

A description of the project

Maison d'Espérance, Val d'Hérault

Das "Haus der Hoffnung", Hérault-Tal/Languedoc The "House of Hope" in the Hérault Valley, Languedoc

Dealing with a life crisis - an holistic human challenge

Each of us can experience a crisis which changes their life. This might be the loss of a close person by death or separation, the loss of job, severe financial problems, suffer an accident, deep human disappointment or experience of assault, or become physically or mentally ill. In almost every family someone will have had at least one of these experiences and may suffer the consequences for a long time.

Someone in this position is often hindered in using their normal life skills, they "function" no longer and are in danger of losing their social contacts. Additionally, people in a crisis tend to isolate themselves and lose self-confidence, they often become skeptical and over-sensitive towards their social environment. Many of them develop a depression or other mental disorder.

Support and a helping hand usually are urgently needed. Some look for help themselves in psychiatric institutions, some are taken there by others, often against their will. Their experiences there can vary a lot: some find empathic support; others are disappointed because they are mainly medicated without sufficient attention to their individual problems. Some are shocked because their rights to freedom and self-determination are restricted, sometimes seriously. This destroys trustful cooperation for ever.

Yet even good professional help is often not enough to enable people to get back into normal life. Coping with a life crisis is an holistic human challenge. This needs time, a lot of patience and an appropriate framework. This is usually beyond the capabilities of friends and relatives. Neither, in general, is it within the scope of a medical discipline.

Therefore we propose an alternative way, as described in the following.

An alternative way out of the crisis

This way is starting from our professional experience during the course of more than 30 years working with people in crises. It is basically congruent with similar projects within the international self-help movement and has the following three key elements:

- 1) the concept of a self-help community;
- 2) the necessity for inner reorientation;
- 3) the principle of activating personal resources.

1) The person gets the possibility to escape completely from his normal environment and its pressures. Instead of going into complete isolation, or into a hospital, they rather join a group of people who have had similar experiences and can be supportive to each other. Also essential is the mutual tolerance of, and respect for, each individual's space and time.

2) In order to truly overcome a crisis, the individual needs to orient himself anew. He or she needs support to rebuild his confidence and self-esteem, to find a sense of purpose for living, and to discover new life goals. This requires time. It also requires the right setting for rediscovering all buried sources of inner energy, and to make them work.

These sources vary individually, e.g.:

- physical care through exercise, sports, wellness;
- reading literature
- creative/artistic activities
- supportive conversations with people in a similar situation
- professional help in the form of counselling and therapy.

3) Everyone has special skills and talents, a crisis does not negate these. They may be buried and need to be (re-)discovered and (re-)activated. Developing one's potentials is essential for stabilizing one's personality; at the same time such skills and talents can be put to use for the good of the group. Importantly, a sense of worth can be gained by feeling of use to the group.

Following these principles we present our project "House of Hope". It consists of three elements:

- I) the living community
- II) the supporting association
- III) the foundation.

I. The living community in the "House of Hope"

The goal of the living community is to support and assist people in crisis to find their own individual way back into normal life. It is a group living together for a limited duration of time. 10 to 15 people with similar experiences live together on a piece of property with a number of buildings and a big garden. They stay as long as it takes for them to have the confidence to continue their lives away from the community. Normally this is a case of two to nine months. Subsequently, if necessary, they receive professional support. A team of doctors, psychologists, social workers, artists, teachers, physiotherapists and art therapists etc. will be available.

The living community in the "House of Hope" is devoted solely to the values of humanity.

This entails: *respect for each person, for his dignity, his history, his problems, and for his very personal solutions.*

Because our project is special, there is an additional requirement for the residents to be prepared to help each other and the community as a whole, i.e. they must offer part of their time and energy for the well-being of the group.

Living in the group makes sense only if every resident takes these ethical bases seriously.

We emphasize that we are independent of any political, ideological or religious organization.

Some general rules for the living community

Some rules are necessary so that living in the group is harmonious.

- 1) The residents keep house together. Participating in three meals per day is recommended, but not obligatory.
- 2) Each resident pays their own costs of living. The contribution to expenses of the shared household would be 5 to 10 Euros per day, depending on income. The group itself manages the pooled money. Rent need not be paid as the foundation provides the buildings without charge.
- 3) Each resident is in general to work 3 hours per day for the well-being of the group, e.g. cooking, working in the garden, or doing repairs, or renovating, improving and enlarging the buildings.
- 4) The residents have equal rights. Decisions are made democratically.
- 5) During the first 3 weeks the resident is a guest. After that he may become a member of the community. Those who have been living in the group for some time and feel able to take on responsibility may become members of the "Committee". The "Committee" represents the concerns of the residents in relation to the Association "Maison d'Espérance".
- 6) If a resident should find a role which is fulfilling to himself as well as being of use to the group as a whole, it is possible for him to live there for an unlimited length of time. People with handicaps are no exception to this rule. No privileges arise from living there longer.

II. The supporting Association "Maison d'Espérance"

The primary purpose of the Association is to make possible the existence of the living community, to support it and to provide financial and legal security. Thus it serves non-profit objectives. The Association is the "legal entity" which has the right to use the property and buildings. It enters into contracts with a) the residents, whether they be of short-term or unlimited duration; b) companies providing public utilities such as electricity, water, garbage disposal and telecommunications; and c) companies concerning larger purchases. Together with the Committee, the Association develops plans for improving or enlarging the buildings. In addition, the Association manages the funds entrusted to it for defined purposes.

Professional help is essential if the project is to succeed. Therefore the Association is also responsible for a team of professionals. It organizes and coordinates the engagements of the team members. Initially, they work without pay (with the exception of publicly provided services). Depending on the financial development of the Foundation, it may be possible to pay professionals later on.

III. The foundation "Fondation Maison d'Espérance"

The primary purpose of the Foundation is to accumulate funds for the purpose of buying a suitable piece of property for the project. Subsequently it will supply the money needed for repairing, maintaining and improving the buildings, as well as for the costs of running the project (e.g. vehicles, tools, electronic equipment) and, if possible, for

professional helpers.

The Foundation is a non-profit organization because it funds the project. The Foundation is controlled by the Foundation Council which will be composed of professionals and prominent people.

The realisation of the project

For the realisation of the project we plan to buy a large piece of property in the South of France (Languedoc, Departement Hérault). It should have a number of buildings which may or may not need repair, as well as a big garden.

The South of France is a vacationing area, particularly popular with people from the middle and the north of Europe. Our residents will be coming mainly from Germany or France (because of institutional and private connections), but also from other countries. Thus the project also promotes international understanding.

The property with buildings will cost about 500,000 Euros.

Accounts for the establishment of the Foundation may be opened immediately at German or French banks. The investors are taking no risk, as their money (plus simple interest) will be refunded, should the project not be realised. Another way of supporting the project could be with a short-term loan, either at low interest or no interest at all.

The idea, the development, and the head of the project

The project was initiated by Martin Urban and his wife Anne-Sophie Girardet. They have been living in St. Pons de Mauchiens in the South of France (Département Hérault) since 2004. They have already provided seventeen two-week vacations for troubled people with emotional (and often also financial) problems. The following is a short description of the two of them:

Martin Urban

Psychologist and Psychotherapist,
many years working in various psychiatric institutions.

Establishing and managing alternative help facilities:

- 1982 co-founded and lead the supporting association "Arbeitskreis betreutes Wohnen e.V." in Saarbrücken. It still provides housing for over 40 people, together with a meeting center.
- 1989 - 2004 organization and management of therapeutically assisted housing in Esslingen near Stuttgart.
- 2000 founding of the self-help association "Offene Herberge e.V." in Stuttgart, which took upon itself the organization and management of the housing project in Esslingen. As of 2006 the "Offene Herberge e.V." also manages a meeting place for people with emotional problems.

Speaker of the department "Clinical Psychologists in Psychiatry" of the German Professional Psychologists Association (BDP).

Speaker of the committee "Psychotherapy" of the German Association for Social Psychiatry (DGSP).

Author of many publications.

Editor of 2 books: Psychotherapie bei Psychosen (Psychotherapy with psychotic disorders), Pabst, Lengerich 2000;

Die Bedeutung der Bindungstheorie für die Psychiatrie (The importance of attachment theory in psychiatry), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2005.

Anne-Sophie Girardet

Professional masseuse and aroma-therapist,
many years of experience with people in crises,
generous host and a haven for people in a diversity of needs.

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Supporters of the project:

Volkmar Aderhold, Hamburg, Dr.med., psychiatrist, psychotherapist and author

Michaela Amering, Vienna, Prof. Dr.med., psychiatrist, author of many publications (e.g. "Recovery", Psychiatrie-Verlag, Cologne 2007)

Dorothea Buck, Hamburg, founder and honorary president of the BPE (German Association of (ex-)Patients of Psychiatry)

Heike Kunz, Stuttgart, journalist

Peter Lehmann, editor and author, member of the board of the European Network of (ex-)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (ENUSP) and member of the International Network Toward Alternatives and Recovery (INTAR)

Jean Penot, St. Pons de Mauchiens, business manager

Wilfried Pfaff, Stuttgart, Dr.med., psychotherapist

Marc Rufer, Zürich, medical doctor, psychotherapist and author