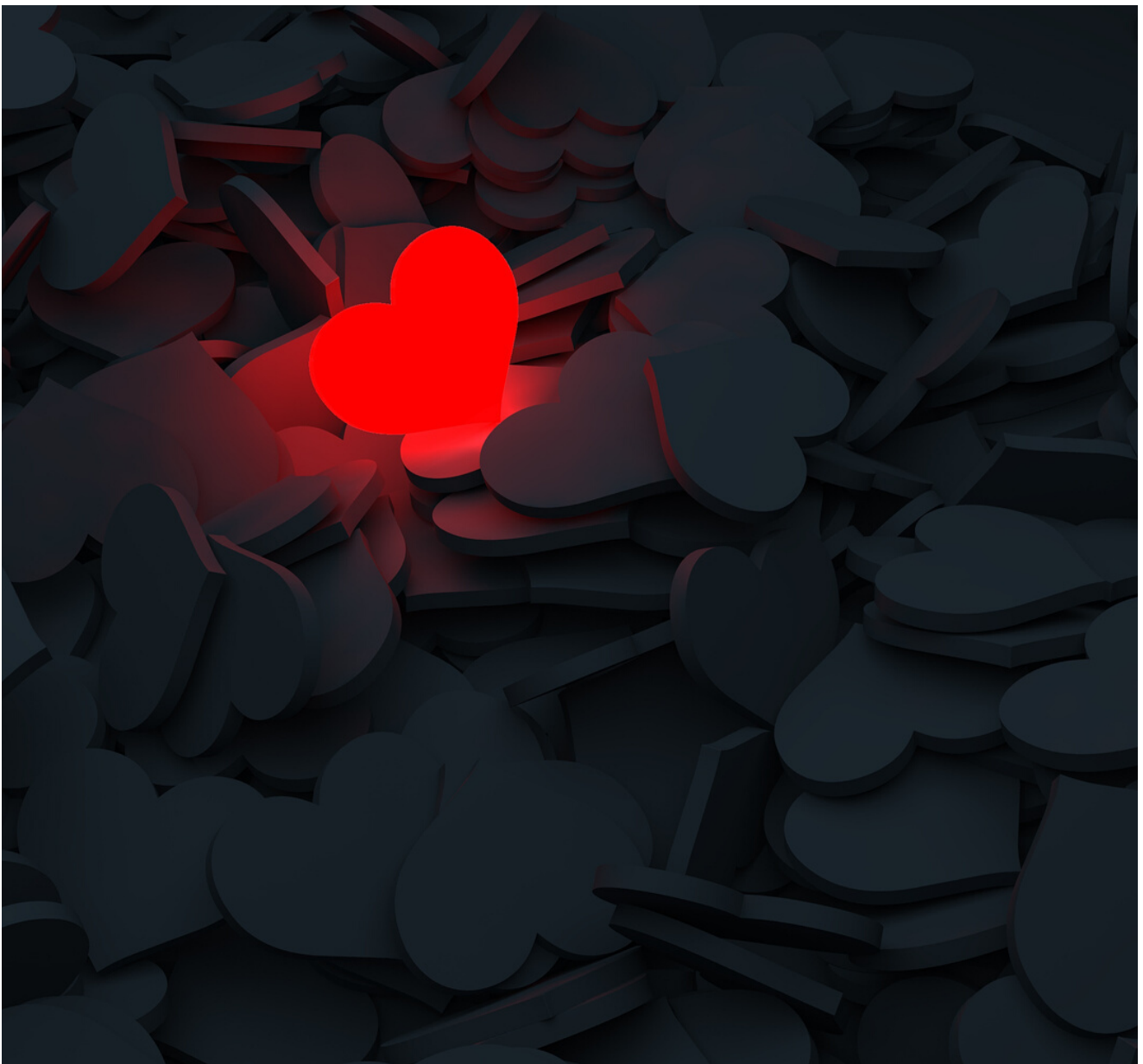


JUNE 2020 - ISSUE 3

LIVING E-MOTIONS

Emotional education through visual storyliving for people with
mental health challenges



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EDITORIAL

We are all living challenging times due to COVID-19. Our lives have changed completely and for most of us that means losses. Loss of beloved ones, of jobs, of a life-style, of freedom, security, hopes, etc.

But every crisis means an opportunity, so take this opportunity to continue creating your own story, to overcome difficulties and grow every day from your own strength.

We will keep on supporting you, www.living-emotions.org.

The Living e-Motions team



THE LIVING EMOTIONS TRAINING COURSE IN ESTONIA

It's the middle of May 2020. The whole world is connected by global health crisis and consequences caused by Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2 virus). Fear and anxiety to be infected has an enormous influence on mental health for all humanity. For sure, contingent worldwide pandemic restrictions have had and have now unexpectedly big impact on people's daily lives, plans and doings, including the delivery process of the pilot training course of Living eMotions. Therefore, at the moment the pilot in Estonia is on standby mode and hasn't been completed yet but there are high hopes to get it finished by June. Our special needs educators Madli Vaidlo and Anni Arumäe have taken the big responsibility on their shoulders to carry out pilot in Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre. They decided to join this Living eMotions project and take the roles of facilitators. On that account, Madli and Anni will share their extraordinary personal learning and lived experiences with you.

1. What are the three most important keywords by which you could sum up your experience as a facilitator of pilot group?

Madli: The most important keywords that come to mind are – surprise, teamwork, open-mindedness. Firstly, I want to point out how surprised I was at how well the group bonded in the first session. As a facilitator, I was expecting a bit of awkward silence and shyness when talking

about their experiences and emotions, but as it turned out, they were supportive from the get go and the group felt united until the last session. Secondly the group was a great team and I would give them an A for teamwork. If someone needed a cup of tea or some notes taken, there was always somebody helping; as a facilitator I didn't have to say anything. The students just understood without saying that they are here for each other. If someone felt embarrassed or very emotional about their story sharing, then the whole group supported the person with a joke, quote or just saying that he/she is strong. Thirdly I noticed how open-minded our group was. Everybody understood without saying that this isn't a place or the time to judge one another. Before the group started, I was a bit apprehensive of how well different personalities and views will mix, but I was surprised of how willingly they tried to understand each other.

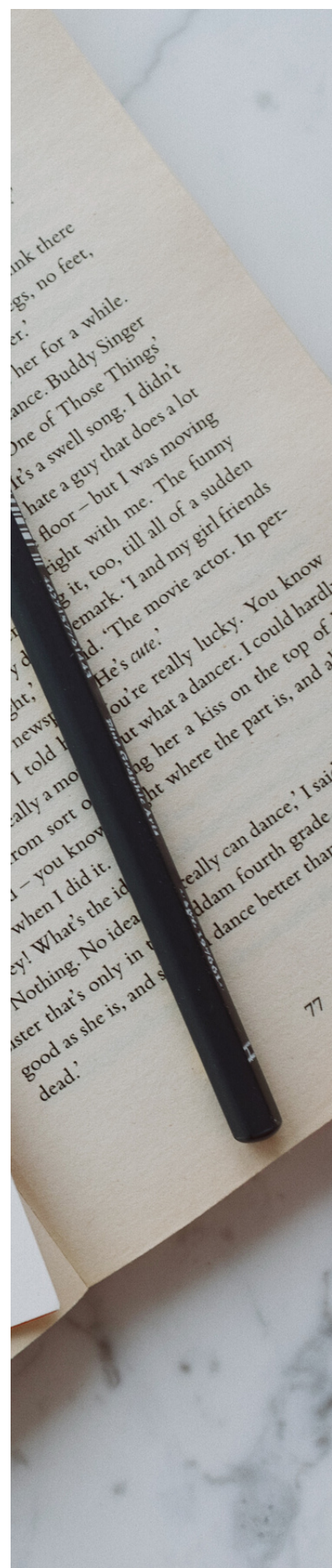
Anni: Openness, connection and creativity. I enjoyed how opened the group was to learn new experiences and share them with others. Everybody was ready to take the next step in growing as a person. Even if some of the participants were quieter, they still showed up every time, wanted to listen to others and shared as much or as little as they wanted. And everybody accepted that we are different and learn at a different pace. The connection we shared in this group, gave me new point of view of my students. I knew lot of the participants before we started this group but, during these sessions, we definitely evolved our relationships with each other. Also when we had to pause our training course because of Covid-19 I saw how much this group wanted to stay connected. They started to talk and support each other online, despite not being able to run our group sessions face to face. And last but not least, a little bit of creativity is what I always need to function well as a trainer. It was very important and refreshing for me that we had the opportunity to adapt the existing sessions if needed and create the learning atmosphere for the needs of our group. Since we had rather younger participants, I felt that making the course relevant for them needed some creativity at the beginning to create safe space for them to communicate.



2. What kind of turning points, highs and lows, twists and turns did you notice and lived through in your personal learning as a facilitator with and without group? What are your own good strategies to cope with difficult emotions and events in your life?

Madli: The lowest point was in the early days of the group sessions when I realized that I have so much to give and so little time. Trying to fit in everything that I wanted to teach them in a small timeframe was very difficult for me, so I had to choose what is important and what is not, but for me as a facilitator everything was important. So to cope I thought “What do I as a participant want to get out of this training course?” and that perspective gave me the knowledge of what topics, worksheets, videos to choose. In the first sessions I tried to rush the group so we would have time to complete every worksheet that I had planned, but then I understood that live conversations and talking about their stories is so much more important than worksheets. So I stopped and forced myself to observe the group and see how much they enjoyed talking to each other and I had to let go of the plan I created in my mind and just let things go and flow. That was a big turning point for me, I learned that sometimes you can't control everything, you just have to let things go - and that I try to implement into my everyday life.

Anni: At the beginning I was little worried that given this time frame in sessions we don't have enough time to open up these people to talk about their experiences and share their recovery story. We realised soon that given the course material we had for 8 sessions we needed to make our choice of topics we're going to discuss. From the moment, we let go of the idea that we have to go through the whole curriculum we were able to enjoy the process more and important topics for our participants stood out with the discussions. In my everyday life I need to listen to music and move physically to cope with difficult emotions. And one of the high points as a facilitator was also discussing the same question with our participants. They had good insight for these activities that can help us in our daily life and it was one of the points where I realised how fast and how far we have already become with them.



3. Let's use your creative imagination for the next. At the end of the pilot course the participants of this pilot will write Living eMotions Learning Passport on their own. If you should write your Learning Passport as a facilitator on your own what might be the content?

Madli: One gained knowledge from this training course is that you have to trust the group to guide themselves in their own learning process. As a facilitator, I can lay their foundation but I won't build their house and if the house doesn't look like I had planned it would, then it's okay, it's theirs not mine. So trust the group and let them go to walk their own journey. Also, as a facilitator, it is acceptable to remind the group members if they drift away from the topic, become too loud, or act inappropriate, to follow the group agreement. At the start I was a bit afraid that, if I pointed out that someone was breaking the agreement, they would get offended or start to act defiant with me but to my surprise it didn't happen. So I learned that you don't have to act as a teacher to get discipline, you could just remind the group by pointing out what they agreed on and respect each other. By indicating to the agreement the unwanted behaviour stops and participants starts to act accordingly. Also, I want to graduate myself for finishing this training course and keeping in touch with the group although COVID-19 wanted to intervene. I am happy that I inspired our group to finish the videos on their own and I couldn't be more prouder.

Anni: I was happy we connected with the group so well that, at the end of the course, almost everybody was ready to make their recovery story video. I hope it was our lack of pressure that gave them the confidence that despite their decision to make or not to make the videos at the end of the course we would support them anyway. I think I also learned to use the strengths of participants in the group. Our participants started to look after each other with every session and it also helped them to cope with their emotions. The ones who had the tendency to be overwhelmingly loud learned to listen others more. And the ones with quiet opinions learned to express them a little louder. I really saw how they became young adults in front of our eyes if we just created the right environment for them to grow.



4. If you should write Learning Passport for your co-facilitator, what would it be like? Describe the content please.

Madli: As a start, I would like to say that Anni is a wonderful co-facilitator. She is very creative and her creativeness really helped us to implement the session tasks in an inspiring way. Also she's very going-with-the-flow person, oppose to me, who is a I-like-to-control-the-flow person. When I was worried, if we're going to get everything we planned done, then she reassured me that it's alright, even if we don't get every worksheet filled, the most important thing is that our participants enjoyed the course and having conversation in a supportive environment. I want to thank Anni for being very motivated, inspiring and enthusiastic co-facilitator. It was a great privilege to work in such a high-spirited team and I felt strong team-work and I knew that I could always depend on Anni. Also, I felt that she built and had very strong connection with some of our participants and they really trusted her with their stories. It would be a pleasure to organize and co-facilitate another training course with her!

Anni: I was really lucky to share this experience with Madli. She is always thinking 3 steps ahead, planning the sessions in details and having materials ready for every occasion we can have during these meetings. She organised our meetings before or after the training course to share the ideas and discuss the topics for each session together and this makes teamwork with her very easy. I admire her effort and energy she puts into her work, she is always ready to put her thoughts into action. As I'm more slow and analytical in my head, I was happy to see how we complement each other as facilitators and also how we could learn from each other.

5. Although the course is not completed yet you have a lot of good experiences. Please tell what did you enjoy most about the course so far?

Madli: I most enjoyed the group environment. I have never had a group that is so warm and supportive towards each other. I gained the confidence that I can run a group training course and I can create a safe environment for them to talk about their emotions and difficult experiences.

Anni: I enjoyed how well this group connected and stayed together. Although our meetings were at the end of the day when the students already had a school day or an internship behind them, they always wanted to come together and discuss rather difficult topics with us. It also gave me the energy lift I needed to be reassured that we're on the right track with our course.

6. What are your plans on the current course and further delivery of Living eMotions training courses?

Madli: I would like to organize another training course so, I could compare those two experiences and see myself grow as a facilitator and also make sure that this projects lives on and helps young people with mental health issues find and support one another. Also it is important to pass my knowledge to fellow specialist who want to work towards destigmatizing mental health problems, so probably try to talk as much about the project as possible, thus organizations all over Estonia can implement this story-sharing approach.



Anni: I see the benefits of the course for people with mental health issues and I really hope we can carry out new courses in next year as well. I also hope we can carry out our multiplier events well so that more people can get use of these practical skills we can provide with this Living eMotions curriculum.



7. Is there anything you would like to recommend and tell to the future facilitators?

Madli: Be open-minded, ready for surprises and give the group the freedom to guide their own learning environment. Also be creative with the sessions and don't hesitate to implement it your own way – whatever you feel is right for your group, is best for your group!



Anni: Trust your instincts and go with the flow. I think the experience itself is a teacher for facilitators if we only let it happen. The participants and topics are always unique because everybody brings something from themselves to the table. So, I would just recommend to enjoy the course as it goes and I'm sure it will surprise all parties with the new learning experience.

In conclusion Madli and Anni express together that they are really happy that we got involved in the Living eMotions project. It has made them grow as a facilitator and they hope this journey continues with the same enthusiasm and joy.

STORYLIVING FOR CHALLENGING TIMES

We are living in challenging times - as individuals, as nations and as a global world. The COVID 19 virus is affecting all of us in so many ways and is likely to continue to do so for some time. It not only affects our health, our livelihood and futures but is also affecting our mental health and wellbeing.

We all have mental health - it is a good and positive thing! However, that means that we can all experience challenging times that adversely affect our mental health. It is good that more and more people and governments are recognising that this challenging time is likely to affect our mental health. The big question is how we as people, communities, countries and a world support a good recovery.

Before we rush to try to develop new services and 'interventions' to deal with mental health challenges we have an opportunity to think about this differently. One of the interesting things about COVID 19 is that we are all affected by it. That means we have a population of people who are experts in their experience of COVID 19. This expertise by experience is a great resource not just for policy-makers to learn from but also for us to support each other.

Mental Health Europe recently called for a human rights based response to COVID 19. What does this mean? It means acknowledging that the mental distress many of us feel is a normal and valid



response to difficult circumstances. It is an opportunity to move away from a medicalised approach focused on what's wrong to one which asks 'what's happened to you' and to recognise that we all have stories and expertise to contribute. This highlights the need to invest in peer support and community based health services. Story living is a peer and community based approach which helps people make sense of their experiences and better understand what supports they need to maintain good mental health and live a life of their choosing.

So what about using story living as a way for us to recover at an individual, community, national and global level? Inviting people to share their stories with others will help them to:

- Make sense of their experiences and feelings – it's amazing how speaking or writing something can really help to clarify but also to get difficult thoughts out.
- Feel less alone and isolated - hearing others experiences and feelings validates our experiences and feelings, creates community and empathy and challenges stigma and discrimination.
- Discover their strengths – storyliving can help us understand that while this has been really difficult we know more about managing our wellbeing than we often think; have insight and wisdom to share and can learn from others.
- Create a positive sense of identity - as someone with skills, passions and qualities that they can draw on but also help us understand when and how we need support.
- Becoming experts by experience - developing people's understanding of their lived experience and how they can use that to support their recovery and help others on their recovery journey.



At Scottish Recovery Network we have been bringing people together in online conversation cafes to talk about their experiences of lockdown, share what they are doing to stay well and considering how recovery will help us move through and on in a world where we live with COVID 19.

What is very interesting is that many people, including those living with mental health problems have been staying well and discovered a resilience and ability to adapt that they did not always know they had. People are telling us that they feel they will be able to use this resilience to help them get through what is to come. They also want to use this expertise to help others.

The Living e-Motions curriculum will provide a practical framework for recovery focused storyliving. We encourage all people, organisations and Governments to invest in peer led community supports where people can come together to share and live their stories. Through this we will develop the respect, empathy and community we will need to learn to live fulfilling and contributing lives in the new world.

If you want to get started now you can find some guidelines and materials to support recovery story sharing on the [Scottish Recovery Network website](#).

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