

MIXED COMPANY THEATRE'S

RESOURCE GUIDE FOR COMMUNITIES

Summarizing the key strategies, ideas, and discussions shared by community members during presentations of "Two-Sided Mirror".

2 SIDED MIRROR

Written by Catherine Frid

"Two-Sided Mirror" is an interactive play about hope and resilience for individuals whose lives have been impacted by Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), depression, and/or suicide.



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BACKGROUND

Purpose of this Document

This document is intended to share the learnings from audiences who viewed "Two-Sided Mirror", a facilitated interactive play about hope and resilience for individuals whose lives have been impacted by Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), depression, and/or suicide.

Context

Seniors 65 years and older, experience a high rate of suicide. Older men in particular are more likely to die through a suicide attempt than any other group, in part because they have access to more lethal means, including prescription medication. Seniors, especially those in residential care, suffer high rates of depression (44%) and loneliness.

Suicide differs from Canada's MAiD protocol, which currently is a response to irremediable medical conditions, but there is often confusion in people's minds about the distinctions. In the scenes, characters struggle with their feelings about both MAiD and suicide. Our project offers an opportunity for audience members to share ideas on how friends and family can support one another when situations involving these topics arise in their lives.

BACKGROUND

Development Process

Catherine met with individuals who shared personal experiences with the topics. She then wrote their stories in collaboration with the individual story originators, changing details to make the narratives anonymous, to the extent that the story originators wished.

MCT and Catherine then held theatre-based interactive workshops with the group, using their anonymous stories as prompts for the activities.

Catherine used the ideas generated in the workshops as the foundation for a new play called "Two-Sided Mirror". Over the course of four months, MCT held two readings with the workshop participants who shared valuable feedback which led to revisions, and a completed script.

Between November 2022 and January 2023, "Two-Sided Mirror" was performed in a hybrid tour of in person and virtual presentations. Then, in MCT's 2023-24 season, it was brought back for a series of virtual presentations. At the shows, audience members were invited by a facilitator to replace characters and show possible ways to improve the situation for the characters.

This document explains the strategies, and ideas shared by audience members.

BACKGROUND

Synopsis

"Two-Sided Mirror" is an interactive play for seniors and their loved ones to open conversations and understand differences between MAiD, senior depression, and suicide.

This new play breaks down stereotypes about senior depression, suicide, and MAiD. With humour, nuance, and hope, it explores how people can support one another to communicate about these often-taboo subjects.

"Two-Sided Mirror" explores the stories of Jim and his daughter Marissa.

After Marissa is diagnosed with cancer, the family, including Marissa's daughter Corinne, are in denial about the situation, and struggle to support one another.

As it becomes apparent that Marissa's illness is terminal, she considers whether MAiD is right for her, and we see the family contend with the realities of MAiD and its implications, through different viewpoints. Jim becomes increasingly despondent through the family's struggles, and after Marissa's death by MAiD, he spirals downward into suicidal ideation.

BACKGROUND

The Forum Theatre Process

Forum Theatre is an innovative, interactive theatrical approach first developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s. It involves communities in developing real-time strategies for addressing social issues in a creative way.

In a MCT production, a story representing an issue is created with direct community engagement through workshops and improvisations. It is developed into a play that is rehearsed, performed and facilitated, by professionals.

The scenes are presented from start to finish for the audience, and then reviewed a second time. This second time, individual audience members intervene in the play to create positive alternatives to the story line. Audience members interact directly with the actors to re-enact parts of the play.

A Forum Theatre facilitator prepares and encourages audience members (“Spect-actors”) to replace the actors on stage, thereby creating agency to drive social change.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Meeting with the Doctor

In "Two-Sided Mirror", Marissa, a mother of two school-aged children, is told by her doctor that she has an aggressive cancer. The doctor explains this diagnosis in cold, clinical terms, likely because she is busy, overworked, and uncomfortable relaying this news to a patient. The consultation leaves Marissa confused and fearful about her future.

Audience members at different presentations of the play, stepped in either as the doctor or the patient, and shared a number of ideas for how they could improve this medical consultation so Marissa receives a more empathetic response from her doctor, and understands key information about her diagnosis.

What Marissa, as the patient, could do...

- 1** **Ask the doctor to look at her and make eye contact**, to stop typing on her computer and perhaps to come closer.
- 2** **Ask the doctor to slow down, and be clearer** when sharing information as there is a lot for Marissa to take in.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- 3 Write down what the doctor is saying**, and ask for a pen and paper if needed, or record the conversation to listen to later.
- 4 Ask for help or support in telling her family**, as this is going to be difficult for Marissa.
- 5** Ask the doctor “What kind of support can I get? What resources are available?” Get referrals. **You have to push to receive resources.**
- 6 Get a second opinion.**
- 7 Change doctors**; if Marissa is really uncomfortable with her doctor, ask for a referral to another doctor she feels more comfortable with. It was also noted that this isn’t always an option.

What the doctor could do:

Audience members recognized how busy doctors are, as well as the pressures and multi-tasking required in their work. Nonetheless, there were numerous suggestions about how the doctor in the scene could better handle the delivery of cancer news to her patient.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- 1** **Actively listen to the patient**, and show that she is empathetic, compassionate, and engaged, by **making eye contact** and not focusing the entire time on her computer.
- 2** **Show concern** about Marissa, and how she will get looked after.
- 3** **Before this appointment, the doctor could invite Marissa to bring a friend or family member** with her who can support her, or **use technology to virtually bring another person** into the conversation.
- 4** The doctor could **have someone else present at the appointment, (eg. a social worker or support worker)**, or could refer Marissa to meet with someone else who has more time for immediate follow-up support.
- 5** The doctor could **invite family members to come and join them in the office now** (though audiences also recognized that the timing of doing this may be unrealistic).
- 6** In different cultures, the doctor's approach could be different (eg. in Russian culture, the doctor could speak to the patient's relatives first).

WHAT WE LEARNED

Talking to family about a serious medical condition

In "Two-Sided Mirror", Marissa delays telling her father Jim and her daughter Corrine that she has cancer until after Christmas. When she does tell them, she downplays the seriousness of the diagnosis. Her family feels hurt that she kept this news to herself.

Audience members changed the outcome by showing how each of the family members could contribute to a better conversation about this news:

- 1** If **Marissa could open up a bit, the conversation with her family changes**; better communication includes recognizing there are things they do not know and being straightforward about what is known. It is important to **answer her family's questions honestly without presenting false hope.**
- 2** Marissa's father Jim, and her daughter Corrine could **reassure Marissa that as a family they'll work to get through this together**, rather than accusing her of hiding her condition, or pressuring her by stating that they need her because Marissa is the glue holding their family together.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- 3 Marissa may need support to break this news to her family and might want to **bring a professional support person to this meeting.**
- 4 The family could **recognize they need outside help to deal with this news** of Marissa's cancer diagnosis, and reach out to get it.

Helping a friend or family member who is depressed

As Marissa's cancer progresses, her father Jim comes to live with her and her two children. Jim is a widower, and his girlfriend Brenda begins to see changes in his behaviour as the stress of the situation intensifies. Jim becomes confused by Marissa's medications regime, overwhelmed by the family's needs, and his relationship with his granddaughter Corinne becomes strained.

He becomes despondent and begins drinking alcohol, which he had formerly shunned, and tries to hide how much he's drinking. At one point, when confronted by his family about an empty bottle of wine, he lies and says that Brenda was the one who drank most of it. Brenda tries to address his behavioural changes, but gets shut down by Jim and Corrine.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Audience members stepped into the scene and demonstrated several strategies to address this family dynamic and the warning signs of Jim's depression more effectively:

- 1** Jim's family and girlfriend could resist the urge to ignore Jim's problem; they could **communicate about what they see happening to him. They could be calm and non-judgmental**, speaking quietly and calmly, in a way that does not escalate tensions. Any of Jim's friends and family could take the lead in starting this conversation.
- 2** When Jim lies about who is drinking the wine, **his friend could calmly call him out on his drinking and express concern about what is happening with him.** By not allowing Jim to joke his way out of his lie, the conversation gets opened up.
- 3** Family members could **name the "elephant in the room" and recognize that they are all experiencing grief** over Marissa's cancer and are under a lot of pressure. Bringing these emotions out into the open enables them to talk about what they are each experiencing.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- 4 Brenda as **Jim's friend can ask how she can help him, and what he needs**, without telling him what to do. This gives Jim an opportunity to vent about what is happening with him.
- 5 Even if Jim is not able to articulate what is happening with him, **those close to him can suggest that he also needs support, and work with him to come up with a plan of support**; respite care or a personal support worker (PSW).
- 6 The whole **family may need support**, both group and individual, but that should not be assumed; **it is important to listen to what people believe they need**.
- 7 Marissa's daughter **Corrine could acknowledge what is happening with her grandfather/family and help more** around the house, to take pressure off her grandfather.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Family doctor understanding a patient's wishes

After Marissa decides to receive MAiD, her family doctor has a brief conversation with her. Marissa is using a morphine pump, and it is not clear how much of the conversation she is following. After this meeting, the doctor tells Marissa's family that Marissa has changed her mind about MAiD. This results in further distress and confusion for Marissa's father and her daughter.

Audiences at the play presentations had the following suggestions:

- 1** The **doctor could communicate clearly with Marissa**, to make sure she understands what her patient's wishes are. The doctor **should not make assumptions or jump to conclusions**.
- 2** **Marissa's family and doctor could all be together to speak with Marissa**, to ensure that they are all hearing the patient's wishes directly.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Supporting a friend or family member who may be considering self-harm

The play's final scene takes place after Marissa has died by MAiD. Jim invites his girlfriend Brenda out for an expensive meal at a restaurant. Jim is uncharacteristically upbeat, even manic. He also seems generous and unconcerned about money, which is in contrast to his usual frugal self, and he gives Brenda his favourite camera lens.

Audience members recognized Jim's unusual behaviours as potential warning signs, and made the following suggestions:

- 1** **Instead of ignoring or rationalizing Jim's unusual behaviours**, including his forced happiness, not caring about spending money, giving away his camera lens, and not spending time with friends, **Brenda could pay attention to these differences and recognize that they might be signs of suicidal ideation.**
- 2** When **Brenda reaches out to Jim on an emotional level and shares her concerns about his behaviour**, she is more likely to have an honest conversation with Jim about what is going on with him.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- 3** If Brenda is concerned that Jim may be thinking of harming himself when he makes statements like “there won’t be a next time,” **she could be direct and name her concern by asking him: “Are you thinking about ending your life?”** If Jim is not thinking about this, he will tell her that; if he is, it will be a relief for him to have someone to talk to about his state of mind. People are sometimes hesitant to raise this because they fear they will be giving a depressed person the idea of suicide, but in fact, it is more likely that Jim feels he has no one to talk to without judgement.
- 4** **Encourage Jim to talk and listen to him**, asking questions like: “Can you tell me more about that?”
- 5** **Reassure Jim that he is not a burden.** Brenda can talk about why she likes to be with him, and the value of Jim in her life.
- 6** **Acknowledge that it is natural to grieve.** Jim might benefit from being part of a bereavement group. Recognizing and naming Jim’s challenges and burdens of the last few months can be affirming.
- 7** Brenda can try to instill hope in Jim and offer her support. **She could reach out for professional help on Jim’s behalf or could offer to stay with him.**

RESOURCES

Mental Health Supports

LOFT – Living with Dignity: Services for Seniors

loftcs.org/what-we-do/specialized-services/seniors/

416-979-1994 | info@loftcs.org

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH)

ccsmh.ca/

289-846-5383 ext. 223 | info@ccsmh.ca

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention

suicideprevention.ca

Crisis Outreach Service for Seniors (COSS)

woodgreen.org/programs/crisis-outreach-service-for-seniors

416-217-2077

Talk Suicide Canada

talksuicide.ca/

1-833-456-4566

Hospice Palliative Care Ontario

hpcoco.ca

416-304-1477 | Toll Free: 1-800-349-3111

Services for Seniors in Toronto (PDF Document)

[toronto.cmha.ca/wp-](http://toronto.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/services4seniors_reduced.pdf)

[content/uploads/2017/03/services4seniors_reduced.pdf](http://toronto.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/services4seniors_reduced.pdf)

Information on MAiD

Government of Canada – Information about MAiD (Medical Assistance in Dying)

health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/maid/

CONTRIBUTORS

Facilitators and Contributing Artists

2022–23 Original Tour: Heather Cherron von Atzigen, Luciano Iogna, Kelsey Rideout, Jane Smythe, Simon Malbogot, Catherine Frid, Flávia Martin, Jessica Balyk, Christopher Jacobs, Tony Babcock

2023–24 Virtual Tour: Heather Cherron von Atzigen, Luciano Iogna, Alexis Wilson, Jane Smythe, Simon Malbogot, Catherine Frid, Tony Babcock, Jo Fan

Administrative Team

2022–23 Original Tour: Swetha Ranganathan, Maranda Tippins, River Oliveira, Catherine Martin, Zoe Vegh–Gross

2023–24 Virtual Tour: Stevie Baker, Maranda Tippins, Jo Fan, Brie Bennett, Yirou Guo

Note: to respect their privacy, the creative participants involved in the development process are not identified.

SUPPORTERS

Community Partners and Host Venues

2022–23 Original Tour: Bernard Betel Centre, College Street United Church, East End United Regional Ministry, Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women, Mimico Presbyterian Church, Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, Scarborough Village Theatre, Toronto Public Library – Palmerston Branch

2023–24 Virtual Tour: Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario

And countless other community organizations, workers, volunteers, and mental health supporters who were integral in making this project a reality.

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2022–23 Original Tour and 2023–24 Virtual Tour

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