

Plate-Breaking and Stepping-Stone Project

Therapy technique uses mortar and concrete to help mold new lives

by Valarie A. Snell and Luke M. Snell

Over the past several years, trauma survivors have benefited from a meaningful support group project, created by the authors, in which they break plates and use the fragments to make concrete stepping stones. Using concrete as part of a therapy program certainly represents a new way of looking at this age-old material and is a unique merger of two different disciplines.

The basic idea behind this project is multifaceted. Some people have faced difficulties and are fighting anger issues. They need a way to release this anger, find the broken pieces in their lives, and make something beautiful and useful out of what they have had to face. Concrete is used in the final step to hold everything together.

Day One

To start, the entire support group works together to make a target. The target is usually just a very large piece of paper, about the size of a poster board. On this piece of paper, the participants write anything that makes them angry, but they aren't allowed to write anything negative about themselves (for example, they wouldn't be allowed to write, "I hate my hair."). But they are encouraged to write the names of others who have hurt them, include phrases that they would like to say to those who have hurt them, or simply add words that describe feelings such as "pain" or "emptiness."

Once the messages are completed, the target is taped to a hard surface such as a sidewalk, a parking area, or even the side of a building. Then, each member of the group is encouraged to have a turn throwing or dropping colored ceramic plates at it.

Usually, a person will only throw one plate; however, extra ones are provided for those who feel the need to throw them. Once the ceramic plates are broken, the pieces are picked up. The small and sharp pieces are swept up and discarded. The remainder of the paper target is then collectively taken down, placed in a steel bowl or can, and burned. The ashes can be disposed of in compost, thus symbolizing the release of anger and turning the anger into something useful.

With that, along with some time to process feelings with the facilitator, the first day of the project is completed. Typically, this first stage takes about 2 hours to finish, while also allowing the participants enough time to emotionally process the event. Safety is stressed throughout. The participants wear safety glasses; no one is allowed to stand near the target or in front of the thrower; and the participants wear gloves when handling the plate shards.

Day Two

In the next part of the process, the shards produced on Day 1 are used to make concrete stepping stones. For this, each person needs a prepared stepping-stone mold (old pie tins or restaurant to-go boxes work well). Participants use cooking oil as a release agent, coating the bottoms and sides of the molds using a spray can. Then, each person is given a mixing bowl, a



Mixing mortar by hand



Selecting and placing ceramic plate pieces for a concrete stepping stone

large spoon, and a prepackaged mortar mixture (sand and cement). Because most of the participants have little or no experience mixing concrete, mixing instructions have to be given in terms they understand—they're instructed to add water to make it look like cookie dough. The molds are then filled, using the mixing spoon to both place and consolidate the mortar, and a wooden float is used to finish the surface.

As on Day 1, safety is stressed. Gloves and safety glasses are required throughout the activity, and anyone who gets mortar or cement on them is instructed to immediately wash it off. Before the mortar starts to set, each person selects pieces of the collected broken ceramic plates to create a mosaic pattern on the surface. They are encouraged to be creative and make any pattern they think is attractive to them. The concrete is then covered with plastic wrap and moved to a safe storage area for 24 hours. Each person can then claim their own stepping stone to use as they want.

The Outcome

Although there are no official measures of success, testimonials from the participants indicate that this exercise is meaningful. The activities of making the target, breaking plates, collecting the pieces, and burning the target are powerful and moving, and participants understand that these actions serve as symbolic and physical releases for their anger.

Participants also report that the process of making and placing the mortar and embedding the broken pieces of the plates is relaxing, therapeutic, and life-changing. While the ceramic shards represent the problems and broken pieces of



Completed stepping stone, wrapped in plastic for curing

the participants' lives, the activity of producing the stepping stones serves as a metaphor for using those fragments to make beautiful and purposeful futures.

Those of us in the concrete industry normally think of concrete as an economical and functional building material—few, if any of us, have considered it to be a relaxing, therapeutic, and life-changing material. It's exciting to see how concrete can be used in ways most of us never even imagined.

On a personal note, we, as daughter and father, had never expected that our individual, diverse experiences would one day converge like this. For us, it was a life-changing moment as we gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's career path.

Selected for reader interest by the editors.



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