Tomaszewski Practice

What helps?

A workshop for volunteers and other helpers

Brief version (1 hr) or full-day format | volunteers and frontline workers

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Overview

This workshop is practical, participatory and grounded in real experience. It draws on research into how emotions work – how people get stuck, how momentum builds, how change happens – and translates that into approaches anyone can use, regardless of their background or role.

The framework comes from clinical practice but nothing here requires specialist knowledge. Everything is doable. The aim is to leave with something you can do right away.

Five themes run through the day: where the boundary is and what it feels like when you cross it; how to generate hope in people who have lost it; what to do with your own anger; the social nature of all helping; and finding your own way of working.

1: Crossing the Line

When we work with people in extreme distress, we naturally want to feel what they feel. But there is a difference between understanding someone's experience and merging with it. That difference is a boundary, and it is the most important boundary in this work.

What you believe someone is feeling may really be what you are feeling, and this is easy to miss.

Notice when you start finishing sentences for someone, or assuming you know what happened next. Caring deeply does not mean becoming the other person! It means staying separate enough to be helpful.

Noticing difference

Every person you meet has a distinct life story. It is theirs. Your job is to create conditions where they can, if they want, tell it. Or maybe they want to hold on to it and think about it. Or not think about it. For any of these things to happen means you noticing differences rather than smoothing them over: differences in experience, in culture, in what something means to each of you.

Show that you are listening. Ask questions. Then listen to the answers without freighting them with what you already think. Silence after a question may just be the person thinking. It isn't often a sign that something is going wrong.

Limits and consistency

Acknowledge limits before you begin. Be honest about what you can and cannot do. This is the beginning of trust. A relationship that begins with clarity about limits is more sustainable than one built on the fantasy of unlimited availability.

Think about what is sustainable for you, week after week. Consistency matters more than intensity. Showing up reliably is more helpful than showing up heroically once or twice.

> **Exercise:** Demonstration in pairs: describe a recent moment when you felt yourself crossing over into someone else's distress. What did it feel like in your body? What did you do? What might you do differently?

2: Generating Hope

When people are frightened, they think things that feel true but are not. When people are angry, they cannot access the parts of themselves that know they are capable. This is not weakness or stubbornness, it is how the brain works under threat.

People working with refugees will encounter fear and panic: hypervigilance, catastrophic thinking, difficulty in planning ahead. They will encounter rage: reactive anger, often turned inward or misdirected. They will encounter grief: shutdown, flatness, disconnection from everything. These are not character flaws. They are protective adaptations, the mind doing what it does under threatening conditions. The problem is when those protective responses persist even when the immediate danger has passed.

To openness

The shift from a defensive state to one of openness cannot be directed. But it can be invited. What creates the conditions for it is usually relational: the consistent presence of someone who does not panic, does not withdraw and who recognises that difficulties are real.

Play is worth thinking about here. Not entertainment, but genuine play. Throw a ball around. Cards. Anything. If you can play, life feels less trapping. Play suggests that hope is possible, that there is some room in the situation. It is how people test limits, discover what they can do, and practise being with others without catastrophic consequences. If you can introduce any element of play into an interaction, you are already generating hope.

Counter evidence

People cannot *believe* things which are objectively true about themselves if those things *feel* untrue. When someone is in a defended, frightened state, positive statements about them (however accurate) often cannot get through. They land unwelcomely, as confusing, or as not being understood.

Rather than disagreeing, create small experiences that provide counter-evidence. Point out what you actually notice, not what you think they should be able to do. A small, specific, real observation lands differently from a general reassurance.

Exercise: *Notice that*. In small groups, take turns with the scripts provided. See if you can mark what's worth noticing, including in someone's verbal and physical responses. See what it feels like to be misunderstood or to suffer insistence when you aren't ready for it.

3: Your Anger

This work will make you angry. Anger is the energy for change, so if you say you don't feel it … think about that. The situations you will hear about are unjust. The systems, the powers behind them are often cruel and faceless. Care or help can sometimes feel cruel when it is administered without feeling, out of duty. This doesn't mean it is worthless. The people you are trying to help will have been caught in situations and structures that grind them down.

Anger is not a sign that something is wrong with you, it is a sign that you feel something is wrong with the situation and needs changing (remember, you may be wrong).

Unexamined anger gets displaced. It gets aimed at the wrong person, or it turns inward, or it subtly erodes and corrodes the work. Knowing where your anger is, and what it is about, is essential to being useful.

Individual relationships with groups

Our relationship with anger is not generic. It is shaped by our own history: families, institutions, encounters with authority and loss. The anger we feel when working with refugees is filtered through everything we have been through ourselves. It is worth asking, regularly: who or what are you really angry at right now? Is it the person in front of you, or the situation they are in? Is it something that happened *to you* that this is bringing up?

Feelings and thoughts need to be expressed somehow. Unexpressed feelings do not disappear; they go somewhere else. What are your outlets? Are they working?

The scales of justice

Anger is the emotion we feel when we detect an injustice — something that compromises our needs, or someone else's. It is the signal that something needs to change. The scales of justice are the working image: on one side, what happened; on the other, what was owed. Anger is the difference between the two pans.

Unexpressed anger means unaddressed injustice. Resentment is the reminder that something still needs addressing – it builds because the scales have not been read out loud. If there is no connection between what you feel and what you express, the people around you cannot act differently, and the anger comes back round again.

Exercise: Are your angry thoughts and feelings represented to others? Is minor irritation visible, or does it only surface once it has compounded into something larger?

Individually, take this week. Where did the scales tip, even slightly? Mark each instance — the small ones especially. For each, ask: did I show it? In what form? Did the person on the other side of the scales know they were on them? Where irritation wasn't expressed even as it was felt. Was the silence necessary?

Then in pairs, share what you noticed. Where irritation went unexpressed, where it was displaced or deferred, where it was expressed and what happened.

4: It's All Social

There is a version of helping work that imagines one person providing care to another: individual, transactional, and ultimately exhausting, because it places all the weight on the helper. But helping can never be individual. It happens in a field of relationships: between you and the person you are helping, between them and their community, between you and your colleagues, between your organisation and the wider world.

Interdependence

The people you work with know things you do not. They have survived things you have not. They have expertise in their own lives that no professional training can replicate. Recognising this is not just respectful, it is practically useful. Whose voice is missing from your work? What would change if the people you help were involved in shaping how the help is offered?

Intimacy as the sharing of differences

Intimacy, in this context, means the sharing of differences, not the elimination of them.

The goal is not for you to fully understand someone else's experience. The goal is for that experience to be able to exist in the space between you, without one of you having to pretend to be something you are not.

What gets in the way of this is usually the pressure to have answers, to fix things, to perform certainty. Staying with not-knowing – while continuing to be present – is one of the most demanding and most useful things this work asks of you. It is not passivity. It is a form of sustained attention.

> **Exercise:** As a group, map your actual network: who are you connected to? Where does information flow? Where does it get blocked? Where do the people you help fit in this map?

5: Do It in Your Way

There is no single correct way to do this work. There are principles, some of which we have covered today, but the way those principles become practice has to fit who you are. If you are trying to do

something in a way that does not match your personality, your culture, your sense of humour, you will not sustain it.

If everyone tries to do things the same way, we end up with a fragile, homogeneous system. If each person finds their own approach, we end up with a diverse, resilient network. Think about what you do well, what feels most natural to you. Practical help, listening, advocacy, humour, directness, patience: these are not interchangeable. Use what is genuinely yours.

Keeping up momentum

One of the things most likely to exhaust helpers is the feeling of stasis: getting stuck … working hard and seeing or feeling no movement. Movement matters not just for the people being helped but for the helpers too.

Small signs of movement are not trivial. A shift in how someone is sitting, a question they did not ask before, a moment of laughter; these are evidence that something is alive in the work. Learn to notice them. They are what sustains you.

The feeling of movement is the feeling of resolution. Some things cannot be resolved, but mostly we can move.

What counts as progress in your work? How do you recognise it? What would help you not get stuck?

> **Exercise:** Individually, write down one thing you do in this work that is genuinely yours, that comes from you, not from training or instruction. Then share it with the group. Notice the range in the room.

Closing

Before leaving, each participant identifies one thing they will do differently next week, one question they are sitting with, and one thing they need from the people they work alongside.

Facilitator Notes

The following is background for the facilitator, not for direct delivery. It sets out the intellectual basis for the workshop's approach.

Neuropsychoanalysis and the affect systems

The framework of seven basic emotional systems – described by the neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp as SEEKING, FEAR, RAGE, PANIC/GRIEF, CARE, PLAY and LUST – describes how the brain organises emotional life at a foundational level, prior to cognition. These are not metaphors. They are identifiable neural systems, each with its own characteristic behaviours, drives and bodily signatures.

Understanding which system is dominant in a given moment helps explain behaviour that can otherwise seem irrational or frustrating. Crucially, these systems are highly responsive to relational context – which is why the quality of a relationship matters practically, not just symbolically. When someone moves from FEAR-dominated functioning toward PLAY or SEEKING, that is a measurable shift, and it is almost always produced by something relational rather than by insight or explanation alone.

Improvisation and momentum

All forms of social work, like good psychotherapy, like good music, depend on following what is happening rather than predicting what will happen and being out of touch. The aim is not always to arrive at an ultimate destination but to keep something moving: if you want goals, make them small, noticeable and easily achievable. A stuck session, a stuck person, a stuck helper: *stuckness* is the common enemy. What restores movement is usually small, often surprising, and almost never the thing we planned.

This is the argument behind the emphasis throughout this workshop: it's about responsiveness over method, while still being secure in all the things you might call *rules*. Miles Davis did it. The worker who can improvise, staying close to what is in the room, is more useful than the worker who follows a script, especially if its essentially their own, however well-designed that script may be.

The social dimension

All helping is embedded in structures of power and history. The people we are helping have arrived here through geopolitical forces that dwarf any individual story. Acknowledging this rather than treating each case as a private, psychological event makes the work more honest and often more useful. It also protects helpers from taking on responsibility that belongs to larger structures. One source of burnout is the habit of personalising what is structural: feeling that a failure of the system is your failure.

Timing and format for full day events

Modules 1 to 3 work well in the morning; Modules 4 and 5 in the afternoon. Allow 60 to 75 minutes per module including exercise and discussion. Total running time is approximately six hours. The workshop can be condensed to a half-day by combining Modules 4 and 5 and shortening the exercises.