



Disable the Label 2013

Re-visiting the Journey

The New Mentality held our annual 'Disable the Label' leadership training retreat this past July at YMCA Geneva Park in Orillia, Ontario. The retreat was a huge success and our largest ever, hosting 65 people including 36 youth. 11 CMHO agencies were represented, as well as community partners and special guests from across the province.



Over the four days, delegates participated in a diverse array of activities, including team building exercises, leadership skill development sessions, reflective art making activities, yoga and meditation, and outdoor sports. And of course, it wouldn't be Disable the Label without a Talent (Not Required) Show, and lots of dancing!

I would imagine that upon returning home from Disable the Label, many of us were faced with the question, 'how was it?' And of course the inevitable first thought: where to begin! To help with that question we've created a day-by-day recap of our journey, along with some photos.

Thanks again to all of the youth leaders, adult allies, and special guests for the incredible contributions, and thanks to our generous sponsors: the Ministry and Children and Youth Services, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.



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Opening – Day One

On our first evening, we opened with an artful weaving exercise, where together we created a beautiful centre-piece. The centre-piece came to reflect many of the core values of the retreat: collaboration, vibrancy, and inter-connectedness. Looking back, it is a beautiful representation the beauty that emerges when our connections are embraced and realized.

We moved into an introspective exercise in which we considered times we have felt afraid, and times we have felt hopeful. We thought about the names we give ourselves and how we identify with these titles. Then, we sat for a moment and considered how big life is, and what we would name ourselves if it was done without hope and without fear.



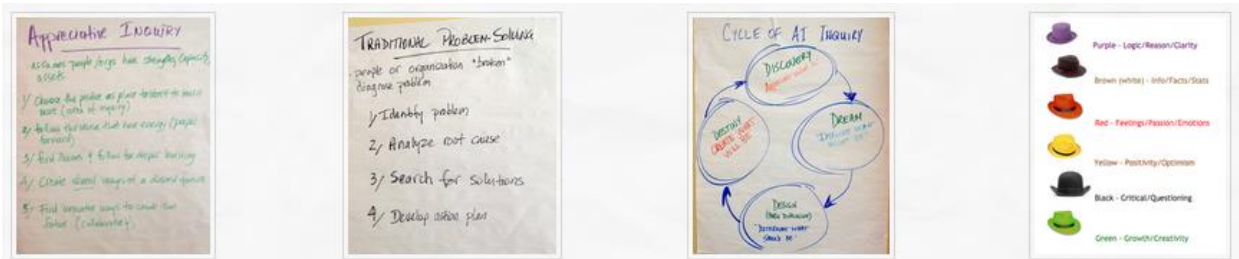
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The System – Day Two

Outside, the morning brought no relief from the heat, nor did the light rain drizzling down. The early risers started with yoga and meditation before the entire group came together. We spent the morning exploring challenging concepts and looking into ourselves.

Our first group activity was an **Appreciative Inquiry** session. Through the four stages of Appreciative Inquiry – Discovery, Dreaming, Designing (through Dialogue) and Destiny - we explored how change happens in the mental health system. To add a twist and to practice engaging in different ways, we used the **Six Thinking Hats** to help us frame our questions. Before lunch we squeezed in a quick introduction to models of systems changes, looking at how we can define how we engage and co-create.



After lunch we moved into a **World Café**, through which we further explored leadership. In small groups we discussed inspiring leadership qualities, examples of interesting and exciting leadership, and what kind of leadership we think is needed now.

After two theory-heavy exercises we took a break for lunch, before we shifted into an outdoor arts exercise. On **Solo Nature Walks**, we reflected on our limiting beliefs, and what we need for our leadership to be strong. We thought about our Star of Potential, the gifts we each have that no one else has. Through our notes and collected items, we build a beautiful outdoor sculpture that remained up for the rest of the retreat, reminding us of our personal introspections.

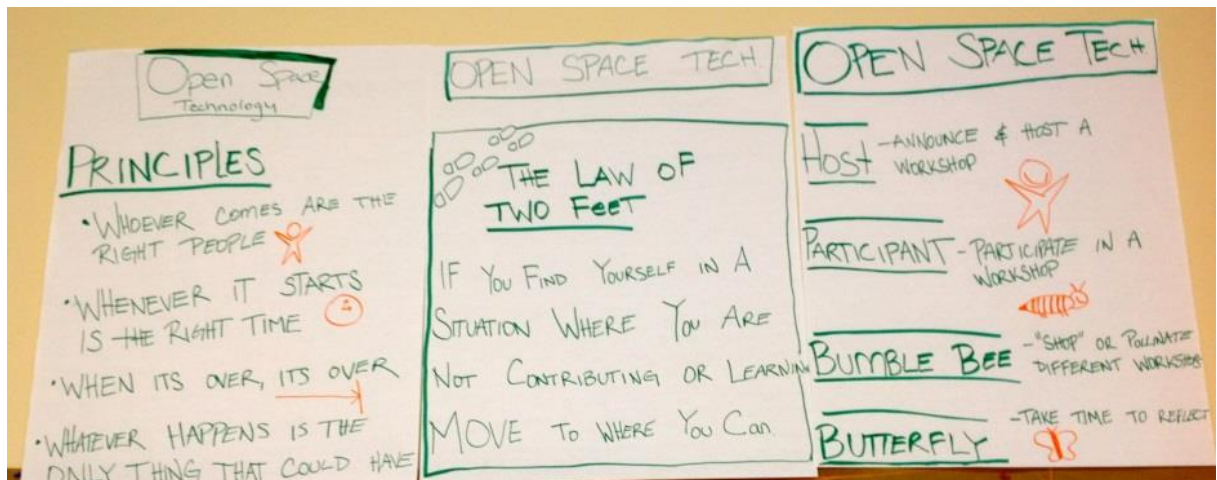


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After dinner, we had a **Self-Care Marketplace** using Open Space Technology. It is very important to take care of ourselves as young leaders often stepping into challenging situations. We opened it up to the group to share our personal strategies. Through discussions and practice, we learned about:

- Yoga
- Printmaking
- Origami, Board games and Puzzles
- Mindfulness
- Magic tricks
- Music and jamming
- Drawing and colouring
- Dancing



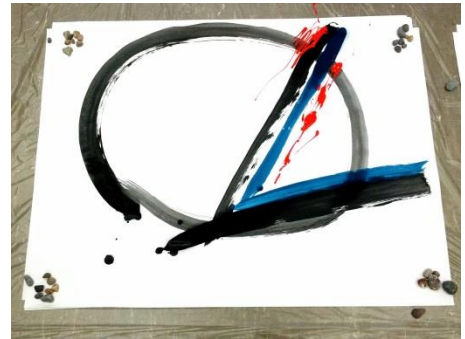
Although we were all exhausted from a long day full of deep reflection and collaboration, most of us were too full of joy and energy to sleep. We hung out in the living room where we made art, played board games, attempted Peter's many mind-bending puzzles, played music, and chatted into the night... Some later than others!



The New Mentality - Who are we, anyway? – Day Three

The New Mentality is a province-wide network, with strong geographic diversity. From as far north and east as Pembroke and Ottawa, through Toronto, and across to Sarnia and Windsor, with many in between! We try to stay connected – the internet helps – but at the end of the day our groups often work in isolation. The theme of this day was to get to know ourselves, as groups and as a network. To this end, we did a reflective art exercise, gave groups an opportunity to showcase their work, shared some of our evaluation results, and did a talent show to further display our unique gifts!

To get ourselves fully into the space and moment, we began with a **meditative painting exercise**. Phyllis led us through a series of strokes using different colours and brushes, with which we each painted a personal landscape. We painted in four elements: the Universe, the Ground, Humanity, and Me. As we quietly wandered around the room, we shared a quiet honoring space together and observed others' finished paintings. We saw, incredibly, that we are at once so similar and so different in how we map our existence. Some shared that the exercise helped calm their anxieties. Some shared that it was rooting.



We then entered a **Storytelling Marketplace**, during which each group had the opportunity to do a presentation about their work and showcase any media, swag, material, or anything else they've developed. As each group presented, the audience listened using guiding questions that aimed to tease out skills and bigger systems change questions, and gave feedback to the presenters to initiate learning conversations. People enjoyed the opportunity to learn from one another, and to celebrate one another's accomplishments.



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A highlight of the Storytelling Marketplace was the Evaluation presentation. Between January to June, CMHO's (now former) placement student, Audrey, developed an outcomes evaluation. As part of her research, she conducted focus groups with all of the New Mentality groups. Audrey discussed some of her findings in an open space session, and shared the beautiful visualization of the evaluation created by a graphic facilitator.



Building Resiliency, Amplifying our Voice

After a long lunch break, with some time to swim and just hang out, we moved into our second **Open Space Technology** session. Now that we had spent time looking into ourselves as leaders, sharing our own work, and learning about the work of others, we were ready to explore the critical question: *What do New Mentality groups need to build their resilience?* The following sessions were hosted:

- Funding & Sustainability – Show me the \$\$
- Opening Talking and Chill Space
- What can make Disable the Label sing?
- How can a Caring Classroom be created?
- Animating The New Mentality Website and Facebook Page
- Self-compassion
- YSI Video Project – Tracking & Inspiring through YouTube
- Recruitment Strategies for New Mentality Groups
- How to learn about mental health in schools



During open space, our special guests had the opportunity to host sessions related to their projects. Alisha Henson, a former Adult Ally for the New Mentality group in Pembroke and a current Ph.D. Candidate at McGill University, hosted a focus group exploring how self-compassion can influence mental health. Jennifer Lewington, a freelance reporter working on a piece about how schools can support mental health, also hosted a session. Jennifer spoke with youth about some of their personal experiences and collected some of their thoughts on how schools can support mental health.

Talent (Not Required) Show

After dinner and a break, we gathered back in our living room for the week, where we held a Talent (Not Required) Show. We watched amazing performances of singing, guitar, poetry, spoken word, hooping, magic tricks, and more, enjoying a raffle for cool swag between acts. The final performance was the Macarena – and our grand finale turned into an entire group rendition of the Macarena, followed by a dance party. After the show, we played cards, hung out, and chatted late into our final night.



Reflection and Closing - Day Four

On our final morning together, we reflected on the skills we had developed and connections that were deepened over the retreat. We acknowledged the challenges of participating in an intensive, deeply introspective retreat like Disable the Label. It can be scary to spend this many days looking deep inside. We learned a profound lesson of the power of sticking together, even when it gets really hard and we want to leave.



We closed with a circle and the question, 'what do you want to take out of this, and what will you take home?' Most people spoke, some stayed in reflection.

After a wonderful journey together we said our goodbyes – for now!



Participant Feedback

- I enjoy literally everything about DTL, it makes me feel so great about what I do and where I am in my life, and it's such great support ad love and understanding and you learn so much and it's so amazing!
- DTL changed my life. It opened my eyes as to who I really am, as well as how to improve our youth group . It was a big eye opener for me. And the people who helped make it happen were truly amazing. They took the time to talk to you if you needed it. I want to come back to see everyone again.
- I found myself welcomed and embraced "just as I am." It was a great place/space for everyone to be exposed to a variety of people, explore issues, ask questions, learn new things, stretch and grow personally.
- I feel so amazing and beautiful and wonderful after I leave each year, it's just such an amazing experience I love it to death!
- [Disable the Label] changed my life. It helped open up the window of hope. It helped give me new ideas as to improve our group and how to help more people understand the means of mental health.
- This is an excellent forum for learning and connecting provincially.
- I'll be back! It's been a great two years, and I can't imagine ever not being involved now!