

Blogpost: Boosting resilient thinking in children through character illustration and narrative story telling.

Ali Winstanley



With experience as an artist in clinical and community settings, a background in Psychology and as a experience working as a producer on mental health and wellbeing events and projects for Maudsley Learning and Guys and St Thomas NHS Trust, I have always been interested to find new ways to bring my work on wellbeing and whole person approaches together with my creative skills to contribute to impactful arts and wellbeing projects.

As an artist I have often focused on character illustrations and small publications, and having worked on short projects with children at arts festivals in Finland and London I had long been interested in exploring how my characters might be utilised to enhance children's wellbeing in some way. After contacting the Cultural Institute I was paired with Dr Jennifer Lau, a Reader in Developmental Psychopathology at the Researching Emotional Disorders lab at King's. Jennifer has an interest in the causes of anxiety and mood disorders in children and young people and was keen to also explore the use of character illustration in her research so we were both really interested to meet and share ideas.

We quickly decided on creating a narrative storybook which would incorporate new characters created by me alongside words informed by cognitive science, with the aim of delivering a message aimed at enhancing resilient thinking capabilities in children. We were thrilled when the Cultural Institute agreed to support the project and set about deciding which area of child mental health we should target, as well as what the publication and pilot study might start to look like.

After teaming up with Jennifer's colleague Dr Victoria Pile, a clinical psychologist working with children and young people with depression and anxiety, we decided that co-production with children was essential to the project. Wallands School in Lewes, East Sussex is close to where my studio is based and kindly agreed to us running a scoping workshop with Year 5 pupils aged 9-10 in March 2017. This we hoped would inform our next steps in terms of what area of mental health to target with the book, as well as allowing us to collect feedback about preferences for characters and aesthetics of story books.

Victoria and I had a fantastic lively and interactive session with the pupils where we conducted a number of brainstorming exercises to explore what made children anxious, sad or worried. We also introduced an aesthetic element by asking them to draw their own characters to represent different

emotions, and also gathered feedback on some of my own character designs. The children were very engaged and especially seemed to value drawing and creating, telling us that they rarely had much chance at school to do this.



We came away with a huge amount of written and drawn material on flip chart paper to slowly go over and analyse. We analysed emerging themes, creating a chart of various anxieties and worries and triggers to low mood that seemed to be prevalent. This list grew quite long and covered all kinds of expected and unexpected areas. Loss, divorce, bullying all featured highly, but so too did climate change, animal cruelty and world politics, not always concerns people might imagine affect this age group.



With such a broad range of anxieties and issues raised, we decided that a publication aimed at learning to cope with general worries and bad memories in a wider sense might be the most useful, particularly as there are already a number of specialist publications targeting issues such as bereavement or bullying. We thought this might also assist us in recruiting a sample to pilot the publication on rather than having to find children with specific difficulties.

Since the children in the scoping workshop had enjoyed the drawing session so much we decided to incorporate a workbook element into the publication. Feedback gathered in the workshop about reading habits also told us 9-10 year olds were mostly moving on to proper story books, and that the picture book element we had in mind might be best suited to the 6-8 age range.

We then decided our final publication would be piloted with children of this age range and this would be at home with their parents over a two week, with a workbook exercise to complete each time.

Once we had decided this, Victoria had the idea of a story based around a forest, with the trees representing positive and negative memories. Drawing on her research into memory and emotional development, she created a story with a focus on integrating negative memories with positive memories, taking children through the process of being in the 'negative' part of their forest, with critical characters, and how they can integrate this with the 'positive' part of their forest, with more compassionate characters. The book explores this through the central character Sam and his adventures in his own memory forest, alongside a critical character Crita, and a compassionate character Kinda.

After Victoria had finalised the wording for each page, it was up to me to bring the key characters to life and find a way to express their specific characteristics. When designing the main character of Sam, I aimed to make something very smiley, likeable and accessible looking using bright colours.



The character of Crita would have a more mischevious look, with jagged shapes and spikes to show he was somebody to perhaps be wary of. The compassionate Kinda character I thought should have comforting, maternal characteristics to encourage self-soothing, so I created a round, kind, cuddly looking character.



When designing the characters I also referred to the illustrations created by children in the school workshop. I tried to incorporate as many visual elements of their characters as possible and took note of what shapes, colours and aesthetics they had connected with being kind, happy, angry and so on.

I storyboarded the whole publication, making draft sketches of what would happen on each page. The book first explores what can make positive memories and how these can take somebody to the positive part of their memory 'forest'. I used soft, rounded shapes and brighter colours for the 'positive' area of the forest.



The story goes on to explore negative experiences such as bullying and how these memories lead somebody to become stuck in their negative part of the 'forest.'



I illustrated the negative part of the forest by making darker trees with more jagged edges that aligned with the critical spiky Crita character who lived in this part of the forest.



The story goes on to explore how rather than 'cutting down' negative memory trees (avoidance) we can instead focus on and 'plant' more positive memories in order for the two parts of the forest to integrate.



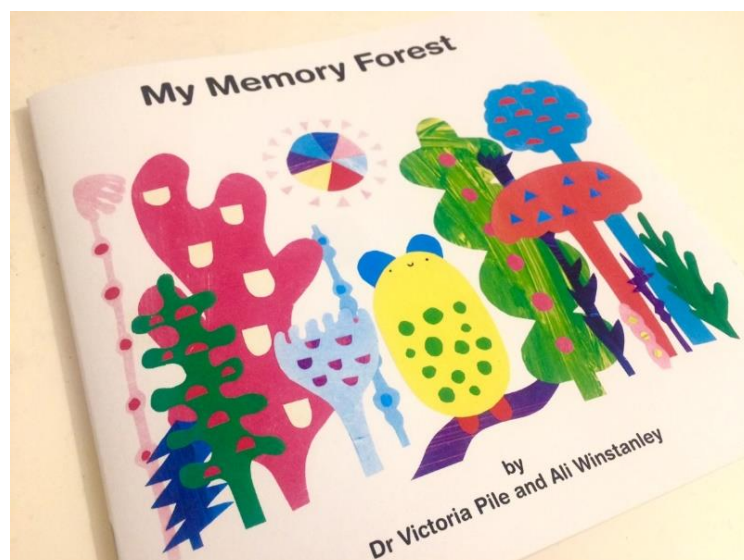


The illustrations were created using collage, a medium I use a lot since I have a particular enthusiasm for the handmade, personal and imperfect feel afforded by these non-digital techniques (as well as a nostalgic fondness for 1970s children's books and animations which used similar techniques). In this case, I thought the medium of collage would help the publication look friendly and accessible, as well as perhaps encouraging children to draw in the workbook.

At first I hand painted sheets of paper mixing various colours of acrylic paint, then cut out the characters, trees and other elements of the picture. I would then work for some time arranging the final composition before affixing them. The work was created over an intensive period, resulting in a mountain of rainbow off-cuts in my studio at the end of the process.



After all the illustrations were made, they were professionally scanned and I worked with a designer in Berlin with experience of designing character books [Jaana Davidjants](#). She laid out the final publication as well as designing the workbook element and researching fonts. As often happens with publishing, there were a few further rounds of corrections, tweaks and changes to the final aesthetic as well as tests on different paper and card that would be used. We also printed a small preliminary run in August order to gather more feedback from children and parents, and then incorporated these changes into the final version of the publication.



As of September 2017, the final publication is now ready and is currently being piloted with 6-9 year olds in London by my King's colleagues Dr Jennifer Lau and Dr Victoria Pile. Mood and anxiety scores are taken before and after each reading session and questionnaires are issued to parents at the start and end of the two week period. So far there has been consistently positive feedback gathered from parents, with several highlighting that the book facilitated and encouraged open dialogue between children and their parents about current worries and events in their life. Preliminary results relating to mood and anxiety are also encouraging.

Dr Jennifer Lau and Dr Victoria Pile are also very pleased with the final publication and its success so far, and are already looking into the potential for us to continue working together on further illustration projects with children.

This has been an extremely fulfilling project for me to work on and I have felt privileged to be supported to work as an artist to create something with real potential to help children, with the expert insight of leading clinicians in the field and the backing of such a widely respected research institution as King's.

I am now passionate about working on further projects that promote mental wellbeing and resilience in children. This project has made me acutely aware of what a vital and urgent area this is to focus on, as well as one that is particularly receptive to creative and innovative approaches. Targeting mental health awareness and education interventions at this point in the lifespan has real potential to change health outcomes and lives and this work is now critical if the next generation are to flourish.

My King's colleagues and I are now looking for further funding to broaden the pilot study and are also looking into the potential of creating other titles exploring other areas of mental health, psychoeducation and building resilience in children, as well as the potential to work with schools and children's hospitals on mental health and wellbeing projects involving illustration.

If you would like to hear more about the project or might like to collaborate with the team please contact: Jennifer.lau@kcl.ac.uk or aliwinstanley@gmail.com

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