

The Innovation

We worked together to create Mindfulness for Life: a course and associated practice network, bringing mindfulness to people with learning disabilities. Mindfulness for Life provides a 12 session course for people with learning disabilities, teaching them how to use mindfulness in their lives.

As a starting point we took the well established Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course and worked together to create a new course which specifically focussed on teaching mindfulness to people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

At least 20 robust studies have found that MBSR can help a wide range of physical and mental conditions (stress, anxiety, depression and pain) (Grossman et al 2004). The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recognises mindfulness can act as an effective bulwark against depression. Mindfulness for Life sets out to bring these benefits to people with learning disabilities.

The Problem

Research shows people with learning disabilities and/or autism :

- Face significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety (Emerson and Baines 2010; Cooper & Bailey 2001; Smiley (2005), Cooper et al. (2007), Deb et al., 2001; Emerson, 2003)
- Have poor health literacy (Green Light for Mental Health 2008/9)
- Are often failed by services (Healthcare for All 2008; and Emerson and Hatton 2007)
- Lack accessible counselling (Sturmey 2004)
- Experience social exclusion, discrimination, and health inequalities
- Are disproportionately affected by austerity, welfare reform, loss and bereavement, hate crime and bullying
- Receive inadequate social and emotional support

Mindfulness is proven to improve mental health, and is widely available, but not for people with learning disabilities. This can result in health inequality. Government policy reflects the need for supports which enhance resilience and wellbeing, delivered in communities which reduce the need for formal services. (GB 2014, 2016; NHSE 2015).

The Impact

The project is being evaluated by two MA students from Northumbria University and our organisations are working together to develop more accessible evidence based measures.

A research project from a student at Newcastle University's Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (Burman H 2016) found that the project is an exemplar of good practice as described in key policy documents (NICE 2016, DH 2010, Health and Social Care Act 2014), and that it includes elements for successful co-production between organisations which has resulted in improving focus on accessibility.

So far, four courses have been delivered and a growing number of people are joining practice groups in their community. Over 150 people with learning disabilities and 58 of their supporters have been introduced to mindfulness.

Next Steps

Our aim is to create a community of practice and peer support networks, both locally and nationally, which will enable people with learning disabilities to use mindfulness to improve their mental health and resilience.

The Collaborators

Mindfulness for Life is a collaboration project. Funded by Health Education England, the project's development has been led by staff and volunteers from Skills for People, alongside a consultant clinical psychologist and an experienced teacher of mindfulness from the trust. Of vital importance has been the input of people with learning disabilities and/or autism. They have helped to shape the project and become its champions, regularly leading meditations, alongside their colleagues.

Funding

The Mindfulness for Life project was funded in its entirety by Health Education England. £29,000 of transformation funding was allocated to cover the cost of a facilitator, development of materials and running costs. Top up funding of £35,000 was also provided by Health Education England once the concept was proved to allow the expansion of the programme, implementation of a train the trainer package and the development of new groups across Tyne and Wear.

"I used to scratch myself and bang myself when I was feeling low. I now use my Mindfulness exercises instead and haven't hurt myself for a while"

"I am so proud of myself and am enjoying being a champion for Mindfulness. Not only am I leading meditation but am making this possible for everyone else"



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