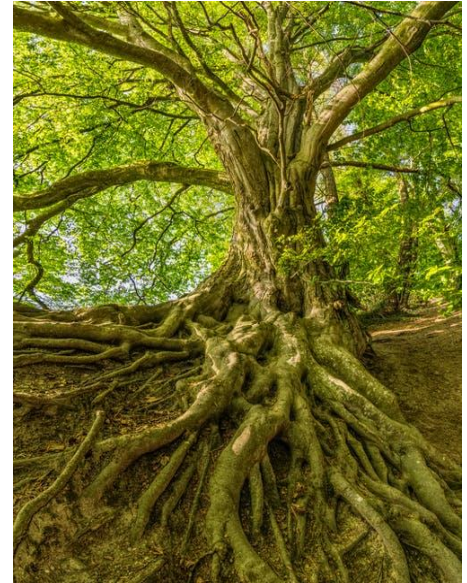


**Practicing  
Purposefully**

**SYSTEMIC PRACTICE**

**The Tree of Life**

The Tree of Life is a tool created by Ncazelo Ncube (2006). It is a metaphorical activity in which each element of the tree is used to tell stories about one’s life. The idea is to help the individual to discuss their life and to create a strength based picture of hope and values which helps with a person’s identity and can give birth to new positive, stronger narratives they have about themselves.



It is important when doing this piece of work that it is done alongside the person, the professional should be curious and ask questions about the person’s life experiences, noticing those shiny moments of strength, the things which have influenced the individual in their life and build upon these stories, thickening them so that they become not only noticeable to the person but also are fully adopted within a person’s identity.

It is a helpful tool for individuals to feel connected again to their values, morals, relationships and life experiences. It can be used for those recovering from addictions, mental health, survivors of abuse or trauma. It is equally useful to use with young people as well as adults. It can take several sessions to complete a Tree with someone – this is fine. The therapeutic element is often in the story telling that accompanies the creation of the Tree.

**Start with the roots:**



Think about where they have come from; their past history; how their past influences them today; favourite memories; list areas they have lived, people they have met, schools they attended, and lessons they’ve learnt etc.

**Ground:**

This is the present– so where do they live now? Who do they live with or see regularly? Who has a positive influence on them as a person? What activities do they do in their spare time? What influences are there from everyday life? What values do they have? The ground could be smooth, or maybe a little bumpy, with rocks in there perhaps. However the person wants to demonstrate their life in the ‘now’ is fine.



**Trunk:**

The trunk is the person’s skills and abilities. Their unique characterisations that make them, *them*. It could be their hobbies or what they’re good at. It could include the perspectives of others here as well, what would others say were their skills and personality traits? If they feel confident in these skills and abilities the trunk may be a thick solid one; if they feel a little unsure or going

through a transition or difficult time, it may be a little thinner but as it grows so might some of the abilities as well.



**Branches:** These represent the persons hopes and goals; stretching up to the sky and aspirational. Their hopes and goals might link to themselves and their future, with relationships, health, employment, travel, happiness etc and it might include their hopes and aspirations for those people around them. They should think about how they might achieve these aspirations, what would they have to do first to be able to achieve them? Who can help them?



**Leaves:** Each leaf should symbolise important people to the person. They should reflect on why these people are or were important to them. What lessons have they learnt or took from their relationship with this person? If there were people who have moved on and they don't have contact with anymore or passed away then these could be fallen leaves next to the tree: still important to remember but not taking centre stage on the tree itself.



**Fruit:** The fruit can take any shape or type they like and represent the gifts from people which they have received. This could be in a material way, something tangible but could also include character traits such as strength or resilience. Perhaps there are people who have always provided them with a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on? Who has given them compliments or thinks highly of them which has bolstered their self-esteem and confidence? Perhaps there are things here which their parents, professionals, friends or famous people have taught them. They can also include on here any

poignant gifts they have given others in their life.

### **Additions:**

There may be important parts of the person's life which don't seem to fit anywhere on the tree. You could be creative about creating ***fallen leaves or fruit***, perhaps a ***compost heap*** of things to be remembered but not influential to the person right now – remember though that the tree is supposed to be about hope, positive stories and strength. Whilst it is okay to talk about negative experiences whilst doing this activity the end result should be one which boosts the person's self-esteem.

You could also in your discussions talk about the '***storms***' (aka challenges) which have occurred around the tree, how long they have lasted, the impact they had on the tree, or what the silver-linings and rainbows meant when the storm had passed. Try and link to positives to add onto the tree in terms of resources, strengths and lessons learnt, with resilience gained for the future.

*Reference: Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 1, 3-16.*