

Lifebook for You(th)

Charlotte Katanaev

Under the Dutch NGO Kinderperspectief, 'Resilience Camps' were created between 2006 and 2010. These camps were for children from foster homes or residential care facilities in Bosnia and Croatia. In these camps the supervisors discovered that children were inspired by books that they read together, such as "The little prince" and "The Alchemist". In the summer of 2009 the idea arose to let children write down their own stories. From that moment, Lifebook came into existence. Martina Poldervaart-Pavic was the manager of the "Resilience Camps". She is also co-developer of the Lifebook for You(th) methodology.

Lifebook for You(th) focuses on youth who have little continuity in their life. These children often had to deal with abuse, foster care, neglect, war or other kinds of trauma. Since the founding of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Lifebook for You(th) by Martine Tobé in 2011, Lifebook for You(th) has been implemented in the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kenya, South Africa and Lebanon.

The main goal of Lifebook for You(th) is: the children develop more insight into their future and past, whereby their self-confidence is strengthened and their self-image is positively expanded. This is achieved by participating in the 5 Lifebook for You(th) meetings. The youths work in groups of five to six others on their Lifebooks, which are biographical writings from themselves. With Lifebook for You(th) the starting point is the child's perspective on its past and future. By working on these aspects the child will be increasingly resilient in the face of adversity. The five Lifebook for You(th) modules are discussed on separate days. A meeting lasts around 2,5 to 3 hours. The meetings take place after school hours in a private setting.

Expressive writing

Expressive writing can have a significant healing effect for individuals who have experienced a traumatic or extremely stressful event (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). These effects were found on longer-term physical health outcomes as on emotional health outcomes (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Ulrich & Lutgendorf (2002) conclude that writers focusing on cognitions and emotions developed greater awareness of the positive benefits of the stressful event. Greenberg and Stone (1992) found that individuals benefited as much from writing about traumas about which they had told others as from writing about traumas that they had kept secret. Pennebaker (1997) stated that health gains appear to require translating experiences into language.

- First, the more that individuals used words with positive emotion, the better their subsequent health was.
- Second, a moderate number of words with negative emotion predicted health. Both very high and very low levels of words with negative emotion correlated with poorer health.
- Third, and most important, an increase in both causal and insight words over the course of writing was strongly associated with improved health (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, in press).

To sum up: regular therapeutic writing can help the writer find meaning in their experiences, view things from a new perspective, and see the silver linings in their most stressful or negative experiences (Murray, 2002). It can also lead to gaining insights about yourself and your environment that could have been difficult to determine without focused writing (Tartakovsky, 2015).

The five modules of Lifebook for You(th)

The first module focusses on the themes: My life until now and my best friends. At the beginning of this module there is a communal start to create a safe and open atmosphere in the group. The children should trust each other and know that whatever they say remains in the room. In this module, every child receives the opportunity to talk about himself and his childhood on the basis of a baby or toddler picture of themselves. The children should know that it doesn't matter how long or short the stories are that they want to share. Every detail that has meaning for them personally is precious and important.

The second module focuses on the themes: 'My school and my creative side'. Not all children have a positive memory of their time at school. With this module the Lifebook tries to help the children develop a broader view of their school period. With 'My creative side' the children can use various ways to express their feelings.

Module three focuses on 'Animals, family and networks'. This theme views family from a broad perspective. The children learn that even people that were not close to them at the time can still have a family role. By talking about their family, the children will gain insight into their resemblance to people in their family. This can be in small things like eye colour but also in traits such as being extravert.

In module four the themes: 'My deep thoughts and my treasures' are discussed. The children gain insight into the skills and qualities they possess. By doing several exercises, the children can develop a broader view of themselves and they can start to see positive aspects in themselves and the other group members.

The last module focuses on: 'My house, future and residences'. Within this module the children find meaning to the places and houses they have lived in. They see that their past has formed them into who they are today. In the end the children think about their future: what are their wishes, what do they want to become, where/how do they want to live? But also: what can I already do today and now? What is the first step in this direction that I can take right now?

After the Lifebook meetings are finished, the children can think of a joint activity "Into the world" that they want to do together. The group members can plan an activity that brings positivity in the world. The aim of this activity is to reach out to others in a positive way and to give something back to the community.

Theoretical framework

The intervention Lifebook for You(th) is based on theories found in literature such as the resilience reinforcement, autobiographical work, self-determination theory, self-efficacy theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Resilience reinforcement. Children who seem to be invulnerable to hardship, and seem capable of achieving a normal development no matter what their circumstances, are thought to have resilience (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). Counterbalancing the effects of risk factors are commonly termed "protective" or resilience factors, which enhance an individual's capacity for resilience, being able to deal with a situation in a favourable way for the person. Lifebook for You(th) focuses on these so called 'protective' factors. The factors incorporated into the manual which are responsible for a healthy and positive development are; Positive self-concept, conviction of self-efficacy, empathy, communication skills, optimistic outlook on life and creativity (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, & Rönnau-Böse, 2019). Lifebook for You(th) focuses on the positive events and reinforces these elements in the child's history. This is done by showing and encouraging the child to use his own resources and strengths. Rutter (2000) suggests that self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and social support are processes that protect adolescents from risky behaviours. Lifebook for You(th) meetings are used to develop protective processes in the youth.

Resilience within the ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that human development occurs through a complex reciprocal interaction between individuals and the people, objects, symbols and institutions around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The ecological systems theory provides a useful way of accounting for variations in resilience by marginalised youth, by considering personal factors in the

context of broader social and cultural influences (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's system closest to the individual is the 'microsystem', which contains structures and people with which the individual interacts directly (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Lifebook for You(th) focuses on the microsystem as Lifebook for You(th)s participants take part in meetings where they are directly involved in material featured on discuss family, school, relationships and one's own qualities.

Self-determination theory. The self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) addresses issues of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to this theory, people have innate psychological needs: Competence, Relatedness and Autonomy. If these needs are met then people will function and grow optimally. To actualize these needs, the social environment needs to nurture them. During the Lifebook meetings this social environment is created. The Lifebook has been designed to be suitable to increase these needs in the participants. Competence is the need to control the outcome and experience mastery over a task. Lifebook is an autobiographical work, which means the participant itself decides whether the Lifebook is done, finished and wrapped up. To increase this need, the coach and the other participants are not allowed to judge or try to frame the Lifebook of others in a way they think it is supposed to look like. Lifebook does not have a certain outcome, since this is all up to the participant. The need for autonomy is also reached this way. The participants are in control of their own book and the way of creating it. Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci (2006) noted that autonomy does not mean that the person in question has to be independent of others. Lifebook for You(th) takes this into account by having the meetings in groups. The participants work on subjects together and exchange thoughts and memories with each other. This increases the need of relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2000) described this to be an universal desire to interact, be connected and to experience caring for others.

Social learning theory in autobiographical work. Wenz & McWhirter (2009) results found that the combination of creating and sharing writing improved the self-actualizing behaviours and self-acceptance of the participants. This addresses competence in the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000). Writing can put words to thoughts, bringing internal hidden ideas out onto the page so that the internal dialogue can be recognized, reflected on, examined, and understood. Writing can provide a neutral way to solve problems, capture feelings, exercise power, and know one's own voice (Atwell, 1987). For reflection within one to occur, oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Listening, sharing aloud and writing, allows individuals to expand, share and reflect on

each other's experiences. This is why Lifebook encompasses writing in a group atmosphere.

Coaches attitude. According to Bandura's social cognitive and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977,1997), resilience arises from the interaction of environmental, behavioural and personal factors. Youths expectations, beliefs and cognitive competencies are developed through interaction with social and structural factors in their environment. Youth specifically model the behaviours of others, through instruction, or through social persuasion brought about via peer pressure (Bandura, 1997). In Lifebook for You(th) meetings the Lifebook coach facilitates and enables social learning. The coaches' attitude is very important as they facilitate the learning environment.

Future research and plans

Over the years, Lifebook for You(th) manuals and meetings have been developed by working in practice. The results of the above mentioned scientific researches have been imbedded into the methodology, but it has not yet been researched whether the theories are implemented during the meetings with the children. After conducting focus groups with youth in 2019, the next step is to carry out a process evaluation of the meetings in 2020. The aim of the process evaluation is to turn Lifebook for You(th) into an evidence-based intervention that can be globally used to help youth strengthen their self-esteem, positively expand their self-image and to become more aware of their own strengths and qualities to develop resilience in the face of adversity.

The study will try to answer the following questions: To what extent do the Lifebook for You(th) sessions adhere to the manual and differ from one another (treatment integrity)? To what extent were the participants involved in the meetings? To what extent is the wellbeing of the participants accounted for during the meetings?

To answer the research question, a combination of a quantitative and qualitative study was chosen. Treatment integrity will be assessed by conducting a direct assessment using an observation scheme and indirect assessments where the Lifebook coaches and the children fill out questionnaires after each session (Perepletchikova, 2011). The quantitative aspect of the research will be done to discover how participants think and feel about the Lifebook meetings and the modules. Qualitative research demonstrates the variety of perspectives and discusses the social meanings related to it.

More information: www.lifebookforyouth.com

References

- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Baikie, K., & Wilhelm, K. (2005). Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 11(5), 338-346. doi:10.1192/apt.11.5.338
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513– 531.
- Fröhlich-Gildhoff, K., & Rönnau-Böse, M. (2019). *Resilienz*. UTB GmbH.
- Greenberg, M. A., & Stone, A. A. (1992). Emotional disclosure about traumas and its relation to health: effects of previous disclosure and trauma severity. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 63(1), 75.
- Harvey, J., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2004). Psychological resilience in disadvantaged youth: A critical overview. *Australian Psychologist*, 39(1), 3-13.
- Murray, B. (2002). *Writing to heal*. Monitor. Retrieved from
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing.aspx>
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science*, 8(3) 162- 166.
- Pennebacker, J.W., Mayne, T.J., & Francis, M.E. (in press). Linguistic predictors of adaptive bereavement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Perepletchikova, F. (2011). On the topic of treatment integrity. *Clinical Psychology: Science*

and Practice, 18(2), 148-153.

Rutter, M. (2000). Resilience reconsidered: Conceptual considerations, empirical findings, and policy implications.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American psychologist*, 55(1), 68.

Tartakovsky, M. (2015). The power of writing: 3 types of therapeutic writing. *Psych Central*. Retrieved from <https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/01/19/the-power-of-writing-3-types-of-therapeutic-writing/>

Ullrich, P.M., Lutgendorf, S.K. (2002). Journaling about stressful events: Effects of cognitive processing and emotional expression. *ann. behav. med.* 24, 244–250 (2002).
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15324796ABM2403_10

Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation. *Educational psychologist*, 41(1), 19-31.

Wenz, K., & McWhirter, J. J. (1990). Enhancing the group experience: Creative writing exercises. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 15, 37–42.