The Tree of Life
Inspiration booklet

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This booklet is part of a training package for conversation leaders in the Tree of Life Workshop with children and adolescents of refugee background, usually unaccompanied minors. The training includes one day of theory and individual exercises and two days of group exercises under supervision. This booklet is intended to serve as support and inspiration after the training is completed, and is developed in a collaboration between RVTS South, Regional trauma center, Norway (rvtssor.no) and Department of Child and Adolescence Mental Health (abup.no).

As a conversation leader, it is important to remember that the Tree of Life process is one of dialogue and reflection. In this inspiration booklet, we will give examples of questions that can be a good starting point for further reflections and conversations with the participants.
The Tree of Life is part of a process of strengthening one’s identity where the tree is a metaphor for life itself. The roots of the tree represent one’s background: where one comes from, family, good memories from childhood, important values and good experiences. The earth represents life here and now, well-being and happiness in everyday life. The trunk of the tree represents one’s personality; that which you are good at, such as dancing, singing, fixing cars and more personal qualities such as being caring, responsible etc. The branches represent hopes and wishes for the future. The leaves on the tree represent important people in one’s life, and the fruits represent what meaning they have in the individual’s life and what they learned from them.

The process of drawing and writing on the tree is divided into two: First, one concentrates on all that is good to remember, that which makes one proud and happy. Each person presents their tree to the others. The others then give feedback on what that person means to them and what strengths they see in them. Secondly, the focus is on storms in one’s life, i.e. the difficulties the participants have encountered in life. One does not go into their storms in detail, but discusses how different storms affect emotions, thoughts and actions. The main focus is on what the participants did to get through the storms and what is good to remember to do when one encounters storms in life. The group becomes an arena for reflection and coping on mastering and opportunities, even though a person has been exposed to painful situations in life.

The Tree of Life is derived from Narrative practice. The method was developed in South Africa and Zimbabwe in working with children who had lost parents in war or from HIV/Aids.

This was a collaboration between the Dulwich Center in Australia and the REPSSI organization in Zimbabwe*. The purpose of the Tree of Life is to strengthen the identity of the participants and create a context in life. The dominant painful story often prevent the memory or awareness of all of the important and good things the person may have experienced in life. Starting from the good, the person one wants to be and the hopes, dreams and values one has for their life, creates a safe platform for conversations about the difficulties and pain one has experienced.

The Tree of Life can be used both in groups and with individuals. It is important that the process is followed by close caregivers, teachers, social workers and so on, so that conversations about life can be continued in everyday life in an expanded understanding of who the young person really is and wants to be.

**Start-up at the Tree of Life workshop**

After a presentation of the participants (write everyone’s name and where they come from on a board or flipchart), it’s a good idea to present why we are here and what the day will contain. Give a brief introduction to the different parts of the tree so that the participants understand the metaphor of the Tree of Life.

**Feel free to say something about the following:**

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**Why are we doing this?** What you all have in common is that you have experienced to flee from your homeland and come to a completely new and foreign country. That creates some very special challenges and your bodies, emotions, thoughts and actions are all affected by this. It is important to be aware of how you can take care of yourself in this situation, how you can support each other and how adults around you can best contribute.

**To conversation leaders:** Draw on the board/flipchart two circles (two suns). In one you write physical health, in the other mental health. Invite the participants to discuss the following:

**How can we take care of our body/physical health?**
(Write down what the participants suggest like rays on the sun.)

**Continue with:**

**What can we do when we have painful feelings or thoughts?**
(Write down what the participants suggest as rays on the sun about mental health.)

**And follow up with reflection on:**

**Does physical and mental health interrelate?**

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*Dulwich Centre Institute of Community Practice, www.dulwichcentre.com.au
Repssi: www.repssi.org/psychosocial-support*
The Tree of Life

Important people in your life and what you have received from them

Where you are from/ your roots

Talents, skills and characteristics

Hopes and dreams for the future

What makes you happy in everyday life
One sum up can be:
All of us have physical and mental health and all of us may be at risk of our mental health being exposed to challenges. One challenge may be if you are in a new place without your family. At one time, you might have been surrounded by parents, relatives, friends, and lived in a familiar society and culture. Who is around you today? Who knows you? Who has thoughts, wishes and hopes for your future? And if you do not have anyone, what can happen then? How may you react?

If there is little response from the participants, you could say that others who have participated in the Tree of Life have expressed that they could become sad, depressed, experience feelings of hopelessness and loss, being lonely, experiencing panic, having painful feelings, reacting with anger. Here you can draw up two circles again. One is about the people they had around them in their home country, the other about the people they have around them today.

Begin with what has been mentioned by the participants and normalize their reactions. For example, in the following way:
What you are describing are completely normal reactions when you are alone, far away from your family, your relatives, your culture... When you experience such challenges in life, it’s important to share your experiences and find new people you trust. Remember that you already have done, and continue to do a lot, to cope with difficult situations.

At the same time, it is important that you know that it is okay if you have secrets or there are things you do not want to share about your life. You decide what you want to share; it is your Tree of Life.

The aim is for you to feel stronger after these two days with the Tree of Life. It requires a lot of strength to be in the situation you are in now. We want to support you, and we want to encourage you to support each other.

We use the tree as a metaphor for, or image of, our life. What do you know about trees? For example, trees consist of different parts - roots, trunk, branches, leaves, fruits. Trees change with the seasons, they grow in woods or stand alone, they grow big and tall or are small and low, and they stand both in storms and sunshine. We shall imagine that parts of our lives are like parts of the tree and make our own personal tree.

If you are still unsure of participation if the Tree of Life iprocess, then we can tell you a little about what other young people have said after making their tree:
- We have learned a lot about each other.
- Never give up, there’s always hope.
- No one has asked us about our background before!
- It’s good to know what my friends here think about me. It helped a lot.
- We can use these experiences later in our everyday lives.

The Tree of life is about telling stories about yourself. If you were to present yourself today, you may say that you are a refugee from Afghanistan (say the names of all the countries the participants come from) and that you have experienced a lot of pain. Right now, that is probably what dominates your story. But we think you are much more than this and the Tree of Life is about telling a whole story about yourself. A story not just about what’s hard, but also about good memories, your skills, qualities, everything you are good at and your hopes and wishes for the future.

Working on the tree
So far, all the participants have been involved as a group. Now the participants will start creating their Tree of Life and also working individually, with support from the conversation leaders and as a group.

We will now start working on the tree. Remember that today’s focus is on good memories, that which is good and important to remember, and all the wealth you have in your own culture and history. When you have experienced a lot of pain, such as having to flee your homeland as a result of war and conflict and arrival to a new and foreign country, it is normal to want to forget. Today we will try to remember, but concentrate on what is good to remember.
Jeg bli tøktor

Jeg bli velspent

best Boxing man.

Navnet - Jonas
fra - Afghanistan

Jeg liker Tenner og Boxing
og dance - og Jeg flink også
men de og prøver flink og
flink me det. Jeg går på
Kongs går skulen sciter og trener
om Løne - Boxing

Mamma
PaPa

Jeg er
Karmench

Det er folk

Jeg ikke å går på skole
å care ting - å jeg mi
videregåninga - og jeg sårde
og Jeg går på uniste
og Jeg bli doktor

Jeg helte
Jeg Kjøpee
ASG

Photo: Gunnar Eide
The tree

The ground - What you like about your everyday life
We start with life here and now because we have experienced that it makes it easier to go from here to the roots, instead of starting with the roots.

We will start with life today and what you think is good about that. You can write keywords on the line above the roots.

- What is good in your life now? Where do you live? (This can be about safety, possibilities, laws and regulations, rights, school, caregivers who help and support, peace ...)
- What brings you joy in everyday life? What do you like to do? (This can be music, exercise, sports, school, football and activities, Play Station ...)
- Who do you like to spend time with? And what do you do together?

NB! REMEMBER! Help the participants to create short stories about what is good in life.

End this sequence with asking the participants to tell some of the things they have written. You could write it on a blackboard/flipchart. As a transition to the next part of the tree, the roots, ask if any of the participants have any music from their home country on their phone. Ask them to play it, and explain afterwards that this is an example of things we bring from our own culture, our own roots. Ask them to mention other examples of things we can bring with us from our homeland, such as national clothes, cooking, traditions etc.

The roots - Where you come from
The roots are a metaphor for where you come from. We highlight good memories and stories that you might carry with you in your everyday life!

Examples of questions and topics can be:
- Who did you live together with?
- What did your parents do?
- Culture? Ethnic group?
- Family / family history? What does your surname mean? First name? Songs? Dance?
- What do you value and appreciate from your home country?

Remember, it’s about getting the participants to tell short stories - and your curiosity and interest will help the process.
If painful or sad memories surface, it is wise to help the participant to change their focus to something else. For example, you could say that having thoughts can be compared to a train travelling with many wagons. If something in particular has happened the train may stop, and maybe one of the wagons that has stopped is loaded with painful memories. If this happens it is important to get the train to drive on and to bring forward new wagons with different cargo. For example, ask the participants to share something about what it is that is painful to think about. Recognise it as something normal, confirm that it hurts, but help the participant to move on.

For example:
Participant: “I was thinking about my mum. I don’t know where she is. I miss her and it hurts to think about."
Conversation leader: "I understand, it must be painful to think about her. Can you tell me something about your mum? What kind of mum was she? What kind of food did she make, etc."

End this sequence with the participants says something in the group about what they have written, this time about their roots. You could write it on a blackboard/flipchart. Working on the rest of the tree, the participants work on their own tree first, before they present their tree to the rest of the group.

The trunk of the tree – Talents, Skills and Characteristics
Here it is about both what the participants are good at, for example dancing, singing, fixing cars, etc. and their personal qualities, such as patience, responsibility, thoughtfulness, etc. In the introduction you can say that it is not so simple and common to say good things about ourselves. The participants will most likely need help to get started with this process, for example, you could start with one of the following questions:
- What kind of person would you like to be? What is a good human being?
- What are you good at? And what qualities characterise you as a person?
- How will others describe you?
- What would your mother, your father, or your best friend say about you?
- And what do you like to hear others tell about you?

This can be something the person does every day without considering that these are good qualities that characterise him or her as a person. Help the participants to recognise how they may for example, take care of others, give compliments, enjoy humour and make others laugh, be a good friend, calm conflicts and take care of themselves.

**The branches - Hopes and wishes for the future**

The branches on the tree stretch out from the trunk and represent hopes and wishes for the future. Help the participants to formulate at least one wish they have for themselves, one for their family and one for their country.

**Examples of questions and topics related to the branches might be:**

- Do you have a goal or something you want to work toward? What do you want to happen in the future? Dreams? Hopes?
- What is the first step towards achieving your goal?
- How long have you had these desires and how have you managed to keep them alive?
- Do you have an example of something you want for others? Your homeland, family, friends ... and for the world?
- Problems can sometimes overshadow hopes and wishes. What can then be helpful? Do you have a backup plan or can you imagine other possibilities if your goal is hard to achieve?

Here is an example from a group that could also be communicated to the participants:

During the work with hopes and wishes for the future, one of the young people said that he had no hope, that everything was just sad and difficult. One of the other in the group said that one should keep in mind that when it is overcast, the sun is still shining over the clouds. He said that it is important to think about this when things become difficult. He called this “Thought Power”

**The leaves and fruits - Important people in your life and what they gave to you**

The leaves and fruits on the trees are connected. On the leaves the participants write important people in their lives. This can be important people from their homeland, people they have met during their journey or people they know today. It may also be people who are no longer alive but who live in the heart of the person. The fruits are connected to the leaves, and signify what the participants have been given or have learned from these important people.

**Examples of questions and topics related to the leaves can be:**

- Can you share stories about people that have been and still are important to you? This can also be people that may not be alive, but that live in your heart.
- Why are these people important to you?
- What is special about him/her?
- Can you remember anything that you did together that meant a lot to you?
- Would this person appreciate you remembering him/her in this way?
- Is this person/these people someone who has/would have had great hopes for you today?
- Do you know that you are important leaves in other people’s lives?

**Examples of questions and topics related to the fruits can be:**

- What have these important people given you that you especially appreciate today? What have you learned from them? Is there anything very special that you appreciate?
This may, for example, be about mum and dad, about their kindness and love, what the person was taught about history and culture, friends who helped in difficult situations, a loving and caring grandmother etc. It is important to raise awareness amongst the participants that it is good to have people in their heart that they know are thinking of them and want them to live a good life. Keep in mind that this is a sensitive topic that may also be associated with loss and sadness. It will be important both to listen to these feelings and to confirm them, while trying to talk about the meaning of this person in their life. In narrative practice, we call this double listening. On the one hand, we listen to the expression of pain in the person’s story. On the other hand, we listen to positive response, meaning and initiative that focuses on resources and is an expression of power and support in life here and now. (Ref: Maps of narrative Practice, 2017, Michael White).

Sometimes we encourage participants to, for example, write some words to one of the persons who have meant/means a lot to them. The purpose here is to put into words the meaning of the relationship and to honour the person, although unfortunately it will not always be possible to actually convey these words.

A forest of trees - Presentation of the participants’ trees

Before the presentation of the participant’s trees, all trees are stitched to the wall. This create a beautiful forest of trees. A short reflection about the trees and what they have in common is recommended.

Afterwards:
Each participant presents his or her tree. Help the participants to describe their tree: Ask them to share one thing from the roots, one from life here and now, focus on hopes and wishes, leaves and fruits. Finish with the trunk, qualities and abilities. Just before you move on to the trunk say out loud to the participants that they are going to give each other gifts in the form of writing “positive notes” to each other. On these notes, they describe what the person presenting means to them, and what qualities and abilities they see in the person.

The participants come forward one by one and stick the post-it notes on the tree of the presenter. It is important that the feedback is rooted in specific events and that questions are asked that explore deeper.

Example:
You said he is good at helping others. Has he helped you with anything? Can you tell about one time he helped you?
It can sometimes be difficult for participants to fully express the meaning the person has for them. In that case we help the participant further in the description.

The presentation and feedback is concluded by asking each individual:
- How was it to receive all the nice comments about you?
- What would your mum/dad think if they heard all the nice comments about you?

Comment and summarise the feedback each participant gave to each other and the meaning that they each hold for one another.

After the participants have presented their tree and have received feedback, it may be important to say something about how to treasure all the positive words that they have heard about themselves. For example in the following way:

The brain can be compared with a computer. You can store both what is good and what is sad or painful. Sometimes it would be easier if it were possible to press “delete” and remove all the bad things. That is difficult! However, maybe you can save all the good feedback you have heard and received today in a new file. When life is difficult, you might be able to retrieve the
good file? But remember: there is a time for everything - both to cry, smile and dance. When you go through life and notice that heavy thoughts and feelings appear, it’s not always a good idea to try to forget and it might well be very difficult. It might also be important to seek comfort, understanding and support from another person, in nature, in God or other things in life that you have experienced can help you.

**Storms of life**

This is both an important but also challenging part of the Tree of Life. It is important to avoid getting into details of what the participants have experienced, focus rather on how they got through the storms. It is important to have a clear leadership that brings the group further if one of the participants begins to tell details from his or her "storm".

When we talk about storms in life, we often use metaphors including trees and natural forces. Try to get the participants to reflect on, for example, that trees may be beautiful, they may have deep roots, a strong trunk, and branches extending outwards, full of leaves and fruits. However, are the trees always left standing in peace? What dangers can trees be exposed to? What can storms, cold, rain, drought, fire, lightning and such things lead to?

The metaphor of the storms is then lifted into the lives of the participants. For example, in the following way:

*Just like trees, people are exposed to storms and stresses in their lives. No one can go through life without storms, but some people experience stronger storms than others. All of you sitting here have been exposed to some of the most fierce storms people may be exposed to. We know that many of you have experienced, seen and heard painful things. We will not talk about the details of what you have experienced, but about how the storms affected you and what it looks like now. Many previous participants in the Tree of Life have told us that they have trouble sleeping, that it may be difficult to concentrate at school, that they have pain in the stomach or head, that they can often become both angry and sad.*

**Specifically, we are interested in the following:**
- What storms have you experienced?
- Who / what helped you in each storm?
- What initiatives did you take?
- What skills did you have to use?
- What was especially helpful and why?

**And more general "life wisdom" like:**
- What can you do when you encounter a storm in your life?
- What is good to remember when in a storm?
- What storms are you in now? What can be future storms?
- From whom and where can you get help?

Write up what the participants say. For example, war, fleeing from their home, hunger/thirst, leaving and missing their family, losing someone they love, being alone, not knowing where their family is, abuse, violence, etc.) Ask participants about how strong these storms were.

If 0 is weak and 10 is max, how will you place the storms you have been in? How strong were your storms?

We know that such storms in life have a negative effect on both feelings, thoughts and actions. What feelings dominated in your storms?

*It is important to communicate that both sadness, fear and anger can be strong, but completely normal emotions in such a situation.*
“Never give up. There is always a hope.”

Participant
What thoughts do you have when you stand in such a storm?

Normalize what comes up, for example, thinking that there is no hope, that one can die, never reaching the goal, thinking why is this happening to me, that it is unfair and so on.

Say something about the fact that when bad thoughts and emotions dominate, you may want to do something that is not good, you might want to give up. You may ask questions such as: What is the point of life? What is going to happen? You may feel uncertain and be both afraid and sad. As a result, strong feelings and painful thoughts can make us want to do something that is not good - it is both normal and natural.

Then go from what is painful to what is possible:
But you never gave up. You managed what is almost impossible! After you fled your homeland and completed the long journey, you arrived here. Many of you are now in school and have plans for the future. What was it that helped you?

How did you manage to get through the storms?
(Write down what the participants say on a board/flipchart.)

Here is an example of what a young person, 14 years old, answered:
"I think I’m a tree with a weak root. It is possible that it can be broken. Right now I feel very weak. If I get to stay in Norway I think I can manage... I had a lot of troubles when I was in Afghanistan. It was a tough situation. And a dangerous journey. I was often sure I would die. It did not happen. I survived. But it was very tough and dangerous."

Answer: "You have been in a heavy storm. You have arrived here. And you’ve managed. - Is there anyone else who has the same feeling, that your roots have become weak? What must happen for the roots to grow strong again? "

Here is an example of a concrete and visual way of talking about this:
Lay out a rope on the floor, approximately 6 meters long. Explain that one end of the rope marks the storm at its strongest, the other end marks the storm at its weakest. Ask the participants to first stand where the storm was strongest and then stand where they feel the strength of the storm is today. The experience with this exercise shows that everyone marks a change over time. Then ask the participants the following questions:
- What did you do to get there? What helped you? What did others do for you?

Then move on to life today. Ask if there are storms that the participants are experiencing now and storms they think may come in the future. (Write down what the participants say on a board/flipchart.) Try to get a conversation going about wise things they have learned to do when it is stormy.

- How can you hold on to the hopes and goals you have for life even if you’re in a storm? Maybe hope is something that must be found and won again, time after time after time, after each storm? What do you think about that?

After the conversation about the storms, the adults who have participated in the workshop are invited to say something about the impression the young people have made on them and what they will take with them from what they have heard. Ask about how their own lives have been enriched by participating in this and if it has changed anything in their thoughts and perceptions of the young people, their qualities and abilities. Ask also what they think the young people’s own parents and family would think if they had been present. Feel free to use metaphors from the tree. For example, ask if the young person is a fruit in their lives! And finally ask them to say what they have seen among the young people that makes them think they’ll get through their storms.

Ending
We stand in a circle and hold each other’s hands. Feel free to say something about the work with the trees and how the participants can take these experiences with them in their lives:

- Take care of the beautiful trees. Nurture them, let them grow inside you and become strong so that you can stand in strong winds and storms, so that you can withstand cold without getting cold in your heart. Take care of the deep roots, although they are far away; it is your loving memories that keep them alive. You are on your way to strong, beautiful trees. To grow you need nutrition; take good care of yourself and each other.

- We hold hands together because no one can cope alone. We depend on each other and need each other both when life is good and when life is difficult. Now we shall send a handshake around the circle. This symbolizes the good wishes we have for each and every one of you. Remember to take care of yourself and each other. Remember to take care of your hopes and wishes for life.
THANK YOU for all the experiences and stories you have shared with us and with each other. Meeting you and sharing these days with you helps to give faith in human kind.

Certificate
After this, a certificate can be given to the participants. This may take time to write, so it is important to agree beforehand who will write the summary for each participant.

The certificate should be a short version confirming some of the important things the participant has communicated, and what others have said about them. There should be no interpretation, but as much concrete description as possible. Write one or two things from the roots, the same from life here and now, something about skills and abilities, one or two important people in the person’s life and the most important thing about their hopes and dreams.

Here is an example:
Ibrahim is from Afghanistan and has many memories from his childhood. He loved celebrations and was especially fond of his grandfather, who taught him a lot about respect. In Norway, he enjoys life and has got new friends and brothers. He loves music, and songs from his home country are especially important. His friends say that he is a happy boy who brings a good mood in the home. He is caring and takes a lot of responsibility. He highlights his mother as one of the most important people in his life. She has given him a lot of love and taught him how to cook. Ibrahim dreams of becoming a car mechanic. He is working hard at school to achieve this goal. He also dreams of peace in Afghanistan, meeting his family again and being able to help other people.

The actual completion and handing out the certificates can be organized as a separate gathering. For example, as a party, or a celebration where other people important to the participants can be invited. It may also be an idea to laminate the tree, preferably with the positive notes on the back. This will make it easier to take care of the tree and the positive feedback they have received. The tree can also be used as a starting point for telling other important people in the participant’s lives about themselves.

Organization and opportunities
This booklet has been based on a process that takes place over two days. It is important to include other involved sectors such as school, housing and health care. In our Community, Kristiansand in Norway, the Tree of Life has been included in the school plans, which simplifies practical implementation and allows as many as possible unaccompanied minors to attend.

However, the tree of life can also be carried out over many shorter sessions, for example in conversation groups, meeting once a week. Then you can work with the different parts of the tree over time.

The method is further suitable for a family context, especially in refugee families, where children and young people together with their parents can confirm good experiences, culture and together look at hopes and wishes for the future.

We wish you good luck in the work with the Tree of Life and would like to hear from you about your experiences, and any suggestions for changes that promote the process and participation!

References
"Be strong, be purposeful and always show love to those you meet. These words gave me strength on the long, difficult journey."

Participant