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**WORKING METHODS OF STAND EASY**

**Staff**

Our staff and their skills and attitude are an important part of how we work.

We work with people who are:

* empathetic
* good listeners
* non-judgemental
* respectful of our ex-Forces participants and everyone else involved
* skilled in community drama methodology
* people who like to work within a group
* disciplined (good time-keeping etc)
* creative and imaginative
* not scared of trying new approaches

**Basic method of work**

FINDING PARTICIPANTS

This is our biggest challenge. Because most of the ex-Forces people we work with live very isolated lives, connecting with them is difficult. We have to rely on agencies such as Veterans First Point, Combat Stress, Step Together, H4H Band of Brothers/Sisters etc. Because of a high turnover of staff in these organisations, keeping connections is difficult.

Being a drama-based project, it is not an obvious choice for ex-Forces people. It is a challenge to explain what we do to our various partners and then for them to explain this to potential ex-Forces participants.

Once we connect with a potential participant, we work towards the Venture Trust method of spending time connecting with them. The Development Manager together with one of our current ex-Forces participants will meet with the person. We will maintain this connection and we will also be there to bring them along to any activity on the first day at least.

ALWAYS 2 PROFESSIONALS

We always work with 2 professionals whenever we work. This is best practice that we learnt from Bravo 22 Co, the English Company that works in a similar way to ourselves and have been going for some 9 years now.

The reason for this is so that if an issue comes up with one of the ex-Forces participants, one of the 2 staff can quietly take them off, talk it through with them immediately and then bring them back in to the group when they are ready. While this happens, the other staff member continues working with the quietly with the rest of the group.

 VOLUNTEERS

We always work with drama students (university students in Stirling), usually 3. They bring with them:

* Enthusiasm – this encourages the ex-Forces participants to join in
* Listening skills – this is all that some of our participants need, someone to listen
* Drama skills – which they pass on
* Empathy – a skill they need as actors, and this transfers to their work with us
* Their youthfulness – this balance works brilliantly as they learn so much from the experiences of the participants and from their struggles with their mental health issues. We find that our students often have their own issues which they open out when working with us – in a positive way.

The benefit the students get from working with us is obviously not the priority, but I should say that unanimously they love working with Stand Easy and with our participants. It is a great release for them. Because of this, this does rub off on our participants and makes for an extraordinarily positive atmosphere.

 We also work with other civilian volunteers – though usually they have a

connection with the Armed Forces. This helps to embed local connections.

Our ex-Forces participants value the fact that these people are working on a voluntary basis.

We also employ ex drama students to work with us when they turn professional. So far we have employed 6 ex-students.

**The value of drama activities**

The value lies with:

* Fostering a sense of play. This releases tension and reduces anxiety. There is no right or wrong way to do anything.
* Working with both whole and small group activities. For some ex-Forces numbers are a challenge. So we can vary it. We can challenge their limitations with the whole group activities which are physical and fun, but we can then work with them in suitably smaller groups.
* Warm-ups and indeed vocal warm-ups. These both have beneficial effects on mental health.
* Communication and a sharing of experiences. This happens very early on in small ways, and then this progresses into major sharing later in the process at a point at which each individual participant feels comfortable to do so
* Imagination and creativity once again releases tension and reduces anxiety. You can see the fun return to participants and the cooperation with others that this leads to.
* Concentration is greatly helped by all our activities

Specific processes we use:

* THE MENTAL HEALTH OF OUR PARTICIPANTS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING ELSE
* It is made clear that anyone can sit out any activity at any time. This would even include a performance. The mental health of our participants is more important than ANYTHING else
* We spend a long time making sure that everyone feels safe and comfortable working within the group
* We explore commonalities
* We always listen carefully to participants and always try to take on their ideas – even if we know they won’t work - we try them.
* We listen to and respect everyone’s experiences
* Participants are encouraged to self-manage (eg go out for fag break to reduce stress)
* All our exercises have safety nets or opt-out options
* We work as quietly and gently as possible
* We always work with humour even when exploring challenging issues
* We teach acting skills that can be transferred to being helpful in real life: such as status work
* We rarely use scripts as this increases anxiety. We base most of our work around improvising and this is a releasing experience for the participants. By the time we reach the performance stage however, they know exactly what they are doing
* While to begin with our ex-Forces participants think they will not be able to perform, by the time they do, they love it and it is confidence-building and empowering
* Our performance projects are based around researched subject matter that is relevant to the participants. They can then choose to bring their own experience to bear ..... if they want to. It is in their control. This makes the performances emotionally powerful
* We always support our participants.