https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v10i3.1184

SPECIAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Light Inside: A Reflection on an Art Program, Traumatised Women and Thriving during the 2020 Pandemic

Dr Anne Riggs[†]

Abstract

COVID-19 and the lockdown are not the worst things to have been imposed upon the people with whom I work. In fact, their lives marinated in childhood sexual trauma, abuse, neglect, family violence, severe mental ill health, and/or disability, have prepared them well for isolation, self-reliance, and uncertainty. Deep wells of resilience, coping skills and an outlook on life formed in the shadow of trauma has enabled these women to manage the impact of the virus much better than they or I expected at the start of the pandemic lockdown. However, that is not to say it has been all smooth sailing.

This study reflects on some of the inner and external resources that supported women through this. As users of this service receive National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding, it is valuable to reflect upon how its continued active support of users assists them and helps minimise the multiple losses and effects of the lockdown and virus.

This is a case study of one small art service being provided to women in Melbourne, Australia. It explores how COVID-19 has impacted them, some of their losses, and their desires for the future post-lockdown. Its focus is on the threads that have woven a sense of community through this service and how women who have never met each other have provided practical and emotional support to each other to alleviate some of the adverse effects of the virus. It speaks to the artist's contributions, the NDIS, and the service provided in enabling those who could have expected to be overwhelmed and severely impacted by this situation, if not to flourish during this time, at least not sink into despair and depression.

Keywords: Art; Trauma; Kindness; Community; COVID-19; Pandemic; Resilience

[†] Art for Soothing & Strengthening, Melbourne, Email: anneriggs@icloud.com

Introduction

Hans made a remark about our inner beast being on display. A character in *All that I am* describes citizen behaviour in Germany during the lead-up to the Second World War (1939-1945). In this fictional conversation set in extraordinary times, resonance can be found with the current worldwide attitudes surrounding the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, "I did not think that we were all bestial inside; waiting only for the opportunity to gratify ourselves, covering with effort and sublimation all our animal desires. I wondered whether it wasn't the other way around; whether inside all of us there might just be a cleaner, purer, more hairless version too naked for the world (Funder, 2012, p. 246-247).

I wondered the same. More than 80 years from the times Funder describes and addressing a very different yet a world-encompassing crisis, it is clear that the opportunity has existed for each of us, and governments, to let our own needs, our own fears guide us. We might have chosen to be harsh, uncivil, and uncaring. However, overall, we did not choose that. Instead, we opted for a softer self, a self that would recognise the suffering of others and meet it with a gentler form of care than we have become unaccustomed to seeing, especially as it is shown towards some of the most vulnerable in society. The pandemic invited new questions about how we live and survive and took us to places of kindness, consideration, community-building, and gratitude. In Australia, and more specifically here in my part of it in Melbourne, the pandemic altered how we see ourselves and see ourselves in relation to others. As it revealed personal strengths in some, it also revealed a surprising lack of resilience and resourcefulness in others. It highlighted the value of compassionate and coherent leadership, and that culture and services, which had been unvalued before the pandemic, such as the arts, the health sector, community, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and teaching, are indeed essential to surviving, and thriving, during events such as this that impact the whole of society.

COVID-19 and the lockdown are not the worst things to have been imposed upon the women with whom I work. In fact, their lives marinated in childhood sexual trauma, abuse, neglect, family violence, severe mental illness, and/or disability have prepared them well for the isolation and uncertainty of a pandemic and instilled in them the resilience and self-reliance needed to manage it. With the exception of the few weeks before the parameters of the lockdown were known across the country, it proved, unexpectedly, to be a time when women in the art programs I run could feel rested and safe; able to be and express more of themselves more fully, at least for some of the time during the crisis. They felt less overwhelmed in the world than usual.

As Australia is released from more than two months in lockdown, in addition to the weeks of uncertainty anticipating it, I believe it is very worthwhile to reflect on how a small group of women anticipated the lockdown, managed it and emerged from it. This study considers some of the internal and external resources, such as the art group, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other financial assistance which supported the women through this, and offers thoughts and reflections from this small snapshot that may assist society, service providers, and others learn something useful from it.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a background to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how both the Australian Federal Government and the Victorian State Government responded in the initial stage of it. It introduces my studio art practice with women who have complex trauma. The second section discusses the heightened levels of uncertainty and anxiety in the wider population in early 2020, as well as the participants, and their coping schemas, the studio practice, and the existing relationship with me, which provided a stable base to maintain a sense of wellbeing. The third section discusses how the studio increasingly became a sanctuary and art a form of freedom as it gave

.

participants the opportunity for self-care. The growing impact of the lockdown is the theme of the fourth section and how some of the worst of it was alleviated through Government and NDIS support for participants. The final section discusses the studio becoming a community hub, a place for participants to give and receive support, goods, social interaction, care and kindness.

Background

I am an artist who provides a suite of art programs to women through an artist-run service called *Art for Soothing & Strengthening*. Except for two participants, all have trauma-related mental ill health, or 'mental injury' as trauma victim and comedian Darrell Hammond describes it in the documentary film "Cracked Up" (Esrick, 2019). *Art for Soothing & Strengthening* is a very small studio-based practice. I am the sole worker, supporting around 12 women per week (in weekly 2-3 hour sessions), most of whom have long histories of childhood and adolescent sexual abuse within the family; some have been further abused by partners and friends, and within institutions. Most of the women live with high levels of anxiety and depression; women amongst this cohort have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder, or other mental illness. Some are in the midst of legal proceedings; another is dealing with issues arising through the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse; in addition to the trauma of abuse, one has a learning disability, another had a catastrophic spinal injury and is in constant and severe pain; another has a chronic illness and is also in constant pain. Addiction plays a significant part in some women's daily life. Amongst these 12, some have considered or attempted to end her life. The two exceptions noted above are, as far as I understand, not victims of trauma; one has a learning disability, and the other is highly affected by autism and has an intellectual disability. This study predominantly focuses on the women with complex trauma.

Deep wells of resilience, coping skills and an outlook on life formed through years of suffering and recovery have enabled each of these women to manage the lockdown more successfully than most, including myself, had expected of them at the start of it. As services closed and government pandemic-related restrictions were enforced, my concern was that women would return to old coping strategies, such as the extreme isolation they had worked so hard to escape, and unhelpful levels of fear, anxiety and addiction would re-emerge. I worried that the positive progress already achieved through community participation, professional and social support, hard work and personal courage may be lost. Yet it was not.

I noticed even a level of relaxation and asked them and myself, what was happening here? What was working for them? And why?

First of all, and of critical importance was that our face-to-face art program could continue; it ensured an on-going connection with me, with their creative practice, and with others who attend the studio. It provided something to look forward to, as well as something to savour in the week in between sessions. All participants in the programs are recipients of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding, a scheme which was rolled out across Australia from 2013 to support "a better life for hundreds of thousands of Australians with a significant and permanent disability and their families and carers" (NDIS, n.d.). The NDIS funds their participation at the studio, and a carer to assist them, as needed. During the pandemic, the NDIS recognised that it was essential to continue supporting clients wherever safely possible. This, together with Australian Government financial support supplements, contributed significantly to wellbeing.

The perception of a kinder world, and therefore the opportunities to show and receive kindness, were also all-important factors. So was time. Women's lived experience of trauma, and recovery from it, has involved long periods of time, much of it spent waiting. As one woman observed, the inconveniences of a short period of lockdown, "were nothing," "We are used to things taking a long time" said another. Some people's healing journey has taken 40 years, and

.

others' progression through the legal system often as long as eight years. The deep wells of patience that served them so well now had been dug long ago.

The NDIS was implemented to improve the lives of people with disability, their families and carers by empowering them through choice. Women who come to the studio now have, often for the first time, the resources needed to improve and nurture their health and wellbeing. They had chosen to attend either the weekly art group or one-on-one sessions, knowing that art would help them meet their personal goals and aspirations. Half the participants came via a sexual assault/domestic abuse service, where I had worked as an artist. Until recently, there were few options for women to continue their creative exploration once those groups finished and many women missed out altogether because that program is oversubscribed. Profound anxiety, depression, fear, and isolation, as well as the costs involved, had prevented most from joining any mainstream community art group. Now, as many of these clients are eligible for and receive NDIS funding, they come to the art studio for the creativity and support they have chosen for themselves in order to thrive. From the perspective of this small cohort of women, who have been attending my studio for 9-12 months, the benefits of accessing services of their choosing, for extended periods of time, have been transformational.

This connection, the existing relationship to the art program, each other, and me has, far as I can ascertain, contributed enormously to keeping women relatively stable during COVID-19.

Pandemic I

Along with many other countries, Australia became concerned about COVID-19 in early 2020. By February and into early March 2020, speculation and uncertainty rose steeply as the potential for the virus to spread rapidly, and severely impact upon those infected with it, became better understood. How the country would respond to the virus, its impact on jobs and the economy, and whether the health system was robust enough to deal with an influx of very ill patients fueled further uncertainty. Witnessing scenes from the prolonged lockdown in China and Italy, along with the growing death tolls, we wondered whether this would be our fate too. As this is a totally new virus and living with a pandemic is a new experience for most of us, including those in leadership positions, there was no well-trodden path to follow.

There is, however, a great deal of behind-the-scenes advance planning for these sorts of events, developed by international organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations, as well as national and local governments, businesses and communities. Looking through that data now, I see that maintaining and strengthening community organisations and social connection, especially amongst the most vulnerable, is very much part of this planning, and therefore, it is no surprise that the NDIS continued to support its clients so actively (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Reissman et al., 2006b; WHO, 2009)

As Australia began responding to the virus, the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety increased. What demands would be placed on us? How will we source food? Supplies? Exercise? Would we be able to see friends and family? What will close? How will people survive financially? Can we travel? Visit the doctors? As uncertainty seeped into all aspects of life, at times, the responses to it were unedifying. Information bombarded us, and restrictions unfolded extremely rapidly, indeed so rapidly it felt like there was never enough time to absorb one set of changes before new ones had to be faced. In hindsight, this period of national and personal uncertainty was relatively short, however, long enough to elevate anxiety and despair within many people across the country, including the cohort of women attending the studio.

Survivors of childhood trauma tend to live in constant trepidation of others, especially those who display even the mildest forms of machismo and aggression. Raised voices, loud noises, unkind and unpredictable behaviour are common triggers. The images and stories of people stockpiling, of empty supermarket

.

shelves, aggressive behaviours, the lack of sanitiser, gloves and masks, alongside the constant news of death, infections, mass burials overseas (see Figure 1), and changing restrictions were confronting. As the women already had a fear of others, these pandemic related experiences heightened their existing anxiety. The combination of all these pandemic responses emotionally transported women back to a place with which they were already far too familiar.

Figure 1: Large ink drawing (2000 x 400 mm) by one of the participants
Source: Author

As all the participants are on low incomes, they acutely felt the limitations of their own resources, such as financial capacity and physical space to purchase and store goods in quantity and thus protect them from the anxiety of running out of essential items which was common at that time. Most were fearful of a Stage 4 lockdown (the severest) being imposed on the state. Under this category, various activities viewed as being crucial to each individual's wellbeing, such as coming to art, seeing friends, long walks, would potentially be forbidden. Fear of deep isolation was the most disturbing.

It seemed that the things surrounding the virus, most particularly aggressive and seemingly selfish behaviours, more than the virus itself, had triggered profound feelings of fear amongst my clients. The altercations in supermarkets and the like may be viewed as being breathtakingly selfish, however, some may have been the result of desperation and anxiety; we cannot entirely know. I do know, however, as I witnessed one participant almost frozen to the ground as she described a scene in the supermarket and the bare supermarket shelves, that her fear was significant and genuine. I took her to a supermarket and accompanied her as she made her purchases, knowing that otherwise, she would have no food in her house. Experiencing all this through her eyes deeply saddened me.

Victims of trauma tend to isolate themselves from society to minimise their exposure to the harm they perceive exists everywhere within it. As fear, at its most basic, functions as a survival mechanism, survivors commonly choose not to leave their homes unless necessary, such as for appointments and buying essentials. Although, in the short term, survivors' creation of a safe haven into which they can isolate themselves from the 'outside world' is an understandable and effective response to fear and trauma; nonetheless, it is very well understood that prolonged periods of isolation are detrimental to good mental health (Denier & Biswas-Denier, 2008; United Nations, 2020). In the longer term, severe self-isolation is a maladaptive behaviour, and illnesses such as depression, anxiety about the rest of the world, poor physical and mental health, and the inability to measure oneself against others to keep thoughts and feelings in perspective commonly flow from it. In time, most found that the benefits of their self-imposed isolation were outweighed by its many

.

negative effects, predominately the crushing loneliness. At this point, survivors are likely to seek help to manage the isolation and confront the trauma.

Having found rewarding social activities to participate in and look forward to, including the art program, the women's mental and physical health had significantly improved. Art programs for survivors of trauma and mental ill-health and being part of a creative community elevate feelings of connectedness to others and a growing sense of wellbeing has been consistent theme in my ten years of research. Being part of the art group had shown one participant "how to live". Art, as the common ground beyond that of the shared experience of the past, offers a solid foundation for creative exploration, for sharing, for companionship and friendship, onto which so much more is built. It opens participants to the sense of awe and wonder and the quiet healing that Julia Baird describes in her reflective meditation *Phosphorescence* (Baird, 2020, p. 17).

It takes enormous courage to reach out and then join a group. The closure of social, creative, and enjoyable activities because of the pandemic represented much more than mere inconvenience and disappointment, it had the potential to bring to a halt so much of what had already been achieved. Fortunately, the studio was able to continue operating; additional clients took up places at the studio whilst their other community services had closed.

Another significant factor in women's heightened emotional state was not knowing the 'rules', not knowing what to do, and fear of making a mistake. Humans devise frames of references from past experiences which act as the scaffold onto which our present and future understanding and actions are built. We all do it. Our experiences are encoded into memory to form what are known as schemas, the foundation of, or shortcut to, how we respond, relate and process experiences, emotions, and relationships. Once devised, schemas strongly influence behaviour and thought patterns that are not readily shifted by new information. Unfortunately, people like my participants, impacted by childhood trauma, develop schemas built on unstable structures. They are not alert to the hospitable world around them. Their core needs, such as safety, security, nurturance, acceptance, respect, autonomy, direction, love, attention, approval, self-expression, joy, pleasure, and relaxation, were not met in childhood, and as a consequence, maladaptive schemas developed. One of the schemas commonly experienced is the fearful expectation that she, a survivor of abuse, is always on the brink of or doing something 'wrong' because their past is telling them that the abuse was their fault. Therefore in situations like the start of the virus impacting our lives, the uncertainty of what is expected of them, is profoundly triggering. The triggers do not simply appear as 'bad memories' but are visceral; they are deeply felt and can activate seemingly disproportionate but nonetheless, genuine responses.

As well as these schemas, participants have developed a suite of coping strategies, many of which are unhelpful; addiction, self-harm, trying to be invisible, and self-isolation are amongst them. However, as well as the maladaptive schemas (the 'default position' as one participant calls it), participants have also developed an extraordinary portfolio of positive coping skills. Seeking professional help and community services, and having a high level of commitment to both, are among the strategies which have set them up well for the pandemic. Another is incredible wells of patience. A woman writing for *Beyond Blue* reflected that years of living with chronic anxiety had prepared her for the pandemic, equipping her with a range of personal resources, including self-awareness, self-care, exercise, as well as people. As a result, she, like my participants, claims she had a 'head start'. Those struggling with stress and anxiety because of the pandemic could benefit from seeking advice on how to cope from those who live with anxiety, she suggested. We "might surprise you" (Beyond Blue, 2020).

Art for Soothing & Strengthening

The art groups are small and intimate, with up to four people plus me. Some are one-on-one

.

classes. They are held in my studio situated at the rear of my home. Its domestic and small scale suits a clientele easily overwhelmed and daunted by institutions, authority, and what they describe as "the outside world". The studio is reached via a short walk from the street through a rambling garden along a path inlaid with mosaics and edged with artworks. Surrounded by trees, flowers, and vegetables, the path leads clients to the pink timber studio, which many describe as a sanctuary.

The importance of entrance to any service which works with vulnerable people was made clear to me when I ran a program for women at a sexual assault organisation. Participants described their overwhelming feelings of dread and despair as they made their way down the driveway to the entrance. Small things that workers may be blind to can make a difference to how, or even whether, someone will engage in a service. (We created art to humanise that walk, by the way.) (see Figures 2 and 3). In response, I set out to create a transition from the front gate to the studio, which welcomes and enchants.

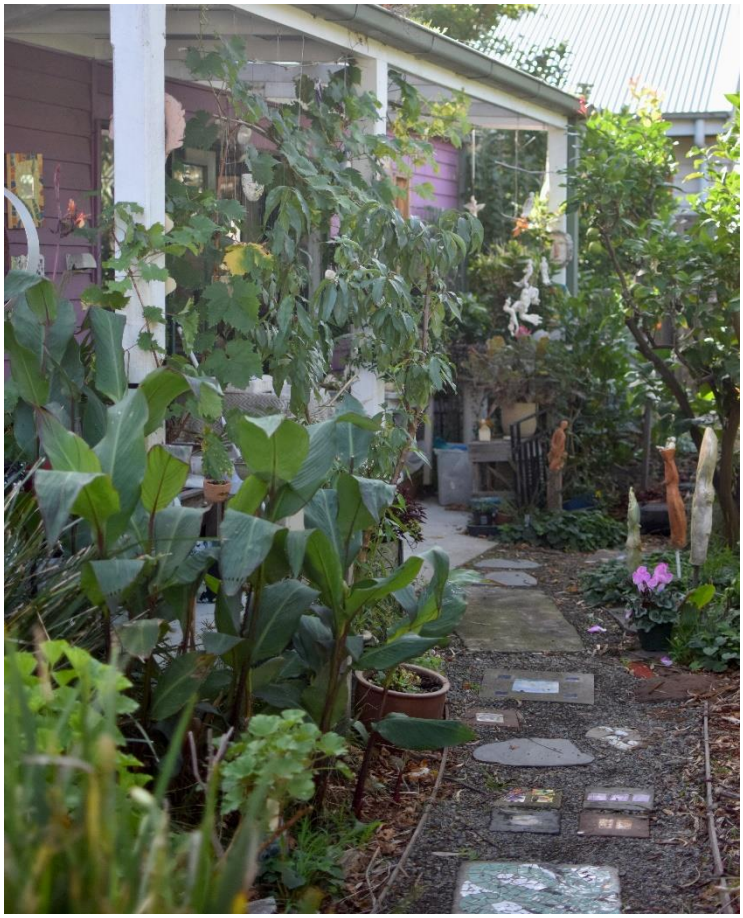

Figure 2: View of the studio.
Source: Author

.

Figure 3: Charcoal drawing on paper (A1) by another participant
Source: Author

The studio, nestled into the garden, is an oasis, a space to relax, create, and feel; it is a place of acceptance and where all these coalesce as a place to nurture art making, care and recovery. A range of materials, books, art and interesting music spurs the imagination. My old cat usually sits on a chair and seems to be especially present at times of distress. These, to-gether with good coffee and healthy snacks, may seem small and barely worth mentioning when discussing an art program, a pandemic and trauma. However, they go to the heart of what is needed and are, indeed, very worth considering when contemplating why this group of women continue to want to come to art, and especially during the pandemic.

During this year of unprecedented disruption, together with the aftermath of trauma, an art program that encourages creative learning, discovery and expression and combines this with a natural environment, self-care, and social inclusion is a unique platform to soothe and strengthen. An immersion into art-making in this context diminishes the intrusion of disturbing thoughts and feelings, giving the maker a place of refuge in which to come to terms with any internal chaos generated by current and past experiences. Art facilitates emotional responsiveness, is wholly intertwined with feeling, and offers a sense of unity, says Sophia Richman (Richman, 2014). As it awakes this in the women, it also assists them re/gain some understanding of continuity and connection. “The arts provide warmth, creative perspectives on our crazy world— a means of weathering the inevitable storms”, says writer Melbourne Arnold Zable in one of his regular COVID-19 reflections posted on Facebook (Zable, 2020).

Participants weather their storms through the studio. Where they may sometimes feel lost or in glorious chaos as they learn to take control of the materials, art becomes a form of freedom. They ground themselves in the space, the materials, the garden, and the creative and social interactions. One woman does this through explorations of nature in clay; regardless of the distress in which she may arrive, once the clay is in her hands and nature within sight, her anxiety levels visibly drop. She is relaxed, chatting and laughing. Richman observed that in many creative actions, one can see “a repetitive engagement with a troubling or soothing theme, expressed through continually elaborated patterns that attempt at self-

.

soothing, working through, and communication" (Richman, 2014, p. 52). This is quite so. One can see that repetitive actions, too, such as sanding a work, smoothing the clay, or the rhythm of painting in long strokes, helps transcends painful feelings of distress or discomfort (see Figures 4, 5 and 6). The body responds sensorially to the materials and the actions of art making; as it does, it moves experiences of tension and suffering through release, easing pain, bringing delight and helping participants remain in the 'here and now'.

Figure 4: A participant enjoying sanding as she learns to use power tools and make a plaster mould.
Source: Author

.

Figure 5: Having clay in her hands brings the maker of this clay sack almost instant relief to her anxiety and distress.
Source: Author

Figure 6: Acrylic on board (1400 x 400 mm), Created by Marion, who finds comfort in the rhythm of the painting movements.
Source: Author

Pandemic II

The negative health impacts of loneliness and isolation are recognised as additional threats to health and wellbeing during a pandemic. Amongst the known detrimental effects are an increase in the likelihood of depression and disease. “Studies show that loneliness can activate our fight-or-flight function, causing chronic inflammation and reducing the body’s ability to defend itself from viruses," seems especially relevant fact at this time (Shihipar, 2020). Pandemic planners, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), The United Nations, Governments and local organisations, being very aware of the potential for individual and community mental health to significantly decline as a result of the pandemic (such as the lockdown and isolation, loss of job, homeschooling, working from home, stresses in relationships) propose a range of actions to be offered to minimise stress and encourage a spirit of community. Financial interventions, and more, are suggested ways to support citizens during these events (Reissman et al., 2006a; United Nations, 2020; WHO, 2018). It soon

.

became clear that the NDIS also recognised the danger of the pandemic and enforced isolation to clients' mental health, and offered a range of options, training, and incentives to providers to keep clients connected to services as far as possible.

Additional Federal and State government funding (in Victoria, where I live) was allocated to provide more mental health services for all (Government, 2020b; Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). In addition to changes made through the NDIS, the Australian Government responded to COVID-19 with a range of benefit payments, including two COVID stimulus payments of $750, which many Australians received, as well as other support and stimulus packages. The extra payments relieved my participants of their usual anxieties about money. One single mother of two young children told me how the payments enabled her to catch up with bills, and purchase a skateboard, art materials and books for her boys and her to enjoy. Aside from the relief from financial stress, purchasing a few extra things was especially appreciated as libraries had closed, and the family could not do their usual outdoor activities. Her face was dynamic and joyful as she spoke of the pleasure these purchases brought to her family. The extra funding enabled another participant to purchase a weighted blanket to comfort her and ease her depression.

As a small and nimble provider accustomed to resourcefulness and creativity, I could adapt to the pandemic health and physical distancing requirements with minimal disruption. Women wanted to be safe, but they also wanted to continue with 'my art' so bringing them along with the changes was easy. Group sessions had to end and were replaced by individual sessions. Many were held in the garden. We observed physical distancing with the participant on one side of the large table and me on the other. It was not quite as convivial as being close by where I could assist more readily with their arts practice, but it was a reasonable second option. Before COVID-19, I provided a platter of snacks to share; participants now received individual snacks. A hygiene station was set up for hand washing, and we all got into the routine of washing or sanitising hands before starting. My cleaning regime increased significantly. Constant laundry, paintbrush and tool washing, and wiping of surfaces before each session became the new normal. None of it was onerous, and all of it was worth doing to keep the program going.

Kindness

Our lives, from the beginning, depend upon kindness. This is explicitly reflected in Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor's reflective exploration *On Kindness* (2009). The authors contemplate:

> Every small child has to ensure it has the parents it requires to survive and to grow up. To do this the child must be loveable enough to induce the parents to look after her. And this is where 'kind-ness' initially comes in, as a bribe to the parents, an insurance policy against deprivation and neglect (Phillips & Taylor, 2009, p. 54).

The bribe does not always pay off. This is especially so for my participants. They have learned in the most painful of circumstances that the people they trusted the most failed them. They have been harmed by others who should have protected them, particularly by those in their family, and as a result, do not readily form bonds with others. They do, however, seek out another 'kind-ness', not of family but of other women who share similar experiences. Cautiously, women learn to give and receive social support and in so doing, experience a reduction in the debilitating isolation and heightened emotions associated with traumatic injury.

Although kindness, empathy and compassion were always very evident in women's words and actions, in their encouragement to others in the studio, their willingness to help, and their compassion towards each other, there was always a reticence about getting too close. Even when participants like each other, most are reluctant to risk or invite closeness and connection. It can be dangerous, and danger, alongside the bitter pain of rejection,

.

abandonment, or ridicule, is too well known and best avoided. Nonetheless, during the 6-12 months before the pandemic, connections had already begun to form. To promote connectedness and trust, women were encouraged to take care of each other, especially when using tools or materials that require attention This is my invitation to reject the deeply held beliefs, the schemas, that all people are dangerous, that it is best to say nothing and do nothing than risk rebuke and retribution by saying something wrong and causing harm or offence.

Although some participants know each other because they are in the same art group, all know each other through the artworks left at the studio. Interest, praise and wonder are regularly expressed about others' artworks. Words of encouragement are passed on to the makers. I encourage acts of self-kindness by supporting women's creative practice both in the studio and at home, guiding women to reduce (and stop) harmful negative self-talk, and as discussed above providing good coffee and healthy food. However, now in 2020, it seemed their time had come. They deeply understood aspects of what the other needed, and each seemed to feel growing confidence that she could safely show concern, enquire, and display random acts of kindness and generosity without hesitation or fear.

The studio became an exchange hub. Food, books, words, art materials, DVDs and plants all made their way into the studio in one set of hands and out in another. As a result of the kindness and care being shown to each other, most felt a reduction in their long held belief that they did not matter to anyone. Normal instincts, default positions, are interrogated and possibly rejected. Women connected and cared for each other through simple exchanges, mostly with others they did not even know, in acts of 'Ordinary kindness' described by Phillips and Taylor. These are kindnesses which are not a manipulative bribe or a magical cure (p. 55) but shown because each knew what was needed. With these gestures of care, the 'you can't trust anyone' and the 'I am not worthy' feelings were being ruptured.

Phillips and Taylor observe that:

> It is now generally assumed that people are basically selfish, that fellow feeling is either a weakness or a luxury, or merely a more sophisticated form of selfishness … Kindness became something we're nostalgic about, a longing for something that we fear may not really exist (Phillips & Taylor, 2009, p. 48).

A sad reflection, yet one that nonetheless appears to have resonance in what had previously been observed in uncaring institutional and individual practices. However, now, the situation is different. Pandemic planners note that good leadership, clear communication, and social care are crucial to contain and treat the illness, maintain community co-operation, provide support, and guide a population through to the end of the pandemic (Victoria State Government, 2020a; Reissman et al., 2006; WHO, 2009, 2018). Messages from governments began emerging to rouse community engagement and cooperation: "we are in this together," "check in on neighbours," "pick up groceries for older relatives" for example, all called for empathetic, kind and active connection with others. Now was not the time to stand back, and despite physical distancing regulations making us somewhat wary of others, it became the perfect time to reach out and support each other.

Participants observed that the actions that all of society were being called upon to observe somewhat aligned with the schemas, or coping mechanisms, they already had in place and had been observing most of their lives. As they witnessed discomfort and anxiety amongst the wider community, they saw how their trauma-related experiences had led them to be better equipped than many to cope with the lockdown. "Our past has taught us", "We know how to be alone; we know what is important — the girls, art, sharing and encouraging each other", and "We have been through much worse". Like others who have faced huge life challenges, the women had each developed a portfolio of

.

schemas, coping strategies and resilience to survive and thrive. They were making their art, reading, gardening, walking, and one, cooking homemade food for others. Women still missed aspects of their 'old life' like bowling, swimming, seeing friends, going to church, and for some, it was our art group.

Conclusion

Prior to the pandemic, mental illness, trauma-related mental injury, unemployment and the sometimes related challenging or odd behaviours, responses, inertia and displays of emotion common amongst this cohort were not always compassionately understood in the wider community. Deep-seated feelings of shame, unworthiness and self-recrimination are the residue of actions not of their making and can be misread by others as being difficult and unyielding behaviours. However, as more and more people across the whole of society found themselves struggling to manage a situation not of their making, a kinder recognition of how hard it has been for those who have struggled with little support pre-COVID seems to have emerged. Many finally understood that it is impossible to live properly on the pre-COVID unemployment benefits, for example. This broadly softened attitude and recognition of the suffering of others gave a level of comfort to participants; "Maybe people will understand us more now" seemed to be the undercurrent. Women seemed to feel some level of vindication, and less judged. Yet now, in an even harder world, kindness was no longer 'a luxury' but an essential service (as art turned out to be, too). Many saw the pandemic as an opportune time to call on society to be less judgmental, more compassionate and more generous towards people who are suffering, regardless of where that suffering emanates.

In this period of an imposed pause, the pandemic changed the parameters of how we live and what we could expect of ourselves and each other; it opened us up to opportunities to experience and learn something new. It took us into an unknown state of uncertainty, through isolation and fear, loneliness and despair, and for many, to empathy and kindness. We reflected and noticed that kindness and compassion are indeed necessary to our personal happiness and our communal well-being. The women attending the studio generally felt that the lockdown had been quite a good time for them, as they enjoyed the kinder world.

The success of this group in navigating the pandemic, and all that it imposed on them, relied on many factors, including the NDIS, financial support, and their own personal experiences and qualities of extraordinary grace. Their lived experience of trauma had prepared them well for the isolation of lockdown, whilst their art, creativity, community, and the relationships developed through the studio, nurtured and sustained them.

References

Baird, J. (2020). *Phosphorescence: On awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark*: Fourth Estate. HarperCollins Publishing.

Beyond Blue. (2020). *Living through the coronavirus with anxiety - Camilla's story*. https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/managing-my-daily-life/coping-with-isolation-and-being-at-home/living-through-coronavirus-with-anxiety-camillas-story.html

Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Health and Aged Care. (2019). *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza.* https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/australian-health-management-plan-for-pandemic-influenza-ahmppi

Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Health and Aged Care. (2020). COVID-19: $48.1 Million for National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan [Press release]. https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/covid-19-481-million-for-national-mental-health-and-wellbeing-pandemic-response-plan

Croakey. https://www.croakey.org/reflections-from-quarantine-on-this-time-as-an-opportunity-to-help-others/

.

Denier, E., & Biswas-Denier, R. (2008). *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth*. Blackwell Publishing.

Esrick, M. (2019). *Cracked Up, The Darrell Hammond Story.* https://www.crackedupmovie.com

Funder, A. (2012). *All that I am*. Penguin.

Morgain, L. (2020). *Reflections from quarantine, on this time as an opportunity to help others.*

National Disability Insurance Scheme. (n.d.). https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us

Phillips, A., & Taylor, B. (2009). *On Kindness*. Penguin

Reissman, D. B., Watson, P. J., Klomp, R. W., Tanielian, T. L., & Prior, S. D. (2006). Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Adaptive Responses to an Evolving Challenge. *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 3*(2), Article 13. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40822660_Pandemic_Influenza_Preparedness_Adaptive_Responses_to_an_Evolving_Challenge

Richman, S. (2014). *Mended by the Muse: Creative Transformations of Trauma*. Routledge.

Shihipar, A. (2020). Coronavirus and the Isolation Paradox. “Social distancing” is required to prevent infection. But loneliness can make us sick., opinion. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/opinion/coronavirus-social-distancing.html

United Nations. (2020). *United Nationals Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health.* https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/UN-Policy-Brief-COVID-19-and-mental-health.pdf

Victorian Government. (2020a). *Promotional material - coronavirus (COVID-19)*. https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/promotional-material-coronavirus-covid-19

Victorian Government: Premier of Victoria. (2020b). Surge Funding Helping Our Mental Health System During Crisis [Press release].https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/surge-funding-helping-our-mental-health-system-during-crisis/

World Health Organization. (2018). Essential steps for developing or updating a national pandemic influenza preparedness plan. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/272253

World Health Organization. (2009). *Whole of Society Pandemic Readiness*. https://www.who.int/influenza/preparedness/pandemic/2009-0808_wos_pandemic_readiness_final.pdf?ua=1

Zable, A. (2020). What we do in the time of the plague. *Post 17. June 21*. Facebook post. https://www.facebook.com/profile/100004372204918/search/?q=creative%20perspectives%20on%20our%20crazy%20world

Conflict of Interest

None to declare. Due permission has been taken from the participants to use their figures for this study.

Acknowledgements

I thank the studio participants for sharing their reflections about the pandemic, the studio, creativity and relationships with me for this study. I thank them, too, for contributing so greatly to the care and kindness they showed to each other and me throughout the many lockdowns. It made all our lives a little easier during those times.

About the Author

I am a visual artist with a research and studio interest in the effects of art practice on recovery after trauma, mental injury, loss and grief. I have built a creative life around the artist’s role in expressing and responding to the most profound human experiences and in enabling others to creatively explore their own experiences.

My installation exhibitions speak to those profound feelings that are so hard to describe in words, journal and book contributions, and conference presentations.

In addition to my arts practice, I am a registered National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers. I run an arts studio for people on this scheme.

.