

Mindfulness for people with a learning disability

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Together with representatives from Northumberland, Tyne and Wear (NTW) NHS Foundation Trust, Skills for People and the North East and Cumbria Learning Disability Network we have developed a new course to teach Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to people with learning disabilities and their supporters.

We have also developed a range of materials, in various formats, that can be used by people with learning disabilities in their day to day lives; and by their supporters to help improve their health and wellbeing.

A discrete training programme has been developed to help a vulnerable group cope better with the demands of everyday living and decrease their chances of using mental health services. Part of the overall objective was also to equip their support staff to help them with this.

The project in detail

The course was developed to complement other courses and associated support groups being developed by Skills for People and NTW; aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of local people with learning disabilities, and reducing their social isolation, in a community setting. A number of 'taster' sessions were held to introduce people and their supporters to the exercises and principles of mindfulness, it gave them the opportunity to think about whether this is the right course for them and allowed them to decide whether they would like to commit to attending the 12 week course.

Phase one of the MBSR project started with ten people with a learning disability, accompanied by their carers/support staff. A formal session, led by Dr Steve Noone from NTW took place one a week for 12 weeks. During these sessions, the group members were introduced to mindfulness and completed exercises to develop their skills. A creative pictorial method was used to record people's 'journey' through the course by using the concept of a path. This allowed group members to record their experiences and gave opportunities to give feedback at the end of each formal session. The content of the course and the materials used to make learning accessible and effective were developed and refined over the course of sessions, meaning that the training evolved to suit participant needs.

Between formal sessions, Skills for People supported 'practice sessions' aimed at embedding learning and reducing social isolation. These have been found to be immensely important as they helped participants to explore the ideas introduced by the course in a practical way. They also assisted participants to think about how they can adopt these practices in their daily living and so better manage stress and anxiety. The sessions were relaxed, light-hearted and fun - including being out and about, trying new things, testing out the ideas introduced on the course by walking, eating out and travelling on public transport. Which are all situations in which a person with a learning disability can find themselves becoming anxious and distressed.

The group members felt that they had benefited immensely from their attendance at the sessions and their supporters reported that they had been calmer, less anxious and more able to deal with change and situations they had previously found upsetting. The group members from phase one were developed to become 'mindfulness champions' and were involved in the roll out of phase two of the project. The objectives of phase two were to present the course again several times 'in different areas in the North East, train members of the Skills for People team (with and without learning disabilities) to deliver the course in future without NTW team members and to act as Mindfulness champions, promoting the ideas, courses, and raising awareness across the region. We also aimed to create a network of people who have attended the course, to encourage peer support, offer practice/support sessions regularly to all those who have attended the courses and ensure there is a mechanism for the future which ensures the team of people who go on to deliver the course are well supported/supervised by those with relevant experience.

Phase one of the project produced astonishing results, which were documented in a short film. This has been used to show the success of the programme and encourage other areas to adopt the methods used. It formed the evidence base to move into phase two of the project. Our short film has been shown in Westminster and has been held up as an exemplar of a simple and cost-effective intervention which can have a hugely positive impact on patient outcomes.

Related Content

Learning disability

Developing a learning disabilities workforce with the education, skills, values, knowledge and behaviours required to effectively deliver and improve learning disability services.

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[4] <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/news-blogs-events>

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