



My Memory Forest: An Arts-Health Intervention for Children

Dr Laura Kemp
Senior Manager, NCACE

Ali Winstanley
Creative Health
Practitioner
aliwinstanley@gmail.com

Keywords

*visual art, creative
health, mental
health*

Ali Winstanley is a visual artist and photographer working at the intersection of the arts, health and medicine. She is a self-taught artist with a degree in Psychology and experience of working as a social prescriber during the pandemic. With many years' experience designing and leading therapeutic arts workshops in day centres, schools, care homes, GP practices and hospitals, Ali has always been interested in helping people to live well. Through King's Culture she met academic partners who have continued to collaborate with her on both arts-health projects and research publications. This has led to a developing portfolio of work which spans child psychology, medical humanities, education and therapeutic arts. Ali has exhibited her work in London, Berlin and Finland and some of her drawings are in the Outsider Art collection in The Museum of Everything.

In 2016 Ali began working as an artist and researcher on cross-disciplinary arts, health and medicine research projects collaborating with scientists, doctors and academics at institutions such as King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, the Wellcome Centre for Interventional and Surgical Sciences (WEISS) (<https://bit.ly/4cDs8Sr>) at UCL and the Youth Resilience Unit (<https://bit.ly/4czMSdx>) at Queen Mary University London. She has collaborated on projects exploring how the arts can help communicate patients' experiences of 'invisible' physical conditions such as Crohn's disease and Neuropathy, how the arts can benefit child mental health and has facilitated creative workshops to explore Bowel Cancer patients' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence being used in diagnosis. Projects include; The Memory Forest, Making the Invisible

Visible: Fatigue in IBD, and patient leaflets for neuropathy and Crohn's disease currently distributed by the NHS.

My Memory Forest

The King's Culture initiative was started at King's College London to provide funded opportunities for collaboration between researchers and arts and cultural practitioners and facilitate cultural collaborations for research, impact and education across London and beyond. There is a strategic focus on creative health. In 2016, King's Culture introduced Ali to Dr Jennifer Lau, Reader in Developmental Psychopathology and Dr Victoria Pile, HEE/NIHR Clinical Doctoral Fellow in the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre, from the Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN). Their research interests lie in understanding mood and anxiety problems in children and young people, and in developing early interventions for anxiety and depression in young people, respectively.

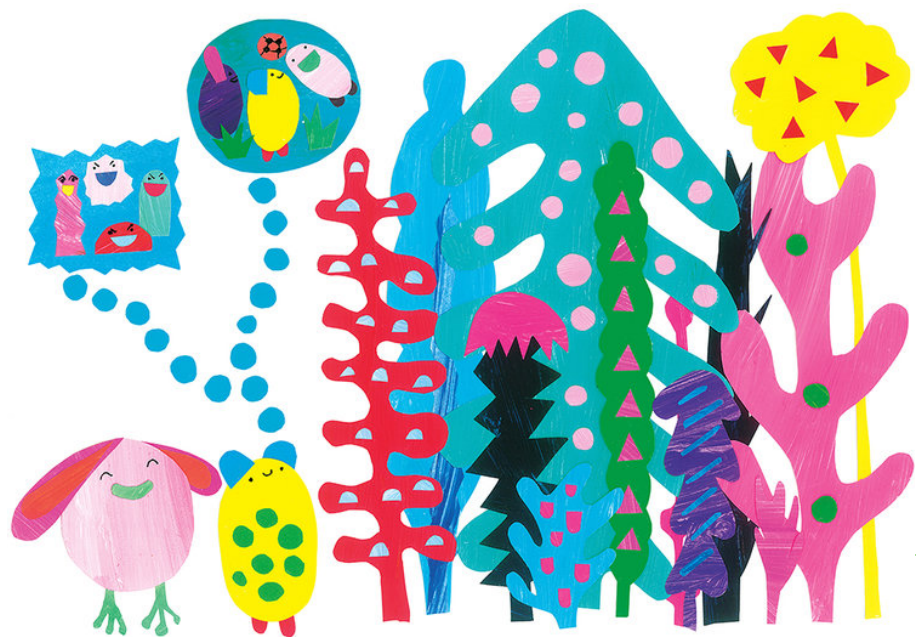


*My Memory Forest ©2020
Ali Winstanley*

Their collaborative project explored whether an intervention that improves resilient thinking in children can be effectively delivered through an illustrated book. Ali had always wanted to make a children's book focussed on

mental health, and she describes meeting her collaborators as ‘a fantastic meeting of minds.’ The book is an upstream mental health intervention tool, which focuses on whether visual storytelling and character illustration can challenge negative thoughts, encourage resilient thinking and reduce levels of anxiety and depression in children. The funding was intended to explore whether storytelling methods can help children build resilience through accessing detailed memories, as Lau and Pile’s research has shown that adolescents with only very generalised memory are more at risk of suffering from depression and anxiety. The Kings’ Culture funding was designed to further explore how the arts could facilitate that element of the research theory, with the project targeting younger children to encourage the development of detailed memories through the book. There was also a workbook element designed by Ali to encourage the detailed drawing of positive and negative memories.

*My Memory Forest ©2020
Ali Winstanley*



The collaborators developed the concept of the book together before Ali worked with a focus group of 15 children aged 8-12 to determine situations that cause them worry and distress. Based on their responses, Ali produced the illustrated publication *My Memory Forest*, which features a consistent lead character who encounters the situations that the focus group of children described and provides examples of ways in which these can be dealt with effectively. The story was inspired by central ideas from Cognitive

Science and therapies emerging from this discipline, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, demonstrating how the arts can be used effectively to harness and better communicate scientific research. The children and their families answered various rating scales before and after they read the book for a week, to provide initial data on any changes associated with the intervention.

Evaluation

The initial aim of the project was to assess the feasibility of the proposed tool in reducing emotional difficulties in children, which has been documented in subsequent research publications by the project team. 40 copies of the My Memory Forest publication were also disseminated to leading child psychologists, youth mental health charities, academics, clinicians and public health bodies.

Making the Invisible Visible: Fatigue in IBD

Ali has also developed other projects around chronic conditions and invisible conditions, using the arts to help people express how it feels to live with chronic fatigue, neuropathy and Crohn's disease. She has worked with 'lived experience experts' to help them use the arts as a tool to explore the unseen, difficult symptoms of these conditions that are not widely understood. In 2018 and 2019 she worked alongside Dr Wladzia Czuber-Dochan at the Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, King's College London as the Cultural Lead in a project addressing inflammatory bowel disease including Crohns and Colitis: 'Making the Invisible Visible: Fatigue in IBD' supported by the Cultural Institute at KCL. Ali co-facilitated a workshop with patients from around the UK discussing their experiences of fatigue and IBD and introduced arts activities including collage, drawing and sculpture for participants to depict their physical and psychological symptoms.

Drawing on these outputs, she produced ten illustrated flashcards inspired by the workshop. These were exhibited at Bush House, Kings College on The Strand in February 2019 and will be used in clinical practice with patients to help them express their symptoms to their loved ones and clinicians.

The patient participants had ongoing input into the creative process and reported positive experiences of their involvement. The project received acclaim from Crohns and Colitis UK (<https://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk>) as well as positive coverage from IBD organisations in the USA, New Zealand, Poland and Norway as part of world IBD Day in May 2019.

Making the Invisible Visible,
©2020 Ali Winstanley



Like a zombie

Continued practice

Ali has continued to collaborate with her academic partners on different projects and she describes the working relationships as supportive, generous and very collaborative. She credits a shared goal, the shared passion of helping children or people with unseen conditions and a similar sense of curiosity between researchers and artists as the basis for this success.

‘For me, it’s natural to want to be embedded with research or evidence based approaches or emerging ideas. I think what I like about working with researchers and academics is that they’re curious and as an artist, I’m also curious, so we share something really significant.’

In 2023-2024 Ali was awarded an Arts Council England Developing your Creative Practice grant which has led her to develop a greater interest in

neurodivergence, working to create resources and further investigate the perceptions and sensory experiences of neurodiverse children and adults. She is now in the planning stage of a project with the Colour Psychology lab and the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. She has also run creative workshops with primary school children around mental health with the Youth Resilience Unit at Queen Mary's University London, and is working with Brighton and Sussex Medical School to design and teach a course for Year 1 and 2 Medical Students on Creative Health and Whole Person approaches to Medicine and Wellbeing, which she describes as 'a fantastic privilege.' Ali asks her students to draw health conditions for a peer, such as migraine with aura or depression.



Ali with Dr Wladzia Czuber-Dochan ©2020 Ali Winstanley

'They find it really engaging and challenging, but it's a great way for them to see actually, there's other ways to engage with the patient beyond words. I can see the transformation in their thinking around art in this way. And actually, this is really powerful.'

Ali's practice as a Creative Health practitioner demonstrates the power of art to communicate complicated medical conditions, facilitate patient-doctor understanding, express concepts generated through scientific research and test their viability. Her dedication to collaborative work with Higher

Education also reveals the synergies between artistic practice and research as endeavours grounded in passion and curiosity.

Additional information:

Ali Winstanley: <https://aliwinstanley.com> | aliwinstanley@gmail.com

King's Culture: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural>

Dr Jennifer Lau: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/jennifer-lau>

Dr Victoria Pile: <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/victoria.pile.html>

Wellcome Centre for Interventional and Surgical Sciences (WEISS):
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/interventional-surgical-sciences>

The Youth Resilience Unit at Queen Mary University of London: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/wiph/centres/centre-for-psychiatry-and-mental-health/youth-resilience-unit>

Dr Wladzia Czuber-Dochan, Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/nmpc>

Brighton and Sussex Medical School: <https://www.bsms.ac.uk/index.aspx>

Boosting resilient thinking in children using character illustration and storytelling | King's Culture | King's College London: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/2016/boosting-resilient-thinking>

Research Papers

2020 *'Targeting image-based autobiographical memory in childhood to prevent emotional disorders: Intervention development and a feasibility randomised controlled trial'*, Victoria Pile, Ali Winstanley, Abigail Oliver, Eleanor Bennett, Jennifer Y. F. Lau.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0005796721001121?via%3Dihub>

2019 *'Exploring a novel intervention targeting image-based autobiographical memory to reduce vulnerability to emotional disorders in children'*, Pile, Victoria; Winstanley, Ali; Oliver, Abigail; Lau, Jennifer. 2019.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0005796721001121?via%3Dihub>