

The Mess Mapping analytic process. Building a Mess Map™ is a group process. Facilitated teams usually in task forces build a common mental model of the interrelated set of problems the sector will face before we have adequately prepared ourselves. This process was invented by Robert E. Horn and has been used in approx. about a dozen cases (as of 2013).

The concept of “Social Messes. Russell Ackoff, of the Wharton School, originated the concept of the mess. He describes messes as collections of problems and other messes, suggesting that “no problem ever exists in complete isolation. Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems.”

At MacroVU, we think of social messes as having these characteristics:

- complicated, complex, and ambiguous
- much uncertainty – even as to what the problems are, let alone what the solutions might be
- great constraints
- tightly interconnected, economically, socially, politically, technologically
- seen differently from different points of view, and quite different world views
- contain many value conflicts
- are often a-logical or illogical.

Different levels of analysis for social messes. Messes can be analyzed and described at different levels of focus. For example we have helped county task forces on mental health, long term care of the elderly, and national and international task forces to address their messes.

A new group process for capturing expertise. The Mess Mapping™ process is a general method for groups working on complex problems. It is based on the assumption that multidisciplinary task groups need special forms of group interactions in order to effectively use the expertise assembled. Nearly every expert in such a group has come to the table with their pet "solutions" to the "problem." This interferes with deeper exploration of the mess as well creative exchange.

The use of the concept of a “mess” as an interrelated set of problems breaks that initial mind set and challenges the experts to work together to produce an analysis they would not have produced by themselves or in a conventional group process. This changes their motivation from displaying their expertise to involvement in exploring new territory together.

The use of the physical metaphor of a “map” also intrigues them. It draws on their experiences of navigating in new territory as well as in the process of constructing the map which changes significantly over several sessions.

A large version (24 x 36 inches) of the mess map template was placed on each table. An even larger, mural size version hung on the wall. In addition, each participant was also given a more abbreviated “place mat” version (about 11 x 17 inches).

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For further information on Mess Mapping processes for your group, contact:

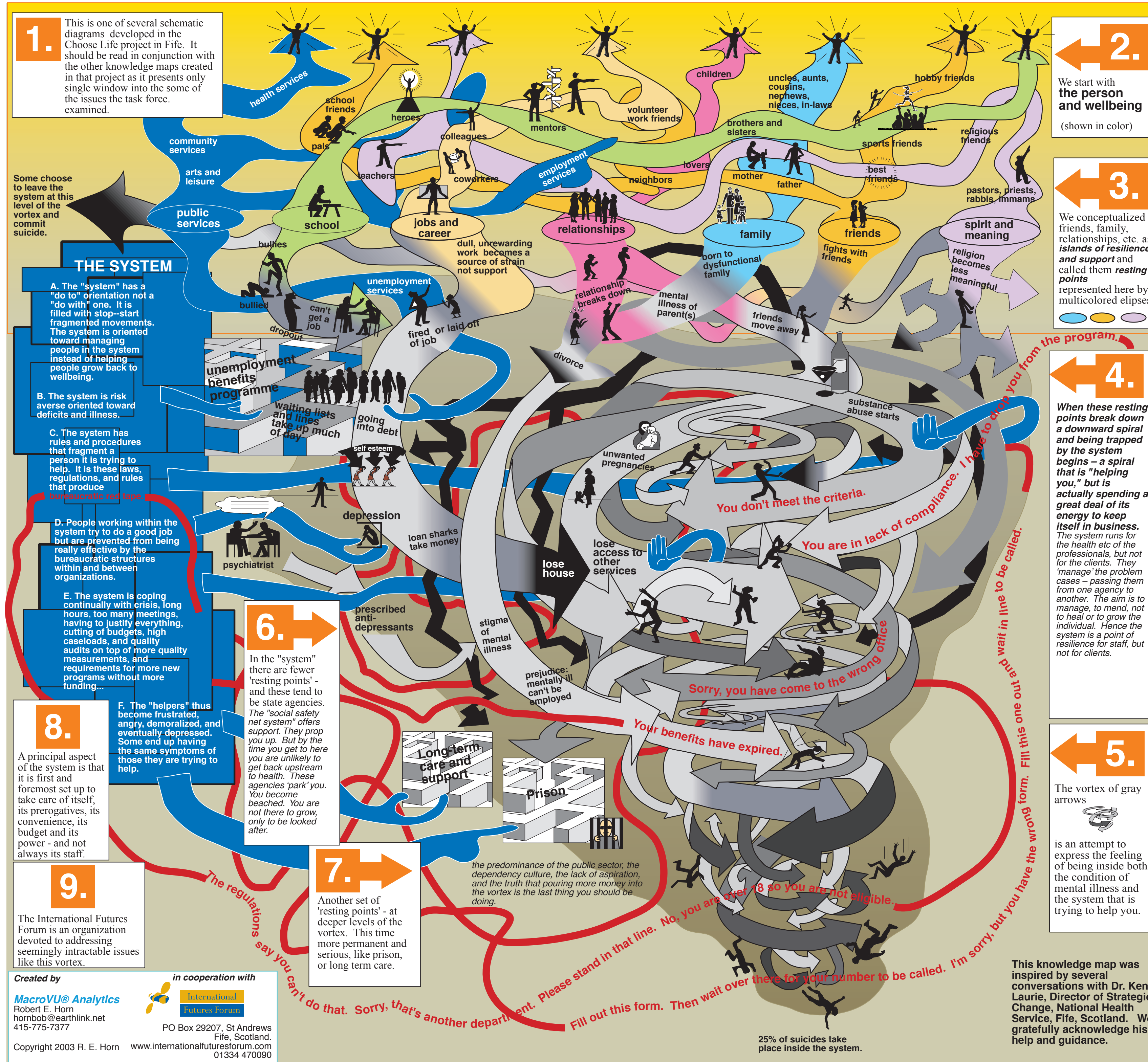
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You can print this mess map out at your local print service bureau.

For many, the overall dynamic of well-being spirals downward into "the system"

2003



The CONTENT - How the suicide prevention system looks to people delivering services -

Organizational challenge

How can problem-solving groups, commissions, task forces understand the context and interrelationships of the social messes they've been assigned to work on?

Challenge of the issue

How can we find and help people who are thinking of committing suicide? How can we do this when it is very difficult to know what is in people's minds?

Information analysis and display challenge

Part of our project challenge evolved as the project developed. How to portray different views of the social messes that such task forces usually find they are facing? How to rapidly develop visual common mental models that enable the task?

Solution

Develop a suite of knowledge maps -- displayed as murals -- that provide the groups with successively more detailed and comprehensive views of the issues. In particular, we developed *five views* of the suicide prevention mess, each shown on separate panels.

View from top management

The first shows the set of organizations and sectors of governance and service delivery as seen from the standpoint of top management, where most organizations were focused on other issues and goals and thus regarded suicide prevention as only one of many secondary issues they had to manage.

View of service deliverers: the mess

Another was a “standard” mess map showing the systemic inter-relationships of problems as seen from the points of view of different organizations and sectors in the county.

View of how to predict and find

Another set of diagrams shows how we addressed the thorny issue of how do you identify “potential” suicidizers. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack as the old metaphor goes. Maybe it is even looking for the haystack itself.

View of the larger system: the vortex

We also developed a larger knowledge maps to show the creation of a rather expressive view of the mental health delivery system from the standpoint of the metaphor of a vortex. **(SHOWN AT LEFT)**

View- Stepping back for commentary

We also used the capabilities of large visual knowledge maps to illuminate various aspects of the vortex system in more detail.

Client

National Health Service, County Fife, Scotland, U.K.

Project team

Robert E. Horn, visiting scholar, Stanford University and President, MacroVU, Inc., Margaret Hannah, M.D., Fife Public Health, Scotland, and Graham Leicester, President, International Futures Forum, St. Andrews, UK.

Thirty directors and staff of the different agencies who had some role or part of their mission as suicide prevention.