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## Empowering Life Stories: Meaning-Making through Arts Therapies in Forensic Care

**Suzanne Haeyen, Evelien Joosten, Jackie Heijman**

Forensic psychiatric patients often carry burdening life stories marked by trauma, family difficulties, maladaptive choices, crime-related events and limited future perspectives. These narratives are frequently fragmented, emotionally overwhelming, and lack self-reflection. While narrative criminology highlights the role of stories in understanding criminal behaviour and fostering change (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016), many forensic patients struggle to express their experiences verbally. This calls for experiential alternatives.

The life story intervention *An Empowering Story* (University of Twente; ZonMw, n.d.) consists of 12 structured group sessions and concludes with a rewritten, printed life story. Yet, group participation can be stressful, and reliance on verbal expression restricts accessibility. We therefore adapted this intervention for arts and psychomotor therapies. This approach enables patients to externalize and reconstruct their life narratives in non-verbal, personalized way which results in unique end products such as a triptych painting, music playlist, or symbolic visualization.

We will present a case study demonstrating how an individualized, creative approach can support patients in navigating their complex histories. In line with the conference theme of Ithaca, the intervention represents a therapeutic journey; not a linear path to recovery, but an ongoing process of rediscovering meaning, continuity, and connection. We will present this initial case that inspired further research with a multiple baseline design in forensic care. We will share preliminary results and illustrate how the approach can be applied across therapy disciplines. This study is funded by the Dutch funding program Quality of Forensic Care (KFZ, Kwaliteit Forenische Zorg). Within this project, we collaborate with a variety of forensic health care institutions and universities.



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## Biography

**Suzanne Haeyen** is professor of the research group Arts & Psychomotor Therapies in Health Care at HAN University of Applied Sciences and coordinator of content of the Master program for Arts & Psychomotor therapies. She is also an art therapist and researcher at Scelta, Expert Centre for Personality Problems, at health care institution GGNet. She has several publications about arts and psychomotor therapies and contributed to both the multidisciplinary guideline and standard of care for the treatment of personality disorders.

**Evelien Joosten**, PhD, is a senior researcher at the research group Arts & Psychomotor Therapies in Health Care at HAN University of Applied Sciences and teacher at the Master program for Arts & Psychomotor therapies. She has worked as a psychologist within addiction and mental health care.

**Jackie Heijman**, MSc, is a junior researcher and PhD student at the research group Arts & Body-based Therapies in Health Care at HAN University of Applied Sciences and Radboud University. She is a visual art therapist and psychologist. She previously published about compassion-focused art therapy, trauma focused art therapy and collecting and/or constructing art therapy interventions.

## Recent Publications

Haeyen, S., Abbing, A. (shared first authorship), Nyapati, S., Verboon, P. & Van Hooren, S. (2023). **Effectiveness and mechanisms of the arts therapies in forensic psychiatric care. A systematic review, narrative synthesis and meta-analysis.** *Frontiers in Psychiatry, section Forensic Psychiatry*. 14:1128252.

Haeyen, S., Heres, H., & Pol, S. (2024). **Making meaning of one's own life story in words and images: A narrative case report of personal recovery from personality disorder through the interventions "An Empowering Story" and art therapy.** *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 80(8), 1736-1753.

Joosten, E., Haeyen, S., & Heijman, J. (2025). **An Empowering Story in Arts and Psychomotor Therapies [Grant].** *Kwaliteit Forensische Zorg [KFZ]*.