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Pilot Project Dissemination Report

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What Amethyst does

Beneficiaries

Amethyst is a Small World Theatre project working with young people in West Wales aged 9-18 years old, using our tool bag of proven to be effective techniques to support our participants with their mental health issues and to promote general wellbeing.

Space we create

Amethyst project prioritises creating a safe, supportive, non-judgemental space. We do this by

- Modelling kindness, empathy, honesty and integrity
- Working in a warm, comfortable and inviting physical space
- Clear, ongoing contracting involving all members of the group

Techniques we use

Amethyst uses techniques from Theatre of the Oppressed, such as forum theatre and image theatre along with elements of transactional analysis, cognitive behavioural therapy, games and exercises and other art forms.

Participant Quotes

“Life-changing.”

“We're all here for similar reasons...it's a very supportive place to be...there's always a positive energy which is really helpful”

“It's not just the counsellors and workers, it's the other people who come to Amethyst that are supportive.”

“Being in the group helped me with making friends online as well, I feel confident talking in group chats and I'm now happy to answer anybody new that wants to make friends. I'm in a healthy mind space and I'm smiling a lot more, I really enjoyed the groups. thank you :)”

“Knowing how much the Amethyst Project has helped my young person in their group sessions, I was keen to take part in the individual sessions with them to increase the support that we as a family could receive. These individual sessions allow myself and my young person to sit down to talk and reflect on our feelings in a comfortable and safe space. I thought I would also give the parent sessions a try, and I am so glad I did, it is great talking to other parents going through similar issues with their young people. Sharing each other's experiences and having a safe space to be able to talk about your week has proved to be very important, especially in these lockdown conditions.”

"Online classes certainly aren't the same but they are definitely a place that I can look forward to. Everyone is supportive and understanding especially during this chaotic time"

“I have been looking for some parent support since last year when my daughter's mental health deteriorated and I found she was self-harming, She later attempted suicide. I wanted to hear how other parents coped with the stress of living with keeping a young person safe and also get ideas for how to support her. I asked at CAMHS but they didn't know of any other groups and it isn't in their remit to support parents. I also asked colleagues in the voluntary sector, but no-one knew of anywhere locally. There are general carers' support groups, but I couldn't find anything specifically to support my situation. Then I saw a poster for the Amethyst group and got in touch. I have found the weekly zoom meetings really useful - the first one I attended felt like a weight lifted off my shoulders as I was amongst others in a similar situation. I try not to miss one now as it is something I look forward to and they really help my mental health.”

Amethyst Groups

Secondary Age Groups

In our sessions for the Secondary School age group, all participants are referred into the project by an outside organisation such as CAMHS, school SENCOs, school nurses, GPs and other local statutory and third sector organisations.

Location: Small World Theatre

Older Age Group (14 – 18 yrs)

Groups we worked with

We worked with young people aged 14-18 from a variety of different backgrounds. Some were attending local Secondary Schools and some were being educated at home, having run into difficulty at school for various reasons. Some of the young people we worked with were under CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health services) or Specialist CAMHS and some were not. They presented with a variety of issues including depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideology. There was a high percentage of LGBTQ+ young people in this group.

What we did

We used the range of Amethyst group tools to explore feelings and strengthen well-being. Drawing on theatre, art and animation.

What worked well

General feedback from participants was that they felt that Amethyst provided a helpful, supportive space that made a positive impact on their lives. We have had participants who previously had been refusing school due to their mental health issues, feel able to return to their studies, which was a great result. We were also told by participants that coming to Amethyst once a week helped them to cope with being in school for the rest of the week. Although the group was not specifically a peer support group there were strong elements of this as the young people were very supportive of each other, which helped them to build trust among other young people again where it had previously been lost. Participants who were previously very isolated have subsequently developed the confidence to make new friends. There was a strong sense of belonging in the group.

Difficulties we experienced

We found it difficult to produce a theatrical performance with the 12-18 age groups. The reason for this is that a high percentage of the participants were very anxious about performing to an audience. This was frustrating for young people who were keen to perform. Another issue we encountered was that participants were referred in at different times so often they joined an established group. This sometimes felt disjointed and was sometimes difficult for those already in the group and for those coming into it. We allowed participants to stay in the groups as long as they felt it was useful to them, which led to some of them taking ownership. Although this is a good thing for their confidence, the familiarity sometimes made new people feel intimidated and did lead to some difficulties that had to be addressed. We had enquiries about young people aged 18+ but it was not appropriate for them to join a group of younger people so we couldn't work with them.

What we could have done differently

We could have persevered with the theatre work with the less confident ones, encouraging them to participate more as it would have been beneficial for them.

We could have had another group that is not performance based but maybe more art based for those who prefer that.

If we had just allowed participants to stay for a maximum of 2 series, we wouldn't have had ownership taken by a couple of members and there wouldn't have been resistance to repeating the same games and exercises.

Senior group performance 8 Jul 2019

One performance we did manage to produce was developed by the group in the summer of 2019. The story was a combination of the experiences of more than one group member and was about a young person's struggle to access mental health services in west wales, exploring their experiences in school, CAMHS and at home. The performance was attended by professionals from the area and very well received. Individuals from organisations represented in the piece of theatre were highly empathetic to the young person's experience

Senior group animations Oct – Dec 2019

The group spent a series of workshops creating evaluative pieces of animation about their experiences coming to the Amethyst project. We have 3 animations as a result of this, all of which clearly demonstrate the ways in which Amethyst project can be helpful for young people who are struggling with their mental health.

Location: Small World Theatre

Younger Age Group (12 – 14 yrs)

Who we worked with

Young people from Ceredigion in years 7 and 8 of Secondary School and some who were not in school. They came to us from diverse backgrounds and with different degrees of issues. Some were under CAMHS and some were not.

What we did

We used the range of Amethyst group tools to explore feelings and strengthen well-being. Drawing on theatre and focussing strongly on healthy relationships.

What worked well

The group responded really well to most of the activities that we suggested, they liked the games and particularly the image theatre. They were very keen to participate and to speak their minds. The group were really supportive and kind to each other, which was very nice to witness as it's not always the case in this age group.

What was difficult

It felt as though we could have had more time with this age group, it felt as though we had more work that we could have done with them. Due to school timings, the weekly sessions were quite short, which made it difficult to get into anything in depth. This age group was generally more sensitive and vulnerable, so we had to be very aware of this.

What could have been different

More time with the group we worked with of this age would have been good and longer weekly sessions.

Location: Penparcau, Aberystwyth
Ceredigion North group (14 - 16yrs)

Who we worked with

The workshops, which took place in Penparcau were attended by a small regular group consisting of young people from Penweddig School, those who were not in school and the local the PRU Nurture Group.

What we did

We used the range of Amethyst group tools to explore feelings and strengthen well-being. Drawing on theatre and art.

One success story

One young person who did especially well was a 15-year old young woman. At her first meeting she arrived shaking and unable to speak. She had left her family home and school and was living with another relative. After just 2 sessions she was participating fully and went on to engage with the online sessions and received 1 to 1 support during lockdown. Her journey took her from extreme isolation and mental health breakdown, to re engaging with her family and she is now back in school doing her GCSEs.

Difficulties

Establishing a network in North Ceredigion was more difficult as Small World Theatre is not based up there, it took time to get word of the project out properly and for this reason the sessions were not as well attended as they were in the south of the county. For the same reason it was more difficult to do our preliminary meetings with individual young people.

Location: Penglais School, Ceredigion
Penglais 6th Form (16 – 18 yrs)

History

Amethyst was asked to support a group of 6th formers at Penglais School who identified as being LGBTQ and friends of people within this group, following an upsetting incident at a debating event titled "Are there only 2 genders".

What we did

We worked for a series of 6 sessions with this group of 15-20 YP and also ran an additional 2-hour workshop with other YP in the 6th form who had been involved with the debate and were curious about what it meant to be transgender but didn't identify as LGBTQ+.

Successes

The group was lively, bright and engaged and they very much used the space we provided to explore the incident that had happened, as well as using the space to talk and explore a range of different emotional challenges and experiences in their lives. They planned a series of Q's and A's to inform the workshop with the other YP. These turned out to be a powerful opportunity to explore prejudice and give people who were genuinely confused about issues of gender and sexuality a safe platform to ask questions and listen. One of the best experiences of working with YP in which a polarising event created an opportunity for open debate and discussion, leading to more understanding and connection.

Work in Junior Schools

Over the course of the 2-year pilot project, we ran a series of bilingual workshops in 5 Junior Schools in Ceredigion. We used the same techniques that we use with the older age groups but the topics we explored were much broader and came under the heading of well-being.

Who we worked with

An important difference with this age group was that we worked with the whole of the school's year 6 and year 5 in all but one school (this was because the classes were mixed age.) This meant that no one had been specifically referred to us although some of the young participants were already on the radar of mental health services.

What we covered

We explored healthy relationships and coping strategies. With year 6 we looked at transition to secondary school. We created pieces of theatre around these subjects.

What worked

The young people were very receptive to what we offered them. They participated with cooperation and enthusiasm. They were not just keen to play games but also keen to open up and talk about their lives and experiences with a surprising level of honesty and maturity. Making the pieces of theatre worked really well, it was obvious that the participants got a lot out of this experience. Showing the theatre to the younger members of the school also worked well, they engaged with discussion around the theatre with great insight. These workshops were overall a very positive and enriching experience not just for the young people but for the facilitators too. Working in English and Welsh for the first time also worked well.

What could have been better

Not being able to finish the work we started in the last school we worked in was very frustrating. We had just begun the process of putting a piece of theatre together when lockdown happened. It was also disappointing that we couldn't work in the last school we were scheduled to work in for the same reason. In retrospect it would have been better if we had been able to work with just year 6 so we could have focussed more on issues more relevant to them. There is a lot of difference in a year at that age. There was never enough time with the groups.

Parent Guardian Group

Face to Face Sessions

What we covered

We ran 3 open days with parents from across the county. We planned detailed workshops for each session but when it came to the sessions we found that mostly parents wanted an opportunity to come together in a non-judgemental space, listen to each other and be heard. Our job became to hold the space, keep it safe and make sure everyone was heard.

What worked

Just having a safe space to share their experiences and feelings seemed to be of huge importance to our participants. Many of them had felt guilty and alone in their experiences and found that talking to other parents/guardians who were going through the same things was validating and supportive.

What could have been better

Some parents couldn't get to the sessions because they did not have transport, or they had caring responsibilities that prevented them from taking that much time out from their day. If we had more funding for this branch of Amethyst, we could have supported these individuals in different ways such as one to one sessions, phone calls etc



2020

Covid-19

What changed?

Everything changed except the fact that young people still needed support with their mental health and parent/guardians still needed help with their young people. Our junior school sessions were cancelled so we couldn't complete our work in St Padarn's school or even begin any in Aberporth. We moved two of our Amethyst senior group and our parent/guardian group online initially running sessions for these groups on a weekly basis. The content of the sessions had to change as our face to face workshops often involve games with movement.

Post Covid lockdown in March 2020

Young People Zoom sessions

We initially facilitated online sessions for the 14-18 age range Amethyst groups from the north and south of Ceredigion. Attendance to these sessions was undoubtedly lower than when we met in person and the north Ceredigion eventually dwindled to such low numbers, we temporarily stopped it. The south Ceredigion group continued until participants went back to school or college.

What we learned

We learned that the way Amethyst is facilitated is of great importance. Safe, non-judgemental space and a chance to touch base was the most important thing we could offer.

It's possible that the sessions in the south of the county were more successful as we had longer, more established relationships with those young people and had become a fundamental part of their support network

What worked

We adapted our work to the best of our ability and introduced new games and exercises. We implemented new safeguarding policies and procedures that required consent of and more involvement from parents/guardians. Regular participants said it was really important for them to have somewhere to talk to people outside their family and something to look forward to on a weekly basis. Over the course of the lockdown it became apparent that some individuals were in need of individual support so we applied for funding to accommodate this and we have been supporting individual young people 2-1 (for online safeguarding purposes) or working with a young person and their parent/guardian 2-2 to give extra support when needed during these difficult times.

Challenges

Heightened mental health problems due to the global pandemic led to some of our participants struggling more than usual. It was a challenge to steer the conversation away from Covid19 as some people wanted to talk about what was going on and some found it difficult to talk about. It was very difficult to work with new young people as meeting online is not the safest way to meet and this made for difficult to implement safety procedures. Some young people did not want to meet online so did not access the sessions as a result of this. Some young people wanted to come to the sessions but did not want to be seen so they appeared with their camera off which was better than them not attending but more difficult for us to gauge how were doing. Access to devices that worked and a private space to meet were issues.

Parent/Guardian Zoom Sessions

When lockdown happened, we used the money for the last parent/guardian day to run a few shorter sessions on zoom. It soon became apparent that these sessions were much needed by those attending and we collected some new parents that we had not previously worked with.

These sessions were touch base, support sessions that Amethyst facilitated throughout lockdown. Parents talked through their concerns and issues around their young people during lockdown and supported each other.

Having a regular point of contact during the pandemic was immensely important to our participants. The sense of isolation was intense and our once weekly meetings were crucial.

Participating parents/guardians had a safe, non-judgemental space where they could speak openly and honestly about their experiences and so felt more supported.

We have also offered parent/guardians 1-1 support with Amethyst workers or 2-2 support with Amethyst workers and their young persons.

The Future

The current situation as of November 2020 is that we do not see Amethyst continuing the way it was pre-Covid for the foreseeable future. This is a great shame because we know this way of working is effective and supportive for the young people we work with. Earlier in the academic year, we consulted our contacts in the secondary schools for their input on how we could move forward with supporting their young people and they confirmed that they would not be able to refer young people to mixed groups. It was suggested that we could work with bubble groups remotely. So we are currently developing our work to be entirely online for the moment and to be around resilience, kindness and coping strategies as well as providing a safe space to raise awareness of mental health issues.

Recommendations

- Establishing a weekly group and a mentoring service for older young people (18-25)
- Developing Amethyst sessions that use techniques other than performance such as arts/crafts activities which are easier to run online
- Developing our work with parents/guardians and their young people to further explore a whole family approach.
- Looking for funding to work with young people within the LGBTQ+ youth community who are struggling with their mental health.
- Developing online work so we can accommodate remote work and reach more young people and be prepared to move online when we need to.
- Find a way to sustainably fund the Amethyst project so we can develop our ways of working
- Regular updating and further training for workers.
- Fact and Figures

Amethyst Engagement

Numbers Engaged

Young people aged 12 – 18 yrs	42
Young people aged 9 – 11 yrs	127
Parent/Guardian	23
Young people engaged through audience participation	600

Areas worked in

Communities across Ceredigion

SA43

SY23

SA44

SA48

SY25

SA46

Referring Agencies

CAMHS

S-CAMHS

School Counselling Service

Ceredigion Social Services

Team Around the Family

Tim Teulu

Ceredigion Youth Service

Ceredigion Child Bereavement Service

Mind

Ceredigion GP surgeries

Ceredigion School Nurses

Referring Secondary Schools

Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi

Ysgol Bro Teifi

Ysgol Gyfun Emlyn

Ysgol Gyfun Gymunedol Penweddig

Ysgol Gyfun Penglais

Canolfan Aeron

Canolfan Yr-Eos

Participating Junior Schools

Ysgol Y Dderi

Ysgol Gynradd Aberteifi

Ysgol Gymunedol T Llew Jones

Ysgol Gynradd Pontrhydfendigaid

St Padarns R C Primary School

With thanks to our funders

