



Public Health  
England



Health Education England  
NHS England

Protecting and improving the nation's health



# Health literacy toolkit

## Case studies

Prepared by Health Education England, NHS England, Public Health England,  
and the Community Health and Learning Foundation



### Part 1

Case studies from patients who attended the national, evidence-based health literacy programme [Skilled for Health](#), aimed at helping participants identified to have low health literacy to more effectively manage their Type 2 Diabetes.

#### James\*

James, who is in his mid-sixties, had been newly diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and was struggling with a number of issues related to his condition, including managing his blood sugar levels, feeling generally unwell, being constantly thirsty, and suffering frequent headaches. James also felt that he didn't want to have to take lots of medication to manage his condition. James does a very physical job, so usually eats large portions of food up to five times per day. Although he is a little overweight, James has never worried about his diet due to the physical nature of his occupation; however as he is due to retire soon, James is keen to ensure that health issues do not impact on a long, happy and healthy retirement. He also realised that retiring would have an impact on his weight management, if he carried on with his current eating patterns.

James' GP therefore suggested that he join one of the Skilled for Health courses scheduled to run locally, as part of the 'Making the Case for Health Literacy' [East Midlands National Demonstrator Site work](#), to help him to manage his condition more effectively.

The course is delivered in a fun and interactive way covering topics such as healthy eating, 5 a day, hidden salt, fat and sugars, accessing NHS/GP services appropriately, physical activity and mindfulness, all of which have been shown to lessen the impact of Type 2 Diabetes on the individual's health. James made it clear at the outset that he had little knowledge of portion sizes and hidden sugars, and didn't look at food labels at all because he didn't really understand what he was looking for, and found them confusing.

Using knowledge gained from the course, James has taken steps to control the hidden salt and sugar in packaged food in his diet by making simple swaps - for example, substituting lentil soup for tomato soup, and making his own pasta sauce instead of using jars. James now regularly batch cooks and freezes meals, making it easier for him to eat nutritious, balanced meals when he gets home from work. Prior to the course, James also consumed at least a litre of cranberry juice per day; but after realising how much sugar was in the drink and the negative impact on his diabetes, he reports cutting this out completely.

James said the biggest shock to him was the portion size information. He used this information that he had learnt during the course to educate his co-workers: "I took the portion size handout to work and photo copied it for everyone! They couldn't believe it!"

The changes that James has made as a result of attending the course will allow him to have more control over what he's eating, and to make more informed choices about the impact of food on his health. He is determined to continue implementing the healthy changes that he learnt about during the course which enabled him to significantly reduce his blood sugar levels, and lose half a stone. James reports feeling much better, and hopes to continue on his new path to avoid the need for medication.

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals' identity

### Ivy\*

Ivy is an 84 year old widow and has multiple conditions, including Type 2 Diabetes. She struggled to cook interesting and varied meals for herself, and found the meal ideas provided as part of the [Skilled for Health](#) course very helpful. Ivy also found the information about medicines management very helpful, especially in helping her to identify the risks to Diabetes patients of taking some readily available, over the counter medications.

Ivy passed on her new found healthy eating knowledge to her son, who had also been diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes.

Ivy provided the following comments, as part of her end of course evaluation:

*"I love trying out the recipes ideas that you gave us on the course, like the homemade baked beans. It gets boring cooking for yourself!"*

### Alice\*

Alice, a widow aged 77, has complex medical needs, with Type 2 Diabetes being just one of the conditions she has to manage. Alice freely admits that she doesn't manage her conditions well, and finds it hard to keep on top of everything. She knows that managing her Diabetes more effectively should be a priority, and has tried in the past to address it, but has found information difficult to understand.

Prior to joining the Skilled for Health course at her local community centre, Alice had attended a course at her GP surgery, however felt that this didn't entirely meet her needs, finding the information provided difficult to understand. Alice found the interactive style of the Skilled for Health course more suitable, commenting that *"...this course is so much more informative and interesting. I love all the games and activities and I've learned so much."*

Alice also felt that, because this course was run in a setting she was familiar with and included other acquaintances from her community, it was less 'scary'. This also helped to make it easier for her to understand the information.

One of the most useful learning points for Alice arose during a session that focussed on looking at labels for over the counter medicines, where she discovered that many were unsuitable for diabetics. As a result, Alice says she would now always read the information leaflet before taking such medications.

Following the course, Alice has continued to monitor her blood sugar levels more effectively with daily help from her granddaughter, with whom she shared the information gained from the Skilled for Health course. Alice feels that although she does not always achieve the goals that she set for herself as part of the course – to "always read food labels" and "walk a little every day" - she is now much more aware of how she should manage her condition, and is able to make informed choices.

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals' identity

## Part 2

Case studies from practitioners who attended the [Health Literacy Awareness sessions](#), aimed at enabling participants to increase their knowledge of health literacy and the impacts of low levels of health literacy on individuals; and supporting awareness of the tools and techniques that can be implemented into practice to enhance health literacy approaches in day to day delivery.

### **Amy, Children's Centre Coordinator**

Amy works as a Children's Centre Coordinator. Her team offer pre-school age children and their families information, advice and support, as well as access to early learning, childcare services and health services.

Amy had previously attended a Health Literacy Awareness course that she'd learnt about via her local District Council, and was so impressed by the content and delivery that she arranged to have the course delivered to her team, as part of the 'Making the Case for Health Literacy' [East Midlands National Demonstrator Site work](#).

One of the aims of the Health Literacy Awareness session Amy's team is now more mindful of is the impact that low levels of health literacy might have on service user involvement. To this end, the Centre's administrative team has consulted the CHLF website to gain an insight into best practice when designing leaflets and notice boards. The team is also aware that there may sometimes be a need to offer assistance in attending GP appointments etc. so that service users have a better understanding of how to manage their general health.

All notice boards and leaflets are now designed with low levels of health literacy in mind. If service users are referred on to other sources of information, e.g. websites, staff ensure these are suited to their level of understanding.

Staff members are now continually mindful of the way that they interact with service users and that any literature provided is appropriate. Reflection on what was learned during the course is encouraged.

The course has not only helped staff to be more mindful of health literacy levels but all aspects of the way they work with service users.

### **Andrew, GP Practice Manager**

Andrew is the Practice Manager at a city based Medical Centre. The area served by the Practice includes communities that have typically low standards of educational attainment, and poor health literacy skills. This makes the communication of health and wellbeing messages a constant challenge for Practice staff, and Andrew was keen to explore how his participation in the Health Literacy Awareness session could help to improve approaches.

Andrew felt that the Health Literacy Awareness Training had a number of positive impacts that could be taken forward for his organisation. A follow up evaluation several months after he had participated demonstrated the following impacts of training:

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals' identity

- Practice staff are now breaking messages down into “bite sized” pieces, using the “Chunk and Check” techniques covered during the training
- Staff have undertaken an evaluation of the Practice’s communication mechanisms with patients and the public, with the aim of including some of the tools and techniques taught during the training session, and as a consequence have re-assessed approaches to their written information – which now includes a mixture of words and pictures, to improve accessibility and understanding for the reader.

Andrews believes that these changes will lead to better patient engagement and outcomes in the future.

### **Sheila, Nutrition Worker**

Sheila is a Nutrition Worker who has been delivering healthy eating courses in the local community for the last 8 years. Sheila works with small groups who have either self-referred, or been signposted by their GP to make small but invaluable changes to their lifestyles, while learning about basic nutrition. Sheila has also delivered these courses tailored specifically to people with Type 2 Diabetes.

Sheila reports that the activities included during the training session, to help build understanding of the difficulties faced by individuals with low levels of health literacy, had a profound effect on her. These activities include participants being asked to record verbatim a verbal report, delivered at fast pace by the trainer, using their non-dominant hand: “How fast people speak, writing with our left hands and identifying words. All those things made me realise just how much we take certain things for granted if fortunate enough to be educated and living in the country of one’s origin.....I hope that this awareness can be introduced as part of company inductions and brought to light more by the media. I certainly have become even more aware of difficulties that people may be facing and take more time and care over my course participants. It is a chain of events in which every link has to be aware of such things. Questions need to be asked right at the start, about what help can be offered - from referral, signposting, booking and attending, in my experience.”

Sheila thinks that low health literacy will unfortunately continue to be a barrier for many individuals: “Only raising awareness can help, and I thought this course was excellent for that.” She would like to see the training rolled out more widely to “share knowledge as far as possible, to increase awareness of difficulties faced.”

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals’ identity

## Part 3

Case studies from practitioners who attended [the Royal Society of Public Health Level 1 Improving Health training](#), aimed at enabling participants to feel more confident when talking with service users about their health and wellbeing.

### David, Fire and Rescue Service Firefighter

David, a professional firefighter, attended the two day RSPH Level 1 training along with colleagues and delegates from other public sector organisations. He soon proved himself to be an active member of the group, happily offering his own personal experiences and examples as a young father. He admitted loving pizzas, and he readily admitted that “healthy food” was boring.

At the start of the sessions David ranked his level of knowledge on nearly all health-related topics as ‘adequate’ and by the end he ranked his knowledge as ‘high.’ His level of confidence in discussing these topics with service users also rose from ‘adequate’ to ‘high’ across all areas. Training delivery included some information about health literacy, including prevalence, impact of low health literacy, and practical techniques that can be adopted to help communicate health messages effectively. David was very positive about the impact that this information had on him, and how it all now ‘made sense’. He wondered ‘how do people with low health literacy manage; get through life?’

Following the course David said that he will now ‘be patient to people’s needs’ in his job role. He felt that participation in the course had a very positive impact on his role around supporting individuals in the community, commenting that ‘it is a vital part of our job and gaining a better knowledge about the difficulties faced by the people we serve can only be a positive thing’.

On a personal level, David plans to have a healthier approach to eating, by planning meals in advance, educating himself on how to cook, budgeting better and drinking a lot more water. He hopes that this will help him ‘feel a better level of self-worth, this will improve my mental health issues. It will also help remove strain on my body, brought on by poor eating and excess weight. Eating healthily will reduce the chances of diseases like cancer.’ He also commented that he has “...a young daughter, and I want to be as healthy as possible to enjoy our lives together”. ‘Throughout, I found all aspects of the course both interesting and educational; it was ‘brilliant’.

### Sarah, Disability Employment Coach

Sarah is a Disability Employment Coach for the Department of Work and Pensions and is based in a JobCentre Plus office. At the beginning, Sarah said she really wasn’t sure what to expect from the course and had little prior knowledge apart from healthy lifestyle basics. Sarah had never heard the term ‘health literacy’ before attending.

Sarah said that she was shocked by the information that she learned about the prevalence and impact of low levels of health literacy on individuals, commenting that she hadn’t really considered these issues before, but now feels they are vital to understanding her customers’ needs. She said it would make her more mindful of her service users’ abilities and challenges, and less prone to make assumptions about the challenges that they face.

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals’ identity

On a personal level, Sarah found the sections on healthy eating portion sizes very helpful as this was completely new to her; and also enjoyed learning about food labels and traffic light labelling – now using this knowledge in her day-to-day approach to her own health and wellbeing, as well as that of others.

Sarah's caseload includes service users with a range of complex health conditions including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, addiction, and other physical and mental health issues. Attending the course has given her the confidence to offer advice and support and to refer people on to local health and lifestyle services if they require more expert help. Sarah reports that she has applied the knowledge on 'too many occasions to name' and that her newfound knowledge now underpins all her interactions in her role.

Sarah is also determined to continue to apply the knowledge that she gained from the course to improve her own health, and commented that she felt more "empowered and confident" about making decisions that would have a positive impact on her lifestyle behaviours. Sarah is keen to progress to an RSPH Level 2 qualification, to further build her knowledge.

A final comment from Sarah shows how valuable the knowledge gain about health improvement and health literacy can be in increasing awareness and supporting change of practice where necessary: "Attending this course has made me consider how low levels of health literacy can impact my customers, and has given me the confidence to actually discuss these issues sensitively, allowing me to support people effectively .... before I thought, why would I need to help with these things, it's all so super basic, ...but now I know I shouldn't make assumptions, just because I know it, why would they?"

### **Andrew, Fire and Rescue Service Centre Coordinator**

Andrew works as a Centre Coordinator across various fire stations in his area, a role that regularly brings him into contact with young people and vulnerable people in their own homes on a daily basis.

Andrew found the RSPH Level 1 course really useful, especially with regard to his own approach to a healthy lifestyle. He reported that following the course, he was more aware of the benefits of healthy eating, exercise and other factors that could improve his health, and of the subsequent impact that these positive changes in behaviour would have on his work performance, and overall health and wellbeing.

The course also had a huge impact for Andrew when going out on home visits, increasing his understanding of vulnerable individuals and the [wider social determinants](#) of health that shape the conditions of daily life. He now regularly shares the information he learnt on the course with the people he is visiting, to help them make informed decisions about their own health and the choices that they make.

Andrew recommends that all his colleagues in the fire service should undertake this training, and that it should be expanded across the whole service as 'it can make such a difference - ....it was so worthwhile, so insightful! It's made such a difference'.

\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect individuals' identity