

# Alphabet of Feelings

## "An intervention – prevention programme during and after the war"

*Training can play an essential role in promoting peace, social security and stability by helping people to deal with traumatic experiences of war and its aftermath.*

*The Alphabet of Feelings is an educational and psychological programme, developed and run by the local Belgrade NGO "Hajde da..." which helps participants to bring out and face their basic emotions of joy, fear, anger and sorrow. The author has described for Coyote how the Alphabet of Feelings works and gives an insight into this programme for peace education in Yugoslavia.*

### How is it here?

Life in Serbia (Yugoslavia), during the past few years, can be characterised as a continuum - with instability at one end and chaos at the other. The feelings that accompany everyday life in this context are suspense, insecurity, and, as we near the end of the above mentioned continuum, different forms of fear. Under such circumstances there are few supports one can stand on, or grab on to. One of them is the impulse to be proactive and to do something constructive for oneself and one's environment.

### What do others think?

As I was conducting a workshop at Bridges for Training – A European Training Event in Brugge, 15-19 September 2001, I posed a question to trainers from various parts of Europe: "What can a trainer do in a situation that involves violence, even when the trainer himself is the victim of violence?" Although the trainers participating in this workshop didn't come from war-affected countries, most of them had been exposed to some violence previously. This workshop happened just a couple of days after the September 11th attack. The results of the brainstorming activity were: to discuss and clarify the situation, to look for support, to help himself and others, to find shelter, to be introspective, relax, escape, act it out, run away...

Some of these answers confused me in the beginning, confronted my assumption for trainers to be the ones to help the others and to protect the most vulnerable population groups. Having been involved directly in war, the team I work with reacted the same way some people in the workshop in Brugge did - look for support, help ourselves and others, discuss and clarify the situation...

### Is there anything that forces us into action?

When we translate the question from the previous passage onto the field of personal and trainer

responsibility, we can ask ourselves – do persons who actively work with young people, who have the knowledge and skills that make them relays for positive changes in their community, really have any choice? Are they common people, supermen or both in one?

The "Hajde da..." ("Let's...") group, a local NGO from Belgrade, that I am an active member of, chose to put together, during the war in 1999, **an intervention - prevention programme** called **"The Alphabet of Feelings"**. The explanation for the big words preceding the name of the programme lies in the fact that the programme was:

- imagined and conceived as a direct reaction to war;
- adapted to suit to needs of the treated groups;
- directed toward the prevention of greater and more serious changes in the cognitive, affective, social and emotional spheres of children and youth;
- and the members of the "Hajde da..." group sometimes felt as if they were saving the world (!).

The programme arose at the time that schools were closed due to the bombing and the children and youth, the especially vulnerable groups, were directly exposed to traumatic experiences. The aim of the "The Alphabet of Feelings" programme was to enable the participants self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-expression of their emotions, in the safety of a group, through a game context. This was achieved, first of all, by securing a safe area for expressing emotions and for offering group support (as well as pointing out constructive ways of overcoming unpleasant emotional states). "The Alphabet of Feelings" deals with the basic emotions – joy, fear, anger and sorrow; feelings that all grown-ups and children have experienced. The purpose of the programme is to enable the participants to have basic knowledge about emotions – to become emotionally literate.

We use the workshop method. Workshops are group activities, usually prepared in advance and

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have 15-20 participants. Every workshop has a specific scenario dealing with a certain theme. The attendees and trainers form the circle. That shape enables everyone to be equally positioned, see each other, communicate non-verbally and share their opinions, insights and inner contents. The circle also means that all that happens during the workshop remains private between participants. Learning in workshops is experimental and social. Previous experiences are formed and shaped through mutual sharing. Also, a workshop is beneficial if it can "push" cognitive and personal development. In order to achieve it, workshop activities have to be one step ahead of the actual stage of development of the participant (according to the theory of Lav Vigotsky, 1983). Further aims of the "The Alphabet of Feelings" programme were emotional relief through exchange with others, supporting personal autonomy and initiative, developing the ability to hear and understand the emotional states of others, and encouraging the constructive management of conflicts. The listed features of the programme make it applicable now as well. At this time there is no direct threat of war, but aggression and conflicts still thrive in this region, although they appear in a different form.

## Emotions as a workshop topic

As the trainers from our organisation are psychologists and students of psychology (some are even psychotherapists, which brings us to a dilemma: are we conducting psychotherapy séances or psychology workshops?) the programmes and contents of the training sessions were conceived to push forth the inner experiences of the participants in the workshops. Still, if we step outside the egocentric position of the psychologist, we might say that emotions are an unavoidable part of psychosocial programmes. It is important to take a structured approach to emotions, because in situations dealing with unpleasant and traumatic experiences, there is a tendency to suppress negative and difficult feelings. This may, at first, offer relief, but the long-term effect is bad, because continually avoiding dealing with the unpleasant parts of one's experiences may lead to escaping from oneself. Emotions are universal. This simplicity of the programme makes it possible to apply it during work with various groups in different surroundings: The Roma Community Centre, The Community Centre for Kosovo Refugees from collective centres, elementary school students, etc.

## A closer look

When creating the workshops the "Hajde da..." team makes sure that the feelings – workshop subjects are discussed adequately during the group sessions. This is a creative, patient and 'no hurry' process and should be done without running into instant solutions, even risking the possibility of non solved tasks. At the end, we get workshops with the following structure: warming up games, introducing

activities, central activities, ending up and evaluation.

The whole programme of "The Alphabet of Feelings" consists of eight workshops: the first two are used for introduction of the project and participants, the third workshop deals with happiness, the fourth – anger, the fifth is dealing with fear and the sixth with sorrow. The seventh workshop is uniquely specific and is created according to the needs of the group discovered through previous work. The aims of the last workshop are evaluation and preparation for farewell. The duration of the programme is two months, one workshop a week.

In order to create a clearer view of the workshops I will give a few details from the specific workshops. In the Alphabet of Feeling's fifth workshop, the Fear, the participants get a piece of paper where they have to draw their fear on one half of the paper and qualities needed to fight it on the other half. With that, the participants create the "card of fear", which can be taken with themselves and use it as a sign of security in fear-provoking situations. In the workshop "Anger", there are theatrical elements. In the workshop scenario we create a conflict situation between paper dolls. Then, participants try to solve the conflict using some of the conflict management techniques - e.g. empathetic listening.

## How do we know our programmes really help?

We do evaluations. We use psychological instruments that already exist (e.g. the sociometry method of Moreno for the evaluation of group cohesion, instruments for measuring the degree of traumatism of children and adults, etc.) or construct new ones by ourselves, according to the problem and the group a certain programme focuses on.

For example, the evaluation of the application of "The Alphabet of Feelings" in a Belgrade school, with refugees from Kosovo, showed that many things had changed for the better. There were marked increases in: the degree of acceptance of the children from Kosovo, the cohesion of the classes, the freedom of expressing feelings, allying the feeling of distress, developing empathy and improving communication and the application of constructive ways of dealing with one's feelings. The results from the project "Support for Kosovo refugees" (organised in the Community Center of the Serbian town Kraljevo in 2001) show the realization of one of the basic aims of our programme – creating a psychologically safe space, the first and the most important condition in the healing of war caused traumas. This is a result of the mode of work in the workshops, having far-reaching implications: identification with the group, which is seen as accepting and supportive, encourages the development of youngsters' self-confidence and feeling of safety.

Evaluations show there are more positive results working with young people than with other age groups. Reasons might lie in the fact that the ability for abstract thinking about inner contents fully develops in adolescence. Also, young people are very motivated to change themselves and the world around them. From our experience and working approach with this age group, there is a special significance in the forming of "a friendly relationship" at participant-trainer level. Answers of the participants confirm that this relation is a precondition for creating safety and trust. And with this the degree of self-confidence and possibilities for self-understanding are increased, for example, we saw youngsters who became able to perceive themselves not just as refugees. Our program succeeded in strengthening psychological powers necessary for overcoming difficult experiences and correspondent feelings.

### What next?

We attempt to choose our own priorities in work, and not to be led by the demands of the market in the NGO world. We are currently developing "The Alphabet of Tolerance", which aims to offer children, through peace education, models and notions that will decrease intolerance towards members of minority populations. Also, we are continuing our work on the "Alphabet of Feelings" project. We just released the programme for the training of teachers to implement "The Alphabet of Feelings" in their schools. We see that as our contribution for the development of peace education in Yugoslavia.

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The drawing is by a 14 year-old girl from a Roma Community Center in Mali Mokri Lug near Belgrade.

# "The Alphabet of Tolerance"

