

Helping new stories take root

Creating a tree of life can offer a creative and collaborative approach to reshaping a personal narrative, says **Julie Devonald**

I was hooked from my very first encounter with tree of life (ToL) at a conference in 2019. Here was a way of working that integrated my creative leanings as well as my love of words, both written and spoken, and of trees - I am never happier than walking in a forest. I felt connected to the others in the group, and immediately felt the impact of the approach as my faith in my skills as a counsellor was strengthened. This led me to look into the technique, and to discover its background steeped in South African culture and enveloped in nurturing traditions.

The approach was created by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo and David Denborough, when Ncube-Mlilo was supporting groups of children affected by AIDS and HIV in Zimbabwe.¹ She wanted to create a way of working with the children that was embedded in their roots and culture, acknowledged their strengths and values and, most importantly, avoided retraumatising them.

ToL uses the metaphor of a tree to help people gain perspective on their lives, past, present and future. It incorporates narrative therapy concepts such as externalising problems and strengthening secondary, less familiar stories.² These stories can counter adverse, well-rehearsed dominant narratives, often based on assumptions and cultural stereotypes, that may be at the root of problems. Ncube-Mlilo uses the Zulu word *imbeleko* to describe her approach to therapy, a word which refers to the animal skin traditionally used to carry babies, and evokes love and protection as well as grassroots wisdom. This speaks to me of unconditional positive regard and relational depth, as well as the love that is so often felt in the person-centred approach.

I have taught person-centred counselling for several years and can see many parallels

with ToL - the participant is the expert, the facilitator follows the participant's lead rather than analysing or interpreting. As it is designed to be used with groups, ToL also offers a community-based aspect, tapping into shared knowledge and culture. It moves away from Western individualistic discourses by examining social as well as personal identities. ToL can also be adapted to focus on specific issues such as bereavement, careers or relationships.

Four parts

According to the original protocol for working with groups, there are four parts to the process. These can take place over one day or over a number of sessions:

Part 1: Tree of life The process starts with participants drawing their trees and labelling their parts - I have used one of my own ToLs as the basis of the illustration here. The different aspects of the tree represent different parts of our lives - the roots, our origins and culture, including language and identity; the ground, where we are now, where we live, who we live with and regular activities we engage in; the trunk, our strengths and values, and the origins of these; and the branches, our hopes and dreams, both for ourselves and society. The leaves represent people or entities who have helped us; fruit represents gifts or attributes we have been given, and flowers and seeds symbolise the legacy we would like to leave after we die. The

compost heap was added by a participant at one of Ncube-Mlilo's workshops as a place where aspects of our lives can be recycled and act as fertiliser for our trees. This part ends with participants telling the stories represented by their trees, which the facilitators retell, strengthening secondary stories.

Part 2: Forest of life Individual drawings of trees are put together to form a forest, and participants identify connections with each other; add to each other's trees and hopefully sense their belonging to the group.

Part 3: Storms of life Participants consider and discuss threats to their trees, and hence difficulties in life. This can feel normalising for participants who may share similar issues.

Part 4: Celebration The experience ends with a celebration where certificates are awarded. Friends and relatives may be invited to witness the participants' achievements and enjoy the festivities.

Groups

ToL has been used in the UK to work with adults and children, and studies show that the approach is especially helpful for client groups who may be described as disenfranchised or stigmatised, including refugees, those who speak English as a second language,³ people with learning difficulties,⁴ older people and those with a mental health diagnosis.⁵ ▶



“Tree of life uses the metaphor of a tree to help people gain perspective on their lives, past, present and future”

I have run two ToL groups - one for people with type 1 diabetes (a diagnosis I share), and the other with a group of women in prison. I used GAD7 and PHQ9 monitoring scales to evaluate the impact of the courses, and these did indicate positive results. These tools do not, however, evaluate the connections formed within the group or the impact the support of others may have. Nor do they demonstrate the importance of sharing stories and the changes to narratives that often emerge from feedback from others.

These courses consisted of weekly two-hour sessions running over six weeks, with a different part of the tree being discussed each week, and then drawn onto the individuals' trees. We also used worksheets such as those suggested by Margot Sunderland in her book, *Draw on Your Emotions*,⁶ to help formulate ideas and allow for stories to be told.

Both courses culminated in a celebration event with certificates and, although we did not invite outside witnesses, the events felt joyous. Qualitative feedback from these groups was positive both in terms of participants feeling able to be open and honest without judgment but also in how it helped them to change the way they thought about themselves.

I have since introduced students to the approach at Metanoia Institute and also Salford University, where I also used it to help the counselling teaching team examine their own attitudes to race and racism, along with Senior Lecturer India Amos.

Individuals

Many students have asked me whether ToL can be used with individual clients, and at first I had reservations as the approach is so entrenched in community. On discussing this with other practitioners training in the approach, however, I discovered that many had had positive results with individual clients. I decided to try it by first offering it to a friend as a way of helping her to explore her career. Her feedback was that the exercise allowed her to see her current situation more clearly and remember past hopes.

I have since invited clients to try it as a structured way to examine their roots and background, where they are now, look at their strengths, hopes and dreams and who or what has or could help them move forward. It can help clients consolidate a focus or goal for our work. Identifying what goes in the compost heap is always popular, although some have chosen to have this on a separate piece of paper, away from their tree.

As with any tool, its value will depend on the client and their presenting issues, and it should be offered as a possibility that can be accepted or rejected. Some may feel foolish during the exercise or even judged, or find examining roots and finding strengths too difficult. The support that participants can offer each other is lost in one-to-one encounters where the counsellor must act as the witness, ask the outsider questions and, if appropriate, share their own reactions to the content. This way of working may not suit all counsellors.

As I have shared the approach with fellow practitioners, I have seen the impact it has had on many course attendees who, like me, see its potential and fully embrace it. Several counselling students I have taught have used ToL with their placement clients, and report that it has been well received. Carolyn Bell, who co-facilitated the women's group, has also adapted the approach to work at an addiction treatment centre.

Development

One concern I have is whether by removing the technique from its grassroots, ToL becomes another resource appropriated by the West. With this in mind, I begin all training by highlighting the origins of the approach and stress the importance of the context of ToL's roots in South African communities and in narrative therapy. I also recommend that facilitators train online with Ncube-Mlilo, via Phola, the charity she founded in 2016. She offers introductory training as well as courses focusing on working with bereavement,

couples, families, communities and with teams and organisations.

Since drawing my first tree at that conference in 2019, I have created many others - one of the aspects of this approach that I value most is its potential for personal development. Creating a tree always helps clarify my thinking, and when I later revisit my trees, I often find new significance in what I have written, especially on my branches detailing my hopes and dreams. My hope of doing a PhD has been there, disappeared, reappeared again. I hope in the future to follow that dream, and start my own research on the tree of life. ■

• To find out more about training with Ncube

Mlilo, see www.phola.org

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About the author

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