give clear and supportive information to alleviate anxiety around attending a new program. We don't just ask about problems – we take interest in all aspects of people's lives, so we don't come to know participants solely on the terms of their 'issues'.

We get informed consent – and can do this experientially (ie. a growing experience of what you can expect if you continue) so that consent is reached gradually and sequentially). This can help us to reduce “culture shock” of unfamiliar environments.

In selecting and forming a group for programs, we consider whether individuals might be positive for the group. We do this through a thorough assessment and pre-program process that is about 'doing no harm'. We ensure that the program is responsive – that it is designed around the needs of the group, that it is client-centered rather than approaching program with a strategic therapeutic agenda.

In designing a program, we hope that it offers enough challenge but is also achievable. The program should include lead-up time and follow-up support. Our programming is responsible – we tailor it to responsibly lead to a safe conclusion and/or follow-up.

### **When we're on program**

In our first interactions on program, we take it easy on participants and try to support them to be part of a group in a relaxed way. We co-create and maintain a collective agreement about positive, pro-social behaviours in a group. Around issues of challenge, we use collective language (“the group”, not “you”) to avoid singling people out when addressing issues people might be experiencing.

We try to have one-on-one conversations and check in regularly with participants. We foster the externalization of problems and help people to see their relationship to 'it'.

We provide an environment that allows people to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable sharing. We allow participants to set the pace of the challenge/change – we do this by always checking in with and asking participants how they are going.

We also endeavor to frame and set up activities such that risk of reinforcement of dominant stories is minimized. We highlight areas of experience that participants can control.

We record, document, photograph, acknowledge moments of success throughout the program (no matter how 'small'). We can use natural objects, drawings, letters from facilitators, letter to self and other ways to 'anchor' the experience in the bush.

We are alert to useful metaphors that might emerge on program and how we can use these in our conversation and planning for the future with young people. We can support people through guided visualization that supports people to plan their 'going home' experience.

We also provide opt-out opportunities for participants that are safe and supported.

## **Staff**

We try to ensure that staff have an ability to work together and be on a similar page. As staff, it is helpful for us to look after each other and be able to ask for help when needed.

We hope that our planning is so thorough that our logistics unfold without needing much thought. This supports our energy to be put to our 'consciousness' in interacting with people. We can ask ourselves, "What are my intentions here? Is my focus on the participant?"

Training, supervision and space should be given to exploring how we can best support the preferred identities of participants.

## **Involving others outside the program**

We try to involve significant others in celebrating success of participants. When working with young people, we communicate regularly with significant others and share the tools we have shared with people in the program so there is a greater chance of support and consistency after the program.

We have celebration days at the end of programs in which significant others can come together and learn more about the program, and where some of the skills and achievements of the programs can be demonstrated, shared and celebrated with friends and family.

We can share our documentation of what happens on the program with others, or perhaps through psycho-education provide more support to families and supporters.

## ***The difference we hope these practices make***

We hope that these practices support sustainable changes in the lives of participants. We hope that we can develop trust and rapport, and promote feelings of safety and familiarity in programs.

We want to support people to stay connected to their 'stand on the mountain' moments, and hope that this connects people to a self-belief that will support them through the inevitable hills and valleys of life. This is to support people to recognize their potential, skills and choices.

We hope that our work can help to normalize people's lives in some way.

Through our work, we hope that participants feel like they can develop useful relationships with staff. It is our hope that this makes participants feel a sense of belonging and a trust in the program and our process.

We hope that we can support people to know that “I am not alone” and “this is hard, but if he can do it, I can do it”.

We hope to manage the risk of participants ‘failing’ in the eyes of their supporters and families.

We hope that by identifying support people in the community, we can support these changes in a more meaningful way and in away that provides more potential for sustainable growth.

We hope that we can support people to ‘land safely’ after a time away, and to deal with the challenges of the ‘real world’. We can support people to anticipate potential roadblocks to their goals.

We hope that by linking people in programs to other, ongoing supports after programs, we are giving them the best possible chance of their program being useful, and helping to ensure we don’t ‘set them up for a fall’ after their program.

*Thank-you to the practitioners who have contributed to the ideas in this document*