

Standing strong in stormy weather



Supporting decision making and problem solving
using the 'Tree of Life'

Practice Guide

About the 'Standing strong in stormy weather' resources

These resources are for disability advocates, social services staff and group facilitators who assist people through tough times. This practice guide prepares workers to help people make decisions in difficult periods of their lives.

There are two additional documents that can enhance the implementation of the practice guide, the Tree of Life in Pictures and an Easy-Read Tree of Life Workbook for group learning. Both documents can be downloaded separately from the NCOSS website www.ncoss.org.au

About the Tree of Life discussion

The Tree of Life tool presented here is adapted from the work of Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo (REPSSI) and David Denborough at the Dulwich Centre Foundation. Their work is based on narrative therapy and collective narrative therapy for people who have experienced traumatic events.

This Tree of Life aims to promote story-telling and healing from a 'safe place to stand'. It is not intended for use as a therapy, or to replace therapy. If you would like to know more about collective narrative practice and the Tree of Life Methodology, please go to www.dulwichcentre.com.au and www.dulwichcentre.com.au/the-tree-of-life/

Acknowledgements

In shaping this practice guide we thank all the people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal people living in Western Sydney who have generously shared their time and stories. We also thank the staff from disability advocacy agencies who have shared their experiences of supporting people in times of stress and hardship, to solve problems and increase people's skills and self-determination.

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Introduction



The Skilled to Thrive Decision Support Project is part of a Disability Advocacy and Information Sector Development project run by the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) in partnership with a research team from the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at UNSW Sydney. As a result of the project we have developed this practice resource to help build confidence and skills of people with disability and their supporters in making decisions in difficult times.

Supporting decision making

The principles of supported decision making, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) have been the starting point for the development of this resource. The key principles include

- Every person has the right to make decisions about their lives
- Every person has the right to support to make decisions about their lives
- Support given must be driven by the will, preferences and rights of the person themselves
- Safeguards must be in place

In thinking about supporting decision making we recognise

- The trauma many people with disability experience, sometimes on a daily basis, can make it harder for people to set goals, make well-considered decisions, plan and move forward towards achieving their goals.
- The road to safety and personal fulfilment is walked in relationship with other people. This is especially true for people with disability.
- People with disability must, wherever possible, be supported to shape their own safeguards and solutions, and manage informed risk-taking. It can be hard to reach out for this support and to receive the right type of support.
- Collective values, health and wellbeing of the family and communities a person belongs to can influence some decision-making.
- When tensions about decisions arise, safety and rights can be difficult to solve. All of us have the right to reach out for support from trusted people, including independent sources.

In this resource we focus on decision-making by people who live with threats to their safety and wellbeing. People with disability, particularly intellectual disability or cognitive impairment, experience threats and violence more commonly than people in the general community. They are also more likely to need support to deal with complex systems that contribute to their safety and wellbeing, such as housing, Centrelink, health, education, justice, immigration and disability support. Some people have poorer education outcomes, are socially isolated, or live in poverty and do not have access to disability support packages.

The Tree of Life discussion prepares people to become more aware of and to carry out some or all of the following decision-making steps:

- Identifying as a decision maker and influencer in your own life
- Identifying a supporter for decision-making
- Unpacking issues, goals and decision-making opportunities
- Finding information and identifying options
- Exploring options and weighing them up
- Making a decision and taking action
- Reflecting, learning, documenting.

Who can benefit from the Tree of Life approach?



People who:

- need some support to gain confidence and skills in any planning discussion
- may struggle to tell their story, think about it and make choices and decisions about their future
- have lived through tough times in the past or present, and may show signs of trauma
- feel afraid or intimidated to speak about their experiences
- feel they lack control in their lives
- are at risk of harm

What are the main strengths of the Tree of Life?

1. It is trauma-aware. The Tree of Life

- helps people to get involved from a safe place to stand
- helps people feel stronger when they tell their story
- helps people imagine their positive story ahead when they are feeling 'stuck'
- highlights the idea of being capable
- highlights the idea that it's good to reach out for support and to give support.

2. It is easy to understand. The Tree of Life

- uses pictures to help people to pay attention and get involved
- gives the person's story-telling a structure, helping them to bring order to chaos
- can be understood by people from many cultures
- includes relationships, culture, values and events that shape the whole person when they are making decisions about their life.

3. It helps in keeping track, looking back and learning from experience. The Tree of Life

- forms part of recording the person's decision-making journey
- gathers information that helps in action-planning between the person and staff/supporters
- can be used when looking back and reflecting with the person, to learn from experience

Recommended prior training and experience

Minimum Cert IV Community/Disability work or similar, and one or more of following:

- Trauma-informed care/support
- Accidental Counselling; Counselling
- Supported Decision Making (NSW Office of the Public Guardian)
- Social work/Psychology.

Preparation includes

- Reading this practice guide
- Completing a Tree of Life about yourself individually or with colleagues
- Reflecting on your findings and the implications for your life and your work.

How to use the Tree of Life



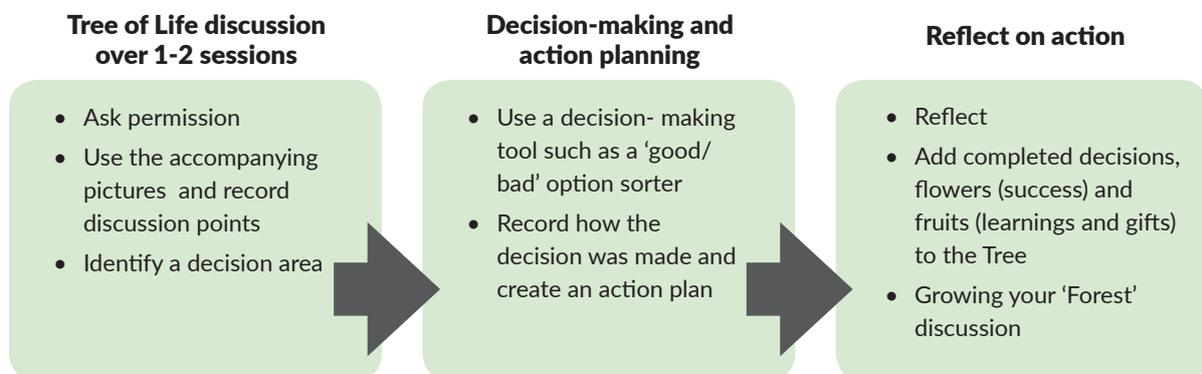
Reflecting on your own experiences and recognising and acknowledging areas of connectedness and areas for healing, change and growth is essential. Spending time on trialling the Tree of Life for yourself and discussing it with colleagues will inspire ways to use and adapt this tool. Prepare to put it into action and make time to reflect on how it worked so you can build up your own and your team's expertise over time.

This guide is written mainly with one-on-one discussions in mind, about a problem a person may be experiencing. The Tree of Life also has great potential for bringing a new group together; building networks of safety and decision-making supports; in peer and self-advocacy groups who may be interested in researching their own safeguarding solutions or activism; or in education and development groups, for example, as a foundation in becoming job-ready.

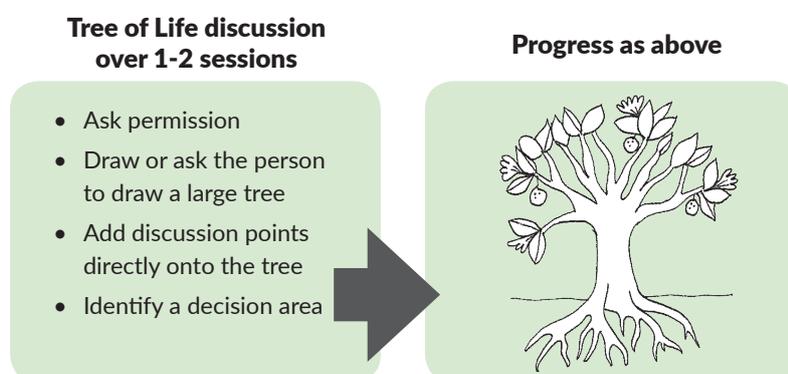
The following are suggestions for use of the Tree of Life discussion:

- a. With an individual person, supported by accompanying pictures
- b. With an individual person using freehand drawing
- c. Facilitating a group process

A. Individual, using pictures provided



B. Individual, using freehand drawing



C. Self-advocacy and peer groups, using freehand drawing

Individual trees

Tree of Life discussion over approx 3-6 sessions

- Seek agreement
- Ask each person to draw a large tree
- Add Tree story directly onto the tree
- Support to complete



Create a Forest

- People take turns to pin their individual tree on to the wall, and tell their Tree stories
- Give appreciative feedback about what was heard and understood



Make meaning, plan action

- Assist the group to find themes
- Assist the group to come to agreement about collective main messages/ statement
- Assist the group to plan a group action if desired

A group tree

Tree of Life discussion over approximately 3 sessions

- Ask permission
- Draw a very large tree on the wall using multiple large papers,
- Add discussion points directly onto the tree



Tell individual decision journey stories

- Each person is supported to tell a decision journey story
- See page 19 reflection to help structure their story



Make meaning, plan action

- Assist the group to find themes
- Assist the group to come to agreement about collective main messages
- Assist the group to plan a group action if desired

Education and self-development groups: Adapt pictures or freehand drawing methods as above, or use the accompanying easy read Tree of Life booklet as the foundation for learning and personal development programs.

The following pages explain step-by-step each stage of the Tree of Life and provide real-life examples and suggested discussion points.

The Tree of Life discussion guide



Storms – Current challenges and hardships



"I want to change my mind, but I can't go against my boyfriend."

"I made a mistake and now don't know what to do."

"Housing says I have no more choices for transfer. But I really have to move".

"I can't pay my electricity bill."

"My family won't let me move out. They say I can't look after myself and they control my money. Where does it all go? Where?"

"I got attacked when I was walking home at night."

"I feel out of control. You decide."

Meaning

For this part of the discussion a storm means a challenge to our safety and wellbeing.

Storms can test the strength of a tree and affect its ability to thrive. Winds can shred the tree of leaves or even blow it over. Lightning may strike and burn the tree. The effects of storms are unpredictable, and the way to recovery may be unclear.

Purpose: Acknowledging the storm

People reach out when a crisis or storm has happened or is unfolding. Some situations have been in play for a long time. People can feel scared and overwhelmed. They may be in stages of 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze'. The effects of discrimination, isolation and unfair treatment can become heavier over time. They may already be exhausted and have lost hope. They may feel incapable of handling any part of the situation themselves.

For some people their fear or trauma might show up as anger.

You may wish to use the 'tree in a storm' analogy in your initial conversation with the person, to strengthen their ability to tell the story about why they have come to you, especially if the person is struggling to talk about it. The person could be invited to rate the strength of the storm, and the fears they are feeling for the future. Acknowledging feelings with an external tool can help a person to 'ground' and be supported to think through their next steps.

Suggested discussion prompts:

- You seem to have a big worry at the moment
- Sometimes people call this a 'storm'.
- This is a picture of a tree in a storm
- What is happening in your life that makes this a stormy time?
- Being in a storm can feel very unpleasant
- Let's find some solid ground to start from.

Group discussions please note:

Peer and advocacy groups with a growth and development focus would follow a different sequence. The discussion could flow in the following order:

1. Solid ground
2. Roots
3. Trunk
4. Branches
5. Leaves
6. Flowers
7. Fruit
8. Storm - Remember a stormy time
9. Forest - Keeping strong and safe together
10. Completion ceremony

Solid Ground – A safe place to stand



- “Cuddling my cat.”
- “Something meaningful to do in life.”
- “People I trust around me.”
- “A chance to stay in this country with the love of my life.”
- “Having a smoke.”
- “Clear plans for what is next.”
- “A safe home where I don’t feel judged.”
- “Strong locks on my door.”

Meaning

For this discussion solid ground means things that help people to feel safe, well, calm or happy.

Solid ground is a place where the ground underneath our feet is reliable and safe. It is not muddy and sticky, sandy and unstable. It is not likely to quake, or to erupt like a volcano. We can trust that it will hold us up and hold firm.

Purpose

The ‘Solid Ground’ part of the Tree of Life discussion is an important step in setting the tone for the discussion by helping the person immediately to imagine a place of safety and well-being. This can help ease feelings of fear and distress. It assists to lay safe foundations for the whole discussion and to uncover and build on already established calming strategies and from there build hope.

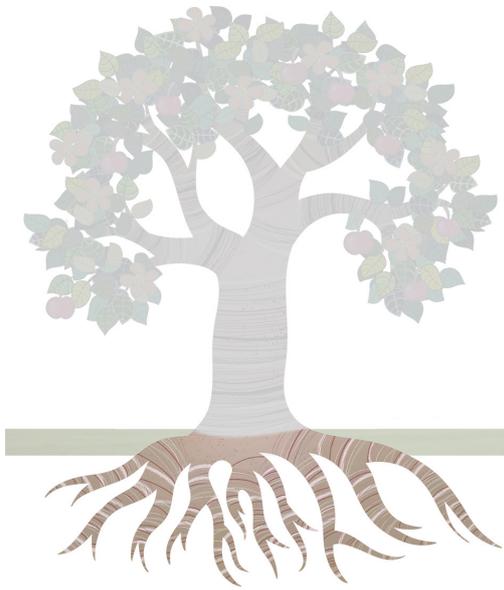
What comes up here may lead directly to the person’s goal-setting with you. The conversation may also highlight some values that inform goals and decision-making about moving ahead.

Suggested discussion points

- Let’s start with the ground the tree is standing in.
- Let’s think of this as *your* solid ground too.
- It could be something you do; some places you go; something you see, hear, smell, touch.
- It is a safe place to stand. You can easily keep your balance here.
- What does ‘safe’ mean to you? What helps you to feel calm, happy, strong, or control?
- When can you just be you?
- Let’s write them down

* To increase the ‘grounding’ effect, you might also choose to encourage the person to close their eyes and become aware of the feeling of the soles of their feet connecting with the floor, or do some mindful breathing. However, bringing attention into the body must be done very carefully. For some people who have experienced trauma, connecting to the body and sensation can be a destabilising and distressing experience. One of the advantages of using a visual tool like the Tree of Life is that it ‘externalises’ the discussion, taking focus about difficult things *outside the person*, to a more comfortable way to get involved.

The Roots – What made me who I am today?



“Travelling with family as a teenager, I was scared at first, but it really opened me up! Now it’s my passion.”

“Mum reared us ten kids so well on her own. I try to be like her.”

“My grandfather was an adventurer and a storyteller. He came here from Lebanon, escaping war and poverty.”

“My disability, and how my Nan treated me as a kid. I wasn’t treated equal.”

“My people are from Thursday Island. As kids we knew we could be taken away. I am trying to get my identity recognised.”

“I was brought up in an institution. We were told what to do.”

Meaning

The roots of the tree discussion helps us talk about some of the important influences in our lives which shaped us and continue to be important to us.

The roots hold a tree firmly in the ground, preventing the tree from falling over in a storm. Roots provide a strong foundation and draw up moisture and nutrients to nourish the tree. Roots also connect a tree to other trees in a forest using networks of underground fungi.

Purpose

It is helpful for many people to acknowledge relationships and experiences that have helped form them, showing their connections to them over time. This is the story people carry with them that informs their values and their decision-making. These can be affecting the person’s attitudes, motivations, and decision-making in the present.

Roots include our culture; family and childhood; important relationships, for example teachers; major life events. Some people may acknowledge the impact of their disability here. They show that the person has thrived because of, and sometimes in spite of, these formative experiences.

Note: This step is not intended to be a detailed life history.

Focus on the positive forces, acknowledge the negative forces.

Identifying positive forces assists the person to have pride and dignity as they move through the Tree of Life discussion, building their competency story as they progress.

While people may be able to readily identify positive influences, Roots can also remind people of really troublesome connections. For example, it may be painful to talk about families and a person may have chosen to make a break from those connections. For others, the break with ones roots has been out of their control. Be alert and sensitive to the person’s verbal and non-verbal cues about potential traumas and respect any signs that the person does not wish to discuss this area of their lives.

If a person reacts when approaching this part of the discussion, move directly to the Trunk (personal strengths) discussion, and possibly come back to the Roots part later, when the person may feel ready.

The Trunk discussion seeks to draw out strengths first and to create a safe space to talk about a difficult situation and put the person in a competent frame.

Listen deeply and with empathy. Validate the persons' perspective, experiences and feelings, without judgement. Use your skills of active listening and unconditional positive regard.

This stage may also help you to consider whether referrals to other professional or cultural supports should be offered. For Indigenous people it is important to offer referrals to Aboriginal-specific services.

If there are signs of a person becoming stuck in the negative part of their Roots story, or showing signs of distress, refer back to the strategies named in the Solid Ground stage.

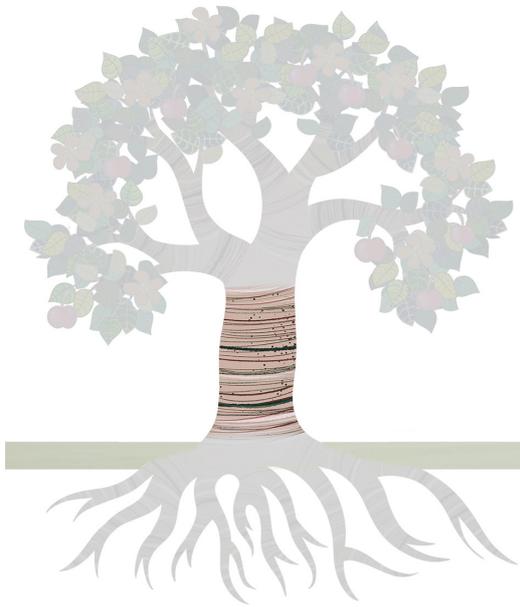
As the facilitator you will need to judge when and how to move this part of the discussion on in a sensitive way. Remember, although being flexible and person-led is good practice, throughout this discussion the person is relying on your guidance to step them through the discussion to the end. Suggest that you both move on but ask permission to do so.

Suggested discussion points

- Let's look at the roots of your tree. In a real tree, they feed the tree from the soil, and keep it firmer and safer in a storm, so it won't blow over.
- For this discussion, roots can be things that have helped make you who you are today.
- Reach down to when you were a younger tree
- Who were the people, what were the experiences that have meant a lot to you? Why?
- This could be family, teachers, friends, culture, important events that had a lot of meaning.
- Let's write each one down on/next to roots of your tree.
- What values were important to these people?
- Are your values the same? Different?

For some groups of people, what has happened to their families and communities has been catastrophic. Healing from racist and destructive government policies; religious persecution; war; seeking asylum; and even the act of migrating and entering a new culture, are not simple processes. Unresolved trauma and lost connections to family and culture can leave people feeling like they don't who they are. People may not have the skills and support to take control of their lives and move forward. Associated trauma and mental distress may lead people to make unwise and destructive choices and decisions, or to want to have a high degree of control.

The Trunk – my strengths and skills



"I'm positive."

"I can push past my comfort zone."

"I use my gut instincts."

"I'm good on computer and IT."

"I'm good in a team."

"I love to learn."

"I admit when I make mistakes."

"I ask for help when I need it."

"I have survived domestic violence. My home without a man...I can do so much!!"

Meaning

In this discussion, the Trunk represents the strengths, skills and attributes we have developed that support us and can have a positive impact on others.

The trunk of a tree supports its branches, leaves and fruits, as well as any animals and insects that co-exist in its environment. Important nutrients and energy travel up and down through the trunk to feed this living system.

Purpose

The Trunk of the tree discussion prompts the person to record their own strengths and skills and *what they already do* to keep themselves safe and strong.

If a supporter is present, they may be valuable in highlighting strengths when the person is in a range of contexts, that the person themselves may not be aware of. People may recognise traits through generations that have helped individuals, families and communities survive and thrive.

This process may also serve to help a supporter become aware of a more rounded picture of capability, which can be overlooked in times of stress. Supporters too may be under a lot of strain or have their own traumatic histories.

Suggested discussion points

- Now let's have a look at the trunk of the tree. In a real tree, the trunk holds the branches and leaves up, and pumps food and energy up and down the tree.
- We can think about how you do this for yourself
- Think about what you are good at. You might know it, or it could be something someone else has told you.
- How have you used this strength in the past?
- Where do you think this strength or skill came from? Who did you learn this from?
- Why is it important to you?

The Branches - My dreams, goals, decisions



“Where I go out at night with my mates.”

“I decided to get married a second time.”

“Going back to travelling. My goal is to reach every part of the world.”

“I decided to fix a problem with a service myself this time, instead of waiting for someone to help me speak up.”

“Not to be scared to speak my mind. I deserve to be safe too!”

“I decided.... I will live.”

Meaning

The branches of the tree in this discussion represent dreams, goals and decisions, and can be thought of as reaching out toward the future.

The branches of a tree reach out and up from the trunk and around in all directions. They support the leaves, flowers and fruits of the tree, as well as birds and other wildlife. People climb up into the branches of a tree, take risks, test their strength, get new perspectives, and day-dream.

Purpose

The main purpose of the Branches part of the discussion is to explore dreams, goals and decisions that have *already* been made and the processes that may have been used. This leads on to reflection on areas for growth and change.

This is a safe place to build the skills of self-reflection and to gain insights from our past.

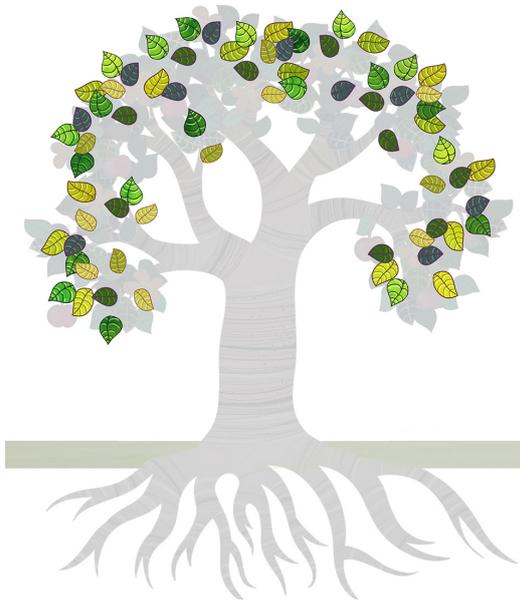
It is not necessary to point out ‘gaps’ here. Affirm and encourage. Mainly focus on drawing out examples of what has worked out well. This phase is likely to grow naturally into the next part of the discussion (seeking support). Suggestions could be made later in actual decision making.

Suggested discussion points

- A tree’s branches usually grow out and up, reaching out in different directions.
- When we make goals and decisions, we could be trying to make a change for now, or for the future. It could be about trying something new. You could say it is ‘branching out’.
- Sometimes people make a decision not to change anything.
- Whatever we choose it will lead somewhere. It might be somewhere we like or don’t like.
- What are some of the dreams, goals or decisions you have made before?
- Was there anyone else involved?
- How did you do it? What happened? Let’s note that down.

From this point on the person might start to relate the discussion to their current situation.

The Leaves – The people and places I turn to for support



“My dad. He’s always been there for me. He has taught me the right way.”

“One of my sisters. Not the other one! She’s too bossy and takes over!”

“I talk to my friend who I trust. He’s been through the same things as me. He listens and shows me how to keep going.”

“My psychologist. She has taught me about toxic relationships.”

“My domestic violence (DV) group taught me about ‘red flags.’”

“I was lost. I asked the shopkeeper where the tax office was. They know what is close by.”

“My advocate. They help me think through things when I am stressed and I can’t think straight.”

Meaning

The leaves represent our relationships with people like family, friends, community members or professional supporters. They are people we reach out to, look up to or are referred to. They have the potential to support our problem-solving and decision making. Some people may not have family or friends and rely on people in paid roles for support.

Leaves do a very important job for trees. They catch sunlight’s energy into the tree, which it turns into sugars and helps it to grow, to flower and to fruit. Without a way to catch sunlight, a tree may not reach its full potential and will wither.

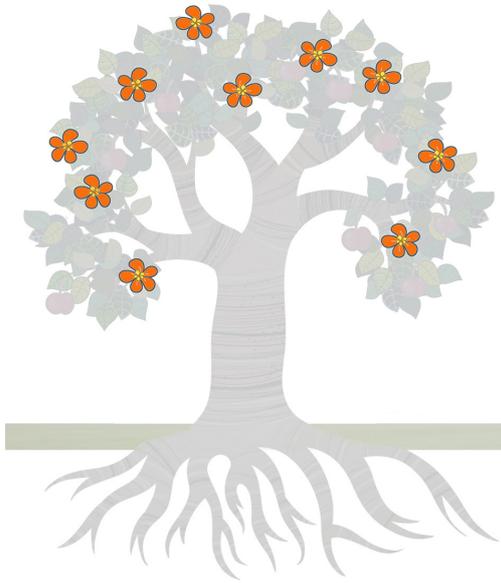
Purpose

The main purpose of the Leaves discussion is to help the person to think through their relationships and resources, and the reasons why they can choose one person over another when it comes to supporting their decision making. Each supporter (or potential supporter to seek out) has their own values, attitudes, knowledge and skills. They will not be suitable to the person for every type of decision. Many people with disability or cognitive impairment find it hard to get information, and some do not have a large range of relationships. This conversation may lay the foundations for working on making connections with more people (the ‘Forest’ stage of the discussion also supports this).

Suggested discussion points

- The leaves of this tree are about the people who you might turn to when you are not sure about what to do.
- These people might be helpful for different reasons.
- Who are the people, and what kind of support are they good at?
- What makes you feel like you can turn to them?

The Flowers – My decision success stories



“I quit smoking, even though my sister said I couldn’t do it.”

“I decided to call the support service, to try and fix a problem with the worker stuffing up. They are getting a worker who can fit into my time better.”

“It was late and I was panicking. I called my girlfriend and I told her about my disability. I thought she would break up with me, but she didn’t! I made it home OK.”

“But now everything is OK. I left my husband, and decided to learn English. Everything has changed for the better. I learn about this country different culture, is different tradition.”

Meaning

In this discussion, flowers stand for our successes, especially through challenges and hardships.

A tree that flowers has come through all sorts of challenges in their environment. Flowers help the tree by making pollen which brings bees and birds. This then helps the tree to grow fruit.

Purpose

This discussion explores the person’s past successes, large or small, to help them become aware of and appreciate the capabilities they already have. A success may be something that a person simply feels good about achieving. It does not have to be achieved alone. Success is defined by the person themselves, though you may need to prompt the person if they are not sure.

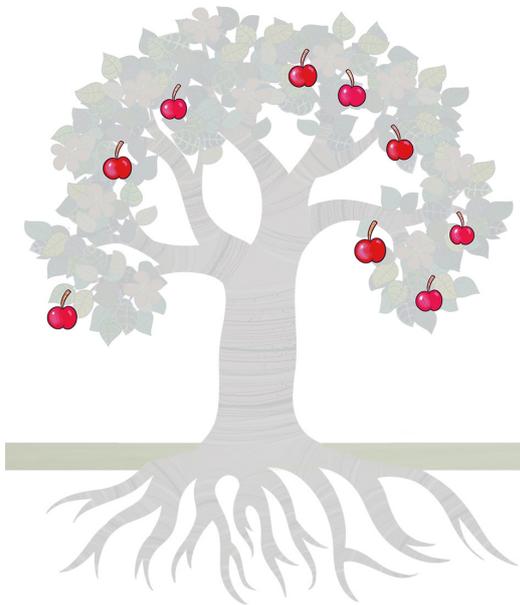
This reflection also acknowledges the risks people have taken to reach a goal. Risk is an essential part of being human and few successes have been achieved without taking risks. This section may flow naturally from examples in the Branches discussion, or the person may choose an entirely different success story.

If the person also offers a story they think was unsuccessful, a mistake, or even something with significant long-term negative effects this is an opportunity to reflect on what the person thinks they could have done differently, and what they might decide to do to change for the better. The Leaves discussion could come in handy here. Becoming aware of specific decision steps is often useful in taking more control of problem solving, self-direction and personal success.

Suggested discussion points

- Now your tree has grown some flowers. This is a sign that you have had some success with a decision in the past. Success means something you decided to do, which turned out well.
- The way it turned out could be what you expected to happen
- Or it could have turned out differently to what you expected, but still good.
- How did you feel at the start?
- How did you feel when you realised you had done well or got to your goal?
- Did you learn something from this experience? Would you do anything different next time?

The Fruit – My special gifts to share



“I give great hugs.”

“I like making a nice cup of tea for my friends.”

“I am a good listener.”

“I am moving up a level in Toastmasters.”

“People say I make them laugh. You’ve got to have fun!”

“So today, I learn English, I can drive and I study a job, to work. I’m happy I can do volunteer work and speak out, because I been through a lot, I can tell you. I know how important is health, and help each other. I love everyone have good health and strong mental health, you know. But if they have something happen to them, they can find the help and support.”

Meaning

Fruit in this discussion signifies how our talents, successes and learnings can be shared and help support the well-being and growth of people around us.

Trees that grow fruit nourish the people, animals, and insects around them. When the fruit containing seeds is spread around, it may sprout, starting a new life.

Purpose

The Fruit discussion aims to help the person realise they are someone who has a positive influence on their relationships and in their communities. Uncovering these gifts helps people who may feel stuck, vulnerable and powerless, to see their strengths and valuable contributions.

The Fruit stage might flow well in one complete Tree of Life discussion, or it may be more meaningful after there has been a decision made and action taken about the person’s current situation. New learnings from experiences may be easier to notice. This could be some weeks or months later.

Suggested discussion points

- Now your tree can grow fruit. Fruit can stand for what you do well, which can help build up the people around you.
- What does this gift or talent mean to you? What does it mean to other people?
- What are some ways you already share your special gifts to help other people?
- For example, you might have learned something really useful, and have shared that with your friends.
- You might know how work better as a team and can accept that different roles are important.
- You might have a way of helping people feel welcome.
- You might be involved in a peer group who try to support each other to feel confident and learn skills.
- You might be part of a speak out group, who can take action together on important issues.

The Forest - Keeping strong and safe together



Yes! The Forest needs more fruits, more flowers, more trees...everything!

Meaning

The Forest discussion encourages us to think about how to build up our connections and stay safe, well and strong. It can help us to think about how to prevent or avoid future harm.

The Forest stage is about a protective and strengthening place where many different types of living things mix together. Each tree does its part to the best of its abilities, so all can grow and become strong. Trees that need a bit of help are supported by the surrounding trees in all kinds of weather.

Purpose

The Forest discussion encourages the person to consider how to keep safe and well, and how to avoid or find a way through future challenges. This section highlights how important it is to have a tribe, a group, a community, or range of people who we can turn to when making decisions for ourselves.

People who are isolated often need facilitation to connect and communicate with others, to keep the connections strong and healthy and to deepen them over time.

This part of the Tree of Life may come at the end of an important period of support, as part of a reflection and closing stage. You might both explore motivations and possibilities, and who might be able to help connect and support the person to maintain their connections. Peer groups, self-advocacy groups, NSW Ability Links, NDIS support packages for those who are eligible, and help to establish a Circle of Support may be starting points. Volunteer programs, such as Choice Mentors (VALID Inc, Victoria) may also be important models to learn from. Information, Linkages and Capacity-building (ILC) grants, and other community grants may enable advocacy and community support agencies to start groups that focus on decision-making, support-seeking and support-giving.

Suggested discussion points

- It is the end of this part of your journey. There will be more to come but what we do from here might be quite different. Or you may not need me or our organisation for it.
- Let's have a look at how to be a strong tree in a healthy forest of trees.
- It can be hard to be strong and make successful decisions on your own.
- If you are a small forest of two or three, that's good.
- But most people get strong and can cope with storms when they feel they are in a bigger group of trees.
- Where are the places you feel like an important tree in the forest?
- Where could you take your strengths and gifts to share?
- Would you like some ideas?

Reflection on process, action, outcomes and learning

During the later stages of the Tree of Life discussion, decision options will have been discussed and settled, other people may have been chosen to get involved, plans made and actions taken. Putting decisions into action may have also involved support for self-advocacy or advocacy. Reflecting what was put into action, and how this turned out, (including making additional decisions) is important in learning for next time (see case study on page 20).

A visual way to remember and talk is also useful here. On a large piece of paper, draw a road or path. Along the way, draw and write key parts of the journey. Some items might also be added to the original Tree of Life.

These are some decision journey reflection questions:

1. What was the situation you started with?
2. Who were the people involved?
3. What did you do? (Somewhere along the path the Tree of Life discussion happened. Draw a tree beside the road)
4. What did you decide?
5. What plans did you make?
6. Who else did you reach out to? For what?
7. What risks did you take?
8. What problems came up? How did you solve them?
9. Did you reach your goals or what were your successes?
10. What did you learn? (About yourself, decision-making, support)
11. How can this make you and your Forest stronger?

Group discussion option:

Completion Ceremony

Holding a ceremony is an option to complete the work you have done together, possibly over a number of hours or sessions. A completion ceremony is a good option for group-work that can be run as a short course over several weeks. The process may have been intense at times and it surely has made an impact on the people taking part. The group may have also come up with group statements about what is important to them, and what they would like to try next. Perhaps the individual trees have been photographed and compiled in a book owned by the group members.

Acknowledging the closing of this stage is an important step to transitioning to new goals and plans.

Some suggestions are:

- Holding a party
- Inviting important others to witness
- Presenting Tree of Life certificates to each group member
- Group members talk about what taking part has meant to them.

Case study - Charlie's story

Charlie is 25 and lives with his Dad. He works in supported employment and has a long-term goal of working in retail. Charlie made a decision to enrol in a TAFE course but worried about falling behind his class, even though he had learning support. Also, Charlie's work supervisor, Mohammed, was worried that he had not been coming to work much for many months, (even before he started TAFE), and asked Charlie to make a decision. Charlie remembered his family had arranged for him to get that job a few years back. He started to feel a bit 'out of control' and got really drunk. The next week Charlie asked his dad and his advocate Helen to make a decision for him, because he felt he could not make a good one for himself.

Neither Dad nor Helen believed in making Charlie's decision for him. But they could help him to think it through carefully. They all got together for a talk.

Charlie explained that Mohammed had talked about some decision options:

- Start later in the day, and come to work less days
- Take leave from work until Charlie completed TAFE
- Leave work for good. If he wanted to, he could come back down the track.

Charlie, Dad and Helen looked at how much Charlie was trying to fit into his week. It was a lot, including fitting in his Occupational Therapy visits for independence skills. It was no wonder Charlie was feeling stressed. Helen drew a big picture of a tree, and they all talked about Charlie's Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life discussion showed that Charlie

- had some ways of calming himself down and feeling safe, like cuddling his kitten.
- was worried about people thinking he was not good enough because of his disability. He tried to please everyone and to show them he was the same as them, by doing the same things.
- thought his main strength was helping other people.
- made a lot of decisions for himself all the time. But he wasn't always happy with the results.
- chose different supporters for different areas of life, and was able to say why.
- had good success in the past, in his decision to quit smoking.
- was not sure yet what his gifts are.

While they talked, Charlie gradually became more confident about making his own decision. He said "If it was up to me, I would leave my job". Because Charlie was able to say what *he* preferred, they weighed up this option using an easy thinking tool, a 'good | bad' sorter. Charlie also asked Dad and Helen for their opinions. They all came up with a couple of points in the 'bad' column, like the risk of having to start at the lowest pay grade again if he changed his mind. But overall, there were many more 'good' or strong points to leaving. The main points were that Charlie could focus on his studies, do really well and get closer to his goal of open employment; and he would 'not have to put up with bullying' and ongoing dramas in his workplace.

Charlie made his decision to leave his job and stick with TAFE. They made a plan together about what to do next. Charlie said he would tell Mohammed his decision, and Dad said he would email so it was in writing, as Mohammed had requested. Charlie arranged to say goodbye to his workmates.

The rest of Charlie's family were quite concerned about his decision, which upset Charlie for a little while. But Dad and Helen supported him to tell his story about how and why he had made his decision. The family accepted that Charlie had thought it through carefully. A few weeks later Helen asked Charlie and Dad to think back on the decision steps and what happened afterwards to see what they had learned. They drew a picture of Charlie's decision journey, like a road-map. Remembering the Tree of Life talk, Charlie said 'It was a lot of thinking!' At the end of the reflection Charlie said he was very happy. He went on to do very well in his studies and is on track to complete his certificate.

Links

Working with people who have experienced trauma

Tree of Life

Explore this site for many examples of adaptations of the Tree of Life methodology

<https://dulwichcentre.com.au/the%20tree%20of%20life/>

Person-centred practice tools, including for supporting decision-making

www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools

Supported Decision Making Information and training

www.publicguardian.justice.nsw.gov.au/Pages/Supported-Decision-making.aspx

Commonwealth Laws and Supported Decision Making

Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry report and recommendations Nov 2014.

<https://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/equality-capacity-disability-report-124>

Guide to NDIS decision-making

www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/our-services/publications-forms/carers/467-guide-to-ndis-decision-making

NDIS Quality and Safeguards information

www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers/programs-services/for-people-with-disability/ndis-quality-and-safeguarding-framework

Skilled to Thrive project research

Literature and practice review: Support to make decisions that promote safety and prevent harm

www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/research/projects/skilled-to-thrive/

Related research

Preventing abuse and promoting personal safety in young people with disability

<https://rcypd.edu.au/projects/the-safety-project/>

Human Rights

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

Recommended reading

Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications

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