

Memory work creates hope and gives people a perspective

Solution-focused memory work recognises each individual as *the* expert of his or her own life. This gives them the self-confidence, assurance and courage to see one's own future in a new light, and to fashion one's own destiny. aidsfocus.ch was invited by CO-OPERAID to facilitate a training-of-trainers workshop on solution-focused memory work with their partners in Uganda.

Von Helena Zweifel

It was a little strange to be invited to Uganda to facilitate a training workshop on solution-focused memory work – to Uganda, the country that is considered the cradle of memory work in the context of HIV and AIDS in Africa. In the 1990s the National Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS (Nacwola) started working with memory books. The women in Nacwola, who themselves were HIV positive, wrote memory books as a legacy for their children. Communication within the family and relationships with mothers also improved through the writing of books and through the recounting of their story. The good experiences gathered with memory books in Uganda became well-known among experts on the subject. The approach was taken up and further developed in South Africa and made its way to Switzerland via our South partners.

At aidsfocus.ch we learnt from the women of Nacwola, for example from Annet Biryetega, who, having been invited to visit Switzerland and take part in an experts' symposium on memory work by aidsfocus.ch, shared her knowledge of the context and practice of writing memory books with us (see MMS Bulletin No. 97). Other sources that inspired us to elaborate the "Treasure Memories" tool kit on solution-focused memory work¹ were experiences with memory books gathered in South Africa and Haiti, with body maps in Kenya and Switzerland, and with terre des hommes schweiz's Youth2Youth training on solution-focused approaches in Southern Africa.



The workshop

The training-of-trainers workshop on solution-focused memory work took place from the 25th to the 30th of September 2011 in Masaka, Uganda. It was organised by CO-OPERAID, one of aidsfocus.ch's partners, and supported financially by the Swiss Catholic Women's League, the Swiss AIDS Federation and aidsfocus.ch. It arose on account of local partners' desire to learn how to use the solution-focused memory work approach, in order to be able to use it in their work with local communities. The aim of the workshop was to experience the process of making a memory book yourself, creating a book of your own and getting to know the methods, tools and the approach practiced in solution-focused memory work. The most important aim, however, was for participants to be able to implement the knowledge acquired in the workshop in practice.

28 women and men and three babies from six local organisations took part in the workshop, including NGO programme officers, volunteer workers (some of whom were participating in such a training workshop for the first time), women and men who live with HIV and/or have lost one or both parents, a partner, sibling or relation through an AIDS related disease. It was quite a challenge to structure the workshop effectively, on account of the participants' heterogeneity, and the diversity and variety of knowledge and experience they represented. These factors simultaneously gave the workshop a wealth of experience and ideas to draw on. All the participants were very keen to learn new things and to participate actively in the workshop.

Looking up to the stars

Solution-focused memory work also strengthens one of the classical qualities that is contained in memory work, that is to say the ability to cope with life's challenges. The solution-focused approach is more future and solution-oriented – it aspires to look up to the stars, to put it figuratively. Two prisoners look through the bars of their prison, one of them might see the stars – and the other one just the mud on the ground.

The solution-focused approach assumes that every person has strengths and abilities, which a person can build up on when he or she is seeking solutions. Objectives are developed together, resources identified and a new awareness and self-confidence are developed in the process, in order to proceed towards the ultimate goal. This attitude is also very important for work with memories – for every single person is *the* expert of his or her own biography.



Expert of your own life

One of the key elements in making the memory book was an exercise with the six windows that provide people with an insight into their own story. The participants drew six pictures of events in their life in their books. Every picture gives an impression of a decisive event in their biography, such as the death of a loved one, being tested positive for HIV or cancer, the first flight to Europe, or the decision to live "openly positive".

The author told his or her story to a partner, whilst the latter listened attentively and empathetically asked questions, if necessary. The partner then re-told the story just heard in a strengthening, empowering way, as the story of a strong woman who has made it against all the odds. One of the stories told was that of T., who was thrown out of the house she and her husband had lived in by his relatives after his death. She experienced great hardship for a while as a result. Thanks to her strong will to survive and her training as a nurse she found work again and a place to stay. Now she successfully works to support other disadvantaged women. It isn't the story of sorrow and pain, but rather the story of a strong woman who never gave up.

Recording and telling a story, listening attentively and recounting it, and hearing your own story in other words, all these are important and mutually reinforcing elements in the process. This helps those concerned to recognise the issues that give them strength and the survival strategies of their own biographies. They are the experts of their own life.

Highlights

A stimulating exercise with one's life story that is inspired by the solution-focused approach is the exercise with the highlights. Someone asked a partner to choose a situation from his or her life in which he or she was particularly successful. The partner then tried to find out how she managed the feat by asking "wh" questions. What happened? When? Where? How did you manage to do that? What was special about the situation? Which of the person's own resources were particularly helpful? Together with the partners, the conversations were consistently steered towards identifying those strengths and resources that were crucial to achieving the success concerned. The exercise aimed to awaken a new awareness – reach for the stars, instead of allowing yourself to be dragged down by your problems.

Memory work is also always oriented to the future. Remembering is like looking in the rear-view mirror when driving a car, in order to look forward. Gladys Nalukenge contributed an apt image to the discussion, namely that every car has a large windscreen at the front, and small rear-view mirrors. Keeping our eyes on the roads ahead is looking to the future, and the rear-view mirrors help us to get our bearings.

The family tree

Memory work is like a tree that enables adults and children to discover their own roots, and simultaneously encourages them to grow and cope with life. Experience has shown that working on a memory book opens a door for parents to talk to their children, write a last will and testament, tell their family history, chronicle their family tree, tell stories and anecdotes and make plans for the future. The participants discussed the most important elements of a last will and testament in the workshop, addressing not only the matter of distributing the material goods, but also looking at the issue of possible carers for the children.

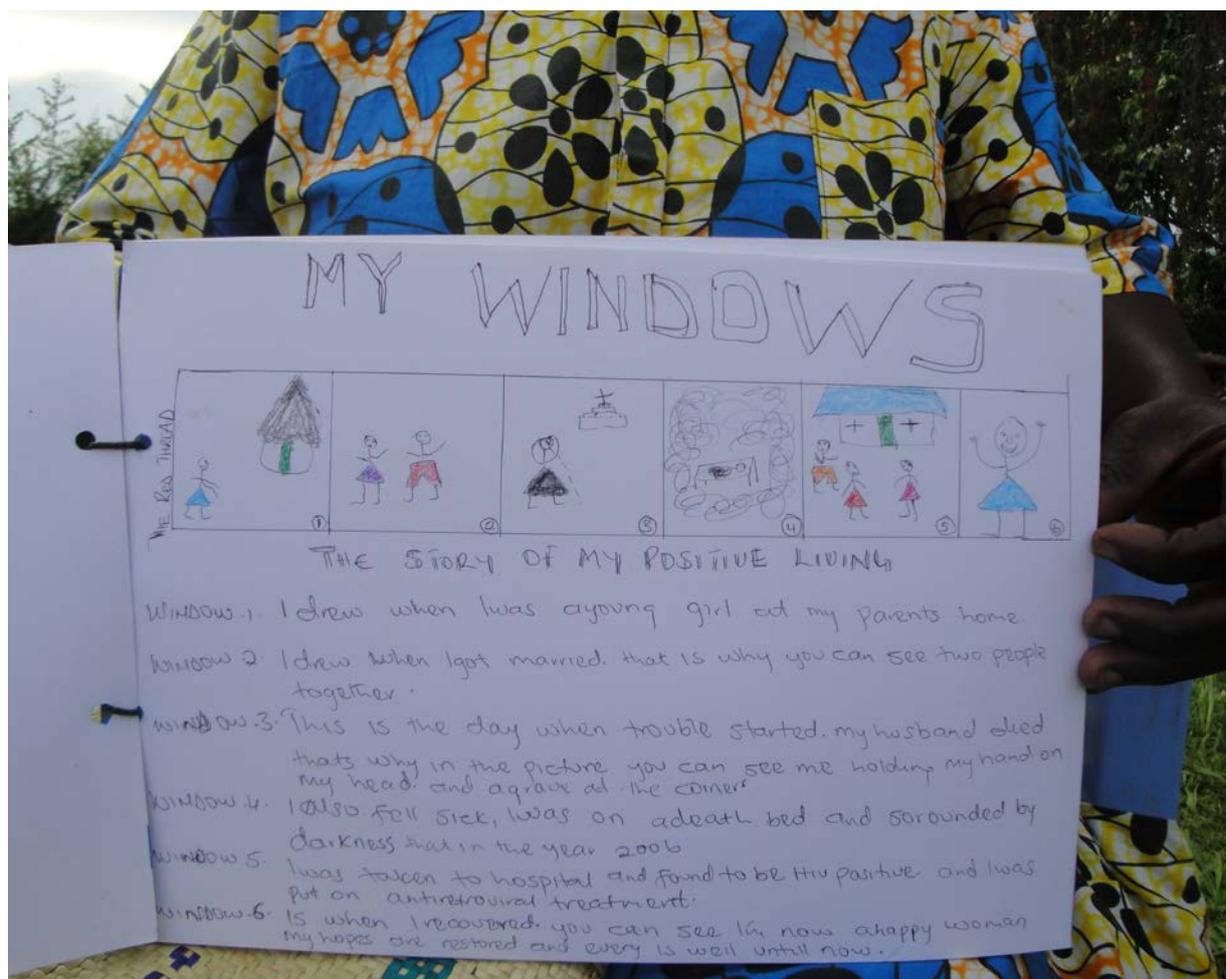
Jacinta Magera, programme manager with Nacwola, very vividly facilitated the family tree exercise with which Nacwola works, and which was developed with polygamous relationships in the Ugandan context. Working on the family tree gave participants an

impressive insight into the relevance of the multifaceted and complex relationships and dependence of Ugandan families and tribes.

Children belong to the father's family, no one questions this fact. Children and youths gain an identity by belonging to the father's family, an identity that is very important when it comes to marriage. They are the only relatives the children have, especially after their parents have died. Jacinta told the participants that, whilst she was sitting in hospital by the deathbed of her late husband, who was dying of an AIDS related disease, his relatives emptied the whole house of its entire contents, leaving just the curtains. Even though she was abandoned by those relatives and was left to fend for herself, as an HIV-positive mother with four children, she continually emphasised to her children the importance of getting on with the relatives: they are the only ones they have.

Living positively

Solution-focused memory work looks specifically at strengthening one's own self-identity and at "living positively" with and despite the illness. Strengthening the self may reduce "self-stigmatisation" and give the person concerned the courage to openly stand by his or her HIV status. Self-stigmatisation is a key factor that impedes one's own development and simultaneously prevents a reduction of stigmatisation and discrimination by others. Experience gathered in Uganda, Togo and Haiti has shown that memory work helps people who live with HIV to become more open in relation to their status – first within their group and their family, but also in the community at large.



Working with one's reminiscences remains relevant today, in a time when antiretroviral medicine is available even in remote areas of Uganda, as it enables people who are HIV positive to live a long life, and simultaneously helps them to cope with life. In her sixth picture Tracy drew herself cheering, with her arms up in the air. "Ever since I have publicly stood by my status I have felt free and happy. I live positively." Francesca also lives positively. She recounted how she put 50 Ugandan shillings of the little that she earns every month aside for transport to the clinic for her monthly health check and to pick up her medicine. The next important item in her budget are the school fees for her children, who she has to look after alone and for whom she wants a promising future. What money remains should suffice for her food. She proudly showed me her two memory books, one that she had already written for her son, and a new, solution-focused memory book, which she is writing for herself.



Planning for the future

"Planning for the future" was another session with tools from the solution-focused approach. Participants were asked to think of the future and to complete the following sentence. "When I think of the future I believe that I can... complete my studies, ... stay healthy and strong, ... train one hundred people in memory work." The participants were asked to imagine a scale from 1-10. 10 stands for the moment when the goal mentioned is met. As precisely as possible they described the situation as it will be when they reach level 10. Then they were asked additional solution-focused questions, such as: "On this scale of 1 to 10, where would you say you are right now? If you are at 5 now, for example, what would level 6 look like? What steps would you have to take to reach level

6? Which of your own strengths are helpful to take these steps?" By using scaling questions the participants practiced imagining the next steps as concretely as possible and planning for the future. It was surprising how many of them chose goals that related to their commitment to supporting people who are worse off than they themselves are.

At the end of the workshop every participant had a memory book of his or her own, and every organisation had elaborated a plan, including aims and concrete steps for how they want to implement what they learnt in the framework of their organisation, for the period through to the 30th of September 2012. In this context, too, the training-of-trainers workshop was oriented towards solutions and to the future. The success of the workshop will be seen in a year, with the implementation of concrete solution-focused memory work activities.

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19th October 2011

ⁱ "Treasure Memories. A toolkit for solution-focused memory work." Published by aidsfocus.ch and terre des hommes Switzerland, 2010.