An illustration of four hands holding a large black sign with white text. The hands are rendered in a simple, stylized manner with orange and brown tones. The sign is divided into four horizontal sections, each containing a word or phrase in a white, hand-drawn, sans-serif font. The background is a solid orange color.

CO-DEVELOPED

THEATRE

HOW-TO

GUIDE

**Co-developed theatre as a
format for disseminating
research on sensitive subjects:**

For researchers, theatre-makers,
and public contributors

Introduction

This guide was developed as part of the ‘Hard Evidence’ evaluation.

The ‘Hard Evidence’ play was co-created with survivors of abuse and the ACTA community theatre. It aimed to:

- raise awareness of domestic abuse.
- highlight the importance of patient and public involvement (PPI) in research on sensitive subjects.

The team behind ‘Hard Evidence’ performed it twice in the ACTA theatre in Bristol, and twice ‘on tour’ in community venues.

Our research group conducted a mixed-methods study with the play team and audience. We:

- collected quantitative and qualitative survey responses from audience members.
- carried out direct observations of play performances.
- interviewed 7 audience members and 8 play team members.

For more information about our evaluation see here:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.70074>



BRING THINGS TO LIFE WITH THEATRE

We then organized a 2-hour workshop in a community centre with key stakeholders, including twenty-eight theatre-makers, researchers, PPI specialists and public contributors. The workshop aimed to co-develop a 'how to' guide based on the findings from the Hard Evidence evaluation. A live illustrator (Camille Aubry) worked throughout the workshop to capture participants' contributions, and field notes were taken by researchers.

After discussing the first draft with the team, we created the final 'how to' guide text which workshop attendees gave feedback on. We then developed it into this illustrated booklet targeted at people who are interested in theatre as a tool for disseminating research on sensitive subjects.

This is not a comprehensive guide or a checklist of things to fulfil, but these recommendations are what we would consider good practice based on our findings.





BEFORE YOU START...

This guide describes what we view as best practice in co-developing a play to disseminate sensitive research. This can be a time-consuming, resource-intensive process which has the potential to harm both the project team and audience members.

The following pages talk you through how to do this in as safe a way as possible. However, before you start it is important to discuss together whether a co-developed, creative approach to dissemination would be the right fit for your project.

Things to consider before starting

- **Motivation.** Why do you want to use creative, co-developed dissemination methods for your project?
- **Audience.** Who are your audience? Do you want to prioritize breadth and reach over depth and quality of dissemination? How can you involve the community you want to reach in all stages of development?
- **Funding.** What funding do you have available for this, including any additional sources of funding you could secure? What is your relationship with your funders like?
- **Support.** What support do you have from the team to engage in these kinds of dissemination? What capacity do existing team members have for this project?
- **Skills.** What skills and expertise do you have within your team? Are there other kinds of skills you need, especially skills in working in a trauma-informed way?
- **Values.** Can you commit to co-development and collaboration, or do you need ownership over the message which is disseminated?





Safety is a relevant concept for everyone involved in your project. It is important to think about:

- your whole team
- audience members
- not just people you know have lived experience of the issue

Safety for team members

Take care to ensure the process of creating, performing, and marketing the play is emotionally safe for everyone.

Suggestions include:

- Using a structured process to support team members in creating characters and storylines that are different to their experience.
- Centring laughter throughout the process. Rehearsals involving fun, laughter joking, warmth can be an important coping mechanism for managing difficult emotions.
- Thinking about the project team's needs throughout, and having space for social gatherings and sharing, such as food and refreshments at rehearsals.
- Be sensitive with how people engage with the media in promoting the play.
- Making sure that all team members have agreed to be part of this process, and checking in repeatedly to make sure everyone is okay with how things are going.



Safety for audience members

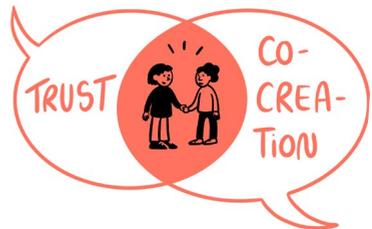
Some suggestions about how to ensure watching the play is emotionally safe for audience members include:

- Avoiding content that is triggering where possible and thinking of alternative ways of telling those stories.
- Sending content notes prior to the performance, so people know what to expect.
- Providing a quiet space so that people can decompress after or during the play.
- Having a member of the project team, or a partner-charity there to provide support, signposting or even directly take referrals.
- Create spaces where audiences can connect with the performers and each other, e.g. having an informal Q&A after the show, providing refreshments and food to share.
- The rituals associated with going to the theatre (including lighting, physical space, and how audiences are welcomed into the space) can create a sense of containment for audience members when engaging with potentially traumatic content.





Having strong and supportive relationships within the project team is key to the emotional safety and wellbeing of all team members, whether or not they are public contributors.



Trust, collaboration and peer support

Support relationship-building within the team:

- Allow time and space within rehearsals and meetings for team members to chat, joke, make connections and develop relationships with each other.
- Create additional opportunities for relationship-building such as through facilitating informal social gatherings, team building and 'warm-up' exercises and by sharing food as a team.

Include support networks:

- Engage and support the families and friends of public contributors. This could be by inviting them for a cup of tea at the end of rehearsals, making time to check-in and chat to them, and creating other opportunities for them to meet the project team.

Partner with specialists:

- Collaborate with charities or organizations for supervision, mentoring, and direct support.
- Consider having a dedicated therapist or counsellor available to the project team and attendees.

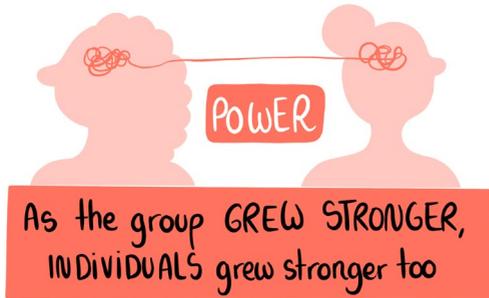
Secure proper funding:

- Ensure adequate funding for essential support services, including travel, salaries and refreshments, as well as partnerships with other supportive organizations.
- Consider any unforeseen or hidden costs.



Shared values are an important reason why people might want to be involved in co-developing a play on a sensitive subject. Promoting autonomy, choice and empowerment should be central to your work, both in the message(s) expressed through the plot as well as during the development process.





Choice and empowerment within the play's message(s)

- Centre your portrayal on the autonomy, empowerment, strength and resilience of characters who have lived experience of the sensitive issue, where possible (for some research topics this may not be appropriate or possible.)
- Demonstrate the value of supportive and non-judgmental relationships throughout the performance. This can encourage people to be open with others and seek help, as well as providing an important model for any professionals or friends/family/carers in the audience.
- A play that shows people overcoming difficult situations with the right support can leave viewers feeling hopeful, optimistic and empowered.
- Engage with your audience through post-performance feedback to understand their emotional response.

Things to consider in the development process

- Support actor empowerment. Actors (especially if they are performing something based on their own experiences) may face challenges in confidence. Participation in such plays can ultimately be empowering for them, helping them grow both personally and professionally (although remain aware that it might have the opposite effect).
- Create a supportive environment to build their confidence, ensure that they have enough time to build up to larger performances, and that they don't feel under pressure to perform.
- Give people with lived experience of the sensitive issue as much power as possible within the development process. Allow them to tell the story they think is important, in the way they think it should be told.





It's important to ensure your play is accessible to people from different backgrounds and with different accessibility needs.



Accessibility for audience members

- Think about your audience and build relationships with the community from the beginning of the development process.
- Ensure your outreach includes people from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds by partnering with community groups.
- Choose community settings that are comfortable and familiar to your target audience. These spaces help reduce barriers for people who might not typically attend traditional theatre performances.
- Ensure performance spaces are accessible to those who are disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent.
- Keep ticket prices affordable or offer free entry.
- Use a combination of word-of-mouth, social media and targeted communication strategies to reach a wider audience.

Accessibility for team members



- Make practical arrangements like transportation, childcare, and flexible scheduling to accommodate team members and avoid creating emotional or logistical burdens.
- Foster an inclusive, supportive environment that considers the personal challenges team members may face, especially when dealing with sensitive subject matter.

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