

# An Introduction to Kitbag: Building Psychological Capacity in Powerful Times

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## The Conceptual Emergency

We live in powerful times. We are citizens of a global society, living in unprecedented conditions of boundless complexity, rapid change and radical interconnectedness. Old identities, rules and models of behaviour and understanding have been swept into a confusing and fast-changing mix, and no new certainties yet stand reliably in their place. We have created a world whose complexity outstrips our capacity to understand and navigate successfully. The International Futures Forum (IFF) calls this a ‘conceptual emergency’.<sup>2</sup>

## In Over Our Heads?

We are not coping well with these changes. No-one is immune. The worst consequences are experienced by the least prepared and those most under stress. This shows up in individuals in symptoms of mental distress, self-destructive and violent behaviour; in communities in marginalisation, hopelessness and extremism; and in nations in failing states, civil war and repressive regimes.

In its reports of 2001 and 2002, the World Health Organisation records mounting evidence of the global burden of psychological distress and violence. It suggests that by 2020 depression will be second only to heart disease as a source of illness in the world.

The 9/11 Commission Report sees people turning to fundamentalism as a source of stability in a world in which many have lost their bearings. The report notes Usama Bin Ladin’s appeal to “people disoriented by cyclonic change as they confront modernity and globalisation”.

In its Readiness for the Future Index of 2001 the World Economic Forum recognises that “social harmony” in a nation is necessary for sustainable competitiveness, but notes that this is deteriorating in many countries.

The Nuffield Trust’s UK review of policy futures for health in 1999 examined the deterioration in “the social context for healthy living”, pointing out how stretched people feel when there is “no time for life, no partner for life, no job for life”.

Time and space have shrunk with the emergence of high speed communications yet even as it empowers and enables, technology alienates human beings from themselves and each other. These last decades have seen a step change in complexity but no equivalent evolution in our systems that provide support for those stressed. The demands of these rapid changes on workers around the world have placed heavy burdens on individuals,

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<sup>2</sup> See International Futures Forum (2003) Ten Things to do in a Conceptual Emergency

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families and communities, stretching them to breaking point. Workplace stress is a major cause of accidents, absenteeism, alcohol problems and burnout.

Divorce rates and single parent families have increased around the world with particularly high growth in Asia in the 1990s. By 2005, Korea's divorce rates were third highest in the world after the US and UK. Suicide rates are growing in rapidly modernising countries such as China and India. Elsewhere in the world community identities forged by industrialisation are crumbling in its aftermath.

In the face of this mounting evidence of global mental distress - revealed by the data above and set out in more detail in our research – society has tended to reach for a biomedical solution. Hence the rise in the use of anti-depressants, or of psychotropic drugs for behavioural problems in children (the number of prescriptions for Ritalin in the UK has increased ten-fold in the last decade). The response is also focused almost exclusively on the individual rather than taking a broader societal perspective.

## Psychological Capacity: a new literacy for a global age

The International Futures Forum, an international and multidisciplinary group of deeply informed strategic thinkers, concludes that the context of contemporary life is failing to provide the requisite touchstones of psychological coherence and failing to nurture adequate psychological capacities to thrive in these times. We live in a toxic psychosphere created by a rapidly changing and disorienting global culture. In an age of material abundance, our culture is defined by new scarcities: time, community, love, purpose, authenticity, understanding, perseverance, rest, friendship. New mental capacities are needed.

**The IFF Psychological Capacity project is a response to the gap between the challenge of the times and our ability to respond. Its purpose is to develop innovative and cost-effective strategies and tools to enlarge psychological capacity outside care and welfare systems.**

The project started in 2004 when IFF brought together a project team and seedcorn funding from the World Economic Forum and the Foundation for Advanced Cardiac Therapies to develop research into the need for and nature of psychological capacity. The thinking led among other things to the development of a prototype 'Kitbag' for promoting psychological capacity which was presented at a joint UK/US government symposium in 2005 on handling the psychological aftermath of traumatic events such as 9/11, the Asian tsunami, Katrina etc.

The symposium was very supportive of both the Kitbag prototype and the philosophy underlying it. IFF continued to develop the work in theory and practice in a number of



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The design alludes to a surgeon's kit – field dressings, ointments, trauma, pain and remedial treatment. This is in recognition that people may come to Kitbag in pain. As this is acknowledged and integrated, people can engage in the growth elements of Kitbag. The design also reflects part of IFF's philosophy that wounds can be turned into capacities, ugliness to beauty. It is also a reminder that Kitbag is intended to be useful when expert professional help is remote. Indeed, it transcends the prevailing high intensity, instrumentalist view of psychological capacity building and instead prompts a growth-based, self-determining, person-centred approach.

The first Kitbag prototype was presented to a group of Mental Health Professionals and Emergency Response Workers at the UK/US government seminar already mentioned - held at the Emergency Planning College in York in September 2005. One of the key reasons for presenting Kitbag at the seminar was to establish whether it would be safe to use in unsupervised situations. The response was emphatically positive.

It became clear in developing Kitbag both that its hand made quality is part of what makes it effective, and that making the Kitbag is also a therapeutic activity. Hence we have simplified the design and provided a simple pattern for the fabric body of the Kitbag in the hope that groups in need might make them for themselves.

In 2006, IFF held its plenary meeting in New Delhi, India. During the visit, IFF made contact with Suvudha, a women's embroidery co-operative, set up by the Hope Project in a poor Muslim quarter of New Delhi. The Hope Project was engaged to make some of the early prototypes and eventually produced ten Kitbags for use in early trials. Another ten Kitbags were made by a seamstress from Cupar in Fife, Scotland.

## Experiences of using Kitbag and Kitbag for Kids

From 2006 onwards, the first Kitbag prototype was introduced to a variety of groups and settings including:

- Cornton Vale Women's Prison
- The Achievers Disability Group Possil, Glasgow
- Community and Domestic Abuse group Aviemore, Scottish Highlands
- A department of a Scottish Health Board

In each case, the power of Kitbag to engage, open up conversation, encourage interaction and uncover hidden resources surprised us.

In Cornton Vale Prison a small group of women have now been working with, adapting and using Kitbag for over a year. The women's comments on their experience have been very positive and moving. Some of their comments are shown below. These are extracts

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from letters sent by the women, the full text of which is included in Appendix 1. Prison staff have reported how the women benefit from Kitbag, being able to take more decisions for themselves, to relax and sleep better and to be more supportive of each other. Staff are now planning to allow the women to become peer educators, taking their learning – and some more Kitbags – to other women in the prison and coaching them in how to use the materials. In time we hope that the women will be able to make the Kitbags for themselves, inside the prison. This is exactly the kind of cascade effect that we hoped for.

### Comments from HM Prison, Cornton Vale

“Kitbags are so useful and to have something that belongs to you is wonderful.”

“It is such a nice feeling just opening up the kit and knowing it is yours, filled with your thoughts and memories.”

“It has helped me greatly as I suffer from depression and I can honestly say it is better than any medication you take for depression.”

“I feel more confident and an inner peace since having the kit.”

“I don’t know how I ever coped without the kit as now I know I never could as well again.”



A member of staff at Cornton Vale Prison told us that Kitbag had helped her twelve year old son who was experiencing bullying at school and encouraged us to develop a Kitbag for Kids. We therefore worked with a child psychotherapist on a version suitable for children aged seven to twelve. A seamstress in Bradford, who had recently recovered from depression, made ten Kitbags for Kids for testing.

The children’s version was introduced to a number of vulnerable children in Fife by therapeutic workers, to children with autism by a parenting co-ordinator, and to children by parents themselves.

Professionals working with children in care reported that they had found Kitbag a valuable resource and thought that it should be made available to all children in care – perhaps as a gift when they are first taken into care. They suggest this would provide children in care with a “home from home” to keep their treasured memories, to help them communicate their

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feelings, and provide a source of strength in the inspirational resources contained in Kitbag for Kids. They also offered to help develop a simpler version for children under seven.

### **Comment from 9 year old girl, Fife**

“You can take the oil, cards and stones anywhere with you”

“The kit’s like having another friend”

### **Comment from nurse therapist about use of Kitbag for Kids by a family in Fife**

“Mum does relaxation with her – this is part of the bedtime routine. This helps the whole family as mum is more relaxed and can give time to her older son afterwards.”



A self-harm nurse who attended an introduction to Kitbag later used the principles behind Kitbag to suggest to a thirteen-year old girl he was working with that she collect together items she valued, things she could do to distract herself when she wanted to self harm and a notebook to record her feelings. She put these items into a box and keeps it by her bed. She also has a notice on the door of her bedroom to remind her to go to this box each night.

The self harm nurse has reported to IFF that this has given the girl the confidence and strength to deal with her feelings rather than self harm. This experience has prompted IFF to investigate the development of a Kitbag for teenagers.

When Kitbag was introduced to a Health Board department, IFF discovered that it opened up the “forbidden conversation” and revealed a deep fault-line in working relations. A severe case of workplace harassment was uncovered but following active mentoring and support from IFF, the person most badly affected has been able to return to work, strengthened by the process. IFF has been exploring further work in the NHS, using Kitbag to support staff so that they are better equipped to deal with the emotional and stressful content of their work.

Kitbag has also been introduced to a disability group in Possil, a deprived part of Glasgow. The Achievers Disability Group has been meeting for many years to engage in a range of social activities. They care for each other a great deal with the group providing peer

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support. Many use wheelchairs and some have learning difficulties as well as physical ones. Their view of Kitbag was overwhelmingly positive. One member of the group, a care home worker, said she found the words in Kitbag inspirational. They made her think about the meaning of her life. She said Kitbag would be ideal for working with groups of people in the care home where she worked and that it would be a helpful tool to encourage and support staff in their caring role.

IFF has introduced Kitbag to a community and domestic abuse group in Aviemore. The group comprises women and children who have experienced violence, plus staff and volunteers. They have become tired of the latest service innovation, the next new thing. So when introduced to Kitbag, they were pleasantly surprised that it was 'not a worksheet in an A4 ring binder'.

They thought it was a really good idea, liking the feel, the opportunities to personalize the Kitbag, the ideas and the thoughts it expressed. They want to be involved in further work and are very keen on Kitbag for Kids. They have kept the samples we gave them and are pressing for more.

### **From a member of The Achievers Disability Group, Possil, Glasgow**

"At the time of my breakdown this would have been Utopia for me. I could not speak to people about this or seek advice. The kit suggests insights without preaching....giving pointers to help turn life around...oh I could try that... or I never thought of that .... I wish I had known that then."

### **Comment from community group in Aviemore**

"This is lovely help to give people. It's lovely just having it in your hand. So many toolkits tell you what to do. This doesn't. The idea of personalising is great. It would be lovely to give one to the women who come through here. Something precious just for them would be lovely. It would be so symbolic of a new start and looking for the future. It would also help people to open up and be willing to talk more. The gift symbolic of a new start, looking to the future".

"The kit will be good even just for ourselves at the end of the week, never mind other women."



### Deepening the practice: international workshop

Encouraged by these experiences, in October 2007 (with funding from Big Lottery's 'Investing in Ideas' programme) IFF hosted a two day workshop for 18 mental health professionals from the UK, Europe and the US. The meeting provided IFF with invaluable comment on the wider concept of psychological capacity, the theoretical underpinnings of Kitbag, the potential uses for Kitbag and opportunities for scaling the use of Kitbag in communities and organisations.

The workshop also developed a draft programme for rolling out Kitbag across a small country (like Scotland), having communities make their own Kitbags and deepening the application of its principles to apply to places and processes as well as people. This is a model for improving the mental health and wellbeing of a nation without recourse to mental health and welfare systems.

With funding support from NESTA's Innovations in Mental Health programme, IFF undertook further research into the theoretical underpinnings of the Kitbag concept and produced a report on its findings. NESTA funding also helped IFF to develop the content of Kitbag, including commissioning music by Scottish composer, Malcolm Lindsay. The overall design of Kitbag was improved over many sessions with designers, including a textile designer. The pictures in this brochure are of this second prototype and include the adult (cream-coloured) and children's (African fabric) versions.

In short, a great deal of professional advice and design expertise has gone into developing Kitbag over several years. A list of contributors is attached.

### Kitbag and Kitbag for Kids: potential for development

Our experience suggests that Kitbag and Kitbag for Kids both have tremendous potential to benefit the kinds of communities we have so far encountered struggling to cope, either with specific circumstances or simply with the stresses and demands of modern living.

IFF is keen to realise this potential. We are therefore establishing a charitable enterprise and an infrastructure to produce thousands of Kitbags, maintaining the home made quality and produced in a socially responsible (and capacity enhancing) way. IFF is seeking grant and philanthropic funding to support this enterprise and to make Kitbag available to deprived and vulnerable communities and to children in need who would otherwise be able to afford them.

We also see further potential in providing support to professionals – not necessarily only those in caring positions - who are under strain. So, for example, alongside further work with the prison service, IFF is also introducing Kitbag into the NHS as a support for staff. One NHS Trust has already been identified as a pilot site. Kitbag also has potential in

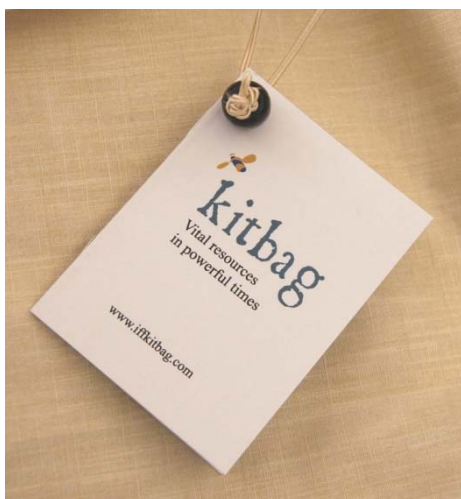
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more conventional organisational settings – developing the psychological capacity of staff in the face of rising stress, absenteeism and burnout.

Trauma counselors, psychologists and emergency care staff, who frequently deal with trauma, have noted the potential for Kitbag to help relatives and survivors of traumatic events. There is also potential for Kitbag in care of the elderly, care of disabled people, people in prison, spiritual care, hospice care and the care of hospitalised children - all circumstances where short term, palliative, professional-heavy responses are increasingly inadequate in over-stretched services. There are many other examples.

As noted above, people who have experienced the existing Kitbag have suggested further developments possible for Kitbag for Kids: a simpler version for children under seven years; and a version for young adults going through life transitions or being away from home for the first time - young offenders, for example, or young people going to university for the first time or living abroad in a gap year.

Ultimately we see Kitbag as a global resource. As a first step we are exploring with members of the development team who are based there ways of introducing Kitbag to the US. In time we hope that Kitbag is translated into other languages for use in recovery from catastrophes, community building and peace keeping – picking up on the original potential seen by the humanitarian disaster relief community. We see Kitbag as a helpful educational tool for everyone navigating the transition from the industrial age to a world community of global citizens.



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## Appendix 1

### **Letters to Margaret Hannah from Women users of the Human Resource Kit in Cornton Vale Prison 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2008. Names withheld.**

Dear Margaret,

I have found the time with Merle has just been great. The little sack has been extremely helpful to me. You know having these meetings in the Prison, well everybody needs help in every way. Kitbags are so useful and to have something that belongs to you is wonderful. Life can be so hard and when you fend for yourself in a place like this, you know that is when you know there is a God as you can get very low. And all you want is someone like Merle to come around you and this makes you feel back to spiritual life around you. So I must say please keep this going as this really helps people in many ways. Positivity in your life is wonderful. I just look around me. And when I look at the Kit Bag it is life on each section as each of us goes through life. I do hope this short letter will help you on your next task.

Thank you.

*(This prisoner was called away to a medical appointment at the beginning of this meeting and therefore had only minutes to write this)*

Dear Margaret

I have found the kit very useful especially where I am its good to know that it is just for me. I think the Cards are very good especially if you are not having a very good day just to take one and realise the wonderful gifts that the animals give us. It always makes me smile and I feel much better and more connected to nature. The blanket is a great source of comfort as when you wrap it around you it's like receiving a hug which reassures me when I am feeling scared or lonely. The one thing which is really nice about the kit and I feel would help other people it has been given to us with no strings attached, a gift to help one feel safe and is a very special personal kit which you can put things in to remind you of the nicer things in life. For example when I saw an elephant on the TV I was both fascinated and very privileged to see. I felt so good inside. Happy. So I got my kit out and wrote down the good feeling I had at that moment and now if I feel a little down when I look in my book from my kit it reminds me. And I think back to seeing an artist at work and I smile and start to feel happy remembering an elephant painting – another gift from the animals. It's nice to have the CD to help me to sleep. I put a little lavender on (*cream*) and listen to the CD which helps me to relax. It is such a nice feeling just opening up the kit and knowing it is yours, filled with your thoughts and memories. The worry dolls I feel bad at the idea of giving them my worries so when I try to I always end up giving them a wish instead which by the time I have finished I start to feel better and by the morning I feel much better and my problems seem smaller than they did. I feel more confident and an inner peace since having the kit.

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Dear Margaret,

The kit has helped me a great deal, as I tend to have more bad days than good, and when I'm feeling down I instantly reach for my kit and comfort blanket. I have some old photos in my kit and when I 'm looking at them it really takes me back to those days with my family when we were all happy and I have great memories of those days. Then I pick myself a H'earth card and memorise it through the day, remember what it has told me and I hold on to that thought. I worry quite a lot about what is happening to my family on the outside and praying every day God is keeping them safe, so I very often reach for my worry dolls, tell them what is worrying me, then place them safely under my pillow until morning. I then take out my lotion and rub a drop into my hands and on the sides of my temple, the lotion and the scent from it really soothes me. I then put my relaxation CD on, wrap myself in my comfort blanket, then lie down on my bed. Once I bring myself too again I feel really relaxed, stress free, bright and bubbly and ready to face life's challenges. I would really recommend this kit to anyone. It has helped me greatly as I suffer from depression and I can honestly say it is better than any medication you take for depression. The relaxation CD really does set you free from being in prison. It takes you to another world if only for half and hour. I don't know how I ever coped without the kit as now I know I never could as well again.

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## Appendix 2

IFF is grateful to the following people for their invaluable advice to the Psychological Capacity project:

Dr Neal Adams (former Medical Director, California State Mental Health Services)

Dr. David Bolton, (Director, Centre for Trauma and Transformation, Omagh, Northern Ireland)

Graham Buchanan (Director, Playfield Institute, Fife, Scotland)

Ged Davis (Director, Centre for Strategic Insight, World Economic Forum, Geneva),

Dr. Maria Duggan (Mental Health consultant, London)

Prof. Len Duhl (Public Health, University of California, Berkeley),

Visiting Prof. Bob Horn (Visual Analytics, Stanford University, California),

Dr. Merle Friedman (Director, The Resilience Company, Cape Town, South Africa),

Dr. Dean Ornish (Director, Preventive Medicine Research Institute, Sausalito, California),

Dr. Mehmet Oz (Director, Cardiovascular Institute at Columbia University, New York),

Prof. Chris Stout (Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois School of Medicine, Chicago)

Dr Ken Thompson (Medical Director, Substance Misuse and Mental Health Services Agency, Washington DC)

Dr. Matt Wild (Clinical Psychologist, Bateson Cancer Centre, Glasgow and freelance organizational consultant)

Dr. Alberto Zucconi (President, Person-Centred Approach Institute, Rome)

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The following people form the Psychological Capacity project team:

Dr. Margaret Hannah (Project Lead and Deputy Director of Public Health, Fife, Scotland),

Graham Leicester (Director, International Futures Forum),

Dr. Maureen O'Hara (Professor, National University, San Diego),

Neville Singh (retired psychotherapist, Edinburgh, Scotland),

Merle Ferguson (retired child and family psychotherapist, Ardentinnny, Argyll, Scotland),

Wendy Simpson (Director of Research, Playfield Institute, Fife, Scotland)

Andrew Lyon (Converger, International Futures Forum)

Shona MacIver (Chief Executive, Locofoco design company, Glasgow, Scotland)

Malcolm Lindsay (composer and user-centric designer, Glasgow, Scotland)

Catherine Barthram (Paleface textile design company, Fife, Scotland)

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