

Cardiff Women's Aid / Joon Dance

Dancing The Self

Feedback Report

This pilot project has been a huge success. After taster sessions that were mostly quiet and low attended, the course was popular and we worked with a total of 16 women, usually having between 4 and 6 people in each session. Ages ranged from early twenties into seventies! The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. New people are finding us all the time, and we are confident this pilot can grow into a valuable ongoing session.



Taster sessions

Our taster session at Oasis went very well, with around 6 participants enjoying themselves a lot and asking us to come back. However, Oasis were busy and didn't want to give the space over to the sessions so it was decided to focus the budget on the Women's Aid sessions.

Each open taster session only had one person, but they both signed up after that and were regular attendees, so it was probably worth doing.

The taster for CRI staff was cancelled due to lack of attendance, it seemed that staff were too busy to take that time for themselves in the work day.

Successes & positive feedback

We had a core group of around 7 women across the two sessions who attended weekly, and many others who came to two or three sessions but could attend them all. Participants reported feeling energised, relaxed and empowered by the sessions. Here are some quotes:

“This was a sacred space for me. I have been experiencing a lot of fatigue, but I knew I’d be allowed to lie down and not push myself here so I came, and then always found the energy to move somehow.”

“This was a hidden space, it felt almost selfish. The first time in my life I’ve done something just for me. I find I can come and not care what I am wearing or how I look. I can just be free.”

“I thought I was going to feel so self conscious but the facilitation was so gentle and inviting I felt safe. I went on a journey from being a baby to growing - all the stuff I missed out on. I’ve never been so playful in all my life. I came because I wanted to connect to my body and this is just what I needed.”



“I thought it was going to be difficult to go, especially as I missed the first classes, but when I did go I felt very welcomed and safe and able to express myself- I amazed myself! I get anxious in new situations, with new people. I surprised and delighted myself with how good I felt in the classes despite this. I noticed we are all beautiful, all very different in the way we move, dance etc. I noticed myself relaxing, having a good time, becoming childlike and liberated in my enjoyment. It was challenging to turn up. I am so glad I did.”

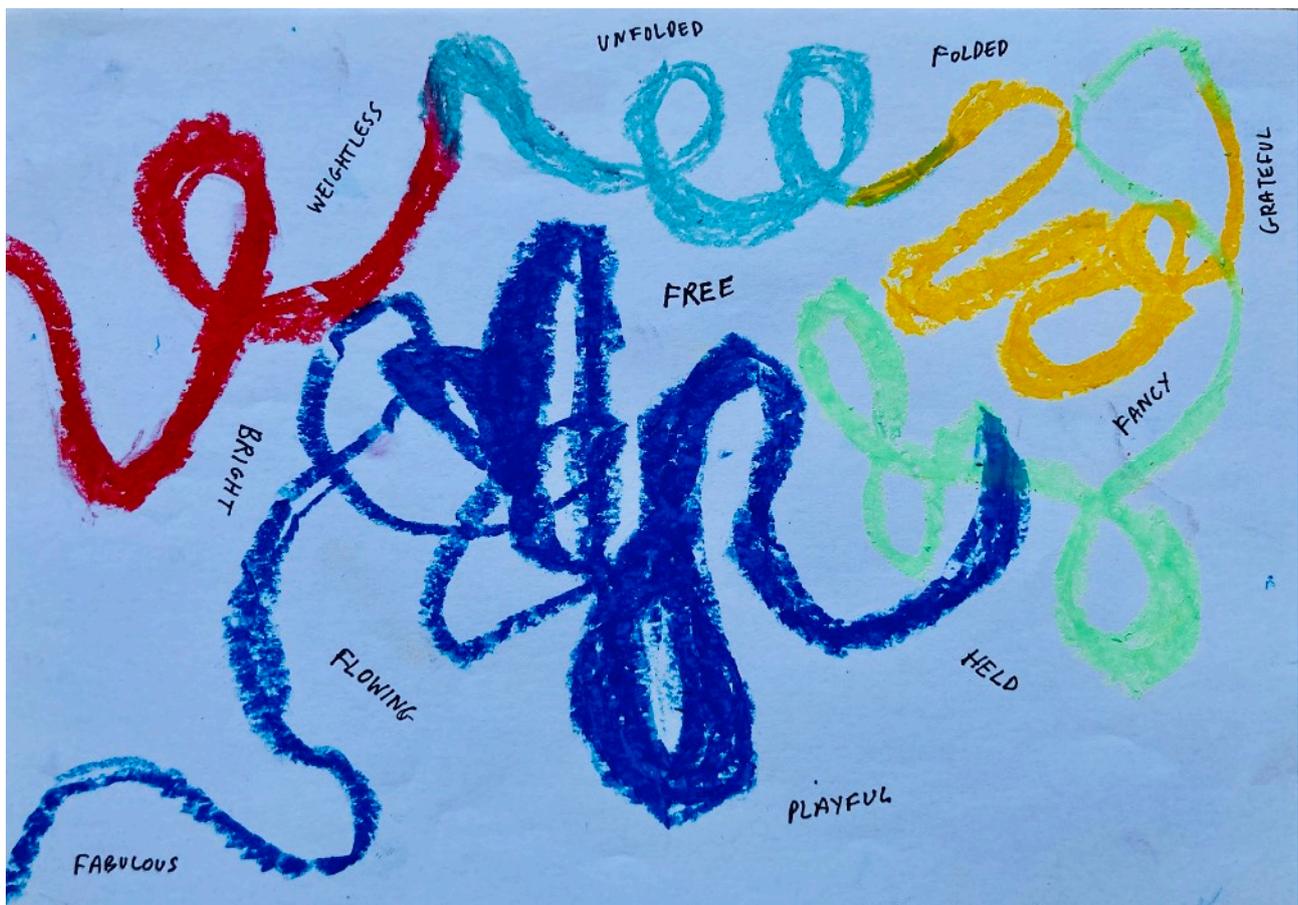
“Supports me in a healing process. Simple connection which allows me to revive, revitalise, reach another energy which can carry me. Chance to land in my body’s immense possibilities and imagination.”

Adaptations

Because these sessions were most participants' first experience of moving like this it felt too vulnerable to arrange any kind of performance, exhibition or outcome. We decided to put the remaining funds into keeping the sessions going as long as possible. We also had to adapt to drop-in culture. Although we initially wanted to run this as a progressive course, people tended to discover us as we went along, and pop in, as well as others not being available every week. This actually worked fine, and some participants did report enjoying a sense of progression but those who came part way through also felt they could fully participate. As a facilitator, it takes work to make sure that things progress but also be mindful of not overly challenging new people, but I felt I was able to do this fairly smoothly and I think it may suit the target group best to allow for drop-ins.

Learning

Many people signed up but didn't turn up and we decided that potentially charging, or taking donations, for sessions would create more of a sense of commitment and value for participants. Many expressed a desire to pay, and wanted to acknowledge the value of the work somehow. There is some evidence that therapeutic experiences are more effective when payment is exchanged. We don't want this to be a block, so it will most likely be donation based or on a sliding scale, but we feel that this will help people commit to the sessions. Eventbrite is a useful tool, but the course structure isn't obvious on there, someone came to the last one thinking it was the last of six! But it will most likely be simpler when it's an ongoing drop in session.



Zosia Dowmunt- facilitator

DANCING THE SELF: CWA REPORT

Background

Cardiff Women's Aid was one of the first refuges to be set up in Wales, and while we have moved location, we have always been grounded in our community in Adamsdown. Since 2021, we have housed half of our staff within the CRI. Cardiff Women's Aid has been running activity workshops for survivors and women in the community since 2019, including creative writing, art, crafts, t'ai chi, and somatic dance. We linked with the Health Board Arts in Health team to explore opportunities to expand and strengthen the CRI community, build relationships, and create opportunities for novel services to support survivors of abuse through arts. Among the workshops and activities we have provided over the past 3 years, Dancing the Self with Zosia Jo has been highly successful, popular and impactful, with excellent feedback from service users. In our initial exploratory phase, participants noted how impactful Dancing the Self was on their wellbeing, with some noting that this had a much more significant impact than other body-based practices such as t'ai chi or yoga. *"Thank you Cardiff Women's Aid for providing this free online event. This session provided a safe space, with other women, where I felt able to connect with my body through dance and movement. This is both incredibly healing and liberating."*

Aims and objectives

Having recognised the benefits of a somatic dance practice for survivors of trauma and abuse, we were keen to continue to develop this service and embed it within the community in which we are situated. We had offered classes on Zoom throughout the pandemic, and even though we targeted it at Cardiff, the nature of this enabled participants from across the world to join. Along with supporting women to become more grounded in their bodies through this practice, we were also keen to ensure they were grounded in their local community.

Further, we aimed to use this project to explore how we could better integrate alternative creative activities and therapies into the recovery journey of those who have been subjected to abuse.

We were also eager to connect with other local services, raise awareness of Cardiff Women's Aid services and those of the CRI, and promote communication among the services within this community.

Finally, we wanted the initiative to be co-produced and led by the community and the participants themselves, rather than being prescribed.

Method

Preparation

We carried out listening and learning sessions with local community groups and spaces. This included hosting a Wellbeing Fair during the week of International Women's Day outside the CRI, as well as Zosia running coffee drop ins to encourage passers by at the CRI cafe to chat to her about movement and creativity.

Despite heavy rain on the day of the Wellbeing Fair we were able to talk with a number of CRI staff and patients about the project as well as other services offered by Arts Council Wales and Cardiff Women's Aid. Several staff members expressed their interest in the project and told us of specific clients they thought would benefit and who they would refer to the dance classes. One GP also travelled specifically from Barry in order to hear more about how our services could support clients at her practice, having heard about the Wellbeing Fair online.

Zosia held a couple of coffee drop ins to discuss the project and engage the local community, this was met with varying degrees of success depending on location. Although offering to talk with people at the CRI cafe appeared less successful, offering to chat with service users at Oasis refugee charity at their canteen worked well, despite a language barrier.

We had then aimed to offer taster classes in specific community locations, such as a local primary school, Oasis refugees centre, the CRI itself and general taster sessions at a rented space in the community. Sadly due to some ongoing changes and staffing at the local school, the school taster did not go ahead and our lunch time tasters for staff at the CRI proved unpopular which we concluded was due to staff having a lack of time and energy to engage in sessions over lunch or directly after work. In contrast our general tasters in the community had a couple of enthusiastic participants and the taster we ran at Oasis refugee centre proved very popular with six women and their children attending.

The Course

Following the learning we had gained from the tasters we then went on to offer two simultaneous 6 week dance courses- one evening and one morning. This enabled us to reach a larger audience of women but also resulted in further learning, as is explored later on. We reached a total of 15 women across these two 6 week courses, with an average of around 5 attending each session.

We had originally packaged the project as 6 week courses with the opportunity to create an exhibition or show at the end, however in response to those that participated, we quickly realised this would be a space where participants were free to drop in and out of sessions and explore emotions and movements personal to them instead of a closed course with the pressure of a final product. Finally following the success of these two courses we channelled what funding was left into continuing the morning class into the autumn term for a further 11 sessions, in response to the desire of participants to continue the classes. As of October 3 of these sessions have been completed with 5 new participants attending.

What was the impact of the sessions on participants?

Participants were clear with us that the sessions had been extremely beneficial to both their physical and mental wellbeing with many offering positive feedback throughout the course, as can be seen in Zosia's feedback report. Women reported feeling free and safe within and after the sessions, that the sessions helped them relax and helped them to heal from what had happened to them. One stated that it was the first time she had been able to show up just for herself and others expressed how powerful and helpful it was to be able to play and be childlike, particularly where some expressed they had missed out on this in childhood. More detailed quotes and feedback can be found in Zosia's feedback on the project. Many of the women also expressed desires for the course to be longer so we have now been able to stretch some funding to continue the course into the Autumn term.

At points the course offered space for participants to express emotions not just through dance but through making sounds. This proved both beneficial and difficult for various clients. Some clients found this activity really freeing, however others felt concerned or put off by other client's emotions and sounds. This gave us some learning points in how to manage different clients' varying emotions in a group setting and Zosia was able to adapt the material to help quieter or more hypervigilant members of the group to engage.

What was the impact of the funding on your organisation?

Beyond the benefit this project has served for our clients, this project has acted as a pilot project to help us gauge how best to work with clients in offering creative activities. Through developing this project from the initial 6 week project to a longer lasting course this has helped to solidify support we have been able to offer to our clients, offering an alternative or extra activity to talking therapies and educational groups.

Seeking to offer this course in community spaces instead of internally at our offices, has also enabled us to further explore the processes, obstacles and considerations when renting spaces within the community as well as developing and strengthening our contacts and relationships with local community spaces. This, we hope, may help us in establishing other activities and groups in local community venues in order for our activities to become more accessible to potential user groups.

Finally, we found this project had an impact on how we engage with other teams and services in our own organisation. Zosia's work is grounded in scientific evidence around somatic movement for healing and this helped us to engage staff in the organisation with the need for alternative creative activities in the recovery journey.

Did sessions help you discover new clients, support women who may not have engaged otherwise and build relationships?

We had women attending the dance group who had never heard of or accessed our services, who although didn't currently need our services, now know how to access support if needed in future and are better able to signpost others within their communities to our service. Our main success in the project however was that some women waiting for or receiving specific group or 1:1 support were able to attend this in the meantime and alongside. We also found that the course grew semi-organically with a couple of clients attending the dance group also attending our popular coffee morning and telling other clients about the group.

There has been a gap in marginalised groups accessing the dance group despite one initial taster session at Oasis refugee centre. Although we found that offering a taster session was really popular at Oasis, with six women and their children attending, it was difficult to engage the organisation beyond this where we had different aims and priorities. The session with Oasis did however give us valuable learning in how to adapt the course to those with very little English and those with children wishing to engage too as well as the cultural and language considerations around advertising and communication of the course.

Learning to Take Forward

We found that running the dance group at two different times- one evening and one morning class- enabled us to reach different groups of women. This helped us to notice a pattern whereby perhaps more accomplished and confident dancers would attend in the evening and our own clients and those needing the dance group to be a safe place to express themselves were attending in the morning. This has helped us reflect on when our clients most need support groups to be offered, as well as how we best support clients who have full time jobs.

We found that women were disappointed in the course only running for 6 weeks, a theme that was echoed in some of our other short term projects. Reflecting on this learning we have scheduled a further 11 sessions of Dancing the Self into the Autumn term and are looking at how we make our activities more long lasting as opposed to short term courses.

We had originally started the project hoping to have a final exhibition or dance show at the conclusion of the course, however as the project progressed we realised the need for women to drop in and process their emotions instead of somewhere with the pressure to produce a final product. This gave us insight into how we collect feedback and present outcomes whilst being responsive to client needs.

Further learning for our own projects was the question around clients financially contributing towards activities. Some participants stated they wanted to offer payment for the classes, and where attendance changed each week, this has brought up the question of whether service users contributing towards projects would improve their ownership or commitment to the course and is something we hope to continue exploring in the future.

In terms of engaging marginalised communities better, it is important to note that organisations supporting minority groups, especially those “by and for” organisations, may be severely underfunded. In attempting to engage with Oasis, for example, we encountered difficulties in that Oasis wished for us to pay to rent the space, as well as to run the activity. This was not factored into the budget of the project, so we were unable to take it forward. In future, it would be important to include venue hire specifically for such spaces in the funding, as well as funding the activity itself. This would enable us to provide activities in spaces which feel safe and welcoming to marginalised groups, rather than asking them to come to preordained spaces.