

BACKGROUND NOTES FOR INSTITUTE

Gecko shows are intended to act as a provocation to the audience, encouraging a personal response and asking each audience member to place him or herself within the show.

Upon touring *Institute*, we discovered that some audience members feel this personal response profoundly and seem to need care themselves after the show. We have had numerous conversations with audience members touching on their own experiences of care and mental health.

When we began to develop *Institute*, there were three male performers and a female performer. The female performer was often assigned the traditional elements of care.

During the two year development of the show, Gecko Artistic Director Amit Lahav decided to replace the female role with a fourth male performer to explore care mechanisms between men. The decision has raised interesting questions of masculinity, strength versus fragility, and, tied to this, male mental health.

We sensed a great opportunity for additional activity that would continue to explore the themes we raise within the show with experts in the field more able to offer substantial support than us.

So in 2016 we developed a series of events and resources to allow audiences to further explore issues of mental well-being raised in *Institute*. We teamed up with Suffolk Mind as the lead partner on the project, and also worked with local mental health networks in each city that *Institute* toured to; Manchester, Southampton and Liverpool. The project was supported by a Wellcome Trust Award.

There were four stands to the project:

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: at each venue we held a post-show discussion with a twist. Artistic Director Amit Lahav and one of our performers were joined by local experts working in the field of mental health to discuss the show's themes, and answer questions from the audience.

SOMEONE TO TALK TO: after every performance there was someone from a local mental health support network ready to talk to audience members in the foyer, answering any questions they may have had.

SOMETHING TO DO: Gecko and Suffolk Mind created a unique workshop experience, combining their understanding and experiences of human emotional needs. Introducing the idea that we all have the same core emotional needs which must be met to sustain healthy minds. At each venue we led a free 3.5 hour theatre based workshop creating a playful and safe environment in which we introduced, explored and discussed these ideas in relation to *Institute*, the characters and ourselves.

SOMETHING TO READ: all audience members received a programme giving more information on the show and this project, as well as information on mental well-being and pathways to support locally. Below are a couple of articles from this programme - we hope you find them interesting.

WHAT ARE EMOTIONAL NEEDS?

We know when our physical needs for food, drink and sleep have to be met, because we feel hunger, thirst or tiredness. However, most of us find it harder to tell when our emotional needs have to be met.

Our emotional needs include:

SECURITY – to feel safe where we live, work or study. When we feel safe, we think clearly and respond to events sensibly whilst coping with change. When we feel unsafe we can become very stressed and find it difficult to think clearly about meeting other needs.

CONTROL – to feel that we have some say over our lives and personal choices. A healthy way to meet the need for control is to take personal responsibility for what we can influence, whilst accepting that there are some things we cannot control.

ATTENTION – like physical nutrition, too much and too little is bad for us. As we grow, we learn how to share attention – to give and to receive it. By sharing positive attention, people, families and communities grow and become healthier.

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION – which means having a relationship where we are

accepted by another person in a way that lets us be ourselves.

Community – feeling that we are connected to both other people and our wider society is vital for emotional health and wellbeing. We are social beings and need to belong to groups in which we are valued.

RESPECT – which is connected to the need for community, because to be valued by others – friends, colleagues, peers and the wider world – helps us to understand our role within the community.

PRIVACY – or having enough space and time to reflect and learn from life experiences.

ACHIEVEMENT – met by learning new skills and becoming competent in our work, hobbies and relationships. Learning new skills is the cure for both low and high self esteem.

MEANING AND PURPOSE – these allows us to cope with suffering and keep going when life becomes difficult and stressful. We meet the need for meaning and purpose by being stretched mentally and physically in one or more of three ways:

- Learning new mental or physical skills such as studying a language, an academic subject, obtaining a profession, or practising a sport or a craft;
- Helping others through commitment to raising a family, working in a team, running a business or volunteering; and
- Having a sense that we are connected to something larger than ourselves, which we have a duty to serve. This might be met through commitment to a religious, political or social cause, but for some people it may take the form of a philosophical or spiritual quest for scientific or experiential truth.

MEN & MENTAL HEALTH BY EZRA HEWING

While women are more likely than men to experience common mental health problems like anxiety or depression, men are three times more likely to attempt suicide. Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that suicide is the leading cause of death amongst men aged twenty to thirty-four, and a leading cause of death for men aged thirty-five to forty-nine. Men are also less likely to seek help with their mental health, either from their GP or from mental health services. Why might this be?

A common explanation is that men are reluctant to talk about mental health issues for fear of being seen as weak or 'unmanly'. It is thought that stereotypes telling men that society expects them to 'man up' and get on with life when they are distressed prevent men from seeking help or telling people how they feel. Campaigns encouraging men to seek help with their mental health often try to challenge these stereotypes about masculinity, which are seen as a barrier to men accessing help for complicated feelings, stress, anxiety and depression. However, there may be more that we need to take into account when thinking about men's mental health.

There is evidence that men and women's brains are 'wired' to cope with stress differently. In general, women may deal with stress socially – through expressing how they feel to friends and partners. A man's natural approach to coping with strong feelings may be to try to 'keep the brakes on' intense emotion, while seeking a practical solution to the perceived cause. In other words men are wired to problem solve.

Helping men with mental health issues might therefore be more effective if we take this into account. For men, 'doing' something about a problem and not just 'talking' about how they feel might be a more appealing way of seeking help with their mental health.

Approaches that give men the opportunity to 'do' things can often be very successful. Examples include social enterprises like Men's Sheds, where men can meet up with others and spend time in a workshop practicing wood-work and mechanical skills. Ecotherapy projects, like those run by local Mind associations, give men the opportunity to do gardening on allotments, get out in the fresh air, and talk over a cup of tea in the allotment shed when the weather is wet.