

DOI [10.26565/2410-1249-2025-24-05](https://doi.org/10.26565/2410-1249-2025-24-05)

UDC 159.9.072

## OFFERING CONNECTION WITHIN A WIDER COMMUNITY CONTEXT: THE HEART WOOD GROUPS FOR MEN

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Our aim is to offer a 'receiving climate' in which men, a majority of whom are survivors of trauma, who are at levels one and two of Carl Rogers' tentative Process Conception of psychotherapy, feel safe enough to begin to strengthen their contact functions (levels of psychological contact with self, others and the shared environment). Since 2018 we have offered person-centered men's therapy groups in a woodland setting. Group members are welcomed into our community for as long as they need. Groups are facilitated in a 'contact-oriented' way; we don't assume psychological contact but work continually to gauge its level with group members, and to facilitate the strengthening of contact through contact reflections within an activity-oriented group. Activities include bushcraft and cooking on the fire. Groups comprise up to twelve men and two or three facilitators, and are of 3 to 4 hours duration. Sessions are weekly through spring and summer, and are currently bi-weekly through autumn and winter. An independent researcher evaluates our service annually through voluntary recorded interviews with the men which take place in the woods by the fire. Our person-centered facilitation means that we constantly listen and respond to feedback from the men about their experience of the groups. The outcomes of these interviews and the feedback we get from group men throughout the process show that we are able to offer a receiving climate to these men who are suffering considerably, but cannot engage with therapy in the way it is generally offered.

**Keywords:** *trauma, pre-therapy, contact work, psychological contact, working outside the therapy room, working in a nature-setting, therapeutic community*

*'What they do up here is unlike anything I've been on. Even it's just a case of sitting around a fire and having a bit of soup and having a chat, it's just totally not like anything you know. When I've gone to therapists before it's been sort of one on one in an office, or it's in a classroom and it's... the vibe isn't there.'*

At Heart Wood we try to offer a safe environment through a 'contact orientated' way of relating with the men who come to our sessions. We work to offer a chunk of time in which the men aren't pressured and are heard. 'John' describes his experience: 'And also there's that, when I've done one-to-one therapy in the past, when I've turned up there's this thing, "I need something to say here". I can't just turn up and say "I really don't want to talk about anything this week". You know. Can we just talk about the weather or go and look for mushrooms or go and chop some wood? Whereas here, that options is there, which is that relaxedness...'

The following is the first of what I intend to be a series of pieces of writing which describe something of the way we work at Heart Wood. Heart Wood is a mental health charity in Northumberland (<https://www.heartwoodcharity.org>) which runs 'contact-orientated', (Erskine, 2023) client-centered therapy groups for men in a nature-based setting, and training for counsellors/ therapists who want to learn about working outdoors in a contact-orientated way. By 'contact-orientated', we mean that we don't assume psychological contact but constantly gauge the level of contact between group members and facilitators. For a number of reasons,

which I'll explore below and in a future piece, we work in a 'nature' setting.

I will quote from anonymised evaluation interviews that have taken place annually between an independent person-centered counsellor/researcher and men from the groups who accepted an invitation to talk about their experiences with us. We are offering something to men who would not otherwise be able to access meaningful psychological support and who don't necessarily fit the traditional populations to whom pre-therapy or contact work has been offered. Whilst a small number of group members experience some psychosis, most do not but can be described as 'contact impaired' or having lower levels of 'contact functions'. And rather than being in the 'greyzone functioning' (Dion Van Werde, 2002, p82) between psychosis and more congruent functioning, these men can be described as being in a 'high end grey zone' (Erskine, 2023). Here, due to trauma, they can find it difficult to form and benefit from meaningful contact with others, their own experiencing, and the shared reality (Prouty, 2002, p. 17). Another way of describing these men would be that they are, to varying degrees, psychologically (and often physically) isolated. Most are unable to engage with therapy, which fits the current 'norm' of sitting opposite someone in a room around and talking about what's wrong, or other support they have been offered.

Alan: 'I've done one on one therapy before but it's been in a doctors surgery'.

Interviewer: 'What was that like, compared to this?'

Alan: 'I don't know, it was just a lot more formal, a lot

**How to cite:** Ponsford C. (2025). Offering Connection Within a Wider Community Context: The Heart Wood Groups for Men, *Psychological Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 24, 36-41. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2410-1249-2025-24-05>

**Як цитувати:** Ponsford C. (2025). Offering Connection Within a Wider Community Context: The Heart Wood Groups for Men, *Психологічне консультування і психотерапія*, 24, 36-41. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2410-1249-2025-24-05>

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more, a lot more very sort of doctor patient kind of thing as opposed to a bunch of lads sitting around a fire’.

I recognise many of the individuals in our groups in terms of Rogers’ (1995, p. 133) tentative seven stage ‘process conception of psychotherapy’ in which he describes movement from ‘fixity to flowingness’ and says of people in stage two: ‘...We seem to know very little about how to provide the experience of being received for the person in the first stage, *but it is occasionally achieved in play or group therapy* [italics added] where the person can be exposed to a receiving climate, without himself having to take any initiative, for a long enough time to experience himself as received.’ Whilst men do have to take initiative to come to group sessions or contact us in the first place, this description of the experience of a ‘receiving climate’ is what we are trying to offer at Heart Wood.

We currently offer open-ended involvement so that group men can be with us ‘for a long enough time to experience himself as received’. The groups run weekly through spring and summer for about 18 consecutive weeks, then monthly through the autumn and winter. Summer sessions are 4 hours long and winter sessions are 3 hours. Summer sessions close to new people after a few weeks while winter ‘connecting sessions’ are open. We currently run two groups at different places on the same wooded site.

Each meeting, we arrive at the woodland fire-site, set up our kit (e.g., seat-matts and camping chairs, sawhorses and tools) and get the fire lit, usually using a ‘flint and steel’. If its raining, we rig up a parachute above the fire site for shelter. Facilitators need a good level of competence and understanding of the steps involved with these practicalities in order to support the men in doing them. Once the site is setup and the kettle boiled, everyone gets a hot drink in-hand and we check-in around the fire. No-one is obliged to do or say anything they don’t want to and the structure in terms of timings and activities is loose, but we offer a lot of relational ‘glue’—lots of contact reflections throughout the entire session.

Soon after check-in, someone starts chopping vegetables for the soup while others continue sitting ‘round the fire talking, maintaining the kettle, collecting or splitting wood for the fire, or looking after the natural habitat. We often remove the invasive rhododendron or take steps to protect tree saplings by placing sticks in the ground around them to prevent deer or rabbits eating them. A common sight at these times is of smaller groups of 2 or 3 men doing different things or chatting respectfully with each other and having a laugh. Most people stop and sit in the circle for soup when it’s ready, then there’s more time in which people do various activities. Following all this, we check-out at the end before dousing the fire, packing up the kit and going home.

‘What they do up here is unlike anything I’ve been on. Even it’s just a case of sitting around a fire and having a bit of soup and having a chat, it’s just totally not like anything you know. When I’ve gone to therapists before it’s been sort of one on one in an office, or it’s in a classroom and it’s... the vibe isn’t there.’

### **Broadening**

We see our way of being at Heart Wood as broadening beyond three ‘core conditions’ to recognise and work with six necessary and sufficient conditions. It is a further ‘broadening’ from perceiving and offering these separate ‘conditions’ out to genuinely experiencing these in combination as part of our own unique personalities. This includes particularly that we don’t assume psychological contact (Prouty, 2002). We aim to offer very sensitive attunement to group members’ ever fluctuating levels of psychological contact with self, other and the shared environment (Prouty, 2002). As facilitators we talk a lot! We often offer contact reflections, particularly reality reflections (Prouty, 2002, p. 17) as a way of acknowledging the shared here and now from moment to moment.

The intention is to co-create an easily readable situation. An example might be ‘I’m just putting this fire bowl down on its stand here now as we’re all arriving’. This is perhaps working in a broader ‘bandwidth’, beyond the men’s internal meaning-making and out into a shared space with shared tasks. Mearns and Thorne describe this beautifully in ‘my friend Jo’ (Mearns and Thorne, 2000, p. 17-53): ‘In this kind of work you are intentionally expanding the contexts for ‘contact’ because there is a contact deficit in this kind of client and contact is the basis for person-centered therapy’. What we are trying to offer is, at once, both an opportunity for some people in some moments to explore their inner lives and for the whole group at all times to experience the group atmosphere of relational safety ‘...relationships without fear, I was offering him a context where he could edge out of his inner world’ (Mearns and Thorne, 2000, p. 18). In this chapter Mearns and Thorne discuss the importance, when offering this kind of relationship in such an expanded context, of the maturity of the practitioner. We at Heart Wood, as will be discussed, view this in terms of therapist congruence.

True client-centered therapy in any context is rooted in the therapist’s deep self-awareness and capacity to exude (implicitly, by expression of core attitudinal qualities through quality of presence) and explicitly express their genuinely held attitudes of respect and trust in the Heart Wood group members’ natural tendency to actualise. This way of relating *is* the therapy. Jan

Hawkins in the recent Autumn 2024 edition of *PCQ* reminded us of the ‘core attitudinal qualities’, which we see as accurately describing something of our personal commitment to a way of being with men who join the groups, rather than doing something to them. It is easy to misunderstand contact reflections as a ‘way of doing’ rather than a ‘way of being’. Our presence feels like it’s at least as important as our more explicit behaviours and responses: Carl Rogers, in an interview with Baldwin before his death (Baldwin, 2000) said, ‘I am inclined to think that in my writing I have stressed too much the three conditions (congruence, UPR, and empathic understanding). Perhaps it is something around the edges of those conditions that is really the most important element in therapy – when my self is very clearly present’.

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Presence is by definition, authentic or congruent. By congruence, in this description of our work I mean what Mearns and Thorne (2000, p. 95) describe as *'the actual living out of relational congruence'*. It follows from this (Mearns & Thorne, 2000, p. 95) that *'Rogers himself placed the emphasis on the therapist's openness to inner experiencing and his or her willingness to be as aware as possible of that experiencing, to be the feelings and attitudes which are currently flowing within and to give expression to them when appropriate...'* A quote from a group man expresses his experience of this genuineness in one of our therapists *'...you feel really like, [the therapist] cares. He's not just doing a job, he's here because he wants to be here. Such as what's going on, he's not just turning up to work 9 to 5'*.

It's more exposing for therapists to offer congruent, contact-orientated relationship in an expanded context of sessions which include practical activities, but it does seem to offer the possibility of 'a relationship without fear'. By naming as much as we can about our own experiencing, not only inwardly but in relation to the shared reality we are co-creating with the men and how they seem to be, we hope there is a minimum of unacknowledged phenomena which could feel threatening if people had to carry them alone. An example might be acknowledging a slightly sarcastic bit of humour from one man to another, and how the man on the receiving end might look uncomfortable as a result. The contact reflection here might be 'you don't look as if you like that [comment] Dave'.

Heart Wood group sessions can feel like a small tribe functioning and *living* together for a few hours. Being in nature and including activities adds a sort of third dimension which is necessary for people who struggle more or are unable to engage with a 'two dimensional' and potentially intrusive focus on the psychological processing of previous experience than they do with the immediate experiencing of the group's shared reality, including conversation about 'non-threatening subjects' (Sanders, Van Werde, 2007 p. 65).

Dion Van Werde (2007, p. 63) describes what we are now, in our work, coming to call three dimensions: *'A combined and integrated paying attention and listening to the context as well as to the client will have a better chance of helping her take a new step in her recovery and help her be in command of her own situation again'*. This requires a high level of congruence in the therapist.

We have defined our roles as a staff team in terms of three elements—including that we are, at times, group members, group leaders, and facilitators. Most of the time I am facilitating group members' experiencing in terms of the contact they are making with each other, with their own experiencing and with the shared reality. 'Facilitate' means 'to make easier', so I see this role as making actualisation easier by co-creating an environment in which group members can feel 'received' (Rogers, 1951/2003). When I'm a group member—when I am checking-in, for example—I will name my own experiencing in that moment, and possibly something of what is going on in my life that week, but I won't explore it. I will also do my best to be transparent so that I'm clear and understandable to my

clients—in my role as participant I'm just a bloke who also has problems, rather than presenting a professional facade (Corey, 1986).

One man spoke about the impact my way of being in the group had on him: *'...but when I spoke about it with [therapist] he'd admitted that he'd used substances in the past, whether he'd had a problem or not I can't remember, but he'd used them. Straight away it brought it back down to a level. Because he's in a position that he's in, he could have held that information back but it's just like, oh right, it doesn't matter where you are, who you are, where you're from, we're all a very fine line away from despair or whatever'*.

Times when we are required to be 'leaders' include, for example, when we need to cancel a session due to high winds which can make it dangerous to be in woodland, or when we support someone to use an axe safely. This latter context can involve very clear instruction giving such as 'You're really putting some energy into swinging that axe, let me show you how to do it more safely.' This is an emphasis on the group member's context over their psychological process but is still as sensitive as possible to the person's process. It might be preceded by 'I can see you really want to split that big log'...

Most of the time, we are functioning as facilitators which requires high levels of awareness of our own experiencing from moment to moment. A way of being aware of levels of contact, and of enhancing client's contact with reality, is to 'show my working' (Mearns & Cooper, 2017) in terms of both the context and peoples' process. Mearns and Cooper (2017, p. 132) state that *'...it can also be very helpful for therapists to 'show their working' to clients. That is if we are feeling unsure of how to respond to a client, or confused or if we are pulled in two different directions, these are all things that we can disclose and this may serve to make us more real in the relationship and hence deepen the encounter'*. We have a broader context in which and about which to choose to give expression to feelings and thoughts when appropriate'...

Our contact-orientated approach includes experiencing 'existential empathy' (Prouty G, 2002. p. 13) for group men, in which we hold in our awareness the realities of their lives and how they live them. This of course includes respecting the realities of peoples' lives and how that affects whether they can come to a session or not.

*'There was no judgement when I just didn't come. It was like, well it'd be nice to see you but if you don't come that's fine.'*

Sessions often look like a social space, and it takes a disciplined approach from us to offer this, like a swan working hard under the surface. My hope is that men who come experience us as genuine, trustworthy, sensitive and warm people who are just spending some time around the fire, in the woods. Asked what it felt like when he first came to a Heart Wood session, Clive responded: 'I was really nervous, you would be nervous wherever you go. But once you got speaking to people, those nerves just went. So, it didn't last long. I found whenever a new person came everybody welcomed them'...

Over 5 years, we have co-created and sustained a particular atmosphere with the men which we feel it is appropriate to describe as ‘a receiving climate’. Bob describes something of it: ‘Yeah, I would say that the group dynamic, it doesn't feel like anyone's above anyone, you're all like among equals. And that just makes it so much better’. There is very little humour based on putting others down, such as sarcastic humour, and we work congruently with such issues ideally when they arise, yet there is lots of lovely humour. There are lots of one-to-one interactions within group process. This is another broadening-out from an image of group therapy taking place within a circle. We do check-in, check-out and eat soup at lunch in the circle and sometimes, if there is something that needs attention, we naturally remain in the circle for longer. Otherwise, as the session unfolds, we move around, facilitators aim to connect one-to-one with each man, and often it is necessary to work with someone for 10 minutes or more by themselves.

In the 2023 novel *Brian*, Jeremy Cooper (p. 17) describes something close to what we seem to create in our groups: ‘He smiled nervously in a general way at the group, two of whom smiled back in an easy-going welcome. Nobody asked him his name or anything about his job...no false familiarity, no banality, no banter, no point scoring, and in those early days Brian felt received with greater warmth by almost all of the shifting band of regulars at the BFI than he had ever experienced anywhere else in his entire life’. The exception to this is that whilst banter is hard to define, I think we have banter which is friendly rather than competitive.

I have been asked by potential group members if we sing or play guitars. I hear this as a fear of something inauthentic and directive of a way of feeling. I am not alone in having experienced activities which are presented as wholesome but which turn out to be extremely inauthentic. It is a privilege to work with a team who are committed to offering something genuinely wholesome and not overly serious, where the culture is about welcoming and prizing everyone who comes. I think Bob describes it well: ‘Seeing everybody each week is nice. Come back, have a laugh, have a cuppa, sit next to the fire, enjoying the soup. It's just something to look forward to each week’.

Since sessions involve moving around physically, we are more likely to touch clients. I am fortunate to have a supervisor who acknowledges that whilst touch can be abusive, it can be just as damaging to not touch someone who needs it. Approaching this sensitively and congruently is of course essential, as is recognising that some people live in intense isolation and appreciate a hand on the shoulder, or a hug, at the right moment. High levels of congruence and sensitivity are necessary within these very personal exchanges. For example, to ask someone if they want a hug, or sometimes to trust that I know someone well enough after a few years of work with them and that a hand on the shoulder or upper arm as I say this thing, or perhaps as they sit in silence, could be very welcome for them right now.

In our work with Heart Wood, high levels of congruence are required to manage boundaries which are

fluid and dynamic due to the nature-based context and the fact that too much ‘admin’ type structure, or organisation-centered rather than person-centered interaction, would lead to participants feeling less welcome because we would seem to be just another service who are overly focused on recording information and protecting themselves. As Bob says, ‘You don't have to fill in paperwork every time, that's a big help. At the other ones [services] it keeps asking how you felt for the last 2 weeks. And I think it's unnecessary really’. We recognise that peoples’ levels of contact are often not able yet to hold a rigid formal contract but that this can evolve over time as trust and safety develop within the group. I think it is unethical to demand that clients focus on administration or form-filling when their capacity to connect with others is fragile. Often, during initial meetings with participants, I own that I'm motivated by being a survivor of trauma myself and that I haven't just read lots of books (although, of course, I've done that too). This is owning my existential reality and being transparent as a way to try to equalise power a bit.

We are constantly assessing and gauging fluid boundaries. We explain time boundaries and the importance of confidentiality, to the whole group sometimes and to individuals who are new to our groups. Other issues, for example safe tool use, are dealt with in a way which combines messages to the whole group with communications with individuals depending on their level of competence. We attend to context and psychological processes at the same time. For example, in the case of a man who often sits but during one session is more active, apparently to use-up angry energy, we aim to acknowledge the energy in that moment and honour his choice to burn it off through axe use. While doing so, we also name the safety boundary by quite clearly, and safely, showing him with a mallet how to use properly use the axe.

We are trying to co-create a community in which power is as equal as possible and, by working things out within relationships with participants, we are expressing our respect for them. This is part of the relational therapy because it recognises participant's autonomy. Whilst we do say things to the whole group, we also do lots of engaging with people one-to-one or in smaller groups of two or three. We do our best to respond, for example to someone who is talking about a member who is not present that day, in the moment to what they're saying and we'll say that we don't feel comfortable talking about them when they're not present. This, in my experience, has always been met with understanding and respect for that absent person.

Higher levels of congruence are needed for pre-therapy/contact work. I have quoted Dion Van Werde in full below because I recognize that the ways of being which are necessary for working with people experiencing psychosis are transferable to those with whom we work, who as I mentioned before might be described as functioning in the ‘high end grey zone’ or having ‘fragile’ styles of processing their experience (Warner, 2000, p. 147).

‘...For me it has to do with levels of congruence of the therapist. People suffering with psychosis are particularly

skilled at knowing from a distance the difference between those who are rooted enough in themselves, sincere and really containing, and those who are going to play tricks on them. Only if the conditions are optimal, I think do people dare to take the risk of really looking at their experiences, especially when these are so private, delicate and anxiety-provoking as are those experiences that are proven to be generators of psychosis' (Van Werde).

Survivors of early, relational trauma are very sensitive to whether people feel safe or not.

It is therefore an important policy of ours to avoid surprises if we can, since these can be included in what Dion means by 'playing tricks'. We once made the mistake of not being clear from the outset that we need to cancel woods-based sessions if the wind is too strong, since there's a danger of falling trees/branches and so forth. We had to cancel a session on the day, and at that time had no

indoor space to use. One man simply didn't believe me, despite my doing my best to explain and reassure him over the phone. Very sadly, he never came back.

Working for 4 hours at a time requires greater levels of presence and congruent, empathic and acceptant relating in more 'real life' type situation and necessarily includes occasional dips in presence in which I am less attentive to levels of contact with the men. These may, for instance, occur when I go to find firewood, or in the moment when I start to eat my soup, or in my getting annoyed at a tangled piece of cord that I need to untangle with cold, wet hands. My contact 'radar' has, to an extent, in these moments turned inwards but it's ready to very quickly turn outwards again. These dips make me human in that I am not presenting a professional facade. The ability to name what happened for me if it feels relevant to the men's experiencing in that moment—showing my working—is important so the men aren't left with not knowing why I seemed, for instance, annoyed. It's honest and transparent to acknowledge that I'm cold and tired, perhaps after I say 'fucks' sake' under my breath. I sometimes say something like 'sorry, I wasn't listening properly then...'

#### One to One

Our one-to-one policy states that we can offer someone some one-to-one space away from the group if they are struggling, for psychological or other reasons, to enter or stay in a group. This can mean agreeing on the phone before the session to meet them in the parking area and walk in to the group space with them, or to meet someone who is in suicidal crisis which prevents them from coming to the group for a walk. Or, it can mean having a phone call with them in similar circumstances. Equally, a man might be unable to come to one of the monthly winter groups due

to illness, so I might meet him for a walk-and-talk session in order to keep up contact with him.

#### Self-Care

This work in three dimensions is enormously demanding of energy whilst also, for me, being less tiring whilst in the sessions themselves. I think this can be attributed to being outside and being physically active as well as being part of a team during sessions. I don't feel the same tiredness and isolation I can feel when working alone indoors. It is also a huge and genuine privilege to work in this way in a growing community space. I find that being the person who is available to take calls and do first meetings with potential group members one-to-one, and knowing the stories and traumas of so many men, can require lots of energy and create vicarious trauma. Self-care is important if I am to be able to respond genuinely and warmly to one of the men when I bump into them in town, or they phone me when they're in a crisis. This happens rarely, which I think is due in

part to the men supporting each other outside of sessions to some extent, and also I think that knowing that they can call is supportive in itself.

The structure of being part of a team of facilitators, having good supervision and of having a trustee board who understand and value what we do is critical. The next two pieces I'll write will discuss the ways in which co-facilitators relate with each other, and how we relate with the living environment in which we work.

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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#### ПРОПОЗИЦІЯ ЗВ'ЯЗКУ У МЕЖАХ БІЛЬШ ШИРОКОГО КОНТЕКСТУ СПІЛЬНОТИ: ГРУПИ HEART WOOD ДЛЯ ЧОЛОВІКІВ

Чін Понсфорд

*Heart Wood Charity у Великобританії Сіті Літ, Лондон*

*Особистісно орієнтований психотерапевт і супервізор (Dip Practitioner Counselling, Person-Centered at City Lit, London. NCPA Accredited) є засновником, провідним терапевтом і провідним фасилітатором Heart Wood Charity у Великобританії*

*City Lit, London Тренер з підготовки до міжнародної мережі Pre-Therapy*

Наша мета полягає в тому, щоб запропонувати «клімат сприйняття», в якому чоловіки, більшість з яких пережили травму, які знаходяться на першому та другому рівнях концепції процесу психотерапії Карла Роджерса, відчувають достатньо безпечно, щоб почати зміцнювати свої контактні функції (рівні психологічного контакту з собою, іншими та спільним оточенням). З

2018 року ми пропонуємо особистісно орієнтовані чоловічі терапевтичні групи в лісовій місцевості. Члени групи можуть бути в нашій спільноті стільки, скільки їм потрібно. Групи проводяться «орієнтованим на контакт» способом; ми постійно працюємо, щоб оцінити рівень психологічного контакту з членами групи та сприяти зміцненню контакту через рефлексії контакту в групі, орієнтованій на діяльність. Заняття включають рубку дров, організацію багаття і приготування їжі на вогні. Групи складаються з дванадцяти чоловіків і двох-трьох фасилітаторів і мають тривалість від 3 до 4 годин. Сеанси тривають щотижня протягом весни та літа, а потім кожні два тижні протягом осені та зими. Незалежний дослідник щороку оцінює нашу службу через добровільні записані інтерв'ю з чоловіками, які проводяться в лісі біля багаття. Наша фасилітація, орієнтована на особистість, означає, що ми постійно слухаємо та реагуємо на відгуки чоловіків про їхній досвід роботи в групах. Результати цих інтерв'ю та відгуки, які ми отримуємо від чоловіків у групі протягом усього процесу, показують, що ми можемо запропонувати сприятливу атмосферу для цих чоловіків, які значно страждають, але не можуть брати участь у терапії так, як це зазвичай пропонується.

**Ключові слова:** *травма, претерапія, контактна робота, психологічний контакт, робота поза терапевтичним кабінетом, робота на природі, терапевтичне співтовариство*

The article was received by the editors 15.7.2025 (Стаття надійшла до редакції 5.10.2025)

The article is recommended for printing 12.9.2025 (Стаття рекомендована до друку 12.9.2025)

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