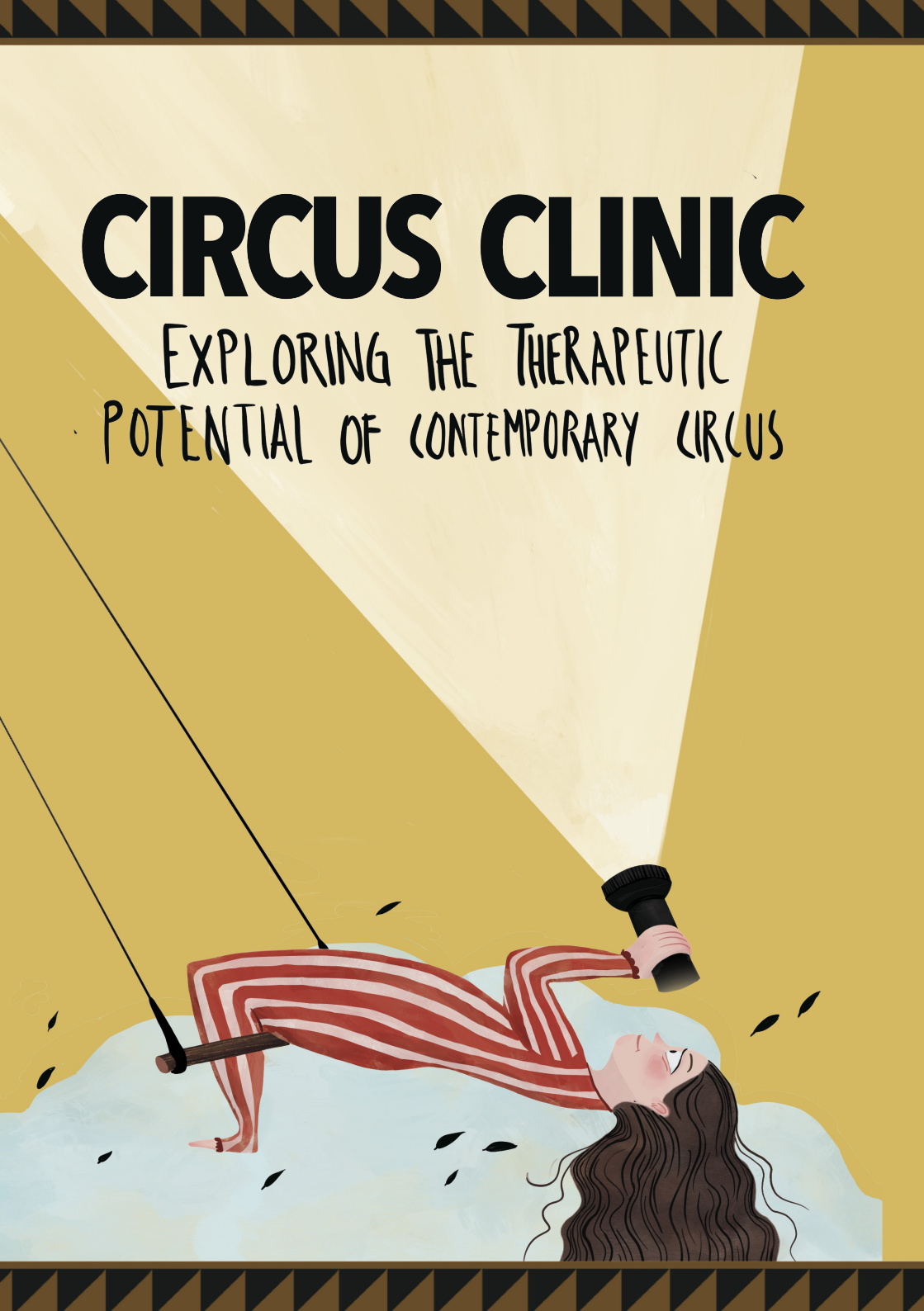
CIRCUS CLINIC

EXPLORING THE THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL OF CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS



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Circus Clinic

Exploring the therapeutic potential of contemporary circus

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WHY CIRCUS

Circus is a serious place to play. It is a vehicle for non-verbal communication, offering the experience of being in one's own body, exploring its limits through conscious observation. Circus can be both a physical place and a state of mind.

Circus requires patience and repetition. Through playful practice, we find flow and connect with the inner child. Circus gives us a way to look at the world with new eyes, and opens us up to let our souls embody its beauty. We learn by making mistakes, discovering how to work with failure and getting back up to try again.

Circus is a place of self-reflection. It offers us a chance to breathe, to create, to develop an image of ourselves. We decide how far we want to go in response to our own curiosity. The only competition is internal, as we recognise our own needs, tune into our bodies and emotions, and use motivation to overcome our fears. Self-esteem and self acceptance grow as we use perseverance to achieve our goals. We compare ourselves today only to who we were yesterday and move towards who we want to be tomorrow. Circus is an environment in which we can experiment with the areas of ourselves we wish to change. In circus, step-by-step successes build independence and self-validation.

Circus is a place full of colours, people, nations, countries, languages, customs and skills. We celebrate this diversity. Circus is a place of welcome, a helping hand of support, an embrace in a difficult moment and the pleasure of being together. There is a niche and a tool for everyone, and each can move and learn at

their own pace, in sync together.

Circus can convey the values of a community in which all are valid, no one is left behind and everyone takes responsibility for themselves and each other. Together we learn to follow and respect another's body, limits and feelings, creating a space that presents the opportunity to share without pressure. Circus can offer rich possibilities for communication, appropriate to each participant's individual needs at that moment. Consent, respect, and boundary setting are practised and learned through physical contact. Circus ignites creativity and cooperation when we connect with others who are just as strong and as vulnerable as we are.

> *Circus is our commitment to the society we want to build. CIRCUS IS LIFE!*

INTRODUCTION

We hope that this book will inspire and inform you about some of the ways in which contemporary circus can be used to support and potentially advance therapeutic processes with children and adolescents. It is neither a definitive guide to, nor an exhaustive list of, circus-therapeutic interventions, as each experience presented is unique. Thus it is not to be perceived as a manual for practice. We are simply offering another way to think about circus, and its possibilities for supporting well-being.

The practitioners in this book come from various professions and backgrounds: youth circus and social circus facilitators, psychologists, psychotherapists, occupational therapists, expressive arts therapists...

Should you be interested in applying any of these interventions in your own work, we would ask you to carefully consider the techniques and information we share with humility and inform yourself of the required qualifications, training, and laws in your particular country and field of expertise. Just as we would not welcome surgery performed by a person without formal educational training, it is similarly important to promote responsible, conscious practices when endeavouring to use circus as a therapeutic medium. We trust that you are aware of your own personal and professional boundaries and limitations and know when to refer clients elsewhere if you are addressing issues beyond your qualifications or capabilities. It is essential to facilitate a safe space and to protect both the participant and yourself.

All of the stories featured in this book are real. They aim to offer a glimpse into a small chapter of people's lives, seen through the eyes of their therapists and teachers. For the most part, they offer a one-sided view into the role that circus may have played in bringing about change to the lives of our students and clients. We do not claim to be responsible for these changes, as it is the client or student that does the hard work. Our job is to facilitate and contain the process, accepting the participant as they are in the moment and using circus arts as our medium.

This work is the outcome of a *pilot project* exploring the link between the practice of contemporary circus and well-being.

The book has two main goals: first, to share with any interested readers our experiences, observations and growing understanding of how circus tools, by way of play and creativity, body awareness and connection, and diligent physical, mental and emotional effort, may contribute to participants' well-being. This can take place in many contexts: one's own solo circus practice, in circus classes, child-caregiver/family sessions, workshops or groups, or when circus tools are implemented by a qualified practitioner as a stand-alone therapy, or integrated into existing individual or group therapy.

The second goal is to direct these insights specifically to circus facilitators and other care professionals to expand their knowledge and spark their curiosity and interest in the potential of circus tools as interventions for well-being. Circus facilitators could benefit from actively learning more about mental health issues and psychological processes, as well as taking a look at how therapists use circus tools to support their work. This knowledge would enrich the circus facilitator both personally and in their circus environment, for instance in being

better able to recognise participants' mental health challenges so that they can refer them to care professionals or give them extra support, or applying these concepts when working with a complex issue in the group. For care professionals, this publication may be a starting point

from which to venture into more research on the benefits of circus in therapy, reading and studying the research that has been done up until now, making contact with those who use circus tools as a therapeutic intervention, or even experimenting with

beginning a circus practice of their own.

Sensitive topics such as sexism, racism, classism, ageism, body shaming, ableism, prejudice based on ethnicity, religion, neurodivergence, sexual orientation, gender identity, and more can and do arise during circus classes and sessions. The values of openness and acceptance are fundamental to contemporary circus and we view these topics and shape our responses to them with this in mind. We aim to support the equal sharing of power and challenge discrimination. We acknowledge that the authors of this book are an almost all-white/European, able-bodied and privileged group, and we recognise that this is problematic and limiting, and that there is a great deal of work to be done in order to enable more access and opportunities for all people and recognise all narratives as valid. We are individually and collectively committed to change in this regard, and we have used language that we hope adequately conveys our awareness of the injustice and inequality in our current systems and respect for the world's rich differences.

We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we have enjoyed the process of creating it!

Circus greetings,

The Circus Clinic International Team

STORIES

In this chapter, psychologists, therapists, circus facilitators, social workers and expressive arts therapists present stories that illustrate some of the settings and circumstances in which we use contemporary circus to support young people.

We have experience working with Youth Circus, Social Circus, Therapeutic Setting and Adaptive Circus. Each story has a header indicating one of these settings:

- Youth Circus describes circus programmes offering group classes to children and youth within circus associations, schools or other recreational environments;

- Social Circus describes circus programmes primarily offered as a means of supporting underserved or at-risk populations to enhance their individual and collective well-being, social and emotional development and aid in the prevention of detrimental behaviours;

- Therapeutic Setting describes the implementation of circus tools as part of individual or group psychiatric, psychological or therapeutic programmes;

- Adaptive (or Accessible) Circus describes circus programmes tailored for people with psychological and physical disabilities. These programmes may have a specific therapeutic aim or be offered just for fun. (There are no stories here specifically from this setting, but every circus experience can to some degree be considered adaptive.)

We invite you to tiptoe along with us to read these stories with respect and wonder. Enjoy the journey.

THE CLOWN, THE NURSE, THE OFFICER AND THE ACROBAT

YOUTH CIRCUS

About Toon

Toon Heylen, 29, studied physical education and social work specifically for children and youths. He originally had an internship at Cirkus in Beweging, a circus school in Leuven (Belgium). He never left. He is now part of their co-ordination and educational team. Within the circus school, he runs a variety of projects, such as workshop planning and administration, organising school projects and holiday camps, teaching multi-circus classes and working once a week teaching children at the psychiatric hospital in Gasthuisberg. Toon learns so much every day, surrounded by inspiring and experienced colleagues. He is grateful to have the chance to explore the many facets of using circus as an educational tool.

Toon on circus:

> *Circus welcomes and respects everyone exactly as they are.*

Ouma Arrives

I had just graduated from college. In my last year I did an internship at Cirkus in Beweging who was apparently satisfied with my work. The internship was a very uplifting period for me. An incredibly rich world opened up, as I eagerly learned from these inspiring and experienced colleagues. What's more, I was allowed to stay – Cirkus in Beweging asked me to join their fantastic team! I was very excited.

Now I was faced with a baptism of fire: I was going to be a teacher myself in the multi-circus class on Wednesday afternoons. We have 25 children aged between 6 and 8 years. The class takes place after school for 90 minutes. I would be managing the group with Giel, a fantastic acrobat who could hold the children's attention effortlessly. We would have two other teaching assistants during the classes.

Thanks to my internship, I was already familiar with the structure of the lessons. I could rely on the tried-and-tested pattern that had been improved over the course of many years.

At the start of the lesson, the children practise freely with juggling materials for 10 minutes. Masses of balls fly through the air, flowersticks roll over arms and diabolos spin. Juggling scarves become ghosts and spinning plates are passed from a stick to a finger. Everyone practises at their own pace or plays together with others.

After free practice, the facilitator loudly shouts 'CIR', to which the children respond 'CUS'! Everyone comes together in a circle. We have a chat, check attendance and introduce a warm-up game,

which is always fun and non-competitive. This is followed by acrobatic exercises on the mats. After that, everyone is ready to work with different circus techniques: acrobatics, circus theatre, juggling, balance and aerial acrobatics. Each lesson covers two disciplines. We divide the group in half and each group practises both techniques. We finish again in a circle, with a quiet chat.

I had this model firmly in my head. I was ready! And then Ouma came in. Ouma was a 7-year-old girl who joined the group for children from the first and second years of primary school. Ouma arrived with Lars, her neighbour, whose hand she held firmly. Ouma settled on a couch against the wall of the room. When I invited her to join the free practice, she shook her head: "I think it's way too crowded! Can I wait a little longer?" Of course, I said yes. When we went into the circle, I invited her again, and received the same answer: "I'd rather wait a little longer." Ouma sat in her safe spot on the couch and watched what was happening. My colleague and I asked her several times to join in and also told her it was okay if she preferred to keep watching. And so she did, for the whole lesson!

When Ouma's mother came to pick her up after class and saw her sitting on the couch, she asked me to talk for a while. Apparently, it wasn't the first time Ouma had kept her distance. Previous 'after school activities' had also proved difficult. Ouma had quit both her drawing class and gymnastics club. Ouma's mother believed this was because Ouma felt she wasn't good enough. Ouma was afraid that her facilitators would report that she failed to participate in the exercises. I got the impression during the conversation that Ouma was putting a lot of pressure on herself. She immediately wanted to be very good at whatever it was

she was attempting to learn. As a result, she could not enjoy practising and playing, without constantly assessing herself.

After class, I spoke to Giel to discuss the matter. "What can we do with Ouma?" "No problem! Giel said. We call in the Clown, the Nurse, the Officer and the Acrobat!" "We call who? Who are they?", I asked." Giel laughed: "That's us, of course".

Ouma Returns

I looked forward to seeing Ouma the following week. Would she return? She did. She arrived again with Lars, but I noticed she no longer held his hand. However, she sat on the couch again, in her familiar spot. I went over to greet her and said that I was really pleased she was with us again. And that I would like it if she came to sit in the circle later, but that she could decide for herself.

During the free practice, Ouma and Lars played together, throwing balls at each other. Ouma joined the circle, sitting next to him. However, she remained silent as she carefully observed everything going on around her. As a warm-up, Giel suggested that we all walk around like very stupid and clumsy clowns. He put his money where his mouth was and began to walk hesitantly and wobbly. All the children followed him screaming, and, wonderfully, there last in line was Ouma. After the warm-up, Ouma returned to her couch for the rest of the lesson. I went over for short chats with her between the sessions. Was she okay? Would she call me if I could help her?

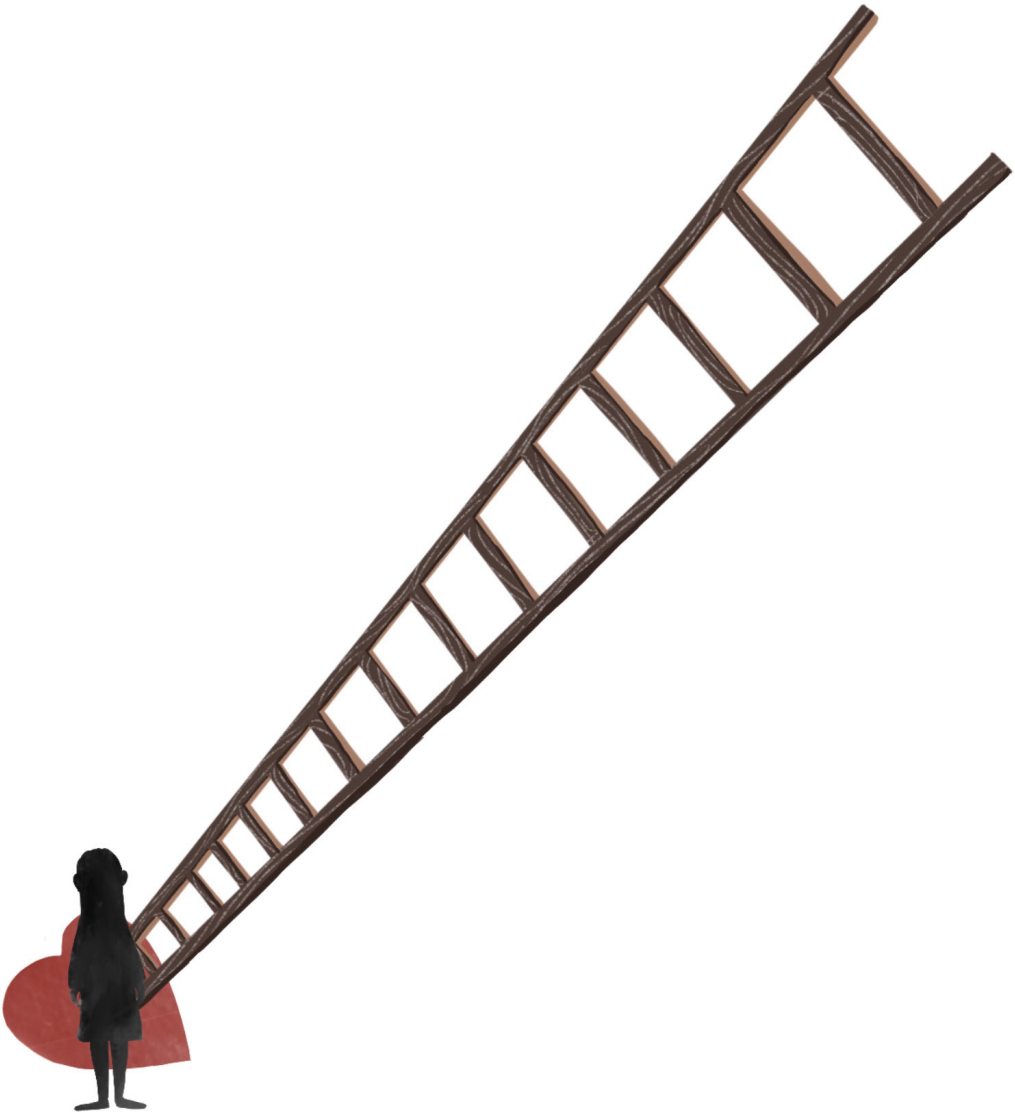
I also invited Ouma to the closing circle conversation. She joined us and I complimented her afterwards. When her mom picked

her up, I saw a smile on Ouma's lips.

Ouma stayed with us. She gradually started to play and practise more and more. Giel and I played our four roles for her and the other children. We did the clown, by putting a lot of fun and action into the lesson. But we were also nurses, providing gentleness, warmth, reward and encouragement. Sometimes we were policemen, guarding the borders, setting rules and demanding respect from the children. We made sure 'the traffic' in the room stayed safe for Ouma, and she didn't feel too crowded. And last, but not least, we were both acrobats. We challenged the children to try something exciting and just difficult enough and we worked on their technical skills. As a teacher being 'the acrobat', it's also our aim to show the children what they can achieve by training hard. We like to show our own skills to the children.

Since then, I have been trying to master the four roles. Some are easier than others. Fortunately, we have a large team of staff members and assistants, so we can play to each other's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses. Through this role-playing and other guidance techniques, we create the safest possible learning environment for the children.

I learned a lot from Ouma. In my mind I sometimes still hear her shouting after the closing of our circle chat. "See you!"



LEVELS OF OPENNESS

YOUTH CIRCUS

About Hana

Hana Davidova is 38 and has been a circus performer for 15 years and a circus teacher for 6 years. She likes to explore all the possible ways of introducing people to circus arts and help them find their potential and abilities. She leads workshops and regular circus classes. Hana recognizes circus as an art, and also as an amazing tool that has a variety of benefits for the individual. She is based in a circus centre where they offer regular classes for children, young adults and adults. The gyms are equipped with juggling materials, mats, balancing equipment, aerials and other props.

Lida's Story

It is the beginning of the school year, and also the beginning of our weekly circus lessons. I'm standing in the gym thinking about how it will go. I'm a bit more nervous than usual, because I haven't taught children for over a year. How will they be? What expectations will they have? How will I perform - will I be good enough? Patient enough? Present enough? Attentive enough?

Breathe in, breathe out. This isn't the first time I've done this.

I am an experienced circus teacher, but I always have doubts at the beginning of the school year. And as always, I tell myself: "it's okay for you to doubt - this is how you are, and you know you're going to give it your best." My colleague Zora stands next to me. She is my partner in the class, my teammate. We plan the lessons together, support each other and give each other feedback. We may see or feel each situation differently, so exchanging this information helps us better understand our class as a group.

The children enter the room. They are amazing and unique, each one an individual. Some are full of energy and fill up the space right away, others hold back and observe what will happen.

I observe them. We sit in a circle, and go around introducing ourselves to the group. We say our names, how much energy we have, and what we would like to do in circus class. We come to a young girl with dark hair, big eyes and a thoughtful expression. Maybe she is also an observer, like me? Her name is Lida and she is ten years old. She says she feels good today, but that she is tired and doesn't have much energy. At that moment, I don't yet know how many times I will hear her say that phrase.

I always try to encourage the children to participate in all of our activities, even when they're not in the mood or feeling a little tired. I want to give them opportunities to forget their daily worries and just play and enjoy the moment. At the same time, I offer them the freedom to express themselves and tell me when they don't feel capable of doing something or feel it's not the right time for them. They know they have this option, they don't take advantage of it, and I feel happy about that.

The weeks go by, and with every circus class I learn something

new about my group of children: who they are, what interests and excites them, what specific activities they enjoy.

One day, during a game, Lida gets hit in the face with a ball. It's a small ball, and the impact is not very strong - such things are bound to happen in play. It doesn't seem like anything serious, but as the ball has struck the spot right next to her eye, it hurts quite a bit. So Lida needs cooling - both the sore spot, and her emotions - a bit of rest. I give her the necessary time, assuring her in soft tones that everything is going to be alright and that she can decide for herself if and when she wants to rejoin the game. After a few minutes, she is back in the game. "Situation resolved - I wish it always went so smoothly!" I think to myself. When the class is over, I call Lida's mother to tell her about the little accident, as it is our rule to notify parents if something happens. Her mother is not upset, and mentions that Lida is sometimes overemotional. I thank her, but do not put too much value in her last comment. Children are humans, they have emotions and that's alright. I note to myself that Lida handled the situation very well.

The semester goes on and I hear repeatedly from Lida that she is tired and not in a good mood. Sometimes she looks sad, as if she were carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. Usually this mood changes the moment she begins to interact with the other children. But one day, she is sitting on a mat on the side. My colleague Zora tells me it's okay, she has allowed Lida to rest for a while. Lida indicates that she feels unable to join the class today. It is all too overwhelming and she wants some time to rest alone. I understand and admire her for being so open about her feelings and for stating her needs so clearly. "I could never have done that at her age," I think to myself.

Sometimes a lesson runs so smoothly that it's over before we know it. Other times, the lesson does not go at all as we planned it. This is one of the latter situations: the kids are very distracted, it seems as if they hear nothing and can't remember anything they have learned so far. "These kinds of situations can occur", I think, "so today I have to be extra patient and give a little more energy than usual". In the middle of the class, Lida suddenly approaches me and tells me this class must be difficult for us and that the group is not easy to work with today. Her voice sounds almost mature. Then she adds a little nod of her head, as if to tell me that I am not alone in this situation. I thank her and assure her that she doesn't have to worry: Zora and I can handle the situation. When she goes back to the class activities, I am surprised by her empathy. Again, I reflect upon how open she is in sharing her feelings, and I appreciate it.

It is almost the end of the school year. Today is the last training before our final circus presentation. It is a tradition that the children show their parents what they have learned in our lessons. One child makes more effort to practise in class and at home and is already ready for the show, another has some doubts and wants to train a little more. I just want them all to enjoy this experience and hope that it will be more fun than stressful. Lida is ready. She has chosen juggling, the discipline she likes, and she is good at it. So now she has free time, and I invite her to practise on the silks, long strips of fabric that hang down from the ceiling, used for aerial acrobatics. She hesitates and does not approach them. Instead, she steps up to me and reveals that she is afraid. She once had an accident on the silks, long before she was in my class, and since then has never dared again to try them. I am surprised at first, but then the realisation clicks in my head that Lida has always chosen

activities other than the silks. “But what can we do about this in the last lesson of the year?” I wonder, “helping Lida with this would require more attention and more time than I can give right now. On the other hand, these thoughts must not paralyse me, I reconsider. “So let’s try! Do you want to just hold the silks and climb a little bit with some support?” I’m equally ready for a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. But Lida bravely answers “Let’s try it!” and I’m thrilled. She takes hold of the silks and starts a new relationship.

I am simultaneously happy and sad. If only I had known, we could have worked together on this issue for the whole year. Maybe I could have helped her and she would have overcome her fear - who knows? But it can’t be undone. I realise now that even a very open and honest person has their own levels of openness, and that every story will be shared at just the right time.

Building Trust: Emma the Architect

Therapeutic Setting

About Vicki

Vicki Pompe, 39 years old, spent 15 years working as a professional acrobat, after which, she reschooled herself to become a dance movement therapist. She has managed to transfer her previous experiences as an acrobat into her current job and gives weekly circus therapy sessions, alongside dance movement therapy, within the Korbeel: a child and youth psychiatry department in Kortrijk, Belgium. She also works in Atelier 113, a place for young people who need extra psychological support, in Harelbeke (Belgium) and within a multidisciplinary group practice, Het Huis van Katrien in Gent (Belgium), where both dance therapy and circus therapy are offered. The circussessions consist largely of partner acrobatics and aerial techniques, although equilibristics and object manipulation are sometimes applied.

Vicki on being a therapist:

> *As a therapist, I feel the most important factors to bring to a session are safety and autonomy. Many people expect a therapist to have all the answers and assume that we know how to cure our patients. We do not. What works for one person may be a contra-indication for another. The job of a therapist is to build a therapeutic relationship with a patient via a medium; in my case, circus or dance. It is the patient who has to do the work. I can closely follow their process, offering support and suggestions but I do not have the capacity to change anyone.*

The Story of Emma the Architect

One of the most important things I learned during my study to become a dance movement therapist was that you can never really know what kind of impact your work has on a patient, as you can never feel what they can feel. This is my story, according to my observations during Emma's trajectory in the hospital. as I cannot fully experience the therapy as the patients do. There will therefore be an element of interpretation in my story, something which I try to stay away from as a therapist during my sessions.

Emma was a 17 year old girl, admitted to the adolescent psychiatric unit due to a suicide attempt. She lived with her mother, who has an intellectual disability and her older brother. Her father is no longer in the picture, due to his violent outbursts during Emma's childhood years. We learned, during the first few weeks of her stay, that her brother had committed sexually transgressive behaviour towards Emma.

When I first met Emma, I met a thin, fragile, frightened girl with big eyes, alert for possible danger. I invited her to the acro session, assuring her that she could just watch if she did not want to join in. She decided this would be better than staying alone in her room.

The sessions took place in a big sports hall. The group consisted of approximately 8 patients every week. As the hall felt large in comparison to the number of participants, I felt the importance of keeping the group close together. I therefore invited Emma to come and sit close to the mats. She sat in a tight ball, hugging her legs, her eyes peering out over her knees. This was her place and posture for the first two months of her treatment. I noticed that the tight ball I saw in the beginning began to relax a little during this time. She did not dare join in as she did not want physical contact with anyone.

During a particular session, a couple of months into her stay in the hospital, the group wanted to try and build a human pyramid. It was during the holidays, so the patients that didn't normally attend acrobatics, due to school commitments were also invited to participate in the session. It was a big group: 14 adolescents. I asked Emma if she could play the role of "architect" and organise the building of the pyramid. She appeared hesitant at first but decided to give it a try. Emma worked well in this role. She listened attentively to the individual wishes within the group and came up with an idea of how to construct the pyramid, whilst keeping everyone happy. Jill, another patient, was small and light, so it was decided that she would be best placed on the top. She was scared as she was new to the group and had not followed many sessions. Emma took Jill under her wing. She talked to her quietly, telling her exactly what to do and

that she needn't be frightened because Emma was going to stay with her. As Jill began to climb, she struggled. Emma reached out a hand to stabilise her shoulder, giving Jill the chance to continue climbing. Thanks to Emma, Jill reached the top and the pyramid was complete. Emma helped Jill down afterwards and complimented her on her bravery and perseverance. I, in turn, thanked Emma for her way of working, being clear in her instructions and making everyone feel safe.

Emma Takes Over

The following session was still during the school holidays and again, the group was large. I asked the group whether they wanted to try the pyramid again and they all agreed. I took a step back to allow the group to build the pyramid by themselves, without my instruction. I looked at Emma and told her: "you know what to do. You can take over". Some members of the group confirmed this and even Jill seemed a little more relaxed. Emma rose to the challenge, smiling! We had a pyramid in no time.

During the following sessions, Emma's confidence grew. All those weeks of watching from the sidelines seemed to have paid off because she could understand how many of the moves worked and what needed correcting, should they not work. She often took over the role of coach and even learned to become a reliable catcher, despite her size. Following her own tempo, she was able to both offer and accept physical contact whilst supporting others. At first she chose who she wanted to work with. There were only a couple of people she trusted with physical touch. She let them find support by holding her hand or her shoulder. This developed quickly into Emma being able to offer and accept physical contact from almost everyone in the group.

Emma Goes up High...

One day, Emma expressed a desire to try an exercise herself as a flyer. She was a bit scared and so chose a strong girl that she had a good friendship with and also asked me to base her. She felt really pleased when the exercise worked and she giggled a lot afterwards! She ended the session feeling pleased with herself! She even told the nurses what she had achieved when we returned to the unit.

> *She felt really pleased when the exercise worked and she giggled a lot afterwards!*

During the following session I suggested that we worked on the flyer standing on shoulders, whilst the base sat on the floor. Emma chose not to take part straight away. She wished to watch the others first. A bit later I invited Emma to try and stand on my shoulders. She accepted. After a couple of attempts, Emma managed to stand on my shoulders. Again, the giggling started when her feet were safely back on the floor. We stayed working at this level for a few weeks, allowing everyone the chance to gain experience with the skill.

... And Even Higher!

Soon the day came where I asked the group if anybody wanted to try and stand on my shoulders, whilst I was standing. The majority of the group looked horrified! Emma was the first person

to raise her hand and said "I want to try it with you!". It worked really well! She needed a few attempts to reach my shoulders, but when she did, I gave her the feedback that she felt very strong and stable on my shoulders and that I felt comfortable working with her as a flyer.

Since that session, Emma is almost always the first to offer to demonstrate the skills with me as her base. She also dares to work physically with the other group members, whilst having respect for her personal boundaries and for the ways in which she needs to work to get used to a new skill.

CAN CIRCUS CONTRIBUTE TO FAMILY THERAPY?

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Matthias

Matthias Vanderhoydonk, 33, is an occupational therapist at KPC Genk, a children's psychiatric hospital in Belgium. He works in an outpatient program for young people aged 12 to 18 who struggle with psychiatric vulnerability combined with stuck or derailed development. The usual treatment time for these patients is 8 weeks. Matthias started to learn circus techniques as a teenager before undertaking further training at the Flemish Centre for Circus Arts (het Vlaams Circuscentrum). He regularly uses these techniques, particularly object manipulation and balance, in therapy, and continues to investigate the possibilities of working with young patients through circus.

Matthias on circus in/as therapy:

> *Circus techniques are a good tool in therapy because they can be varied and graduated endlessly. They can be adapted to almost any therapeutic objective.*

Juul's story

In the summer of 2021, I took on a case with one of our team's family psychologists, my colleague Tine Vandersanden. Juul, a 15-year-old boy in our department, had previously been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He was admitted to our hospital to see how we could advance from these diagnoses and empower Juul to take more control of his life. However, Tine and I soon discovered that Juul's social-emotional age did not seem to match his physical developmental age. He had the physical strength and learning ability of a 15-year-old, but functioned emotionally more like a child of 6 to 8 years old. This made it difficult, for example, for him to reflect on the consequences of his behaviour, what had happened or what was to come. This also complicated his ability to differentiate and talk about his feelings. In our opinion, Juul's parents were overestimating his level of social-emotional development and imposing rules, boundaries and duties on the basis of his age, just as they did with his older sister. This caused a lot of conflict between Juul and his parents.

The next session

Tine and I agreed that we would see Juul with his mother and father during the next session. Juul's older sister was not invited at this time. Our goal for the session was twofold: on the one hand, to connect Juul more with his parents; on the other, to draw parallels with the difficult home situation through circus exercises about working together. In an earlier conversation with the parents, Tine had already spoken about the concept of 'social-emotional development', but without concrete examples, the parents might be unsure as to how to work with this concept.

That Wednesday, Juul and his parents arrived on time. We started with our habitual practise - establishing a safe foundation for the therapy. I provided a lot of light and rolled out a vinyl circle two metres in diameter that would delineate the mini-circus space on which we would

work. That way, all of the family members were automatically standing in a circle and everyone could see each other well. We gave the family a brief explanation of what the session would look like. It would consist of three parts. First we would do a few short exercises to get together in the here and now. This would be followed by some structured assignments for the family, in which I, as a circus therapist, would be the moderator and Tine the observer. In the last part, Tine would enter into a conversation with the family, which I would supplement with practical examples and observations from previous assignments.

At first, Juul and his parents appeared uncomfortable and tense. To reduce the tension, I started with a playful basic exercise of social juggling: making eye contact with someone in the circle and throwing a juggling ball underhand. After a while, I started tossing several balls at once, then a football or overball (a small physiotherapy ball) instead of the juggling balls, directing them to catch the balls only with their dominant or non-dominant hand. Slowly, I saw the tension diminish: the ice was broken. The family seemed ready to work together.

I divided them into two groups. Father and son were invited to use the circus equipment to build a two-metre-high tower, capable of standing upright for at least 30 seconds. The mother was encouraged to give directions, which she did, enthusiastically. The father remained in his 'executive' role, but Juul indicated that

it was difficult. He knew from previous sessions which materials were stored in the cupboards and, as a result, had very different strategies in mind to tackle the assignment. His mother persevered and managed to instruct father and son to build the tower in a short time. Juul followed his mother's advice but clearly didn't agree with her construction methods. The tension was visible on his face. Would he continue to participate actively? I needed to reduce that tension to keep him engaged in the session. I should also be able to explain to the parents in the debriefing how I had done this …

I told everyone to take a short water break. This allowed Juul to regain his composure and start the next part with adequate mental space. I divided the tasks as follows: Juul was allowed to sit on an oil barrel and give instructions to his parents, who this time would build a tower for him. I consciously told Juul what he could say or do (give oral directions) and refrained from stating what he could not say or do (for instance, to help). I did this because if we verbally restrict a person with an emotional age of 6 to 8, there is a good chance that they will focus on the restrictions, inflating them in their mind and distracting them from the task at hand.

At this point, things went terribly wrong. Juul gave a lot of short, quick, and highly confusing instructions. His parents did not understand them, and Juul's frustration grew. (I thought to myself: it sounds clear in his head, but the message is not getting across.) Frustration tipped into anger as Juul became more agitated. Suddenly his father realised he could stack all the gymnastics mats. But this was intensive work for the parents, with a relatively meagre result. The tower was now only 60cm high. Juul then had his parents pile up spinning plates, with a

combination of diabolos and sitting balls on top. Unfortunately, that resulted in a structure that threatened to fall. Juul resolutely and forcefully rejected his parents' suggestions: he and only he could give instructions! Meanwhile, things went from bad to worse.

The tower toppled over and tears welled up in Juul's eyes as he hit the empty oil drum angrily several times…

I decided to intervene and told the family that, due to lack of time, we would make the tower a bit lower, 1.5 metres high instead. To make my instruction visual, I held my hand out at that height. Juul nodded in understanding (comprehending, because structure and time appointments must be respected, but not grateful). He picked himself up, reconsidered his plan and at that moment also took his father's suggestion to put the overball on top of the diabolo, and not the other way around.

It worked!

The tower remained upright. Juul jumped off the barrel and hugged his parents. The family laughed, not with relief but with sincerity: they had managed to complete a task together and have fun doing it, something the father and mother later said hadn't happened for a long time. Juul looked at his mobile phone and said that he had done his job: after all, he had been told that he could come to a circus session, not that he also had to stay for a debriefing. He snatched the car keys from father's pockets and left the room with the words, "I'll wait in the car". His parents didn't seem to mind at the time: finishing the assignment together was worth more to them than a fight over the car keys.

In the follow-up discussion, Tine and I aimed to convey the

interventions I had applied during this session into useful tools for the family's daily home life. We talked about giving short and simple, one-step instructions, adapting a task when emotions run high, decreasing the pressure of completing the task ("you have to do this, or else!"), celebrating the little successes instead of focusing on the bad things and, maybe most importantly, we shared that we could see how much strength and enthusiasm his parents had put into bringing up Juul from a baby to a teenager!

Later on...

A few months later, I happened to run into Juul's mother in a shop. She told me he was occasionally overwhelmed by his emotions, but that their life together was, all in all, a lot more stable than before.

BUILDING ART IN THE AIR

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Katja

Katerina Alderliesten, 28 years old, is a psychologist and psychotherapist currently living in Prague (Czech Republic). She participates in various psychology and psychotherapy projects, both locally and internationally, while working part-time as a private practitioner. She completed five-year psychotherapy training in daseinsanalysis (existential-humanistic approach) and has recently begun her journey with EFT (emotion-focused therapy) training. She is a part of the circus community both as a juggler and a facilitator. Katja conducted qualitative research on "Juggling Through Emotions", exploring juggling as a tool for emotional regulation and its benefits on mental and physical health. She interviewed both male and female jugglers aged between 24-27 from the Czech Republic, France, and the USA. The text below is an extract from this research. The interviews took place in a safe 1:1 setting. Due to the anonymity guaranteed to the participants, any names and confidential information have been removed, changed, or reorganised. The responders were aware they are participating in a psychological research and have given signed consent.

Oliver

Oliver, 27, lives in the US, and has been juggling for approximately thirteen years. He has a history of anxiety and depression, and has experienced difficulties with emotional regulation. He often felt alone, as if he did not belong, and found himself continually overthinking and overanalysing. The feeling of expressing himself in a unique way with movement and various juggling props helped him to feel understood and gave him a sense of identity and belonging. He was now a part of something. He also became a part of a circus community that showed him a safe space, support and unconditional acceptance. He was no longer alone and labelled weird.

What made you start juggling in the first place?

A class in school when I was 14 years old. I was a teacher's assistant and was not participating in the class. When everyone started trying, I liked the challenge and gave it a try. The positive feedback received was definitely a reason I continued in the very beginning and I haven't stopped since.

What makes you pick up the prop again and keep getting better?

Positive feedback from people is a factor for me but another important driving force is the feeling of creating through this outlet. The feeling of expressing myself in a unique way with movement and props helps me feel understood.

How do you feel when you first make the trick or movement happen successfully?

The first success of a new trick after failing and pushing forward feels like putting a crack in a huge barrier, and only then can the trick really begin. The first hint that the movement is working is often the spark I need to keep going. Having a prop fall in the right way and knowing what I need to complete the motion is very compelling. When I fail, however, there is a lot of frustration, anger, sadness, disappointment. Especially nowadays, since the skill in circus disciplines is incredibly high and it is getting higher and higher every day – as inspiring as it is, it also makes it difficult to only compare yourself today to yourself yesterday, and not to anyone else.

Have you ever found yourself juggling to relieve any specific emotion?

I have definitely gone to juggling to resolve emotions. After some relationship troubles I have found myself drilling juggling patterns to keep my mind occupied and focused. The activity clears my mind by engaging my body. I'm not sure if it was conscious or not in that instance. Juggling is always a way of quieting my mind from anxiety. The repetition and comfort after years of practice make the movement second nature. Sometimes the emotions I feel come through and fuel my movement and expression. I would like to think positive emotions yield better art, but I would say the opposite is true. Juggling is always there for me. I have worked with it through all of my emotions. All of my frustrations are quelled through working on my chosen skill, even if the clarity is only temporary. Most emotions need time to be resolved and juggling gives me a rest from heavier thoughts and change of point of view. It clears my mind by engaging my body and gives my emotions a safe release. Often when I

was angry, I was able to transfer that anger into creating new concepts of movement and juggling.

Do you sense any difference between the state of mind you are in BEFORE, DURING and AFTER your training or performance?

Before I practise, I may have different levels of anxiety but when I am working and focused on what I want to learn or improve, my anxiety fades. During practice, I can feel a range of things – frustration, freedom, clarity. After a good practice I feel accomplished, satisfied, and content. I think the term "flow state" is a bit romanticised and often used incorrectly. That being said, the flow state is very real in cases of trained physical activities like these. From activities as simple as menial factory tasks to movement arts. When I perform, I go into this mode, and it is very hard to remember afterwards exactly what happened. Time seems to speed up when performing a long-standing piece of choreographed work. My head feels very clear when I know what I need to do and feel I can do it! The feelings of nervousness have subsided over the years and what I am left with is exhilaration and a feeling of being very present. In personal training time this feeling comes and goes. When practising something new, it takes time before I can begin to feel in the zone.

How do you feel when you do not juggle for a few days? Is there any difference in your state of mind?

I feel like many things build up in my head without this outlet. As I stagnate I notice my feelings of anxiety have increased and became more tangible. I would not say this is the only reason, but juggling gives me physical exercise and mental focus I don't feel in other areas of life.

What has juggling taught you about yourself?

I have learned how I learn. This is huge. The school has not shown me how I best absorb information, but spending time on improving myself through juggling and then teaching others has taught me what works. Everyone has something they enjoy and excel at, but many never find it.

How do you incorporate your experience from juggling into your everyday life? Do you think there is any connection?

Juggling has always been there for me. It has kept me together many times throughout my life. I am a rather clumsy and shy person, and juggling has taught me I can do anything I set my mind to when I invest time and effort into it. It gives me freedom. It [juggling] is all about learning, and learning happens through failure. Juggling helps me deal with failure because everything I get good at is built on a foundation of mistakes. We drop a ball and have to figure out why that happened. When we pay attention to the circumstances that caused a failure we can avoid them and find a better path to success.

It gives me both the physical and mental release I need in life. It is a beautiful, never ending journey. There are thousands of tricks and movements that can be done in juggling. And there are thousands of combinations of those tricks and movements. Every training or every day can be divided into small moments of success. There are countless directions one can head to and we can never learn it all. That is great, because when you are on the top, on the peak, it is boring. The view might be nice but there is nowhere to grow from there. But when you are going up, rising and growing, you know something is waiting there for you. That

there is still somewhere to go and something new can be learned. It is a never-ending journey that is only as pretty as one makes it.

If you were to take me with you to your juggling landscape, what would it look like?

"I see my juggling landscape in detail and very clearly. I see a large space – a meadow, surrounded by forest. I see a doe in the distance and there is both the details and the continuity… tranquillity. It's an open space where I can fit anything I can think of. And sometimes it's like finding a four-leaf clover on a very large meadow. So, it's a free space with all the details and then when I focus very carefully, I can see more and more details. So, this is it. And the sun is shining. I feel good. I can lie down on the grass, or I can juggle. I can hear the birds singing. It is my zone, where I can loosen up, unwind.

> *Juggling makes me feel freedom. Freedom to build art in the air.*

Conclusion:

Juggling can be a significant tool for mental health and supporting emotional regulation.

THE BLOOMING FLOWER

SOCIAL CIRCUS

About Sarah

This story takes place in the year 2019. Sarah Cinardo is 32 years old and teaches circus in a Youth and Social Circus School in Galway, Ireland. The story she tells below took place in the context of a homeschooling project for children aged 3 to 10 and their mothers.

Sarah on circus:

> *I decided to work with this group without having any knowledge of the homeschooling process. The educational method is different from the usual school curriculum: children learn school subjects with their parents at home or in small groups guided by carers and parents in turn. During the day, they engage in activities that allow them to socialise and develop various social and motor-cognitive skills, such as horseback riding, cooking, climbing... and contemporary circus\. The children attending the group were quite varied in age, so this was a challenge and an opportunity for me to learn. Violet, the little flower that bloomed, was surely proof of this.*

The entire group consists of 12 children and 4 mothers. The children are lively, chatty, and varied in age. They are open to playing together, but tend to stick by their mothers. Over time, they learn to enjoy being with the other children, but are still always a little reluctant to share their parents - especially Ewan.

Ewan

Ewan is 4 years old and comes to the group with his mother and two older sisters aged 7 and 9. Ewan's mother is an easygoing, smiley person. She seems curious and open to new things, and always available for her children and the group. This is a very important factor in Ewan's transformation in the collective.

Ewan is introduced by his mother. He has a hard time talking to strangers, tending to close up in new situations. His mother, then, acts as his voice. He has creamy skin, thick blond curls, a sporty style, and blue glasses emblazoned with an image of a superhero.

Ewan only plays with his sisters and bursts into tears if his mother leaves him for even a few minutes. He does not easily accept other children's help or co-operation during games. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, Ewan will start screaming as if he is terribly hurt, though he has apparently not fallen or fought with anyone. His mother occasionally takes him out of the classroom to calm him down. Once, it was nearly impossible to console him and his mother decided to take him and his sisters home in the middle of the lesson.

As the first few weeks go by, the group settles, but Ewan has difficulty connecting with the others and with us teachers.

I spend time wondering how I can best involve Ewan. I offer games that support Ewan in progressively decreasing reliance on his mother and getting closer to the other children without feeling threatened. Whenever possible, I talk to Ewan in quiet moments, often with mum around, as she can act as a translator and emotional bridge. This child seems unapproachable, and sometimes I feel helpless. Ewan has a strong Irish accent, so even on the rare occasion that a few words come out, I still have a hard time understanding him.

The other children, even the most impetuous, take turns trying to involve Ewan. They want to make friends and understand that Ewan needs some more time to connect to them. This creates an environment of understanding, respect, and mutual help.

Ewan really likes to play and train on the aerial silks. These are long strips of fabric that hang down from the ceiling of the room, used for aerial acrobatics. You can climb on them, turn them, swing them and disappear into them… this is a discipline that attracts a lot of other people's attention, and in the name of safety, requires one to "be seen." But Ewan doesn't like to be looked at. So first I make a knot at the base of the fabric and create a kind of hammock. Ewan gets inside, swings around, and his mum comments that Ewan feels protected and hidden by the fabric's hug. We do other exercises with the fabric: I show Ewan how to stand up. We practise different poses and make up games using the fabric that also involve other children and adults. It seems paradoxical - though Ewan struggles with being looked at, the fabric also offers motivation to keep going, one step at a time.

The environment that is created during these games and exercises is extremely supportive. Students cheer for each other when the

fear of trying something new comes up, and everyone advises each other when they forget the moves. Everything is done safely. The mothers are quiet, yet co-operative. The children appear engaged and relaxed. They trust us trainers who guide them and show courage and creativity in trying new paths. Group and guided work are alternated, with time for both led and free individual practice.

Sometimes Ewan allows us to give him some guidance, but most often needs mum by his side. There are moments of free and individual play, in which the other children encourage Ewan and even seek him out to make up new games together. At the beginning of each lesson, Ewan needs time to melt the ice, but over the course of the lesson and over the months we notice progress in co-operation and connection. Ewan gradually manages to attempt more complex moves on the silks.

Violet

At the beginning of our sessions, as is common in educational circus groups, there is time for all participants, children and adults alike, to tell their stories and be heard and welcomed without judgement. This active and respectful listening facilitates group connection and playfulness. The basis of this interaction is openness; it gives participants the courage to share parts of themselves and be accepted.

One day, Ewan comes to the class behind his mother and two sisters like a chick following a hen...But in those blue eyes there is something new. This time, I get a smile. Ewan has a confident attitude, taking more distance from the family. In fact, I see his shoes and jacket fly off as Ewan runs off to join in a game of chase with the other children.

I look at Ewan's mother in disbelief: "Wow! What happened?" With calm, happy eyes, she responds: "Today, instead of Ewan, Violet is here with us."

Violet's glasses are no longer blue with superheroes, but purple with flowers. Today Violet is here with us, I repeat to myself.

Violet appears relaxed, sits in the circle a little taller, still close to the family, but no longer leaning on them. Violet does not appear frightened.

Today, the question buzzing around the circle is "what do you want us to call you?". It's not hard to imagine some kids wanting to name themselves after their favourite superhero. But Violet says her name: Violet, pronouncing it clearly, telling us that she always wants to be called that. Behind her shy presence, you can feel the courage of this little flower.

Violet's mum supports her with a hug and a smile. The whole group welcomes Violet's choice without commenting, with all the naturalness that these occasions deserve.

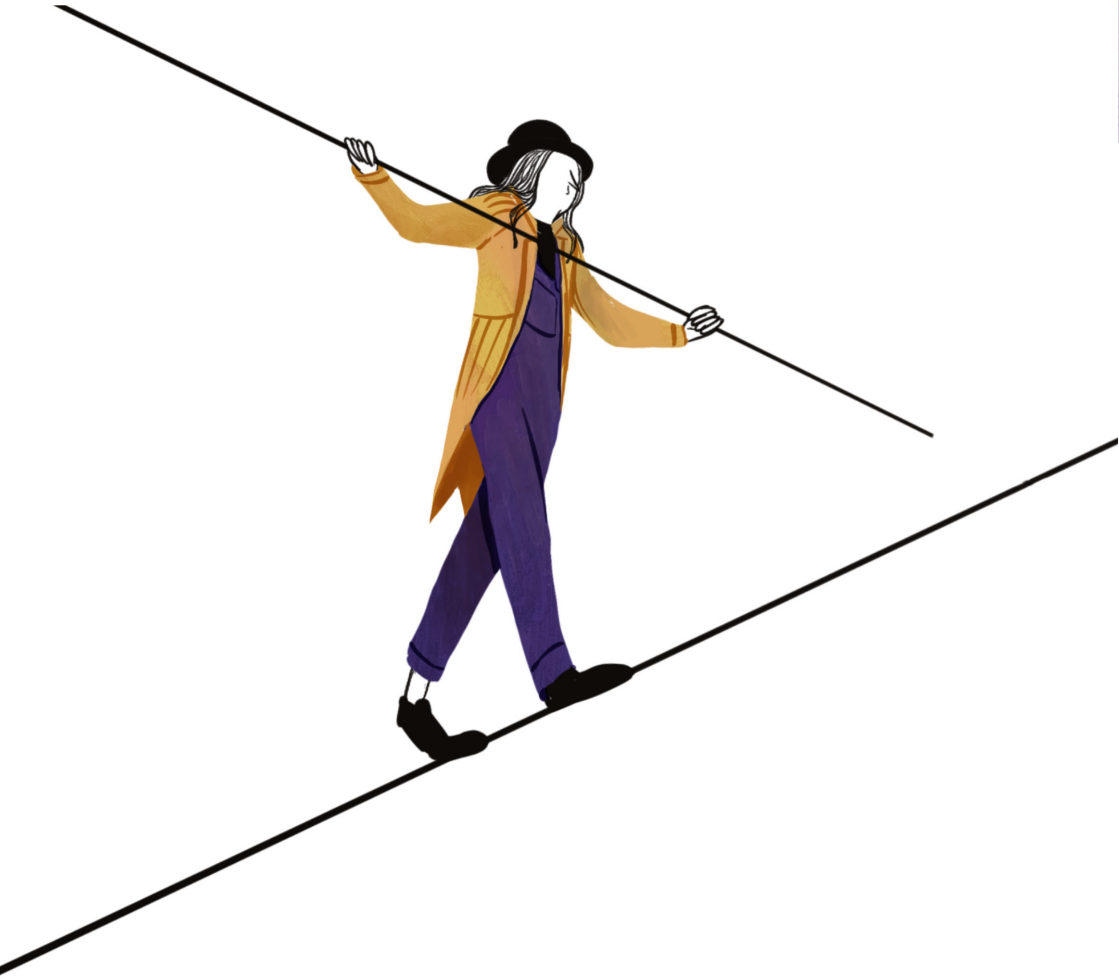
From that day on and for the rest of the year, Violet plays with the other children, manages to connect with other mums and me, and seems less clingy toward her mother. It is, of course, not always easy; sometimes Violet bursts into tears, or closes up like a hedgehog and needs an extra hug. Still, as Violet becomes more communicative and confident, the change is momentous.

Violet continues to enjoy the aerial fabric and now feels more at ease under the gaze of others. She has found a supportive environment in which she can carry herself and blossom into the safety of being received as she is.

A Brave Space

I have no recent news of Violet; we do not know the evolution of her gender identity after that time, but that is not important. The important factor is that Violet found acceptance in a situation that demanded courage. Just as when one receives support when trying a scary new trick on the fabric. The other students root for them on the fabric just as they do for that person's life itself.

Circus trainers place great emphasis on creating a safe space, an open environment in which listening, acceptance, and mutual support are the basis of the work. This sends a message of "brave space" that lets everyone know "here you can be yourself, because you will be welcomed, and we're rooting for you". In this way, even frightening situations become opportunities for growth for everyone, as Violet led me to believe.



DOWN TO THE WIRE: COMING ALIVE WITH CIRCUS

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Glynis

Glynis Hull-Rochelle is a contemporary circus teacher, drama therapist and somatics practitioner with individuals and groups. Wirewalking, clowning, physical theatre and partner acrobatics are her favourite circus disciplines. In 2016, she established a grassroots social and support program for young LGBTQI+ people, where the youth experience acceptance, validation, friendships, resilience and healing in community across a variety of activities from support groups to museum outings to a book and film club. This story is about a struggling teenager from the LGBTQI+ group who found a whole new world in circus.

Glynis on circus:

> *My desire is for all people to be able to fully inhabit their authentic selves and enjoy empowered, connected, dignified lives, even when the world is in crisis and so many of us are deeply wounded. The creativity, curiosity, energy and hard work of circus enables us to learn so many ways of relating to ourselves and each other. We can dive into play and imagination while striving for our goals, and practise being patient and grounded while responding to life's complex realities.*

Changes

Dina is 17, but began attending our LGBTQI + workshops and support groups at the age of 14. That first time, I remember how jumpy and fearful Dina was, and how complicated her life seemed to be - moving back and forth between mom's and dad's houses in two different towns, with two completely different ways of functioning - both unfortunately seemingly quite dysfunctional. Dina expressed never feeling satisfied in either place. Home was mainly with her mom, who worked too much and was barely ever there, and who seemed to be an emotional burden for Dina anyway. Instead of supporting her child, she considered Dina her confidante, so Dina learned all about her mother's many trials and tribulations and experienced her constant mood swings… it seemed there was little space for Dina's own feelings and needs. Still, Dina did not feel safe or comfortable if her mom was not home, and would wander around town for hours to avoid being alone with her abusive stepfather. Dina's biological father, who was emotionally distant and critical towards her, had also found a new partner, who brought several new kids into the mix. Dina managed to cultivate relationships with her new step-siblings, but her stepmother acted unkindly and unfairly towards her. Dina was unable to concentrate, often late with schoolwork, and had switched schools a few times. She seemed to have a lot of trouble with the basic elements of living. No one had ever taught her or shown her how to handle her emotions, so when stress and conflict arose, she would either be overwhelmed and anxious or flat and depressed, pendulating back and forth. She sometimes fell deep into loneliness and separated herself from the world. She felt as if she'd never fit in anywhere. At our workshops for LGBTQI+ teens, we played games, did art projects, sometimes

practised juggling and balance skills, and held the space for the participants to talk about the problems in their lives. It seemed Dina had finally found a place where a group of her peers understood and accepted her. She began to enjoy the social life of the community, and made some friends.

As teens sometimes do, one day Dina just disappeared from the scene. After a long absence, we ran into each other by chance downtown. "Hey, I've changed my name - it's Sam!" Sam told me that they identified as nonbinary and should be addressed in the neutral gender from now on.

Feeling Alone

Some time later, Sam returned to our teens groups and joined our improvisational theatre and circus sessions. Sam and Alex became very close at the sessions. The two of them were together all the time and it was clear there was real depth in and an inimitable quality to their friendship. A few months went by. The others, of course, speculated that a love story was growing, and teased the pair for weeks on end. Sam's requests for them to stop were not honoured. This incensed Sam and drove them into a dark space in which they felt they were being watched and judged. Full of shame, fear and frustration, Sam suddenly cut off all relations with the others, including Alex, and stopped showing up to the sessions. The friendship was over and Sam was alone again. We chatted online a bit. When I found out what had happened, I suggested I could moderate a discussion between the people involved, feeling how important the community had been to Sam, but Sam refused.

Motivation

Meanwhile, at the contemporary circus centre where I teach, we were invited to participate in a 10-day youth exchange project in another country within the framework of an international arts festival. The exchange would culminate in a final performance of funambulism (the art of crossing a tightwire holding a long, heavy balancing pole, or balancier) walking over a river basin. The festival would take place in a few months, during the summer. We had trouble finding the last young person for the trip, and I remembered Sam and the interest they had shown in the circus. Sam was grateful for the invitation and began to attend our balance training, where they met another nonbinary person. The two quickly befriended each other. At first, Sam was a bit nervous, shaky and full of negative self-talk, such as "I'll never learn this, I'm too clumsy!" But within the first few hours, as they got used to carrying the unwieldy balancier, Sam had already made visible progress walking the wire, and was motivated to return to the training sessions, each time developing a little more confidence and skill.

Higher and Higher

In the month before the festival, we had the chance to go to a neighbouring country (5 hours away) for a long weekend and practise with another team that would be also attending the summer youth exchange. Sam and Martina, another exchange participant from our circus, joined me. In addition to a few hours' training each day, in which we progressively moved to higher and higher wire heights, we also explored the city and had some fun with friends. I walked the four-metre-high wire on the first day, as I already had experience in such heights. Martina, being

a determined wirewalker, but new to funambulism, managed it on the second day. The third and final day was hot and sunny. After a bit of cursing and nail biting, Sam decided to take this last chance to go up and walk the highwire. Sam got into the harness, climbed up the tower and was attached to the safety line. Sam stood for a moment on the platform, taking the long pole in hand and looking around with wide eyes. The trainer, Victor, spoke to Sam encouragingly, letting them know that he had confidence in Sam to cross successfully. After a few moments, Sam stepped off the platform, the tops of the trees at eye level and grass far below, wavering but dedicated. Sam faltered a few times, but laboriously made it all the way across the 40-metre-long wire, accompanied by a single cloud passing through the blue sky. We all cheered at Sam's confidence and acknowledged their growing resilience. The three of us travelled back home that night satisfied with our practice and progress.

Panic

The festival was coming up and the exchange group had not been able to prepare the performance we were meant to create before the trip, nor to even meet in the full group. Sam asked about all the details of the trip and expressed both excitement and worry about such a busy schedule. I reassured them that we would try to optimise our resting time and that we would manage whatever came up. On the travel day, 10 of us (two exchange leaders and eight participants under 30) boarded an aeroplane and set off to the exchange. We began our 10-day adventure, meeting the other 50 exchange members, and went back exhausted the first evening to cramped hostel rooms.

Over the next week, Sam, like most of us, felt both exuberant and overwhelmed by the many interesting people and things happening in the project. Sam made friends with young people from the eight other countries. During the daily open trainings in the local circus centre, they

taught each other circus games, skills and disciplines. Sam was there, learning new things every day. We tried to organise the schedule so that there would be as little stress as possible, including a lot of play and free time, decreasing the expectations for our performance, and making sure we got to relax at the beach.

Nonetheless, the activity was still demanding. We travelled several times a day between three different sites in the city for meals or practise, and some chose to walk around sightseeing in the city which was full to bursting with festival tourists and activities. Privacy was hard to come by. Despite the fact that the group worked consciously every day on strategies for managing the nervous system, as the performance came closer, the general level of anxiety and anticipation rose. The exchange members in our group craved space and time to be alone, and missed the comforts of home. Each of the young people had had at least one day when emotions had overtaken them and they had felt overwhelmed. We had a nice support system within the group, but there was a lot happening all at once! People were growing exhausted.

On the day before the performance, waiting around for hours for the general rehearsal, Sam came to me looking alarmed, saying they had to leave the place and couldn't do it. We had only one

very small time slot in which to practise our performance, and were asked to be ready whenever the director told us to go. This was not the time for any complications. But Sam's heart was beating faster and the anxiety was increasing. Sam became more and more uncomfortable, feeling out of control. This was the second time during the week that fear had led to a panic attack with Sam curling up in a ball of stress. I made sure Sam had a bottle of water and we walked around to an empty green space behind the building, where Sam stayed for over an hour, re-regulating their nervous system in communion with the trees and birds. I checked in regularly to make sure they were alright, and soon after Sam's nerves had calmed and they returned, our group was called for the general rehearsal. Whew! I wondered what the performance the next day would bring!

Walking on Water

The next day was the full performance. There were hundreds of people gathered around the river basin and a lot of excitement in the air. Seven wires were strung across the water at different lengths and heights - the longest measuring 55 metres long, and the highest being 6 metres above the water.

Our group stood around in their costumes. We did some stretching and practised some balance moves.The music began and everyone found their places. Sam stepped out on the wire. We had been repeating the importance of not looking straight down into the water, which, as it moves, reflects the light variously, and can make some funambulists feel off-balance. It is ideal to keep our eyes on the end of the wire, lightly focused on the spot we intend to reach. This is precisely what Sam did. The wires were much more bouncy than the ones we had trained on, and Sam

had to work extra hard to keep in step. But they landed on the centre platform with the other performers and took a bow to the audience's cheers and clapping.

Coming Alive

That night we had a party to celebrate the successful exchange. The following day Sam said many goodbyes to new circus kin. In the community sessions, Sam expressed being grateful to have been exposed to so many different circus practices during the daily open trainings, and said that the experience had been wonderfully enriching. There was a sense of feeling at home with the other young people involved in the circus world. On our travels back home, Sam shared that perhaps funambulism would not be their favourite discipline, but that they wanted to keep pursuing circus, and sign up for the regular teen classes at the circus centre.

In the autumn, Sam began to attend the circus centre not once but two times a week! School was a mess, friendships were complicated, and their mental health not as stable as they wished, but Sam reported that the circus brought them real joy and a sense of freedom. Sam says: "Circus is probably the best thing I've ever gotten involved in, mainly because of the lack of judgement - whether it's about my mental state, my skills, or my body and weight. Everyone gets along well with each other there, and that's beautiful!" and adds: "When I'm on the silks, I feel cool and powerful. I always thought it would be impossible to do!"

PLAYING TO CONNECT: CIRCUS IN A PRIVATE PSYCHOTHERAPY

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Vojtech

Vojtech Holicky works as a health psychologist in a private clinical practice in a small historical town in the Czech Republic. He is trained in integrative psychotherapy and uses the principles of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) in his work with clients. Vojtech is also a juggler. Flowersticks were his first juggling tool. His skills evolved through flow arts and fireshow to passing clubs, a discipline with which he also performs as a member of the Cascabel Passing Trio at public events. For ten years, the Cascabel group has run a circus club, where they focus on integrating children with a wide range of special needs.

Two Shy Sisters

Melissa was rather shy and withdrawn even in early childhood. In preschool, she stayed close to her twin sister Karina and played very little with the other children. Around that time, their mother became unable to care for the girls, so their grandparents took over their care. In primary school, Melissa and her sister were separated into different classes, purportedly to support their independence. This, however, led to insecurity and an even stronger feeling of isolation. Melissa was unskilled in establishing

friendships and remained on the periphery of the class group. Her sad appearance earned her some unpleasant nicknames, and sometimes random children shouted at her in the halls, which frightened her even more. Melissa began to experience her first bouts of stomach pains and was reluctant to go to school in the morning. For the last two years of primary school, the teachers finally put the two sisters back together in the same class. They were relieved, as they felt safer. However, they still did not fit in with their peers, feeling lonely and tense around other people.

The twins were both good students and passed their exams to get into the local high school without any difficulty. New challenges awaited them there. Their teachers were less forgiving and more demanding. Their classmates were less aggressive, but soon found their weak spots and ridiculed them. Again, they were subject to insults in the hallways at break time and taunting remarks during class. Tests in front of the blackboard were hell. It became impossible for them to speak in front of the class, despite the teachers' insistence and threats. During the second year, the sisters could no longer cope with the pressure of the educational system and the school climate. Fear-inducing concerns mixed with intense shame made it impossible for them to get up in the morning and go to school. The girls stayed at home, their education halted, unable to find work and dependent on their grandmother and grandfather. They only went out if accompanied by their grandmother, or in the evening when no one was on the street. Their symptoms met criteria for social phobia underlined by an anxiety personality disorder. The girls were granted partial disability benefits.

Life Feels Unmanageable

Around that time, we had our first appointment. Melissa came with her equally unhappy sister and her grandmother, who walked laboriously with a cane. Grandma was very worried that the girls couldn't take care of themselves. They couldn't go shopping on their own, let alone go to any office. During the session, both girls hid their faces behind their long flowing hair, whispering short answers to my questions. Their grandmother had to provide most of the information. The girls clearly felt uncomfortable in my presence. They seemed anxious and barely reacted to simple conversation. We arranged several more appointments, but they were very similar. The girls were not interested in changing anything; they wanted to escape the situation. My attempts to interact with them ended in failure. Eventually our contact faded out completely. The twins' anxiety seemed to be a curse that could not be broken.

A Second Attempt

A year went by. Their grandfather passed away and the twins were left alone with their grandmother. She brought them back to my office, asking for help, afraid of what would happen to them if they didn't learn to take care of themselves. The girls had managed to find suitable work putting leaflets in mailboxes, which allowed them to avoid people, and they could deliver at times when they would not have many encounters. During our appointments, the twins seemed slightly calmer, but were still very reserved. My attempts at longer conversations were unsuccessful again.

At that moment, I decided to take a different path and use an approach employing nonverbal communication. At first, I introduced a simple game of juggling to create interaction, sending a ball around our small group in a circle. It turned out that sister Karina didn't want to take the ball from me, but when we sent it via Grandma, Karina could hand it back to me. Melissa was a bit more courageous and joined in the game with more gusto. However, my attempts to develop the passing game with new elements was not successful. Even minimal interaction seemed too difficult. Nevertheless, the game served as a good example for us to reflect on the current dynamics of our relationship, which was not yet secure enough to allow them to relax into play together. I offered a safer way of working that would allow the twins to be in a less active role, discussing the possibilities of influencing and alleviating their constant anxiety through psychotherapy. We were able to describe their current struggles using the Circle Diagram, which brings awareness to the interconnectedness of the thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations that subsequently shape one's behaviour and relationships. In our empathic exploration of these struggles, we found the twins had a limited ability to verbalise their bodily experiences and to turn their attention inward. There was evidence of extensive long-term traumatization causing severe emotional pain. In our attempts to alleviate the symptoms, the girls found conventional relaxation techniques unpleasant, and they were ineffective. We had only a few sessions, and then again the contact gradually ceased.

Third Time's the Charm?

After another year, Melissa returned to my office with her grandmother but without her sister, who hardly left the house

anymore. Melissa had made the decision to try to do something proactive to change her own situation. We built upon our previous co-operation and further tried to deepen her awareness of her own experiences in order to help her gain some control over her manifestations of anxiety. We utilised some of the principles of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) and carefully explored the intense emotional suffering caused by the lack of acceptance and feelings of shame, which completely constrained Melissa, forcing her to shut down and hide within herself. In our sessions, the conversation always quickly died out. It was evident that Melissa was still under severe stress and did not feel safe talking directly about her difficulties or her circumstances. It was very difficult for her to focus her attention on her experience. Each time she tried to do this, there was a strong emotional reaction and her whole body tensed up. Fear and uncertainty filled the office. It was as if every word was dangerous to utter.

It was critical for us to establish a basic sense of security in our relationship. The methods I had employed so far were apparently ineffective. I needed to change my approach, so I offered Melissa a way to stay in contact without having to talk. I suggested we juggle together. Collaborative juggling could bring playfulness and relief from the oppressive atmosphere of therapy, as well as a communication tool to enable shared movement.

First, we tried the basic three-ball cascade juggling pattern on the table. We sat on the floor opposite each other. I showed Melissa the basic pattern - rhythmically picking up and replacing the balls, alternating left and right - and encouraged her to try it by herself. She refused, so we practised it together, with her mirroring my movements. This helped us connect and synchronise our tempo

so that we could create the same bilateral asynchronous rhythm with the three balls on the table. Melissa quickly picked up the skill and was clearly enjoying herself. We both acknowledged her enjoyment, and I pointed out the contrast to the anxiety she had felt just moments before. This exercise calmed Melissa and felt good, so we continued with it. She was soon able to do the cascade behind her back with her eyes closed. We focused our attention on the balls, which was safe enough and also mediated contact with our own bodily experience, which we could again explore further together.

Juggling seemed to bring something new to our relationship. At the next session, we already had a foundation upon which to build. The cascade pattern became our ritual to begin each session. Practising together face-to-face allowed us to take advantage of mirroring each other's movements, and our position sitting cross legged on the floor across from each other brought a greater, non-threatening intimacy through play. We even made fleeting eye contact. We took advantage of the more relaxed atmosphere and used the juggle board, an adaptive tool made of wood which has tracks on which jugglers can roll juggling balls. Sending the balls back and forth naturally set the stage for interaction and eventually a rhythmic synchronisation, and again, we both expressed enjoyment at this experience. The challenge of more complex combinations brought up a bit of tension in Melissa, but because the difficulty was reasonable, her anxiety never rose to panic and she was able to withstand the discomfort and move through it without giving up and declaring "game over."

Juggling Emotions

Our co-operation slowly began to deepen. Melissa was able to attend our appointments regularly, always accompanied by her grandmother. Juggling seemed to open a new channel of communication and allowed us to bypass the curse of anxiety. In the safe atmosphere of play, wherein nothing was judged as wrong, Melissa allowed herself to let go of her stress for a while, and this allowed her to experience new feelings. Our interactions increased. In addition to throwing balls at each other more often, we also "eyeballed" each other, and our non-verbal language became richer, which led to a stronger connection between us. We were more readable and therefore less threatening to each other. In this way, a common language began to develop. Melissa began to spontaneously recall long-forgotten experiences that she was willing to share. Laughter and smiles became a regular part of our sessions.

Reinforcing Melissa's sense of self-control empowered her so much that she could turn her attention to her life situation and observe it with curiosity. It turned out that the home experience was just as difficult as before. Her anxiety barred her from really engaging with her environment, and her life appeared very empty. Melissa continued to hide from the world in the safety of her shell. There was only one situation she looked forward to: our juggling together. We took advantage of her enthusiasm and continued her training, adding more challenging elements. Over the next few sessions, we explored different ways to use balls and juggling rings together, devoting at least half of each session to this activity. We quickly moved on to juggling in the air. Soon we were passing five balls to each other. Melissa made great efforts

to improve. During our sessions, the smile on her face showed her joy. She became much more capable of staying with this experience. It became apparent that she was comfortable in this relationship and that we could find success together. The effects of this experience lasted for a while. Melissa added a regular juggling practice to her daily routine and was soon consistently successful in throwing the three-ball cascade. She practised for up to an hour each day, expressing the immense pleasure she gained from it.

Melissa‘s juggling now served as a tool for regulating her emotions. It helped her relieve anxiety, release physical tension and open up to new experiences. Breathing exercises combined with ball manipulation helped her relax even further and she felt a greater benefit from them. When we experimented with contact juggling (rolling balls on the body’s surfaces), Melissa had the opportunity to explore the boundaries of her own body. The ball was a tool for anchoring herself in her senses, for instance while balancing a ball on her head, or using it as a massage tool.

When juggling, the sense of control over one’s own body and contact with one’s physical environment increases, and this may have led to a reduction in Melissa’s anxiety. We tried to ensure that Melissa took away at least some sense of power and success from each session. Achieving shared successes in passing, further strengthened our therapeutic alliance. Passing became our metaphor for a relationship in which we learned both to face common failure and to work for a common cause. The experience of a safe relationship and support proved to be a powerful emotionally corrective experience for Melissa.

Despite clear advances during our sessions, the changes in Melissa's daily life happened only very slowly. For a whole year we met twice a month and took small steps towards change. It was very surprising when Melissa showed up for the first time without accompaniment. She came in with a smile, seemingly even surprised by herself for a moment. We were both pleased with this step and noticed that she had managed to build up more courage over time. She believed she could handle the journey and she did. Was Melissa learning to juggle her life with more ease?

More changes developed. Gradually, Melissa gained more confidence, determination and trust in her own abilities. She began planning trips in the area, such as going to the theatre, and finished high school. Through juggling, we were able to work together to overcome what had originally seemed like an insurmountable barrier and create space for psychotherapeutic change. Juggling continues to serve Melissa as a tool for grounding and skill development, as well as a source of new feelings such as joy in her achievements and a sense of competence.

This story is reconstructed from the minutes of 30 sessions over four years. Melissa remains in psychological and psychiatric care.

THE GIRL WITH THE SPLITTING HEADACHE

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Matthias

Matthias Vanderhoydonk, 33, is an occupational therapist at KPC Genk, a children's psychiatric hospital in Belgium. He works in an outpatient program for young people aged 12 to 18 who struggle with psychiatric vulnerability, combined with stuck or derailed development. One of Matthias's hobbies turned out to be a very suitable means for helping him to connect with these young people, namely… circus.

Circus techniques based on experiential learning proved very useful as part of the approach used at KPC Genk. Patients are offered what for them is a new, unprecedented experience with the opportunity for reflection aimed at developing fresh ideas or behaviour. From his research, Matthias learned that only 1.6% of the patients in his target group had ever come into contact with circus techniques before.

Matthias on circus in/as therapy:

> *The fact that circus is a physically active medium is a nice benefit for our young patients who often struggle to get out of their beds or up off their sofas every single day.*

In autumn of 2022, Jasmine arrived at the department...

Jasmine was a gifted young lady who was referred to us through her GP because of depressive symptoms and almost continuous severe headaches. From a medical standpoint, nothing seemed to have helped. Jasmine had dropped out of school for almost half a year. After the intervention of a psychologist at her home, she was willing to give our day care a chance.

How do you activate someone who has been home alone for more than 6 months, and who gives up every activity because of a severe headache?

I started with Jasmine as with every young person referred to us. I invited her for two circus sessions a week as part of a group of four in which we would discover a circus technique. The programme also included one session per week with a larger number of people, with a group dynamic and group strengthening objective. To make sure we had enough variety in the circus exercises in the small groups, I focused on 9 techniques, one per week: spinning plates, unicycles, flower sticks, stilts, diabolos, rolla-bollas, juggling, barrel and ball, then slackline, and back to the spinning plates.

Jasmine arrived when we were just getting started with the stilts. The first weeks of her residence were mainly characterised by listlessness and a lack of interest. She quickly dropped out, seeing little value in the sessions. How was circus going to make her feel better? I told her I could understand why she had her doubts and that it was not my job to

convince her. Instead, I kept inviting her to the sessions and afterwards we would talk briefly about the meaning and goals of what we were doing. Sometimes she recognised them, sometimes we agreed to disagree. And that was ok too.

During the fourth week of Jasmine's residence, we started juggling.

I had abandoned the 'classic' notion of juggling with three balls long before. Instead, our basic exercise is all about social juggling: standing in a circle, focusing on each other and throwing one or more balls to each other. Then we make patterns and shuffle around. I built upon a suggestion from Jasmine's fellow patients and taught the group to juggle in pairs, first with 1 ball, then with 2, then 3 balls, both facing each other and side by side. It wasn't until the end that I consciously realised that Jasmine had been present throughout the whole session. With a short, casual compliment, I thanked her for participating and let Jasmine leave. In the sessions that followed, I continued to offer different types of juggling equipment at various levels of difficulty, using both individual and group techniques. I gradually started to see a pattern in Jasmine's behaviour: I noticed a higher degree of participation from her during the juggling techniques in a group, which peaked while working with the juggling balls and/or juggling clubs.

Then came the next challenge...

How could I help Jasmine move from these short moments to a longer, more structured and physically active commitment? I started by talking with her during the sessions and told her I saw that, despite her difficulties, she was still trying to be active.

I decided to spend more time working with juggling clubs. I called friends at the circus school in Hasselt to help refine my instructions and get some new ideas. They provided a video showing how two people pass juggling clubs in all kinds of ways. When I shared this video with the group, Jasmine and one of her fellow patients decided to try some of the moves themselves. Towards the end of the session, Jasmine asked if she could take some juggling clubs to continue practising during lunch break? Over the next three weeks, Jasmine and her fellow patient, Laura refined their techniques, sometimes with me, but most often alone.

How things went from there...

When Laura left the department at the end of that third week, Jasmine was left feeling a little lonely. After all, nobody else there had matched the juggling level they had reached together. It was then that I decided to chat with her about transferring skills she had learned from juggling to everyday life outside the centre. How she had found (again) something she was potentially good at, something she really enjoyed doing. Something she wanted to invest time in because she could, not because she had to do it. Jasmine indicated that she recognised this, and that when she was juggling, even her headache disappeared (for a moment). And so we made the link: headache to tension headache, tension headache to (short moments of) relaxation.

After Laura left, Jasmine stopped juggling. The learning experience she gained remained with her. So too did our conversation about finding ways to (briefly) relax as a means to live, rather than survive.

A SPECTRUM OF POLARITIES

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Vicki

Vicki Pompe, 39 years old, was a professional acrobat for 15 years and then retrained as a dance movement therapist. She now works as a circus therapist and dance therapist in De Korbeel, a child and adolescent psychiatric hospital in Kortrijk (Belgium). She also works in Atelier 113, a place for young people who need extra psychological support, in Harelbeke (Belgium) and within a multidisciplinary group practice, Het Huis van Katrien in Gent (Belgium), where both dance therapy and circus therapy are offered. During her weekly sessions with patients, she can draw on her rich experience as an acrobat. In those sessions she mainly uses partner acrobatics and aerial techniques, as well as balance exercises and object manipulation.

Vicki on performing:

> *Circus and performance go hand in hand. However, performing is not for everyone and in a therapeutic setting, the choice to perform should be carefully considered. A performance places the performer in a vulnerable position; the public may judge the work, interpreting the content and meaning of the performance in their own ways, which the performer has no control over. This can be detrimental to some clients. Other clients may see a performance as an achievement in expressing their ideas and emotions to others. It can represent all their hard work during their therapeutic process, offering a liberating feeling. It is important to me as a therapist that the client has the choice to perform, right until the last moment, to decide whether they wish the show to go ahead. Knowing your client and taking a singular approach is imperative in helping them to make the right decision.*

Kim's story

Kim is a 12-year-old girl that was admitted to the Korbeel: a psychiatric hospital for children and teenagers, due to aggressive outbursts at home and school. Her aggression was becoming progressively worse and her mother was at her wit's end. This was not the first time she had been admitted to the hospital. When she was 6 years old, she spent several months in the unit for the young children (0 to 7 years old). Now she was placed with the older children (7 to 12 years old). She had already been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) during her previous

period in the hospital.

It was during her first few days that I met Kim. She was a girl who saw the world in polarities: everything was either right or wrong, good or bad... She had little capability of seeing nuances in any situation. Due to her ADHD, Kim's mind appeared to race through thoughts, jumping from one subject to another, without tangible links. She spoke her thoughts out loud, like a waterfall: a flowing stream of consciousness.

In one particular session she found a bag of bouncing balls in my cupboard. There were 6 in total and each one had a different colour. She began playing with them all at the same time, even though she had not yet had the chance to develop much juggling technique. She talked about the different balls, commenting on which was the most bouncy, which one always ended up getting stuck in a corner, another always seemed to still want to come back to her after she had sent it hurtling around the room!

As we were walking to the session the following week, Kim began talking about the balls, expressing the wish to play with them again. The red ball that kept coming back to her during the previous session, seemed to continue returning this session. I asked her if it reminded her of anything in her daily life. Her answer was "love". Even when she had behaved badly, she seemed to always be given another chance by people who cared for her. She had just behaved badly in the group common room and was able to reflect on the moment with one of the nurses. The ball was also red - a colour traditionally associated with love.

I posed the question "if that ball is like love, which emotions belong to the other balls?" She spent the session naming the other balls: sadness, anger, fear, happiness and "dark thoughts"

(which she described as feelings of self-harming and suicide). In order to do this, she watched the balls carefully as they bounced around the room to see how she could translate their actions into emotions. She also started to move with the balls in slightly different ways. Over the coming weeks, we worked further on the different ways of moving with the balls/ emotions to clearly express how Kim felt and reacted when experiencing these emotions herself. She chose suitable music for each emotion, which we edited together. She then spent time making short choreographies for each emotion, until she had developed an act, which she wished to perform for one of her group leaders.

Before the show, Kim was a little nervous, but more excited to share the work she had spent many weeks working on. The show went well. Sophie, the group leader who came to watch, was very impressed and Kim felt proud of herself! She had not only been able to identify and

feel specific emotions, but found a way to give expression to them via the juggling balls in relation to her body and the space. She also was able to find nuances within the emotions instead of only seeing polarities.

THE BOY IN THE PINK VEST

SOCIAL CIRCUS

About Sarah

The following story takes place from October to December 2017. Sarah Cinardo is 30 years old and has just graduated from Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles as a Social and Youth Circus Trainer. She has joined an international project granted by UNICEF at the "Genclik ve Kultur Evi" in Mardin, by the Turkish-Syrian border. The project invites international circus trainers to lead training-for-trainers for Turkish and Kurdish young adults and leading classes for children in various cities affected by the civil war and the Syrian crisis.

Sarah on Circus

I immediately fell in love with the circus when I met it at 23 y.o. For me, circus means freedom, solidarity and mutual support. It is a safe space with a respectful environment in which you can feel at home in your true self and try new things and new ways of being. In my opinion, the connection between people is the most powerful factor in the effectiveness of circus. In circus, everyone finds their own space, which they can fill in according to their own pace and possibilities. There is no rush, no deadlines, nor any set goals that everyone must reach at the same time. Every tool and training is tailored to the individual, even when they are part of a group. In circus, we always focus simultaneously on the group and the individuals who comprise it.

In the social contexts in which I work, I always want to create connection between people from different cultures, who live together with all kinds of obstacles, and make it accessible to anyone. My main goal in these contexts is to protect the innocence of the children, who are forced by life to grow up far too quickly. I want to help these children - who are often expressionless with hardened eyes - laugh again. I want to melt their gaze and bring a smile, let their hearts breathe and release the tension in their bodies... at least for a few moments.

Circus in a War Zone

One of the stories that left a big mark on me is precisely that of a child, a single child in a group of 80 children, most of them orphans. This child never told us his name, but he showed

immense life strength. We will therefore call him 'Yasar', which means 'life'. We knew him as "the boy in the pink vest".

His story takes place in October 2017. I had just finished my extra year of professional circus training at the Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles. I arrived in Nusaybin, a town on the southwestern Turkish-Syrian border. Two wars raged there: one within Syria, where various refugee centres were established; and a civil war between Kurds and Turks. Both conflicts, until just five months before our arrival, had torn families apart, destroyed cities and decimated the population. Nusaybin had also been brought to the ground. Many children lacked anyone to care for them. They had no option but to be grown-up and 'strong' as soon as possible, in order to survive on their own. I travelled to Nusaybin with a team of 15 circus trainers and performers from France, Belgium and Germany. We would meet local trainers and carry out a circus project for these abandoned children.

Our project was to last for 3 months (10 weeks), from October till December. Twice a week we would give circus workshops to the children in the morning and afternoon in a large gymnasium. The project would end with a show performed on stage by the children themselves. Our training days followed a specific pattern, as is often done in social circus, including an opening circle, warmup and group games, then splitting up into small training groups to practise floor acrobatics or aerial acrobatics, walking globe, rolla bolla, tight wire, jump rope, hula hoop, or juggling balls and clubs. An essential part of our daily schedule was cleaning up and putting the circus materials back in order: by organising them, the children learn to take responsibility and comprehend their value, not as objects per se, but as tools

allowing us to be together, have fun, create, learn and grow. Learning to work together and take care of others and ourselves.

Yasar, The Boy in the Pink Vest, Appears

This boy is clearly one of the tallest in stature and, we think, also among the oldest. Yasar is perhaps 10 years old, though he could be 12, or 8 - one can never be sure. For these children, biological age is one thing, their social age, another - that is, the age assigned to them by life's struggles. Yasar has dark skin, black hair and a tough look - and a fuchsia vest, which he never takes off.

Yasar always says no. His response to anything we offer or ask of him is to stand in silence staring at us. He does what he wants, listening to or ignoring us as he sees fit. He seems to want to intimidate the adults and other children. He usually arrives to class late, alone, moves between groups as it suits him, and leaves when he wants. He assumes a posture of open challenge toward us, and, our local colleagues tell us, insults us in his language. The other children are afraid of him and they keep their distance. Some validate his behaviour and imitate him. He always stares us straight in the eye with a proud and provocative look. Our Turkish and Kurdish colleagues are also surprised. No one can figure out an effective way to win his attention and cooperation. All of our attempts at integrating him fail. This creates problems in our team, bringing up questions about authority, safety, mutual support and discussions about our professional values.

Over the days, we offer Yasar different activities in various small groups. We show him all the equipment and disciplines, hoping to find which one interests him the most. The walking globe and

the trapeze seem to have a chance. So, when we see him show up, we try to get him involved in these groups. Sometimes he participates, other times he has a fit of anger and fights with the other children. It is difficult to ensure that all the children get attention and care when he is there.

Yasar Explodes

One day, Yasar arrives late and the children are already in their subgroups. He enters the room, furious, with his proud and powerful presence, kicking everything in his path. We do not know how to respond to this show of emotion. He demands the instructor's attention and commands him to let him work on the trapeze immediately and that the other children should stay away. Yasar reacts strongly to the protests of the other children and physically threatens them. When we try to approach him, he runs away, with a flurry of movement, knocking down whatever is in his way. There is chaos everywhere. The Kurdish trainers begin to shout. We, as foreigners, do not understand what they are saying, but can see the aggression escalate. The French trainer is apparently stopping Yasar from getting what he wants. Yasar tries to punch him. The instructor evades the blow and Yasar is pushed out of the gym by the other trainers.

The other children are tense and bewildered for the rest of the morning. The trainers are also uncomfortable and worried. There will be an emergency meeting at the end of the morning. Several trainers demand that Yasar be expelled and no longer allowed to attend subsequent classes in the afternoon. I myself have difficulty with this, because I believe we must be there especially for kids like Yasar - to give him a space for his unease and fury, to let him

experience safety again, to offer him a new model of behaviour, to let him enjoy himself, play, laugh and be a child again.

Yasar Returns

Despite his outburst, Yasar comes back the next day. He strolls in, late again, examining and observing us. We greet him and encourage him to come closer. We suggest he join the balance group and try out the walking globe he loves so much. We reach out our hands to him and he takes them. This time he stays with us.

All that day he is amenable; still suspicious, but quiet and waiting, cautious and present. The walking globe becomes his instrument. In order to stand on the globe, one must breathe, move carefully, wait, be conscious of one's bodily movements, and be present with oneself in the here and now. The globe seems to channel Yasar's energy. Occasionally he wants to climb on the trapeze, but the ball attracts him again and again. The other children also seem to realise how important it is for Yasar to be able to choose how much time he wants to walk the globe and to skip the group rotation. We let him stay.

During the following days, Yasar regularly has outbursts of anger, with menacing and destructive behaviour, but something has changed. He calms down faster and more easily. He also exchanges glances with us that are not threatening but communicative. His presence is becoming more and more continuous and co-operative. The next weeks go on fairly quietly, peace being relative in a city of which there is little left, where soldiers in tanks thunder around our building, and where children must get through each day on their own.

Grand Finale!

We complete the ten weeks of training and set up for the final presentation, our big show. We choose the music, choreography, and costumes for the acts. The training groups are now fixed, they no longer rotate. Yasar also has a fixed group, but... two days before the

show he is suddenly gone, he does not come to the sessions, and no one knows where he is. We also can't go looking for him in the city, because we are not allowed to leave the gym for safety reasons. We organised this performance in a flexible way on purpose, because one never knows which children will or will not be there. Where is Yasar? The walking globe needs him. We miss him. The boy in the pink vest has also touched our hearts. We see how,

little by little, he has lowered his guard and connected with us. We are worried, we are afraid that something has happened to him. He's always come back, hasn't he? Why not now?

The day of the show arrives. We know that if Yasar comes back at the last second, the globe will be his. The students in the balance group also know that Yasar and his pink vest still belong to the show. We prepare the stage props and start to set everything up outside on the square behind the gym, so that everyone can come and watch. Our arena is surrounded by barbed wire and military vehicles...

The tension mounts. The children now know that without co-operation, nothing will be achieved. Each is responsible for their chosen discipline: they must set up their props where they can

access them, keeping an eye on their own equipment and that of the others. But the agitation is growing, and they forget what they have decided, some change their minds at the last minute about what they want to do in their performance, some say they no longer want to participate, others have forgotten their costumes, and there are arguments about who the purple scarf belongs to.

Amidst all that chaos, suddenly Yasar shows up. All of the trainers jump up with joy and disbelief. There he is! Does he want to participate? Does he remember that there's a performance? Is that why he's here? "Please stay!" we all think. He knows it. Yes, the boy in the pink vest, Yasar, is there for the show!

Many children have stage fright, they complain, make a mess of the equipment. Yasar becomes the leader of the whole group, giving instructions: "Careful with that globe, otherwise it will break… carpets must be lifted, we must carry them together because they are heavy… put the materials in that corner of the stage…" The children follow his lead. This is the climate of co-operation we have been striving for in our work here.

Yasar remembers the choreography down to the last details. He rehearses it with the children of the balance group. Yasar takes matters into his own hands.

Farewell

The show is wonderfully upbeat and enjoyable. Laughing and working together. Music and applause. Then the curtain goes down and our project in Nusaybin comes to an end. This time the children do not help put away the equipment. We get some kisses and hugs, we play some more together... and then they all

run away cheerfully. We stare at each other in amazement and satisfaction. We look through a veil of nostalgia at the work that is finished and at the children we will never see again.

Those children are already far away, except for one: Yasar, in his pink vest. He helps us pack all of the equipment in the van. He acts like a member of our team, with all the care of a motivated and passionate colleague. He stays there until the last moment. He does not leave us. He doesn't want to leave. He and his little gang are grouped in front of the bus. They have to let us go forever. They erupt in abundant and almost desperate tears. "Don't leave, please." We can't help but be overwhelmed by the same tears. "Please, stay."

> *I see you. Look at me. Stay.*

Yasar had been able to take off his armour to reveal the big warm heart of a child. We fervently hoped that he would often have the opportunity in the future to give space to beauty and refinement, in himself and in others. We had made a circus together, creating a welcoming environment. We had helped each other in a close-knit team. We had worked hard to support the strength of a child who was unable to control himself and put us to the test. We had also managed to get the other children to understand the situation, so that they could, in turn, be hospitable. Only then was he able to rediscover the smiling child he had once been. The environment allowed Yasar to trust again. We don't know how things developed for this child or for all the others, but we hope that this experience gave them tools to help them cope with their uncertain futures.

FINDING BALANCE: CIRCUS TOOLS IN DRAMA THERAPY

THERAPEUTIC SETTING

About Glynis

Glynis is a contemporary circus teacher, drama therapist and somatics practitioner with individuals and groups. Wirewalking, clowning, physical theatre and partner acrobatics are her favourite circus disciplines. Glynis was a Montessori teacher for over a decade, consciously applying experiential and experimental educational methods, and has years of experience facilitating workshops on creative approaches to parenting, compassionate communication, self-care and collective care, yoga and mindfulness with children and adults, and more. This story took place during her years working as a social-emotional learning facilitator and drama therapist in Montessori schools.

Glynis on the body:

> *By connecting with the inner wisdom of the body, we can identify, accept, truly feel and process our feelings and needs. We can commit to ourselves and our communities, clarify our visions for our lives, engage in meaningful relationships, and live in alignment with what matters most to us*

Ivo's Troubles

It is the beginning of September. I am walking with my headphones on, singing through the forest on the edge of the city, enjoying the deep reds and yellows of the leaves on the trees. I arrive at the house, set in the middle of a residential neighbourhood, which probably no one would identify as a community school at first glance. A child comes to open the door and gives me a hug. After putting my shoes in the closet, I step carefully through the open classroom, feeling the warmth of the wooden floor. The sun is streaming through the wall of windows and I can see the garden, lush and green. A few children are outside eating their snacks, others running around. I observe some children having a lesson at a table, another group clustered around a maths game on the floor, and still others absorbed in an art project. I smile and wave at the teacher and assistant across the room. Rachel, age 7, is reading quietly in a corner. When she sees me, she comes to ask if she can help me set up my station in the library room. Together we move some chairs out of the way, place the big rug in the middle of the space and set up the bag of circus props. I thank Rachel and head to the kitchen for a cup of tea, nodding and smiling at my first client of the day: tall, skinny, pale, hunched over, 8-year-old Ivo. Ivo is writing in his journal, but he is not focused; he's biting the end of his pencil, sliding his notebook around the table, and his legs just can't stop moving. I take my cup back to my room, wondering about this energy stuck inside Ivo: if his mind felt safer, would his body feel safer? Just then, another child walks by, and Ivo sticks his foot in the

boyminating's way, laughing as the boy stumbles over it. The teacher appears with a big sigh, and whispers to Ivo, leading the two boys to a space in the corner. They spend a few minutes talking, resolving the situation.

Ten minutes later, Ivo walks toward the library, turns over the placard that says Please Do Not Disturb, and shuts the door behind him. I smile from where I sit cross-legged on the rug waiting for him. I have been doing some conscious breathing, grounding myself for the work with this intriguing child. Ivo's eyes are wide and they dart around the room. He stands across from me, as far away as possible in the small room, his hands held tightly by his side in fists. He is shaking. I smile: "Hi Ivo! Welcome! What's happening today inside you?" He shrugs his shoulders and looks down at the floor. I stand up, facing him, and ask him how he wants to start. After many months of weekly sessions, Ivo is still sometimes very nervous when we meet, and generally does not want to engage much with me. Sometimes he ignores me, but mostly he makes up rules for games that I can never win, and looks smug and happy when he gets to maintain his power as the biggest and best. Today I can see shame burning in his face, as he knows that I have seen him trip the other child and be called aside by the teacher.

How To Be Together?

Without a word, he begins marching around the room. I start to walk next to him, keeping distance but offering companionship if Ivo wants it. Soon he breaks into a run, waggling his head and shaking his fists left and right, fast, so that no matter what, I cannot catch him. Eventually Ivo tires himself out. We stand in opposite corners, each searching the other's face. His hand

goes to the side of his hip, and I hear shots - Ivo has fired his invisible gun! He is pointing right at me! I fall to the floor, deadly serious, clutching my heart. "Owwww! Why did you hurt me? Are you angry?" Ivo stands laughing. He shoots me again. I die dramatically, eking out my last words: "Please, call an ambulance! Do something!" Ivo looks at me for a while with a blank face, says scornfully "why should I care?" and resumes his march around the room, pausing occasionally to inspect the books on the shelf. Finally he stops, his back to me, looking at a book for a long time. I see his back is straight, his torso expanding with breath, deep and regular. Something has been released. The alarm sounds. Time is up for today. I stand up and together we pull down the magic trunk from the sky, opening it synchronously. This imaginary container holds everything that has happened in our session. Does Ivo want to take anything from our time together? "No…well – maybe the walking," he says, quickly popping his hand into the trunk, and sliding it into his pocket, avoiding my eyes, but with a little smile on his lips. That was the most peaceful moment between us. Perhaps he wants to connect, but doesn't know how?

Again And Again

On the following Wednesday, the teacher tells me that Ivo has been bullying another child regularly. For the next four or five sessions, Ivo comes in with his body tightly strung - shoulders up and tense, chest sunken, fists at his sides, sometimes shaking. He visibly loosens up as he spends the time marching, walking, running - sometimes allowing me to walk with him, other times walking towards me menacingly or avoiding me completely. In every session, he eventually shoots me dead. Ivo doesn't call for

help, never tries to soothe me, but leaves me for a long time, jumping around the room on his own, until he suddenly tells me "ok, you're alive again!" - only to shoot me once more the minute I get up off the floor. When time is up, he always says he wants to take the beginning of the session with him - the part when I welcome him into the room, smile at him, remind him it's time for him and his feelings, and ask if he has anything he wants to share before we play. At this moment, he often says that every day is like the next - nothing feels special. At his young age, he already says he is bored with life.

Here Come the Penguins!

On a frosty day as the autumn turns to winter, we meet again in our room, and this time Ivo sits down. As usual, his body is electric, seemingly unable to rest; the air is thick. Ivo crosses his arms, looking like a bubble about to burst. I mirror him and welcome him with gentle eyes. Something is happening. Before I can open my mouth, Ivo yells emphatically "I hate my grandfather! He makes me so mad!" Then, the story comes spilling out. His grandfather has been very insulting, making fun of him and his brother, pushing them around and threatening to beat them. Ivo is sure he never wants to see him again. He doesn't feel he has anyone to talk to - his parents are too busy, and anyway Ivo's father always has a short temper, just like Grandpa. Grandpa seems to have the power to make everyone feel bad, but Ivo and his brother have finally stood up for themselves and told their parents they refuse to be alone with him again. I congratulate him for expressing how he feels honestly and exploring what he needs to feel safe and good. His mother has said she will respect the boys' wishes, for now. He expected a worse response, so that

feels good. I ask what else would help Ivo feel safe and good, right here and now. Ivo runs over, picks up a juggling ball, puts it between his feet and starts shuffling around the room, trying to make sure it doesn't fall off. "Let's play penguins!" I know he has been studying ocean animals this week. I get up and start waddling like a penguin. I ask Ivo if he can take care of the penguin egg while I travel to the sea to get food. He agrees, but then bends down and picks up the juggling ball, throws it to me. I catch it and send it back to him. He catches it and meets my eye. We begin to pass back and forth. "What would this penguin like to say to his grandfather penguin?" Ivo throws the ball, shouting out different wishes: "Stop yelling at me!" "Why are you so unfair?" And what would he say to his father penguin? "Play with me!" "Why are you always working?" After many rounds, with me repeating Ivo's wishes after him, Ivo slows down. We pass the balls in silence, in a reliable rhythm. Ivo puts the ball back on his feet, and his whole body seems to soften. He shuffles over to me, and with his eyes lowered, in a quiet voice, says, "I don't want to be mean." I waddle off to the edge of the room. "Thank you for taking care of the egg, that was very kind" I say, returning with a juggling club. "Here's a fish!" Ivo looks surprised and goes to get another club. We put them in the middle of the room, sit down and pretend to eat. The alarm sounds. Time is up for today. This time, Ivo takes the whole session with him, symbolically putting it in his pocket. For the first time, he smiles at me before he leaves.

Standing on One Leg

Over the next few months, Ivo no longer shoots me in every session. He still comes in with tight shoulders and arms stuck to

his body, but each time is able to relax more and more. His head is mostly still down, and he rarely holds eye contact with me for very long, yet he makes it clear that he wants to walk together and pass the balls. I ask him what he notices when he feels like he wants to be mean or hurt someone. He realises that his body gets very tense and hard, and that he feels a buzzing in his chest. One day he says that when he does bad things to others, he feels bad. I make a rule in our game: whenever the ball falls, we stop, try to figure out and say out loud what emotion we are feeling, and then stand on one leg for five breaths. Ivo greets this challenge with excitement, and works hard to breathe through maintaining his balance. I suggest this could help him whenever he starts to feel that buzzing begin in his body. Now, he usually tries to hide his excitement as he comes in for his session, but I can see and feel it. According to the teachers, Ivo has stopped bullying his classmates, but his moods are still up and down, and he can be very unpleasant to the others. He generally keeps himself out of the community, alluding to the belief that he cannot trust the others, but indeed, they feel the same about him - he will have to work to gain some of their trust. For the last five minutes of every session, I invite him to lie down and charge himself up like a battery with the enjoyment he feels in the session, so he can carry his good feelings back to the classroom, and all the way home. Sometimes he relaxes so much he almost falls asleep. These days, it is typical for him to take the whole session with him from the imaginary box.

Over the winter, the usual fighting with his brother decreases quite a bit. They even promise to support each other when their father yells at them too much. And Ivo makes a new friend at

school, Max, who sleeps over and goes bike riding with him. They also get a new puppy, which brings him infinite joy.

Breathing Helps

One day in the spring, Ivo looks different. He is not tense today, but rather limp and lifeless. The teacher tells me she has never seen him like this. Ivo is a fighter and his primary response is to show anger, but not many other emotions. He sits on the windowsill and looks out the window. I sit next to him and we watch the birds chattering, going from tree to tree. "It doesn't help me feel better," he says, crossing his arms and closing up his body. "Jonathan didn't invite me to his birthday party." He puts his face in his hands, then shakes himself out, as if remembering he must maintain calm. "Oh, I guess it doesn't matter… But…" He stands up, starting to get red in the face. "He should have! He invited everyone else!" In a moment he flops down again on the rug. "It's not fair! I'm mad! I'm…sad." Ivo goes quiet. I lay down next to him for a moment, and we breathe together..

Then I get up and walk to my circus bag. I take out two walking cylinders and place them on the floor, rolling one back and forth with my foot, as if to make the cylinder talk: "You're sad! You're mad! You want something you can't have!" I step on top of the cylinder. Ivo looks up, watching with interest, and then jumps up, moving quickly toward the other cylinder. For the

rest of the session, Ivo and I are fully engaged in balancing on our cylinders. Over the next sessions, we practise walking forward, backward, juggling a ball while walking, trying to squat down while on the cylinder, eventually placing the ball inside it, and throwing the ball back and forth to each other while each on our own cylinder. During one session, Ivo discovers

that remembering to breathe is very important and that it makes the struggle more bearable. I remark that I think this is true for everything in life.

Balancing is Hard

By the time summer break comes around, Ivo is more capable of naming and accepting his emotions, and has some tools to work with them. He is more thoughtful and kind with the other children, and makes steps towards becoming part of the collective. He stands a little more tall, a little more at ease in his body, and sometimes I see him laugh, a real laugh from his belly. The teachers find him more approachable and he has better focus in his school work. The teachers have put a cylinder in the classroom for any time in the day he (or others) might need a break, or when they feel emotionally overwhelmed. Nothing much may have changed at home, but Ivo is learning to work with what is. "Balancing is hard," he says. "But I can learn to do it!"

CIRCUS IN/AS THERAPY

We would now like to introduce some theoretical foundations that support the practices you have read about in the preceding stories.

There are many ways in which the practice of circus can have therapeutic benefits, not only for a client or patient but also for a student taking part in regular circus classes (further known as the participant). Each person finds their unique way in the techniques taught and reaps the rewards by discovering more about themselves, in relationship to others and within society.

This chapter will look at ways in which the therapist or teacher (further known as the facilitator) can support these therapeutic processes and, in particular, the three ways in which circus is used as a therapeutic medium. Smeijsters (2000), describes two ways of using a particular medium within therapy. He suggests that a medium can be used in therapy or as therapy. These two ideas will be discussed later in the chapter. The authors of this paper would also like to present a third use of the medium of circus to achieve therapeutic goals.

1. Circus as a possible therapeutic value

This approach to using circus applies to many lessons, workshops, activities and even therapy sessions. Through training, the participant works on aspects of their character, sometimes consciously, at other moments, unbeknown to himself. Social competencies, behavioural patterns, and attitudes towards the self and the body can be learned through the practice of circus. In his work, Biru (2019) identified the Five C's of social circus. He describes how these were the possible outcomes of the positive youth development programme that was organised in Addis Ababa. It could be argued that these elements may provide a therapeutic effect that enhances the wellbeing of the participant.

These outcomes are:

- Competence - the positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social and academic skills.
- Confidence – an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy.
- Connection - positive bonds with people and institutions

that are reflected in exchanges between the individual and their peers, family, school, and community and in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

- Character – respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviours, a sense of right and wrong (morality) and integrity.
- Caring – "a sense of sympathy and empathy for others".

Pompe (2021) proposed a sixth 'C', namely "creativity", which is a potential outcome of both developing new tricks and during the process of making a performance.

2. Circus in therapy

Circus can be used as a tool to offer an extra dimension during a therapy session that predominantly works in another medium. The psychologist for example, whose predominant medium is the spoken word, can use circus skills with a client as a means to work through a specific theme or problem area. The verbal exchanges during the exercise are vital for attaching associations to the experience. In this way circus can be used as a metaphor for life outside the therapy room or to address a particular behavioural or emotional patterns and/ or reactions. A case study will be drawn upon to illustrate this approach.

The case study of Ellie illustrates the use of circus in therapy:

Ellie, a 21 year-old woman who suffered from anxiety, attended Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) to work through feelings of isolation in social situations. She had few close relationships

and was perfectionistic and self-critical. She developed anorexia as a means of control over her body. After attending therapy for two years, the therapist taught Ellie a little juggling as a means to introduce the element of play, rather than only focusing on the negative aspects of her problem. By learning to juggle Ellie was able to address other areas of her problem, such as learning to cope with failure, being able to celebrate small successes and learning 'control' of her body in a positive way. Through learning to juggle with the therapist (passing the balls with each other), she was able to practise putting her trust in somebody. Passing became a metaphor for communication with others. After some time, Ellie began to practise juggling outside of the therapy sessions and it became a tool for emotion regulation and as a solution to over-thinking. At this point, she had mastered the skill and reaped the benefits. It was no longer necessary to use it within the therapy sessions.

3. Circus as therapy

Circus itself can be used as a stand- alone therapeutic medium, which can bring about change to a client on a psychological level. The therapist is attuned to the strengths and shortcomings of a client and teaches a skill that may stimulate them to bring about change. Smeijsters (2000) refers to this as the "psychology of the medium". He explains that this provides a connection between the processes of the medium and the psychological processes of a client. Van Der Heyden (2017) states that arts therapies provide a way of expression for psychological processes.

Circus therapy does not distract the participant from their problems but uses the skills acquired to bring about psychological change. It is used as (part of) a treatment programme and works

with set goals that support the psychological process of the client. Circus therapy underpins psychological growth by providing room for experiential self-discovery. The specific needs of each patient are carefully considered and regularly evaluated.

The ways in which the therapist conducts the sessions are tailored to suit the needs of the client. Even in a group setting, the focus is on the individual. The client is encouraged to work at their own tempo, according to their own therapeutic goals. The therapist may need to take a directive approach, should it be necessary to contain or co-regulate a client, but must also be prepared to take a step backwards to allow for autonomy. The therapist must therefore offer carefully considered interventions.

The case study of Celine illustrates the psychology of the medium:

Celine, a sixteen-year-old girl with a negative body image, came to the partner acrobatics sessions offered on the psychiatric ward that she had been admitted to. She had been hospitalised on account of extreme self-harming and a suicide attempt. During the initial partner acrobatics group sessions, she hardly dared to do anything. She was afraid she was too heavy, would hurt others or would not be able to do what was being asked. She expressed her distrust in her body. She was encouraged to stay close to the group whilst the others were working. This way she became involved, first working as a catcher for some simple tricks and then trying them herself as a base or flyer. Before every exercise she would worry that she would not be good enough or that she was too fat to be carried, but gradually these comments became less frequent. Eventually the remarks stopped entirely. At that time Celine had found a level of confidence and trust in her

body. She began to volunteer to practise the skills instead of waiting to be invited by someone. On good days she would even be able to demonstrate tricks to the rest of the group with the therapist, taking on the role of coach, explaining to the group what they needed to do in the role of flyer to achieve the trick.

SAFE SPACE, ATTITUDES AND IMPORTANT CONDITIONS

During our project meetings, we held long discussions pondering the foundations of contemporary circus. We recognised that for so many participants, it is uniquely beneficial on many levels. We concluded that the basic ingredient that must be present in order to support these benefits is a **safe space**.

What factors must be present in order for a safe space to be created? What attitude must a circus facilitator or therapist embody in order to create and maintain such a safe space?

It is a priority shared by all of the circus facilitators in our working group to maintain an environment that allows participants to feel safe enough to explore. The facilitator's attitude and approach sets the stage for the working space and determines the quality of the participants' experiences and relationships, whether in individual or group circus sessions.

SAFE SPACE

We define safe space as an environment that supports and protects both the teacher/trainer/therapist/facilitator and student/client/patient/participant mentally, physically and emotionally to the greatest degree possible. The safe space can then become a **brave space**, in which all involved acknowledge the challenge and complexity of attempting to maintain a safe space, yet still choose to be vulnerable and risk trying new paths.

Different aspects contribute to a safe or brave space:

- **Environmental safety:** the size, shape, organisation of materials, light and noise levels in the working space, its location and environment; potentially distracting or

dangerous objects, circumstances threatening/inhibiting participants' sense of safety (for example: located in a war zone); participants' freedom of movement in and out of the space, the individual or group's energy levels, physical activity.

- **Physical safety:** We aim for all participants and facilitators to feel that they are physically free from threat of harm or unwanted touch. We work with consent, expressing our wishes and boundaries from the most trivial to most complex interactions. When practising partner acrobatics, for instance, we do our best to take care that all parties know they have a right to speak up for their comfort and that the physical interactions do not cross personal boundaries. We can acknowledge sexual energy in a room full of teenagers, and at the same time also commit to ensuring that it does not become an open space for sexualization.

- **Emotional safety:** Facilitators are aware of participants' circumstances, conditions and/or diagnoses and mutual relationships (if in a group setting), and evaluate which details are relevant to and important for the work. Rules and boundaries are decided upon together. Facilitators act with respect, track participants' body language, encourage them to express their thoughts, ideas and emotions, supporting both fairness and accountability for everyone.

- **Cultural safety:** Does each participant see a reflection of their race and culture in the facilitator? If not, practices that are sensitive and respectful toward diversity and actively strengthen cultural awareness must be implemented structurally in the organisation and personally by the

facilitator. Facilitators are prepared to help participants work together, moderate discussions on topics of cultural difference, and deal with potential misunderstandings, disagreements, bullying, discrimination. Facilitators must be able to creatively navigate the challenges of keeping the space and activities physically and practically secure while maintaining sensitivity to cultural differences, for example, when a participant is learning to ride a unicycle, how can we safely accommodate traditional loose clothing or headgear that may block one's peripheral vision?

- **Temporal safety:** Clarifying the length of each session and the length of the work together; clear time frames surrounding opening and closure of the co-operation; fostering independence during the co-operation and ensuring this continues after the session.

- **Social safety:** Many factors contribute to determining the rules, principles and approach: the length and consistency, level of formality of the co-operation; internal rules of the supporting institution; whether the group is a one-off event or ongoing, open to newcomers or closed.

Maintaining balance in safety: Participants must feel safe enough in the circus environment to explore, but not so coddled that they are in a bubble. For example, we remove all potential obstacles from the ground before juggling, but participants don't wear helmets to protect them from juggling balls. Facilitators perceive participants' limits, trust them to take responsibility for themselves to the greatest degree possible, guide them through challenges, and actively support the growth of their capacity.

(*We do not claim to state a theory or an exhaustive list of considerations or classifications; we offer here just the bare minimum to illustrate the topic.)

RITUALS

Rituals include those for: coming together, beginning and ending the session, transitioning between tasks, and sharing. They establish rhythm and clarity in individual and group sessions. Participants come to expect: "we will do many things, but I know we will begin and end the same way, and that there will be some time for talking, practising and playing…"

- ### The Circle, Organisation of the Space

Meeting in a circle is possibly the most significant circus ritual in groups. Participants can all see and hear each other, and all are equal. Participants know that the circle is the space in which each of them can speak and be heard, listen to, learn about and respect others, and where they negotiate social co-operation. The circle can also be a way to explicitly delineate the physical space for the activity, bringing some privacy particularly when the session takes place in more open or shared places with other distractions. We also give each circus material its own spot and indicate where shoes must be removed and where we can eat, drink, and rest. These practices help participants move mentally from their daily reality to the circus world of fun, play and physicality, laying a foundation of order, safety and predictability.

- ### Beginning and Ending, Transitions

The circle can be enhanced by music or games which indicate specific tasks; for instance, a song can signal free play for the

first few minutes of the session before meeting in the circle, tell participants it is time for working on their creative processes, or for final stretching and putting the circus tools away at the end. Such rituals that connect activities or meanings are beneficial for all, and especially useful when working with younger participants or those with disabilities, or in complex circumstances. They can reinforce a sense of belonging and group identity, and contribute to relaxation, motivation and joy.

- Emotional Sharing and Processing

The circus environment and experience calls up a variety of physical feelings as well as emotions such as excitement, fear, frustration, joy, motivation, pride, satisfaction... It is not always easy to work with one's emotions. Circus gives participants the chance to observe and identify their own emotions and perceive the felt sense in their bodies, as well as being aware of and respectful towards others' whether climbing in the air, walking on a tightwire, or building human pyramids in a shared, supportive experience.

The facilitator commits to a nonjudgmental space for validating and helping process participants' emotions - whether at a check-in at the beginning and/ or end of the session, when encouraging a participant during a difficult or scary circus trick, or when resolving conflict.

We can utilise the many qualities of circus tools to indicate, represent, or express emotions, for example, we can line up 10 spinning plates of different colours and ask participants to choose a colour to represent their energy, tension, comfort, or other qualities during the session. Participants can animate a

circus tool of their choice to express something about how they are feeling at that moment, or tell a visual story with a number of different tools. Such versatility in the use of the props inspires creativity and empowers participants who may prefer nonverbal expression.

FACILITATOR'S ATTITUDE AND APPROACH

"A good relationship is essential to helping the client connect with, remain in and get the most from therapy" (De Angelis, 2019). The relationship between the facilitator and the client is vitally important. Without a therapeutic relationship, psychological processes are not possible. We suggest that this is also true of a facilitator's relationship with the young people that attend regular classes and/ or workshops within an educational and social circus setting. The attitude and approach of the facilitator are fundamental in creating and maintaining a safe/ brave space. This collection of qualities is a guide to those that we find beneficial in creating a safe space. We are aware that each facilitator combines these points in their own personal way in accordance with their specific situation. We do not need to embody all such qualities to be a good enough facilitator and conversely, we may embody them all and do our best, yet some participants may still not actively engage, or we still may not reach the goals we are aiming for.

An effective facilitator's attitude can be divided into being and doing.

As facilitators, we strive to "be" the following:

- **Accepting**: Acceptance implies a sincere lack of judgement and is conveyed through the expression of respect, genuine concern, receptive listening and responses that acknowledge the other's unique experience and point of view.
- **Adaptable:** to participants' attention and energy levels, motivation and needs, and in the plans and goals of the session.
- **Aware and Authentic**: Facilitators are aware of and act in congruence with themselves, their own backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses, the limits of their circus skills, their boundaries, triggers, tendencies, habits, their intentions. They are aware of their colleagues, the participants and their needs (ideally including some that are unexpressed), the rules and specificities of the space, and the group dynamics.
- **Boundaried and Consistent**: The facilitator knows that their primary responsibility in the session is to ensure the participants' wellbeing. They maintain clear roles and boundaries and are consistent in their principles and behaviour, and are skilled in working with their own emotions so able to maintain the proper distance and composure to deal with whatever arises. They give just the right amount of guidance while encouraging the participants' autonomy.
- **Communicative**: The facilitator uses their body language to express confidence and composure in the environment and to mediate every situation, including gaze, gestures,

posture, tone of voice, and more. They use their words selectively, understanding their importance.

- **Connecting**: bonding and resonating with participants and colleagues, knowing that a strong team feels safe and works better and more efficiently.
- **Curious**: The facilitator is a life-long learner, open to growing and changing, and continually gaining experience and knowledge, both professionally and through interaction with participants and other sources.
- **Observant**: The facilitator is guided by watching and learning, always threading in new information and experiences to enrich what they may already know about the participants.
- **Present**: Fully in the moment.
- **Reflective**: Facilitators regularly review successes and further goals with the individual and group participants, colleagues and supervisors, exercising mutual support through the exchange of thoughts and ideas.
- **Trusting**: The facilitator trusts the participants and supports their autonomy, faith in themselves and others. The facilitator may represent an attachment figure for the participant, and does not abuse that power.
- **Welcoming**: Facilitators show warmth and openness and give opportunities to all participants.

As facilitators, we strive to "do" the following:

- **Perceive and gently help to expand the participants' window of tolerance**: (the ideal emotional zone for optimal functioning, feeling grounded, emotionally contained and flexible to maintain openness to new experiences) encouraging them to take risks. When the activity is too demanding or not demanding enough for the participant's window of tolerance, their nervous system can go into hyperarousal (anxiety) or hypoarousal (collapse), in both cases leading to unnecessary distress (Siegel, 2011).

- **Promote well-being, act preventatively**: Support the participants' quality of life, offering possibilities to empower themselves;

- **Recognise complexity beyond behaviour**: Facilitators use a non-violent approach to look beyond our assumptions about behaviours to discover what the participants truly feel and need and to help them identify and give expression to these feelings. We hold the view that people are doing the best they can and simultaneously, that the result of one's actions and accountability are also important. Sometimes diagnoses and labels can help us understand more about a participant, and at other times we must forget them in order to see the person.

- **Use a Non-violent approach**: an approach to communication in which individuals observe a given situation without judgement and take responsibility for identifying and communicating their feelings and needs with a focus on clarity, empathy and accountability, both toward

themselves and others. Conflict is viewed as generative, and conflict resolution is performed with compassion and an aim of enriching the lives of all parties involved, rather than reaching a compromise that satisfies no one. Non-violent approaches help de-escalate interpersonal conflicts.

- **Work progressively**: The facilitator meets the participant at their current level and together they envision and work toward a possible outcome, always considering timing and level of difficulty. We find the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987) and challenge the participants individually and the group just enough to secure attention and commitment, but not enough to scare them into inaction. In this way, they learn through a series of "flow" states (Csikszentmihályi, 1990), finding comfort and ease in one level of difficulty and naturally moving to the next so that the participant neither feels boredom nor anxiety for long. Working step-by-step is a way to slowly expand this zone and support participants in re-regulating themselves when their nervous systems have gone into dysregulation.

- **Work in a structured way**: Facilitators have clear aims and goals tailored to the specific needs of the participants in their sessions. They offer structure and transparency to whatever degree necessary for the participants, and when relevant, the plan of action may be created in tandem with the participants. At other times, it may increase participants' enjoyment and decrease stress if the facilitator does not not initially reveal the ultimate goal of an activity or process but allows the participants to devote themselves to the task

and celebrate the successes afterwards.

When we ensure this safe space, circus activities can be therapeutic because of the secure context of the relationship in which they are performed; the sensitivity and responsiveness of the facilitator to the participants and their needs and the special qualities of the circus tools themselves, which encourage the participant to find flow and more profound contact with themselves and others. The whole self can, thus, be connected and nurtured in the circus environment.

THE TOOLS OF CIRCUS

In this chapter, we will share our understanding and knowledge much the same way we do in the contemporary circus community itself - people practising in the same space, individually or with each other, tend to play with ideas, observe and give each other pointers, and discuss the insights they gain through exploration.

Contemporary circus is fully embodied, experiential learning. In circus, there are no winners or losers. Participants are encouraged to listen to their bodies, accept and grow wiser through their mistakes, set goals only in relation to their own achievements, co-operate, learn from and support each other.

There are three elements consistently present in all contemporary circus activities: play, training and presentation. (Circus Elleboog 2010) In play, we discover, explore and imagine. Fun and freedom are emphasised here, because they support the development of creativity and imagination as well as self-regulation skills and group dynamics. When we train skills and technique, we inculcate

habits of regular physical work, learn to accept and redirect our mistakes, strive for excellence, take risks, and find the limits of our endurance and determination. In order to present our skills and creations, we must develop an artistic aesthetic and engage in creative process, problem-solving and decision-making, then express ourselves on a stage.

Play

Play can be understood as any activity that does not lead directly to an observable benefit, the purpose of which lies solely in a process, which we experience as pleasurable.

The use of play in therapy has a long tradition, from the psychoanalytic beginnings of Anna Freud to the humanistic child-centred Non-Directive Play Therapy. Engaging with the imagination has the potential to promote self-healing processes. Through play, i.e., a state of mind marked by the questions "what if?" and "as if?" we can attend to our inner processes and fulfil unconscious needs. At different developmental stages, play allows children to make sense of the world, meet the demands that the given age brings, and build skills. The principle of playfulness allows us to imagine a new reality, in which we remain ourselves but feel the freedom to test different ways of being. This enables us to shift emotional schemas. Play fosters personal development, constructing our internal sense of who we are.

From the moment we are born, sensory exploration is our first way of experiencing the world. This first "play" mediates our contact and engagement with our surroundings. At its core is an unquenchable curiosity about what can be done with an object, and then… what else can be done? In this way, we also discover

the limits of our bodies. Such play often invokes the agency we can already see being developed in toddlers. As we grow older, the many inhibiting structures in our life, such as school, contribute to a decrease in this habit, yet our instinct is still there. Circus arts give us an opportunity to return to this primal exploration. Developing and retaining the capacity for engaged exploration - remaining curious - may support a creative, open and flexible approach to life.

We enter into symbolic play when objects around us begin to come alive and can be assigned a role or function. A rope can become a snake, a ball can become the moon, and a juggling ring can be a plate. The child's world of direct imagination is very similar to the magical world of the clown, in which anything is possible and all associations are plausible. Even in adulthood, being drawn into this space can bring us into contact with this child self.

Thinking becomes abstract usually in our teenage years, when we are able to associate and compare different areas of our life experience to one another and to outside phenomena, and then extend that observation to areas in which we have no experience. When I know what it feels like to balance on another person or hang from a trapeze, I can integrate that knowledge and use it for lateral, flexible thinking, understand more layers of experience, recognize patterns, solve problems and analyse ideas. Abstract circus play thus offers a multidimensional store of powerful metaphors that grows through reflected experience. This integration also supports the development of new life skills without pointedly "working on myself."

We use contemporary circus props, disciplines and processes as

tools to facilitate connection both with ourselves and others, to challenge ourselves, play and explore, develop physical aptitude and improve communication. Such circus tools can promote a deeper internal understanding about who we are, what we feel, want and need, and how to express ourselves and interact with others. In a therapeutic setting, we may use a particular tool to support a desired behavioural, emotional, physical or social change or development, whether in an individual or within a group context. We know that all of these aspects of life mutually influence each other, so that tending to one will surely affect the others.

We can adapt all circus tools to reach specific goals, meeting each person or group just where they are. We may be seeking ways to practise patience, delayed gratification, or perseverance, to decrease tension in the body, feel more confident using touch, or process unreleased anger. Each tool is adaptive, offering more simple or complex skill development, depending on what we need. Even in simplicity, the core principle of the tool remains. For instance, the core principle in object manipulation is dexterity in moving an item, which one can do with a ball, a sandwich, or an umbrella, at whatever level of skill one's particular body and the specific prop allows. In this way, object manipulation is accessible to everyone.

Learning new skills brings us into the here and now. Focus and concentration are required if we want to ride a unicycle, hang from a trapeze or throw and catch another human being. We tend to find a flow state when we reach a plateau in our skills and this can be a moment of blissful nervous system regulation before we naturally begin to hunger for further improvement. It

has been found that a certain amount of frustration is actually a condition we need in order to move further in learning and make new neural pathways in the brain. (Huberman, 2022) Circus tools lend themselves to increasing or decreasing the challenge and experimenting with progressively more or less difficult and creative uses.

The Tools

For the purposes of this book, we have divided the circus tools we use most often into several categories, as follows:

1. **Equilibristics** (balancing)

In equilibristics, we balance our bodies dynamically, which both requires and develops core strength, body awareness, and focus. Equilibristics work can improve both gross and fine

including:
pedalo,
rolla bolla,
slackline,
stilts,
tight wire,
unicycle,
walking cylinder,
walking globe.

motor skills. Challenging the vestibular system helps us access neural plasticity, supports our ability to learn in general, and also releases neuromodulators such as serotonin and dopamine which help us feel good. We also know that balance work can bolster the memory and keep our bodies more agile and mobile, even into later age. (Huberman, 2022)

In considering the potential therapeutic effects of equilibristics, we could take the example of stilt walking: while it looks difficult, it is deceptively easy to learn. Standing up on stilts can promote a great sense of self-confidence and strength for someone who feels weak or lacking agency in their lives, or mastery for someone who may feel directionless or without skills. Stilts are often greeted by a newcomer with some fear and doubt, but with the right support, a participant can soon work through their fear and succeed. This newly crafted self-trust can transfer to working with other challenges in their lives. Stilt walking together in a group can promote mutual support, feelings of connection, belonging and empowerment.

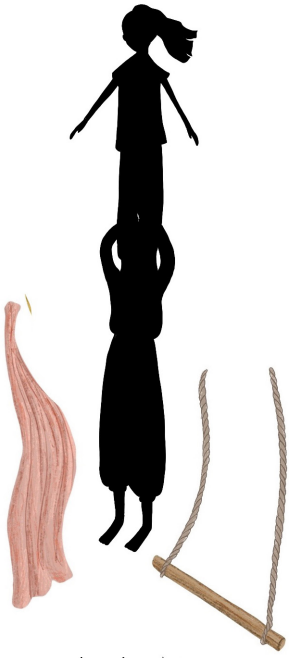
2. **Object manipulation**, including balls, buugeng, clubs, contact ball, contact staff, diabolo, flower sticks, hats, hula hoop, peacock feathers, poi, rings, scarves, spinning plates, and more. Object manipulation techniques include juggling, balancing (the object), spinning, body contact and manipulation (moving). One object can

be manipulated in a number of ways. A juggling club, for instance, can be used for throwing in the air, balancing on the body or connecting two people. It can be used to experiment with creativity or to hone one's skills.

Object manipulation develops reflexes, visual tracking, hand-eye co-ordination, gross and fine motor control, among many other skills. We can offer juggling and object manipulation to a client or participant who feels too slow or too fast, unsuccessful, unfocused, unaware, directionless, or has low moods and mood swings. Research has shown that juggling can decrease anxiety (Nakahara, 2007).

Let's look at how passing (sending an object - any object - back and forth between two or more people) might benefit a person or group therapeutically. Passing might be helpful for those who are uncomfortable with eye contact or interpersonal communication, who struggle with reading body language and interpreting others' behaviour, impulse inhibition or trust. Passing establishes a rhythm and therefore establishes even temporary predictability, which regulates the nervous system and can support feelings of security for someone who feels confused or chaotic. (Perry, 2021) For those who are challenged in spatial and temporal perception or physical co-ordination, passing is a simple way to confirm patterns. Brain plasticity is exercised, training responsiveness to new and surprising information and new synapses can be established. All of this practice is transferable to other areas of life.

3. **Acrobatics**, including dance, ground acrobatics, partner acrobatics, acroyoga, aerials (lyra, rope, trapeze, silks, straps) and more.



Acrobatics can be performed individually or in groups of two or more people (pyramids, standing on shoulders). Acrobatics trains a number of dynamic physical skills including gross motor skills, spatial orientation, body awareness, transfer of weight, flexibility, range of movement, complex explosive power, balance, springing, speed, timing, etc. We can offer acroyoga or partner acrobatics to help participants become more comfortable with physical touch, develop mutual attunement and trust, and train clear communication along with physical strength and enhanced mind-body connection. One might offer trapeze to help a participant overcome a fear of heights or another who feels unseen or unappreciated. Ground acrobatics, with its precision and explosive energy, can help participants process complicated emotions, and when participants need to relax, we can offer them a "cocoon" made from a set of silks tied with a knot in which they can swing and sway.

4. **Expressive techniques**, including clowning, magic, music, rhythm, singing/voice work, theatre.

*Clowning is an important part of the circus world. We connect with our exploratory inner child when we engage in clowning. The clown is a state of mind that contains all of the emotional possibilities. It is naive and playful, greeting the world with wonder and awe, facing every problem with enthusiasm. Indeed, problems are the clown's bread and butter; the clown asks "what can I do with this?" It is well known that laughter is key in stress reduction and we can use this tool when a participant is stuck in ways of thinking or moods. We can safely learn to take ourselves a little less seriously through clowning. It lightens up our struggles in life and can increase connection to oneself and others. An appropriately implemented intervention that brings at least short-term contact with the imaginative world and brings relieving laughter, has the potential to facilitate the body's adaptation and activate self-actualisation mechanisms. In short, laughter can contribute to recovery.

*Magic is a foray into the realm of the imagination, while requiring self-discipline and focus to master and to present successfully. It can be useful when a participant is lacking self-confidence or doesn't feel clever, and is a good option for those who are not drawn to or adept at the more physical disciplines.

*Music/rhythm brings people together. Different tones and rhythms have an effect on our nervous systems.The emotionality found in music can be employed to support participants' self regulation by way of expressing and processing feelings and calming or energising both the body and mind. Repetitive rhythmic activities such as clapping, body percussion, patterned or synchronous walking, jumping or dancing, can bring individuals and groups into a feeling of safety and bonding. (Perry, 2021)

*Singing/voice work might bring relief for someone who is tense and anxious and has a habit of shallow breathing, and empowering for those who need to learn how to speak up and express themselves. As there is a great deal of social judgement around the singing voice, we can take the emphasis off of "pop star quality" and set the voice free in other ways. The breath moves the body and it is through the breath that sound is made, so we can work with the breath and then add sound to the breath to ease participants into using the voice. Having a call-and-response signal to get participants' attention, playing games in which we must yell out words or make sounds, casually singing popular songs that everyone knows, or matching sounds to bodily movements can all be ways of engaging the voice, working with emotions and strengthening the participants' sense of self and belonging in the group.

*Theatre: The world of drama provides us with fertile ground for the imagination and, as has been understood for centuries, the capacity to aid the processing of emotional complexity. Contemporary circus has incorporated theatre techniques since its inception. Circus skills and tricks are certainly impressive, but alone they lack depth. When enriched by the imagination,

transformation can take place for both participants and audiences. We might offer dramatic techniques to participants who need some distance from a painful issue in their lives, or a way to dive into the issue to make sense of it in a way other than discussion, to try out different roles and play make believe can help participants see solutions they might not see otherwise.

Games as additional tools with potential therapeutic effects.

Games are not a tool or discipline specific to circus, but they are often utilised in contemporary circus environments and can be incredibly useful in terms of working therapeutically.

Due to their versatility, games may be geared toward achieving certain effects in communication/co-operation, confidence-building, creativity, emotional regulation, evaluation, exploration, focus, icebreakers, skill-building in specific disciplines, teamwork and more. In contemporary circus environments, we often play "green" or non-competitive games in which participants are focused primarily on their own level of commitment and effort given to the game and skill development, or on a group commitment to a shared goal. Games must have internal tension and challenge in order to be interesting for players. In circus we want to find just the right amount of that tension in order to awaken each individual's innate desire to achieve and evaluate themselves in relation to others, as we inevitably do. Yet the competition and value attributed to "winning" or "losing" should not dominate the process of the game itself. Otherwise it may culminate in participants feeling under- or over-confident depending on their performance.

One Ball can Change a Life

How can a simple circus prop be used as a therapeutic tool? Let's take a juggling ball as an example.

Just touching and holding the weight of a juggling ball can reduce tension levels in the body by giving us a tactile outlet. A ball can be used as a massage tool and help us feel the limits of our own body. When we move a ball around, we can use repetition and rhythm to create a pattern. We can add more balls and create different juggling patterns.

Now the ball is a scoop of ice cream, a light bulb, an apple. It can represent our worries that weigh us down, or our dreams that seem to roll out of reach. Can we put the ball down for a moment and gain distance from it?

When we work with a partner, simply passing the ball is already interactive.This is the foundation of shared play. One person gives information to the other through the ball, and the relationship is formed and deepened around our interpretations of, and responses to the information we receive. If I throw you the ball, will you throw it back? Do we get into a volley? Will you take it and run away? How do I feel in this exchange? What if I throw it under my knee? Will you imitate me? Are we having fun? Manipulating an object together in space brings us into connection and synchrony.

When we are in a larger group, we are together. Everyone must be attentive, as the ball conveys the individual and collective feelings. We can determine the tempo of the activity by throwing the ball fast or slow. We can all work towards a common goal with the ball, for instance not letting it drop. Or we can all

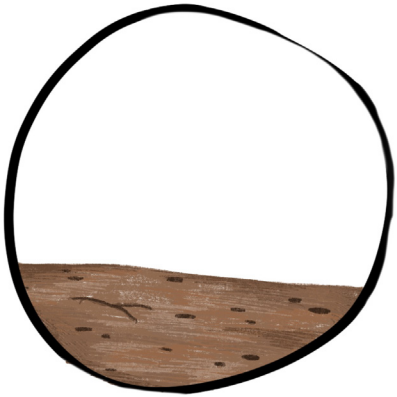
give the ball a character or role and each can contribute their creative interpretation. We make eye contact with the others, and discover our place in the group. Feeling a sense of belonging is one of the most powerful corrective experiences.

A ball is just a ball. In the hands of a therapist, however, it can serve as a tool to enrich already existing therapeutic processes. And in your hands… well, we invite you now to go get a ball, any ball, and play around. Explore its texture, weight, temperature, behaviour on the floor, in the air, on your skin. What can you do with it? and … what else can you do?

THE BENEFITS OF CIRCUS

Circus benefits health and well-being in a variety of ways, for both individuals and those in a group. It could be argued that the relationships within the group and also in interaction with the facilitator are paramount for fueling the benefits of circus in a therapeutic setting (**see chapter safe space, attitudes and important conditions)**. We will endeavour to explain the benefits with the help of a circus metaphor.

When a circus comes to town, it requires a solid and sturdy ground on which to pitch the tent (strong foundation). As the tent is being pitched, guylines are anchored to ensure that the tent stands securely and everyone inside is safe (**guylines of the tent**). The tent canvas itself holds everyone equally (**the canvas of the tent**). The artists warm-up and run general rehearsal together (**warm up and rehearsal**), preparing themselves to show their full potential and share their creation on the stage (**the performance**).



1. A Strong Foundation

These are the participants' most basic and perhaps, most obvious requirements. When we have a strong foundation, we have more capacity and energy to dedicate to broadening our horizons and deepening our curiosity. We already know that important changes take place in the body during regular dynamic physical movement, challenging the body's proprioceptive, biomechanical, and nervous systems. Training circus benefits participants by meeting these needs, keeping both the body and the mind healthy, and enhancing overall wellbeing. This is the solid ground

on which we pitch the tent.

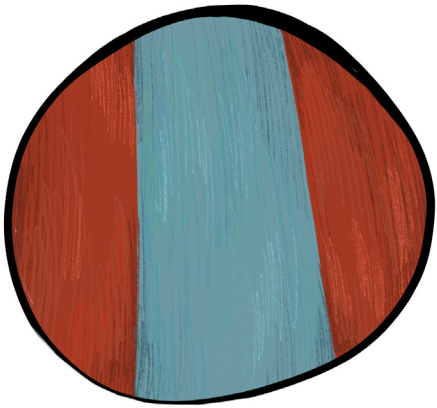
- body awareness
- fine and gross motor skills
- co-ordination and a sense of rhythm
- metabolism
- physical fitness
- stamina
- sensorimotor memory
- proprioceptive skills

2. The Guylines

A safe space is also a fundamental requirement of circus practice. Without certain rules, boundaries and protocols, any circus discipline can become unsafe. We weave together these principles and habits to create powerful guylines that secure our safe environment, so that participants feel supported enough to be brave and push their own limits.

The facilitator's job is to establish physical and emotional safety for themselves and then for the participants, so that facilitators are understood to be reliable and trustworthy. When a participant has difficulty achieving a task alone, they can seek guidance from the facilitator or perhaps from other, more experienced, participants. An important part of circus practice is learning to calculate risks, being able to recognise and set boundaries in order to keep everyone safe. These guylines aid us in framing the risk taking within reasonable parameters. Circus also empowers participants by giving them choices, inviting them into active decision making and respecting their own agency. In circus, participants must practise recognising, setting and communicating boundaries. All of these are skills they can then bring to the outside world. The qualities necessary to create a safe space are further discussed on page

- co-regulation
- coping mechanisms (problem-focused, social-focussed and emotion-focused)
- emotional regulation
- internal locus of control & letting go of control
- learning about responsibility and commitment
- risk assessment
- sense of agency



3. The Canvas

The canvas of a circus tent encompasses everything. Both in this model and in reality, circus acts as a common "language" all around the world. Right from its origins, the circus has been composed of people living, working and travelling together. Non-competitive at its core, participants' unique talents are encouraged and the disciplines are tailored to their needs and abilities. There is nothing for everybody but something for everyone. Circus teaches us respect and equality; it celebrates unconditional acceptance of difference and challenges stigma, discrimination and minority stress - the stress arising from being part of a discriminated group. If we find prejudice within the circus environment, we use the values of circus to teach acceptance.

Circus connects people and cultures, and it promotes community. It also facilitates the process of bidirectional acculturation, as many people from different backgrounds can meet and influence each other. The following describes examples taken from various circus lessons, projects and sessions: the participants' family

and friends may socialise while waiting for a class to end, while attending performance, co-operating backstage, maybe sewing costumes or preparing food from their own cultures for the performers and/ or audience to share.

In youth, social and therapeutic circus, the role of relationships is very important; not only between the facilitator and participant(s), but also amongst the participants amongst themselves. These relationships nurture the feeling of being accepted; cared for and welcomed within a group. They form the necessary foundation that enables further learning to take place.

Through circus work, we offer social support, both practical and perceived, which can then improve the participant's quality of life. They can practise new habits, learning valuable social skills and behavioural models, through their interaction between the facilitator and/ or the group. This enables forming and maintaining meaningful relationships, whilst building trust. The participant gains a sense of belonging and can transform negative interaction patterns through corrective emotional experiences.

- appreciation of unique talents
- challenging stigmas
- assertiveness
- bidirectional acculturation
- building trust
- celebrating others' successes
- communication, cooperation and teamwork
- cultivating respect for all

- equality
- experiencing unconditional acceptance
- expressing needs
- flexibility in social roles
- meaningful relationships
- non-violent behaviour and communication
- prevention of self-destructive behaviour
- setting and honouring personal boundaries
- social support (real and perceived) in situations of distress
- supporting quality of life

4. Warm up and Rehearsal

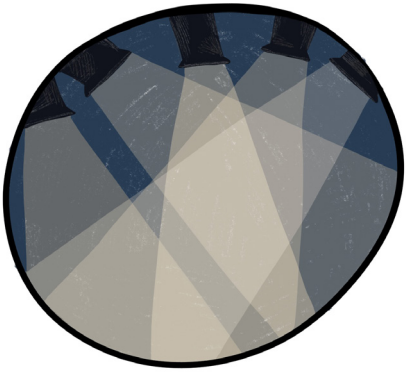
Through circus practice, a participant can develop greater body awareness, a more positive body image, increased self acceptance and self esteem. They can experience growth in self-efficacy, decision making, risk taking and the ability to perceive and use mistakes as learning opportunities. Participants can learn to regulate their emotions by recognising, processing and controlling them, whilst practising complicated circus tasks. Patience and delayed gratification are developed when coping with frustration and anger, failures and mistakes, or when celebrating hard-earned success or hearing praise for the effort invested. Empathy, a skill that we know can be trained, develops as a result of connecting and working with others. Concentration, focus and attention improve through regular practice.

- body image & body awareness
- concentration, focus and attention

- decision making & risk taking
- empathy
- experiencing success
- learning to work with mistakes and failure
- patience & delayed gratification
- self acceptance & self-esteem

5. The Performance

Circus promotes the full realisation of the participant's creative, intellectual and social potential, through engagement, playing and improvisation, amongst many (many, many) other skills. The importance of play is further addressed on page… A person with these skills has the ability to be creative and spontaneous, and experiment with imagination. By leaving behind certain defence mechanisms,there is more space and energy created for passion, motivation and curiosity. All the unique talents discovered through circus training help participants create their identities



and facilitate self-expression. Circus gives the participants a voice of their own, therefore promoting self-determination and sense of agency. There is space to be authentic and experience freedom, independence and autonomy. And that is the beginning of a journey to discover how we can be ourselves both on our own and with others.

- authenticity
- creativity & creative thinking
- dignity
- engagement
- experiencing freedom
- expressing identity
- imagination
- the ability to play and be spontaneous
- learning personal, social and interpersonal competencies
- moving beyond "survival modes"
- experiencing freedom
- motivation & passion
- individuality, independence and autonomy
- understanding one's place in the world
- self-determination

ETHICS

The main mission of this book is to introduce the benefits of circus as a therapeutic medium and to connect the work of circus facilitators and psychologists/therapists.

Belgium, Italy and Czechia all have slightly different legislation regarding the professions of psychology and psychotherapy. These differences presented a challenge for us in finding common ground regarding the ethical requirements that should be followed by practitioners when using circus as a therapeutic medium. However, all three of the countries' codes are derived from the Meta-Code of Ethics shared by the American Psychological Association (APA) and European Federation of Psychologists' Association (EFPA), so we refer to it.

We recognise that the principles and values named therein are very similar to those we follow when using circus as a therapeutic medium, namely:

- client protection → principle of professional fairness and patient confidentiality - loyalty toward colleagues and commitment to clear communication → principle of solidarity and support
- responsibility in the profession → principle of decorum, dignity and professional autonomy
- responsibility toward society → principle of promoting the well-being of the individual, the group and society

What does this mean?

- protecting both clients and practitioners. As part of our ethics, we don't force anything on anyone. We respect the limits of our clients and ourselves. All circus practice is tailored to the limits and competences of the person receiving the training/therapy. Professionals should feel as connected to the process as the client;
- promoting fairness, loyalty, support and solidarity in the workplace and among professionals;
- encouraging responsibility in the profession;
- protecting and fulfilling fundamental human rights;
- respecting decorum, dignity and professional autonomy;
- encouraging responsibility towards society (promoting

well-being of the individual, the group and society);

- tailoring circus practice to each participant's limits and competencies;
- recognising that certain activities are not for everyone and respecting individual boundaries;
- building a trusting relationship via confidentiality, consent (both physical and mental) and clear communication;
- respecting the boundaries and limits of our clients, ourselves and our colleagues; - being aware of the asymmetry between the role of the professional and of the client, accepting the related responsibility and using our position of power with humility, without taking advantage of the client's trust;
- acknowledging the restrictions of each setting in which we work (whether a circus class is just for fun or has a therapeutic aim)
- clarity on whether the role of the facilitator is pedagogical or therapeutic. Does the facilitator have the capacity to treat the participant therapeutically or should they be referred to another professional?;
- possessing adequate skills and knowledge, demonstrating sufficient competence, accepting regular supervision and consistently and continuously keeping up to date with evolving education and resources (research, techniques, methods, etc.)

If you are interested in reading about ethics for psychologists beyond this summary, you will find some resources below:

- The APA Code of Ethics: www.apa.org/ethics/code
- The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) **Code of Ethics**: www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781444306514.app1
- Information about the Code of Ethics in different European Countries: www.psy.it/psychology-in-the-european-union

HOW IT ALL HAPPENED: THE STORY OF THE WORKING GROUP

As every working group has its story, we would like to share the story of our project. Progressing through the phases in the life of a group was necessary; a fundamental component in the creation of the intellectual output you are now reading.

We seemed to naturally follow Tuckman's Theory of the Five Stages of Team Development (Tuckman, 1965), which says that each stage of team development has its own recognisable feelings and behaviours; understanding why things happen in certain ways on one's team can be an important part of the self-evaluation process.

Forming

The story begins with Bára, Cirqueon's project manager. Bára generally has brilliant ideas and has brought many of them to life in the contemporary circus scene in Europe. In 2018, she spent a weekend at Sarah's house in Galway, Ireland, where they were both working in a local circus program. Bára told Sarah that she wanted to explore the idea of connecting circus and psychology and how we use circus to support young people up to age 21. The two began to talk to the other people they knew were using circus in therapy or who would be interested and willing to participate. There were circus trainers and therapists from Cirkus in Beweging in Leuven (BE), Cirqueon in Prague

(CZ) and Casa Circostanza, Fondazione Uniti per Crescere Insieme, in Torino (IT). As Vojta (CZ), a psychotherapist using juggling in his private practice, said, "We could see the positive effects of circus all around us, but nobody was really talking about it. Circus is a mighty tool that we should explore further." Suddenly, we had a team of around 10 people who all felt the same. Everyone was elated to be part of the project, full of lofty expectations about the outcome, and there was also some uncertainty as to how it would work.

The conversation developed for well over a year. The co-ordination team regularly met online to write the project, and the grant was awarded in December 2020. Unfortunately, due to the unpredictability of COVID-19, we had no idea when and how we could begin. We felt a bit frustrated about the situation, continuing to plan and dream about the project without knowing whether it would ever happen! Nonetheless, we still had hope and motivation during that complicated time. When the global situation improved, we planned the first meeting in Leuven in October 2021.

During that first gathering, we considered questions such as how to conceptualise the book, how to write it, and how to organise the ensuing meetings. Yet the main goal was to get to know each other and build trust. How did we do that? Using CIRCUS, of course! We played and shared our ideas and experiences of self-confidence and the fear of failure, which were the main topics of the weekend.

The second meeting took place in Prague in March 2022, focused on the topic of relationship building. That is just what we did: we developed our own interpersonal relationships and also studied

some bridges between neuroscience, select psychological and therapeutic theories and practices, and contemporary circus.

We collected ideas about what information we wanted to include and how to categorise all the rich material we wanted to share with those who would read our publication. The team was ready to start - excited, motivated and productive. It all went smoothly with fun, joy and concentration.

Storming

Our third meeting took place in June 2022 at Casa Circostanza in Turin. As the meeting progressed, we discovered that the many individual beliefs and perceptions we had about expectations, roles, responsibilities, aims, and the general direction of the project caused confusion, disagreement and a whole range of painful emotions within the group, from sadness to frustration, anger and hopelessness. The conversation went around and around, analysing from every angle a critical question about the foundation of our work which would determine how we developed the written product: for whom were we writing, which elements of this work were most important to include, and what did we want readers to do with the information? Each team member had their own valuable, but slightly (or drastically) different opinion, from the next. There was just no one approach or concept that could be prescribed or packaged as a generalised cure-all, or codified as a method. Agreeing on our approach could be very difficult.

As the team is made up mostly of non-native English speakers using English as the common language, we recognised that language was an obstacle that could potentially further complicate

our collaboration. Although we in the contemporary circus world tend to be fun-loving and enjoy a good challenge, expressing one's thoughts and feelings, studying theories and professional texts, and attempting to hold meaningful discussions in one's non-native language is no joke! Needless to say, some of the enthusiasm was lost, and we had a few truly challenging days as we pondered how to hold and honour so many people's feelings and needs at once.

Our only option, then, was to adapt the daily program to best respond to the emotions that arose, and to be open and honest about how we could negotiate all our needs and clarify our goals as one unified entity. We knew that facing the storm would be the only way to move through it. We hoped to emerge stronger, as a real team. One thing was certain: we all believed in the project, and each of us had an important and irreplaceable role in it.

We talked. We talked for a long time, conversing open-heartedly, exactly as we do in our roles as circus facilitators: we listened to each other, and, true to the theme of the weekend, practised welcoming and validating each other's emotions. It was not always easy, but we did our best. By the end of the weekend, we were re-focused on our shared goals, with clearer ideas and a more precise methodological direction. Most importantly, our team grew deeper roots.

Norming

However, the complex question of the content, organisation and direction of the book was still lingering. The mid-term co-ordinators' meeting in Prague in August 2022 took on the task

of considering this issue and redefining the parameters of the publication we would write. We were able to establish a common ground that honoured all of the participating countries'

professional policies and codes of ethics and each of the practitioners' specific paths reflecting their education, experience, theoretical foundation, target group and approach: the co-ordination team concluded that it would be most effective to share individual stories reflecting our varied experiences in the field.

We met in Prague in November 2022 for our fourth meeting, focused on self-regulation and managing emotions. This was again another chance for us to encounter the specific characteristics of our group dynamics, and to learn and apply new strategies for understanding ourselves and each other better.

We became more flexible and inclusive in our perception of each other's offerings and practised giving and receiving appreciation as well as constructive criticism; communication went deeper and our questioning became more incisive. We progressed to a stage in which we felt more comfortable expressing our experiences, ideas, feelings and opinions, as we know that such diversity makes a team stronger and its product richer. We were able to shift our energy toward the team's common aims, and our desire to focus on the output brought a flurry of activity in both individual and collective work.

The fifth and last meeting in January 2023 in Leuven, Belgium,

found us mostly typing away on our laptops - quite surprising for those of us accustomed to a lot of movement. In fact, we spent the time finishing these chapters, with a great deal of teamwork and concentration. By the end of the weekend, we were very excited to see the final book and present it in each of our countries.

Performing

At the time of this writing, it is February 2023. Five years have passed since the first discussion of the project idea. The team has changed because the people in it have changed. One thing is certain - all of us have grown as individuals and as a collective.

Adjourning?

Perhaps our plans will manifest in future groups involving some of the same people, or the projects will multiply and we will work concurrently, creating more and more material to enrich the interweaving of circus and therapy. We don't know, but look forward to whatever comes!

We would like to express our gratitude to you for reading this far and for being part of our journey.

THANK YOU!

MEET THE TEAM

Now you can meet the people behind the Circus Clinic project who wrote this book. Nice to meet you!

The Belgian team:

Rika Taeymans, 65, has been inspired by circus as a tool ever since she discovered circus in London in 1984, working as a playworker with the Albion Kids Show. She established a circus school in Leuven in 1993 and developed circomotoriek (circomotorics), a playful method in which parents have fun doing acrobatics with their children (Jack's Acrobatics 2012). In 2010 she started a circus high school in Leuven. She loved working with circus in the children's psychiatric hospital in Gasthuisberg. Her latest project is Circus for 60+.

Matthias Vanderhoydonk, 34, is an occupational therapist who lives in Limburg (Belgium). He bought a unicycle when he was 15 and over the years his interest in circus just kept growing. After ten years as an occupational therapist in youth and young adult psychiatric hospitals he was asked by KPC Genk to make the connection between circus and therapy - a rather unknown connection with huge potential, which you probably saw in this publication.

Vicki Pompe, 39, spent 15 years travelling everywhere with her husband (and later, twin boys), working as a professional acrobat, performing largely at International Street Theatre Festivals. When she felt that she was no longer a spring chicken, she reschooled herself to become a dance movement therapist. She has managed to transfer her previous experiences as an acrobat into her current job and gives weekly circus therapy sessions, alongside dance movement therapy, within the Korbeel: a child and youth psychiatry department in Kortrijk, Belgium. She also works in Atelier 113, a warm house for adolescents who wish to follow different forms of arts therapy, in Harelbeke (Belgium) and within a multidisciplinary group practice, Het Huis van Katrien in Gent (Belgium), where both circus and dance therapy are offered to people of all ages, next to physiotherapy for children. The circus sessions consist largely of partner acrobatics and aerial techniques, although she

often applies equilibristics and object manipulation as therapeutic interventions. Vicki has also been involved in the BVCT-ABAT (Belgian Association for Arts Therapy) since 2019 and has taken on various roles, such as Chairperson for the working group dance movement therapy and delegate representative within the EADMT (European Association of Dance Movement Therapy). Vicki likes noticing the small details in the world that put a smile on your face and make life worthwhile!

Toon Heylen, 29, studied physical education and social work specifically for children and youth. He originally did an internship at Cirkus in Beweging (CIB), a circus school in Leuven (Belgium), and never left. He is now part of CIB's co-ordination and educational team. Within the circus school, he runs a variety of projects, such as workshop planning and administration, organising school projects and holiday camps, teaching multi-circus classes and working once a week teaching children at the psychiatric hospital in Gasthuisberg. Toon learns so much every day, surrounded by inspiring and experienced people. He is grateful to have the chance to explore the many facets of using circus as an educational tool.

The Czech team:

Barbora Adolfová, 34, is a producer and researcher in youth circus. She ran away from the theatre to the circus shortly after CIRQUEON opened in Prague in 2010 and has been involved in their youth and social circus projects ever since. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and at Pennsylvania State University. Her research is focused on youth-adult partnerships and amplifying young people's voices in youth programmes. She is a circus hobbyist who enjoys funambulism and the occasional successful handstand.

Hana Davidová, 38, is a fire performer, contemporary circus teacher and administrator. She started her circus journey 18 years ago spinning a fire staff. Since then she has performed at various events and in different countries and has slowly become involved more in teaching and discovering ways of making juggling and object manipulation more accessible to the general public. She is happy to be part of CIRQUEON circus centre in Prague as a teacher and also as project co-ordinator. You can meet Hana both at juggling and fire spinning festivals around the world and small local events doing workshops for children and families. Hana likes the sound of rain, chocolate, tea, books and moving objects around.

Katerina Alderliesten, 28, is a psychologist and psychotherapist currently living in Prague (Czech Republic). She participates in various psychology and psychotherapy projects, both locally and internationally, while working part-time as a private practitioner. She completed a five-year psychotherapy training in daseinsanalysis (an existential-humanistic approach) and has recently begun her journey with EFT (emotion-focused therapy) training. Katja conducted qualitative research entitled "Juggling Through Emotions", exploring juggling as a tool for emotional regulation and its benefits on mental and physical health. She is a part of the circus community both as a juggler and a facilitator. In her second profession, she is an accounting analyst, so it is true what they say – everything is possible in circus! Katja identifies as a bookworm, knitting aficionado, juggler, and unicyclist. Fueled by coffee, yarn and quirkiness.

Glynis Hull-Rochelle, 54, is a contemporary circus teacher (CIRQUEON, Prague) and occasional performer whose fate as a clown was first marked at age 4, when, with unintended comic persistence, she repeatedly missed her singing cue in a local production of The Sound of Music. She has not stopped singing since, especially when walking on the tightwire. She also enjoys unicycle, partner acrobatics, dance, drumming, body percussion and physical theatre. Glynis, trusting in the healing powers of the body, creativity and imagination, is a

drama therapist and somatics practitioner with additional training in art therapy and dance/movement therapy. She also facilitates support groups and creative workshops. Glynis integrates circus tools into all of her work and is engaged in international projects focused on improving mental health through circus. She cherishes time in nature and believes in caring for and honouring the earth and all beings, while also advocating for dignity, safety, housing, food, education, rest and social connection for all humans. She has been involved in social justice movements throughout her life. Merging art and activism is her passion.

Vojtěch Holický, 36, is a psychologist working at the TENT Klinik in Olomouc providing mental health care for both children of all ages and adults. He is trained in Integrative Psychotherapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy. He participated in the Circus Transformation project for social circus workers. Vojta was hooked into the circus by the flowerstick in high school and after that he gradually fell deeper into the juggling/flow arts community and discovered a passion for passing juggling clubs. For the last ten years, he has been the leader of a circus club called Kejklířský spolek Cascabel, offering circus classes for underserved populations, organising workshops and fire gatherings. He performs in fireshows and juggles at local festivals. He celebrates freedom and sarcasm, and loves ska music, urban cycling, baseball and beer.

The Italian team:

Sarah Cinardo, 36, is a psychologist and Youth Social Circus trainer living and working in Torino, Italy. She studied Clinical and Social Psychology at the University of Turin, while in 2010 discovering circus and its benefits training on aerial hoop and partner acrobatics. She lived and worked abroad from 2014 to 2020: Berlin, Brussels, Galway, on the Turkish-Syrian border and in South Africa. Sarah graduated as a Social and Youth Circus Facilitator at Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles in 2017. She gained experience in Youth and Social Circus working with refugee children and their families in projects of social inclusion and anti-discrimination; and in teaching circus with/to people with various cognitive and psychomotor skills. She continues to explore the use of circus as a tool for psychological interventions. She loves her two cats Mapo & Leffe, the sun on her skin, both silence and metal music, wandering in nature, in thoughts and in emotions, enjoying the smile of the eyes and the breath of the heart.

Giovanna Sfriso, 39, is a Social Educator living and working in Turin. She studied Philosophy and then specialised in Educational Sciences. She works for a non-profit organisation based in Turin (Uniti per Crescere Insieme) in a special place called Casa Circostanza, a huge space fully dedicated to Social Circus with children, teenagers and people with different disabilities. In her job she loves using pedagogical theatre elements and playing with circus props in an unconventional way in order to promote fun, well-being and self-awareness. She loves punk rock music, going to concerts with friends, travelling and taking pictures.

Cecilia Obbili, 29, lives and works in Torino, Italy. She studied Sociology and Anthropology and graduated in Intercultural Communication in 2015. Soon after, she found the magical world of social circus and in 2017 she participated in the training course for Social Circus facilitators run by Uniti per Crescere Insieme (UCI). She volunteered at Casa Circostanza for a while and still collaborates on some projects, mainly offering circus workshops in public space. She has had valuable working experiences in the social field as an educator and is now looking for new paths in social work. She loves listening and dancing to Brazilian music, loves cycling and is looking forward to a worldwide bicycle revolution!.

MEET THE ASSOCIATIONS: YOUTH AND SOCIAL CIRCUS IN EUROPE AND IN THE WORLD

Here is a list of people and places offering more information about social, youth and adaptive circus as well as circus therapy.

The associations directly involved in this project:

- Cirkus in Beweging, Leuven, Belgium
  www.cirkusinbeweging.be
- Cirqueon, Prague, Czech Republic
  www.cirqueon.cz
- Casa Circostanza, Fondazione Uniti per Crescere Insieme, Torino, Italy
  www.unitipercrescereinsieme.it

The associations revolving around the project:

- Kejklířský spolek cascabel, Olomouc, Czech Republic
  www.cascabel.cz
- De Korbeel, Kinder-en jeugdpsychiatrisch ziekenhuis,
  www.dekorbeel.be
- Kinderpsychiatrisch Centrum Genk / KPC,
  www.kpc-genk.be

- Orimaghi, association of psychologists and psychotherapists in Torino
- Het Huis Van Katrien, www.hethuisvankatrien.be
- Dienst kinder - en jeugdpsychiatrie UPC KU Leuven www.upckuleuven.be/nl/dienst-kinder-en-jeugdpsychiatrie

If you are interested in discovering more Youth and Social Circus Networks and associations in Europe and the world, you can explore these links leading to other circus associations and projects:

- Caravan Circus Network www.caravancircusnetwork.eu
- Cirque du Soleil, Social Circus Map www.cirquedusoleil.com/citizenship/social-circus-map
- Educircation www.educircation.eu
- Circus Arts Institute, USA www.circusartsinstitute.com/circus-arts-therapy.html
- AltroCirco, Italy www.altrocirco.it

…note that this is just a selection, there are many more circus associations. In many of them it is possible to volunteer at many levels (such as European Solidarity Corps) if you are interested.

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…the Erasmus+ Programme for the funding that brought this project to life;

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…the trainers, facilitators, therapists and researchers that took part in the meetings and contributed their knowledge and experience to the exchange;

…the associations and institutions that welcomed us to observe, visit and enjoy the power of circus;

…JINT Belgian National Agency: it was so important having your support at every step of the project;

…Jan de Braekeleer, our editor who helped us get our stories into shape;

…Nazli Tarcan for her wonderful illustrations that brought magic to our pages; …the translators and proofreaders who enabled us to share this publication.

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The aim of this book is to inspire and inform. It explores several cases in which contemporary circus can be used to support and advance therapeutic processes for children and adolescents. It is neither a definitive guide, nor an exhaustive list, but offers exciting ways to think about circus and its possibilities for supporting well-being through play and creativity, body awareness, connection, and diligent physical, mental and emotional effort.

This book is the result of an international exchange between practitioners from Belgium, Italy and the Czech Republic, with a variety of expertise in youth circus, social circus, psychology, psychotherapy, occupational therapy and expressive arts therapy.

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Czech Republic, Cirqueon: Vojtěch Holický, Glynis Hull-Rochelle, Barbora Adolfová, Hana Davidová, Kateřina Alderliesten

CIRQUEON

Uniti per Crescere Insieme

Cirkus in beweging