

Shared Space Guidance

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I am currently a student studying Community Education at Dundee University. I have been lucky to have my placement with Fife Centre for Equalities. When starting my placement, I was told about the concept of Shared Space which was created during Fife Centre for Equalities: Year of Young People conference in 2018.

As someone who is interested in youth work, particularly in mental wellbeing, I wanted to be part of this project. Youth work and mental health has always been an area of importance to me. This may be because 1 in 10 young people are clinically diagnosed with mental illness between the age of 5 and 16 years old (Audit Scotland, 2018). Often life gets in the way of making time for yourself but not many people realize that this can be detrimental for your mental wellbeing. My hope is that during Shared Space people take the time to think about themselves and how important self-care is, as well as providing a space for people to be open and talk. I hope that by creating Shared Spaces, there will be an inclusive space where everyone can access good mental wellbeing tools and remove the stigma attached to mental health.

This guidance has been written with young people in mind, however, the principle of Shared Space can be applied to any age group.

What is Shared Space?

Shared Space is a space for young people to go and feel safe to express themselves and receive advice on mental wellbeing. Much like Safe Space, this model looks to help young people identify a space with feelings of safety and acceptance. Often groups become territorial, which may lead to some members feeling a stronger sense of entitlement to the space, leading others to feel excluded. However, this is not the case in Shared Space. Shared Space is for everyone and you do not need to fit within a specific protected characteristic in order to become a member. This aims to prevent the segregation of groups and allows everyone to have the same opportunities to access support for their mental wellbeing.

Whether you decide to host your Shared Space virtually or in the community, it should be a space for young people to receive peer support and signposting to other organizations best equipped to help support more complex or specialist supports/ needs.

For every young person attending it is important they feel safe and comfortable to share who they are and their struggles. Shared Space should be a relaxing and supportive atmosphere where a young person can go and process their thoughts and feelings. It should also provide young people with a place where they know they can be listened to, whether that's through peer support or talking to a member of staff trained in mental wellbeing. Everyone should be treated fairly and with dignity and respect (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014). This is particularly important when creating a fully accessible space, otherwise, young people may not feel comfortable to talk freely.

Definition of Safe Space:

- A Safe Space is a physical or metaphorical place for people, usually of marginalized identities, to feel free of judgment or harm (Everything After Z by Dictionary.com, 2019)

Definition of Shared Space:

- A Shared Space is a physical or online space for people to go and express their authentic self and share their feelings with peers to gain low level support in order to improve their general mental wellbeing.

Why host your Shared Space online?

An online community may help reach the young people who struggle to leave their rooms/houses for reasons such as: Mobility issues, caring commitments, mental health issues, etc.

Young people in these situations often feel isolated, this approach will reach those young people who are isolated due to circumstance and may use this support as a steppingstone for contacting agencies about more structured support. Also, there are large portions of young people who live chaotic lives and by having a group that they can access from anywhere then allows them more of a chance to engage with those out of their current situation.

Why host your Shared Space in a community setting?

A group in person may allow you to explore more topics and allows people the chance to meet face to face. It doesn't require the young people to have a device or to have internet access in order to meet people and/or seek advice. It also enables the young people meet in person and have a better social life.

What affects peoples mental Wellbeing?

There can be many things which might lead to people experiencing bad mental health. Today there is still a stigma surrounding peoples mental health. When it comes to our mental wellbeing, we often tend to neglect it until we reach a point of mental health crisis. You may be asking what the main causes of poor mental wellbeing are. Here is a list of things that can contribute to poor mental health outcomes:

- Loss or bereavement
- Loneliness
- Relationship problems
- Issues at work
- Worrying about money

People who have experienced the following are more likely to be affected by these issues:

- Childhood abuse, trauma, violence or neglect
- Social isolation or discrimination
- Homelessness or poor housing
- A long-term physical health condition
- Social disadvantage, poverty or debt
- Unemployment
- Caring for a family member or friend
- Significant trauma as an adult, such as military combat, being involved in a serious accident or violent crime

So, you may be questioning what does positive mental health look like. Positive mental health is different for each person but often people who are experiencing positive mental wellbeing will feel:

- Positive self-esteem and having some confidence in yourself
- Feel and express a range of emotions
- Build and maintain good relationships with others
- Feel engaged with the world around you
- Live and work productively
- Cope with the stresses of daily life
- Adapt and manage in times of change and uncertainty

This is what each of us strives to experience on the day to day and what we hope for our children and young people. However, this does not come naturally and for many people they will experience a period of low moods and poor mental wellbeing. Despite that, we as practitioners/facilitators look to help provide an ease to this time period or teach young people positive coping mechanisms to deal with these difficult times. (www.mind.org.uk)

Groups like Shared Space are beneficial for young people who feel they don't identify as needing specialist treatment. Shared Space could be the level of support the young person feels they need or could use as a steppingstone to receive more specialized care. A new study has suggested that only a quarter of young people have contact with a mental health specialist, meaning two thirds of young people have not had any contact with a Mental health service.

Here's 7 steps to creating a Shared Space:

Step 1: Get young people involved



When creating a Shared Space, it is important for the voices of Young People to be at the heart of the group.

Getting Young People involved gives them a sense of ownership and will make them feel like a valued member.

A space designed for Young People by Young People will draw in more of your target audience because they can identify themselves within the space, whether that be a physical space or virtual space.

Consider running focus groups or online surveys to gage the young people's voices and opinions about their ideas on the Shared Space. This is particularly important when looking at themes/topics to explore. By asking Young People for themes and topics to explore then you are allowing the young person to take agency of their learning. It also ensures that the session you are running is helpful for the young people attending, confirming that the topics/themes you're exploring are relevant to the people attending/following the group.



Step 2: Looking for a venue

Physical Space

When looking for a venue to host your Shared Space consider whether the building is accessible for all. Ask yourselves questions like:

- Is there a ramp or lift if there are stairs?
- Once the room is set up will there be enough space for wheelchairs?
- Will it allow assistance dogs?
- Does this building pose as a barrier due to connotations placed on the building (e.g. school, religious building, etc) and if so, what could I do to break those barriers?
- Is the venue close to public transport links?
- Is this a place young people can identify with?

Online Space

When looking for a platform to host your Shared Space consider the following:

- Is this a platform that young people can identify with? Is it something they use?
- Do you use a platform or create your own site?
- Who do you have as admin? How many admin staff are needed?
- Can anyone post or do people post through you as admin staff to filter things that may be inappropriate? Is the group allowed to post out with a specific time or all the time?

Step 3: Create a nonjudgmental and respectful environment

When creating a Shared Space for young people to come to and feel safe then it is important that you make that space safe for them. Often when creating groups like this for young people the group members tend to become territorial. This could lead to young people to feel that their Shared Space is not a safe environment. It is important to

build an atmosphere free from bullying, harassment, victimization and unlawful discrimination through direct, indirect or by association intended or perceived.

It has been argued that by challenging bullying and discriminatory behavior allows the person behaving in this manor to question their own views and may help them have a transformative experience. By teaching the young people how to respond to differences in a positive light then they can learn to value others and the diversity they bring. This will help young people feel an appreciation for other people's views throughout life. Not every young person has been brought up in an environment that understands and values diversity. To help break this viewpoint then we must educate the young people of the future.

One way of ensuring there is respect and people follow the values is through a group agreement. This should be a list that the young people have helped co-create with expectations of everyone who joins the

group and of facilitators and themselves. This is like a set of regulations to help ensure that



everyone in Shared Space is respected and that everyone feels safe and comfortable within the group. Once the Shared Space group agreement has been created it is important that it is in a place for young people to see. This allows the young people to refer back and understand what is expected of them.

Step 4: Designing your Shared Space

When creating a Shared Space that young people can identify with, it is important to keep the space colourful and relaxed. Get the young people involved in creating the Shared Space so that they can feel ownership of the space. While decorating, think of feelings associated with the colours and the type of atmosphere you wish to create.



Physical Shared Space

If you are setting up a Shared Space in the community then think about how accessible your Shared Space is once you have it set up, think of how everyone would access the room. For example: Will there be enough room for wheelchair users to go in and out of the room?

How relaxed is your Shared Space? Aim to set up the room in an informal way. By setting up the room in this way it will ease the young people, creating a homely vibe it will break down the barrier of it feeling like a support group which many young people might not want to attend due to stigma. Consider small groups of seating so that people can go chat to their peers and they don't feel they have to talk in large groups. If you set up more than the one area within the room you will be opening up a smaller space for people with social anxiety to attend and will create a more laid back and chilled environment to share your feelings in a small group setting. Consider a space where young people can go and talk to the facilitator about their issues in a private way, making them feel comfortable to speak to you knowing that no one else is aware or can hear.

Also ensure that all young people can relate to the space. That means that the space must be fully accessible as well as culturally aware. By allowing activities to also include other cultures it will help all young people feel important and will also help others to be educated on cultures different to their own.

Online Shared Space

When creating a Shared Space Online think about the setup of the page you would like to create, this will make the space more manageable for you and easier to understand for your young people. Aim to keep it basic and maybe have pinned on how the group functions.

Think about how you want topics and conversations handled so people can understand what is going on. Sometimes forms can get messy and overcrowded, so aim to create a system so that people can easily tap into the conversations and topics relevant to them.

Think of what visuals you would like, as this will be what sets the tone for your Shared Space and allows people to open in a comfortable environment.

Step 5: Universal Support

Universal support is:

- It is available to all young people and values diversity
- It promotes the holistic development and wellbeing of the young people as an effective contributor, confident individual, responsible citizen and successful learner
- Supports and enables positive and effective relationships around the young people
- It informs young people where to seek advice

With Shared Space you should aim to listen to the young people in the moment and help them process their thoughts and feelings without judgement or becoming analytical. Young people told us that they wished people would fully listen to them before trying to “fix” everything.

If there is a place, organisation, or website that you think would be useful, let the young people know the support available out there and ask about their opinion about going to seek that help/support. This way it creates a conversation and gives the young person more choice about what happens rather than just being referred and feeling forced to accept the support.

It's important that young people get a decision on what care they receive and where from. Young people should be "recognised as an expert in my own experiences, needs and wishes" (Scottish Government, 2017).



The hope for the group is that it is a low-level support to prevent young people needing medical help and support. By teaching relevant coping strategies, and signposting, young people feel safe and secure and therefore are less likely to require specialist support.

Step 6: Create Themes

Themes nights are a good method to give the group direction and to gauge other young people's interest. Engage with the young people and ask them about issues they are facing and what they



would like to know more about. That way you can be confident in knowing that it is something relevant to them and that they are more likely to engage in the session.



Liaison with local organizations and see if they can come in and give a talk on what support they offer. This not only gives the young people a chance to learn more about relevant issues but also allows

the young people to feel more of a connection to their local community.

Also, by bringing in other organizations and locals from the community you are enabling the young people to step out of their comfort zone and become more proactive in their own mental

wellbeing. It also helps attendees learn more about local support networks they can access if they require any assistance.

These themes should always be announced prior to the day. This way it gives people a warning about the difficult themes that are going to be discussed. It allows them the option of whether they wish to be



involved in that one specific session. By giving the warning you are giving some young people the chance to prepare for what will be discussed and may prompt them to discuss issues that this may have triggered for them.

Be prepared to deal with discussions to potentially trigger the young people. By having a backup plan for this happening then you know what to do in that situation. Not everyone is at the same level of self-awareness to see that coming so by you being able to be calm about the situation then you can deal with the situation to de-escalate the persons discomfort.

Step 7: Have fun

Although the Shared Space is to help combat bad mental health and promote mental wellbeing this should a fun thing for people to work on with your support.

Look at what the young people enjoy doing and see if you can incorporate in that. For some of them it will be a s simple as talk about their thoughts and feelings with a peer, for others it may be more active. Look at what can help improve people's mental wellbeing.

- **Art and crafts** have been seen to help improve people's mental wellbeing as they can express their thoughts and feeling if they cannot articulate them or will help them to provide a visual to work through their feelings.
- For others **physical exercise** is helpful, so maybe consider a space for people to move around and be energetic. Studies have found that when you partake in physical activity that your body releases hormones such as endorphins which often increase your mood and makes you feel more confident about yourself.
- Give **opportunities to learn**. Look at what skills that the group members have to offer, there may be some hidden talents that can be taught to others. This gives people a focus and can help them gain a sense of self achievement once they have learned something new.
- **Mindfulness**. Look into mindfulness and how you can incorporate that into your practice. Mindfulness is becoming more aware of the present moment can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better. It helps take people out of their own heads and back into the present moment and be aware of the world around them and how they are part of that.
- All people to **share their interests and hobbies**. This can help build more community capital. By allowing others to share these things then you are enabling people to expand their knowledge and giving people the opportunity to learn new skills which will inevitably give them a sense of achievement.
- Allow people to share their **hints and tips for selfcare**. This was people can gain a more diverse way of dealing with emotions and looking after themselves. It will offer a more

varied approach to self-care and may lead to people doing things they had never heard of in order to take time for themselves. I also will allow people to feel a sense of achievement for being able to help and support another young person by sharing their personal techniques.

What makes for good practice:

1) **Valuing diversity**- by having a diverse group of young people allows room for the attendees to have different outlooks upon life. It also helps them be aware of more cultures and open their minds to other viewpoints. By valuing diversity, you are also opening the group to more young people who would normally feel left out. You are also enabling the opportunity for learning and growth.

2) **Treat every young person equally**- This may seem like a basic thing, but you should allow young people to have the same opportunity no matter what their background or protected characteristic. By allowing everyone equal opportunity and not creating any bias in the group then you are ensuring that everyone feels like a valid member. It also starts a cultural change of everyone being fairly treated that may go on to branch out into people's lives.

3) **Keep young people at the heart of what you do**- This group is for the young people and to improve their mental wellbeing. The young people are experts in knowing what their needs are and what they will engage with more. By ensuring that the young people's needs are met and that they feel happy and safe in a space that is there's then the young people are more likely to come back and bring friends along with them. You should also investigate the needs of that

young person, get to know them and understand their struggles so that you know the best way to support that young person.

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