

# **How does the Spin a Yarn, Weave a Life (SYWL) process enhance the therapeutic effectiveness of work being done with traumatized individuals, communities and populations?**

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Experts in the field have explained that for many people, the painful effects of trauma can be difficult to ameliorate because their neurobiology has ‘frozen’ the traumatic event in time. Trauma is a multi-sensory experience and SYWL sends information through neurobiological pathways within a framework of layered multi-sensory processes. Narrative and/or visual imagery related to the trauma are tangibly represented, then exposed to a process of physical and symbolic transformation that fosters mastery of new skills, interpersonal collaboration, and the creation of a unique community weaving represented as fabric, a universally recognized material. The efficacy of multi-sensory engagement is well-illustrated in how Special Education professionals teach the brain of a dyslexic child to access and develop a brain region that helps them learn to read. The child will trace a letter with their finger in sand while alternately saying the letters’ sound, the letters’ name, and an associated image/meaning, like “C” for “cuddly cat.” Interestingly, in the end, dyslexic readers as adults use a different brain region than that used by typical readers.

The SYWL experience begins with introductions and orientation to the process. Participants are then provided with a prompt. For instance, in one project with veterans, as a prompt, participants listened to excerpts from the “Warrior Writers” project. After the prompt, participants write or draw their response on a special kind of paper. With permission, these papers are digitally copied. The participants then learn to cut their paper into strips in preparation for learning to spin them into pieces of yarn. Despite appearing difficult, learning to spin paper into yarn is much easier than it seems. Anxiety is raised by the expectation of meeting the challenge to perform a seemingly odd and daunting task. The breaking of yarns is anticipated and a method of mending the broken ends together is taught as well. Hand-operated spinning tools used in the process are shared by small groups of participants who remind each other of steps, give each other tips, and take shared pride in their unique completed yarns.

In addition to the activation of neurobiological, multi-sensory processes, participants experience metaphorical representations of what their internal world may feel like at times. They have taken paper personalized with their writing and/or drawing, deconstructed the original and felt it, through their finger tips, transform into a piece of yarn that is not only imbued with their original image, but also tangibly stronger than the paper they started with. There have likely been mended breaks along the way, and reminders are given that an image of the original has been preserved.

The process of hands-on learning and transformation is repeated when the yarns are woven on a specially prepared loom. Individually each participant learns to weave. As a group they watch the creation of fabric that is stronger than any of their individual yarns, now woven side-by-side. Feelings of connection and community have been created which stimulate neurobiological systems reaching back to primal roots essential for survival. The completed weaving is displayed alongside images of the scanned original papers. Corresponding tags on the fabric allow one to map the location of those transformed images.

Healing and resilience are intimately related to an individuals’ access to experiential opportunities of safe and caring social connections. In this relational context, people see themselves through the eyes of others who accept them despite their limitations, giving them an opening to experience a part of their own humanity. Ones’ ability to see humanity in others is thereby strengthened, and can potentially be extended to include even those who have inflicted harm. This potential is dramatically enhanced when the perpetrator is able to engage in honest communication. An example is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s approach to trauma from apartheid. When perpetrators’ exposed vulnerabilities are laid bare, one may be able to see their behaviors as born from weakness, ignorance, and fear.

Power is thus redefined as the ability to reclaim the full strength of one's own humanity. The painful knots from traumatic events become loosened, new connections are made, and SYWL enhances the integration of these processes.