LIFE AND HOPE OUT OF DARKNESS

Creative Interventions for Helping People in Violent Communities

Sarah Coleman

UKCP
UK Council for Psychotherapy

KARNAC
firing the mind

First published in 2025 by
Karnac Books Limited
62 Bucknell Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 2DS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80013-315-0 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-360-0 (e-book)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-359-4 (PDF)

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India

www.firingthemind.com

Contents

Acknowledgements ix
About the author xi
Introduction xiii
Prologue: The journey xix

Part I
Safety and support

1. Safety 3
2. Difference 9
3. Dreaming 15
4. Support 19
5. Control 23
6. Boundaries 31

Part II
Body awareness

7. Just explain 39

8. Just breathe 43

9. Just dance 49

10. Just shake 55

11. Just sleep 61

Part III
Connections

12. Play 69

13. Community 75

14. Forgiveness 81

15. A higher power 87

Part IV
Moving on

16. Comfort zones 95

17. Rehearsing the possible 99

18. Relational dynamics 103

19. Role models 109

Part V
The impact on the therapist

20. Taking its toll 117

21. Finding life 123

Epilogue: Living with hope 129

Notes 133

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to all who supported me, read, and made comments and suggestions for my book while I was writing it. To Mary, Ashraf, Dina, Jon, Carrie, Donald, Corrie, and in particular, Ivor who spent many hours reading and revising it.

My biggest acknowledgement goes to the people in the communities I have worked with, without whom—and without my meeting them—this book would not have been written. You will always be in my mind and my heart. It has been such a privilege working beside you all. Please know that you have taught me so much and inspired me in many ways. The lives you live are not easy, and the environment in which you live is immensely hard, with violence and trauma constantly present. I find it hard knowing that I am but a visitor in your community and can leave, whereas you have to stay there. For that, I admire that you get on with life and keep going despite these difficulties.

I would like to thank the Trauma Healing Institute for its kind permission to reuse the forgiveness statements found in Chapter Fourteen which are translated and adapted from *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help, Revised (Stories from Africa)* © 2021 SIL International and American Bible Society. All rights reserved. Adapted from

Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help, Expanded edition © 2016 SIL International and American Bible Society, and *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help, Africa edition* © 2014 SIL International and American Bible Society. Used by permission.

About the author

Sarah Coleman received her bachelor's degree in costume making. She is passionate about using her creativity to help people and completed a master's in integrative arts psychotherapy to support this. She uses a mixture of art forms, including visual art, dance, drama, music, puppets, poetry, and sand tray.

Sarah has half a decade of experience working in the UK with children, young people, and adults who were impacted by domestic violence and substance misuse. She ran a private practice for adults with mental health issues.

Sarah moved to South Africa at the start of 2020 to deepen her skills in working with trauma, running therapeutic groups in violent communities.

She enjoys playing the piano and saxophone, dancing, swimming, hiking, and being in nature. She is passionate about connecting with people on a deeper level and making life better for them.

Introduction

"I'm late because the gangs were shooting again today, and I didn't want to leave my house until it was over."

"My nephew stole my phone, and he sold it to get money to buy drugs."

"There is a memorial service tomorrow for my uncle who was shot dead last week."

Hearing any one of these comments when running weekly therapeutic group sessions would be unusual in many settings. Yet I regularly hear these, and similar, comments from the women who attend the sessions I run in a township in the Cape Flats of Cape Town in South Africa.

The level of violent crime in South Africa has been likened to "that of a war zone".[1] In 2018, 57 people were murdered on average a day. In 2022 this rose to 74.2 people a day. A murder rate of 43.7 per 100,000 people makes South Africa one of the most violent places in the world.[2] The most common murder weapon is a gun, followed by knives, sharp instruments, blunt instruments, and bricks or stones.

If one lives in a township (a low-income community that has a unique and distinct history due to the past political happenings of South Africa), crime is all around, and it cannot be escaped. Let me give an insight into the lives of the people I work with by introducing three women. I will use them throughout this book to help paint a picture of their lives and the impact that living in a violent community has on them. I will also provide tools on how to help people in these kinds of situations deal with the realities they face. Each of the three women is an amalgamation of people I have worked with. This is partly to help preserve confidentiality, but also a tool to help you, the reader, understand what it is like to live in a violent community.

Geraldine is thirty-five years old. She lives in a government-provided flat that is part of a high-rise building. The alleyways are dark, the windows are broken, and nothing works. It stinks of crystal meth, a drug that is surprisingly cheap and easy to get hold of. Geraldine is a single mum. The father of her child used to be a nice person until he got involved in the gangs. Being in a gang provides a sense of safety and belonging. If anything happened to him, someone else in the gang would have his back. Unfortunately, this results in retaliation and an escalation in violence. If a gang member is shot or hurt by an opposing gang, his gang will take revenge. Geraldine tries to keep her child and herself away from him so they can stay safe and not get caught up in inter-gang activity.

Geraldine lives hand to mouth every day. She receives a small government grant (approximately £20) for her child each month. Whenever she goes to collect the money from the local post office, she has to wait outside in a long line for most of the day battling the elements: extreme heat, high winds, rain, or freezing cold. Some months she waits the whole day and returns home empty-handed as they have run out of the cash that was allocated for that day.

Lilly is forty-three years old. She is married with three children: a teenage daughter and two younger children. She lives in a two-bedroom house with her husband and family in one room together while her uncle and his family live in the other bedroom. Her uncle has some business with the gangsters, so she doesn't feel very safe in her house. The house is positioned on the edge of the high-rise flats and is the perfect location for the gangsters to run in and out of constantly. Lilly gets

frustrated that her husband does not work and just sits around all day. She feels like she is the one who must do everything.

Each day Lilly wakes up not knowing how she is going to feed her family. Her youngest child gets sick and when she takes him to the clinic, she waits in line the whole day. Eventually, a nurse gives some basic medication to her son and sends them on their way. The doctor has been too busy to see them that day. If she had money, she would be able to go to a private clinic. Sadly for her, as for many others in her community, she cannot afford this privilege.

Courtney is fifty-nine years old. She is quiet and withdrawn. She lives in a shack in a particularly dangerous part of the township with her grown-up daughter. A shack is a temporary structure typically made of wooden beams and corrugated iron. Courtney's shack is among a large cluster of shacks close together. People often put them up illegally in their backyards to create living spaces for extended family or as a source of income.

Courtney is unable to read or write properly. Instead of going to school as a child, she went to beg on the street corners to find money for food. This enabled her and her grandmother with whom she lived to survive. Her mother was a drug addict and absent from the home. She doesn't know who her father is, as is the case for many in her situation.

Courtney mostly stays at home. What else is there for her to do? She has no sense of purpose in her life. Plus, how does she know if it will be safe to go outside? The gang members are frequently shooting outside her shack. Even if the gangs are not shooting, there have been many times when she has gone out to the shop, and someone has assaulted her to steal her possessions.

What can we learn from Geraldine, Lilly, and Courtney's stories? How do they relate to your life or those around you? Sadly, violence lives everywhere. Their stories are examples of living in a high-crime area and the impact this ongoing trauma has on their lives. Throughout this book, I aim to highlight some of the lessons I have learnt about how to effectively support people who are going through ongoing trauma due to living in a violent community. You do not need to have experienced a traumatic life, or have worked with people in violent communities to find these lessons and reflections useful. Through the stories I narrate,

I share my insights into how I have helped people in these communities find hope in their lives. I describe how I create places of safety when everything around them is dangerous. These insights can be a learning tool for all of us and applied to each and every situation we find ourselves and others in, not just those living in violent communities.

As you will see, the way I work in this community is different to the way I worked in the UK. My strategies and boundaries have had to be adapted to suit the context in which I find myself. The healthcare systems and support structures such as social services in the UK do not exist or barely exist in this community. Poverty and violence play a huge part in my need to adapt to the context in which I work. I constantly need to think about my safety and the safety of the people I am working with. For example, I will take people in my car due to the lack of transport access/money to pay for it and the dangers of walking around the township with the threat of gang activity all around. I also work differently due to the significant power dynamic inherent in being a white British woman working among a "coloured" community.

The term "coloured" is commonly used in South Africa for persons of mixed race. Coloured people are not black nor are they white. In South Africa, they have their own distinct classification. I share more of my life with the people I work with to help level out this power dynamic, although my self-disclosure is carefully thought through to be helpful for them.

The stories in the book come from the range of weekly therapeutic groups I run at a local church in the community. Some of the participants come to more than one of the groups. However, each group has been formulated with its unique structure and boundaries to create containment and enable growth. All the artwork and creative writing displayed in this book are original pieces by participants. They have granted permission for me to share these as well their stories.

The book is split into five parts. I begin in Part I by thinking about how to create a safe space, working with difference, and then how to find support and boundaries. In Part II, I explain the importance of psycho-education and go through what is happening in the body with particular reference to breathing and the nervous system. In Part III, I describe the value of connection and being with others as well as the significance and support of believing in a higher power outside oneself.

Part IV explores how we move on and grow, and Part V details the importance of looking after oneself. Working and living in violent communities can be hard, but the book ends with an epilogue reflecting on how we can live with hope.

I hope you will learn something about yourself and apply the lessons from the insights I share to your own life and work. At the end of each chapter, I invite you to reflect on the topic and see what you can learn about it for yourself and to better understand how you can support others around you who are going through a difficult time.

Prologue: The journey

"What do you want out of life?" the facilitator asks me.

"I want to use my creativity to help people," I say after some reflection. I am away on a course learning to understand myself better.

"How can you use all of who you are?" the facilitator continues.

I did not know the answer to this question. I completed a degree in costume making and spent the next two years travelling. Part of my travels took place with the Zulu tribe in South Africa, working in an orphanage with the children and teaching sewing to the adults. I loved being in Africa but circumstances led me to settle back in England. I felt at a crossroads in life. I was doing a bit of this and a bit of that and I didn't feel fulfilled in what I was doing.

How could I use all of me? What would the use of my creativity to help people look like? This was a question that I pondered for a while.

One day I was chatting with a friend and she mentioned art therapy. It was a lightbulb moment, and I knew I was meant to do this. I knew nothing about art therapy but something about it felt so right. Here I could use my creativity to help people. I looked into the different courses and eventually enrolled in the Integrative Arts Psychotherapy

course at the Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education (IATE). I loved all art forms and didn't want to only use visual art. My training at IATE covered seven art forms: art, dance, drama, music, puppets, sand tray and poetry. Here I could use all of these modalities as a form of therapy.

After four years of training, I qualified and got a part-time job doing therapy work with children and young people who had experienced domestic violence and substance misuse. I also ran a private practice for adults with mental health issues and continued to teach an evening sewing class which I had been doing since before I started my arts therapy training. I finally felt fulfilled in what I was doing and inwardly knew I was using all of myself.

Sadly, my contracted job only lasted one year due to funding and a lot of my self-employed work ended. I questioned what was going on. I thought this was what I was meant to be doing. However, I always had a heart for living and working in Africa. I now felt the time was right to pursue this. I approached several organisations to see what options there were. Working with trauma had become a particular area of interest to me, so I had been doing lots of continual professional development (CPD) in this.

"I would like to offer therapy to people who are struggling with trauma and run a sewing class," I said to the different organisations I approached. "I am happy to explore doing this in any part of Africa."

A Christian organisation came back to me and offered me a placement in Cape Town doing art and play therapy work in a school in a violent community. There was a lot of trauma there so it ticked the box of working with trauma. And I could set up a sewing group with the women in the community. Yet my heart sank. South Africa was the last place I'd imagined working in. During my time working with the Zulus, I had struggled with how divided South Africa was between the rich/poor and white/non-white people. South Africa was a particularly dangerous place to live and I was not inclined to work in violent communities.

Nevertheless, the more I thought about this placement, the more peace I felt about going there. I sensed I could fully utilise my skills. I had my faith that God would protect me and keep me safe. Being assured

of this, I set about raising the funds to move out there and undertake the work I felt a calling to do.

Thoughts for reflection:

- *What would you like out of life?*
- *Are you using all of who you are?*

Part I

Safety and support

CHAPTER 1

Safety

I have eight ladies signed up for a therapeutic group. I am nervous as this is my first group in a new and foreign setting. I have worked a lot with trauma before, but I have never worked with people who are constantly living in danger with bullets being shot around them or people being stabbed in front of their eyes. Nor have I worked with such extreme poverty that people don't know when they will be getting their next meal.

The first thing I realise is that I need to create a safe space. The world around the women is dangerous and threatening. According to Abraham Maslow's[3] hierarchy of needs, basic bodily and emotional needs for shelter, food, and comfort must be met before any higher orders, such as a desire for growth and self-fulfilment, can be considered. In this community it is hard for those baseline needs to be met so I feel the starting point comes even before this.

Jaak Panksepp[4] describes how a frightened hungry cat will not eat, and a fearful, hungry, or cold animal will not play. Likewise, humans cannot engage in their full emotional, cognitive, and behavioural abilities when under stress, as too much energy is being used just

to survive. Therefore, I see the first aspect to consider when supporting and helping people is to create a place of safety.

The women are a mixture of ages ranging from mid-twenties to late sixties. It is a closed group enabling the same women to come for eight sessions. This helps create a safe space as they build up relationships and a sense of trust with each other. I speak with each member individually and tell them what to expect from the group. They all sign a consent form and commit to attending all eight sessions. The aims of the group are: to help the women find a purpose and meaning in their lives; to learn how to deal with the stresses they face; to navigate life better; to build up resilience; and to find support among each other.

It is Wednesday morning, and all the women arrive. I close the door behind them and lock it to stop people from interrupting us. We are meeting in a church hall and people often wander in begging for food or wanting to meet with the pastor. The church is on a busy corner at one of the entrances to the township. Gangsters used to hide behind the boundary walls of the church and shoot at each other. The church council had recently knocked these walls down and put up a fence. Since then, the gangsters have found alternative places to hide and the church building is now a safer place to be. While the surrounding area is still dangerous, I feel safe inside the church. There is no way I can create a safe space for people to come to if I do not feel safe myself.

Coming from the UK, it is a hard concept to comprehend having fences around buildings, security gates on doors and bars on windows, yet it is a common occurrence in South Africa. Nevertheless, I appreciate the safety that a fence around the church provides, as well as the security gate outside the door. It feels strange and unusual to lock oneself in a place, but in the interest of safety, this is a necessity.

"What are your expectations from this group?" I ask after we sit down together in a circle. I have a big flipchart beside me and write down their thoughts so we can visually see their answers and refer to them over the weeks if we need to.

"Confidentiality," says Lilly. "To know that what I say here isn't talked about elsewhere." Gossip is a big thing in the community. There is a high population density with many people living in a small space. There are run-down high-rise flats as you enter the township, with small houses and shacks as you move further in. People can't afford to have

ALSO IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPY MATTERS SERIES

Sexual Diversity
by Silva Neves

Bringing Your Heart to Work: A Seven-Step Journey to Mental Health and Wellbeing
by Hazel A. Hyslop