Mindfulness.

A pilot partnership project

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The Langholm Initiative | The Holywood Trust | SHAP Annandale and Eskdale Safe and Healthy Action Partnership | ia2ps

Introduction

Mindful practice is an increasingly recognised and approved method for dealing with the stresses and difficulties of life. The purpose of this project was ensure that young people were equipped with the tools they needed to become resilient adults.

The Langholm Initiative's "Richer Lives" project was funded by Dumfries and Galloway Council (and local trusts and foundations) to address hidden poverty in Langholm and Eskdale through signposting, building skills and challenging perceptions of what poverty means in a rural area.

Building resilience in young people to cope with external pressures, including financial, is an important way to ensure that we help to reduce inequalities in our society. In Eskdale we are seeing increasing underemployment, rural poverty and drug use – particularly among young people.

This project was our way of offering young people an alternative. We hope that this can demonstrate to local authorities, schools, community development practitioners and youth workers that mindfulness is a worthwhile investment.

Who was involved?

The Langholm Initiative is an award-winning community development trust for the Eskdale area of Dumfries & Galloway. For over 25 years they have been providing community-led solutions to economic and social disadvantage. Their key streams of work currently revolve around employability, poverty, skills development and environmental education.

Increased Access 2 Psychological Support (IA2PS) are a mindfulness and compassion-based mental health charity operating from the Stewartry of Dumfries and Galloway. Their facilitators are qualified to deliver mindfulness courses to people of all ages.

Langholm Academy is a small comprehensive school serving the districts of Langholm and Canonbie.

The Holywood Trust is a Dumfries and Galloway based funder focussing on young people aged 15 – 25. They offer grants to individuals and organisations to provide opportunities in the region that benefit young people.

Safe and Healthy Action Partnership is a partnership of agencies and organisations with an interest in improving health and wellbeing in Annandale and Eskdale. The SHAP is committed to developing capacity within the partnership to ensure effective delivery of services.

Background

In August 2018, the Langholm Initiative met with Increased Access 2 Psychological Support (IA2PS) to discuss the potential for joint working.

IA2PS provided two session leaders: Gordon and Lili Culbert. They are fully qualified mindfulness practitioners with extensive mindfulness and compassion teacher training and work within the UK Network Guidelines for mindfulness based teachers

A recognised need arose from Langholm Academy to provide the opportunity for students to participate in mindfulness sessions. In order to facilitate this, a mindfulness project was facilitated between IA2PS and Langholm Academy by the Langholm Initiative. This project was gratefully funded by the Safe and Healthy Action Partnership (SHAP) "Day Opportunities Fund" and the Holywood Trust.

Funding package

Fund	Amount
The Holywood Trust	£1250
SHAP Day Opportunities Fund	£500
Langholm Initiative "Richer Lives" project	£250
Total	**£2000**

What was involved?

The course begun in January 2019 and ran for 10 one-hour sessions. The sessions focussed on introductory elements of mindful practice and allowed the group to access resources that would reinforce their practice.

Example lesson plan – based on Mindfulness Association MBLC-YA

Time	Activity
5m	Introduce mindfulness – what is it?
2m	Film clip
2m	Benefits of mindfulness – why practice?
2m	Compassion – why include it?
3m	Self-compassion film clip
5m	Recognising the unsettled mind
2m	What did you notice?
10m	Settling the mind – practice
5m	What did you notice? How do you feel now?
2m	Home practice

The sessions were designed for a group with a maximum capacity of 20 young people. The initial session served as a "taster" for young people to understand what the course would be and how it might benefit them. 12 people attended this, 11 officially enrolled and 7 of this group successfully completed the course. One young person was removed due to an ongoing negative attitude towards the course.

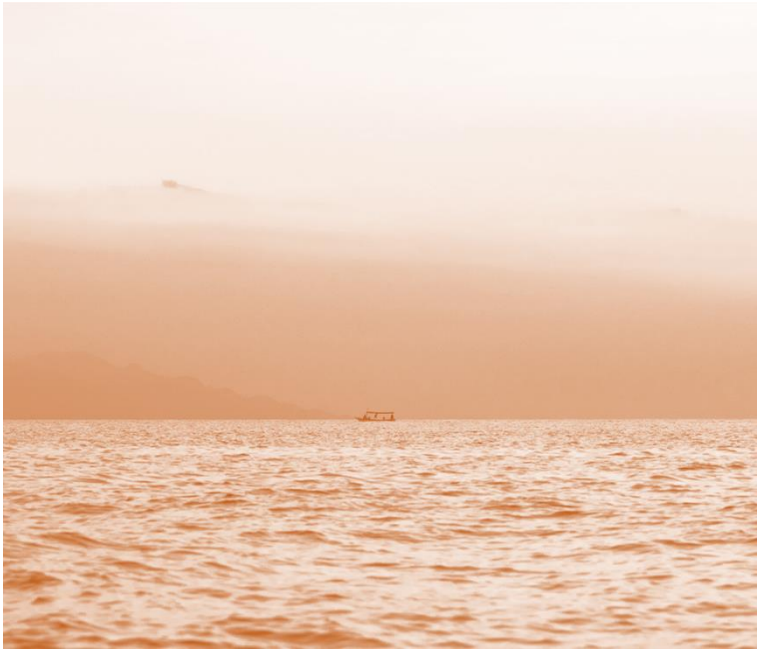
The course was composed fully of 15-year-old girls. This age group had been targeted by the school, agreed by Langholm Initiative, due to upcoming exams and support to deal with exam pressures. Many of the participants exhibited some challenging behaviours which may have also been a contributing factor to their participation. The school expressed to IA2PS that the group would likely pose a challenge to IA2PS given their behaviour. The group also took longer to "get into it" than other groups worked with previously, were more easily distracted and demonstrated less commitment to the course than would be expected.

Following some drop-outs and one removal, the core group of seven girls were able to settle into a safe environment and pay closer attention to the sessions. IA2PS commented that once the group reached a consistent number, the participants were more willing to open up and take part. In this smaller group, the girls started to ask constructive questions and take the practice seriously.

Psychometric testing

In order to effectively evaluate the impact of the course on the young participants, IA2PS used two well-established psychometric tests at the beginning and then at the end of the ten weeks.

- Self-Compassion Scale
- Child and Adolescent Mindfulness Measure



Both psychometric tests are recognised as effective measures of self-perception and can be used to demonstrate how mindful practice improves mental wellbeing. IA2PS note that although the measures are useful, psychometric testing itself depends on how the individual is feeling *in the moment* that they take the test.

The impact of this project

The results from the psychometric testing was significant and positive.

Five of the seven participants (71%) showed a significant improvement of their self-compassion. Improved self-compassion involved adopting a more balanced point of view, ensuring that stress and difficulties are handled better and being more responsive than reactive.

Anecdotally, one of the students said that the practice allowed her to adapt her behaviours. Using the example of an H.E. class, the student mentioned that she became aware that she was thinking more carefully about her actions and the steps needed to complete a task.

Confidence was also improved among the group. A quieter member of the group had two examples of increased confidence: firstly, when she was asked to demonstrate her sitting technique to the rest of the participants and secondly when she was invited with another group member by Langholm Initiative to present the impact of the course to the Safe and Healthy Action Partnership meeting in May.

Indeed, the changes witnessed in the participants impressed the group leaders. They said: “It was inspiring” and “It’s fantastic what those lassies achieved.”

One young person said that mindful practice has now been incorporated into her daily routine and is improving her ability to process the day at bedtime.

Another said that this programme would be useful to roll out across other schools.

The impact of mindful practice is well-established and well-documented, supported by scientific research and personal testimony. Although during a time of their lives when stresses are most prevalent, a lack of life experience leads to less available perspective and when mental health issues are most likely to develop – there is not enough accessible support for young people to deal with difficulties in a productive and healthy way.

Overarching this project was the key outcome: that young people are better able to deal with stresses and difficulties and are more confident. This course allowed them to have a safe space to explore alternative methods of coping and improved their kindness towards themselves. Through this, we have assisted their transition into resilient adults.

A learning curve

This was a pilot project, and as such we expected that it wouldn't be perfect.

Our project plan was to work with 20 young people, a target we missed by 13. However, early on we recognised this as potentially over-ambitious: 20 was the maximum capacity of the sessions. A group of seven young people allowed for the sessions to be person-centred and offered a safe environment for the participants to discuss personal issues, if they felt comfortable doing so. The participants also reported that the smaller group size was more beneficial for their learning.

IA2PS fed back that prior acknowledgement of the make-up of the group would be useful to plan their teaching. Having a "challenging" cohort to work with was rewarding for the practitioners, but meant that their plans needed adaptation to account for disruptions or distractions within the group.

In a similar vein, a group of mixed cognitive ability may have helped to improve the standard of achievement. IA2PS believe that this may have increased the girls' willingness to commit and practice.

Mindfulness within a school setting was not as easy to deliver compared to sessions in other environment, for a number of practical and intangible reasons. With increased support from third parties (Langholm Initiative and Langholm Academy) these could have been mitigated, including access to IT infrastructure, limited practical support from staff and external distractions from other classes etc.

There is also the issue of the school itself being a stressor for young people. With better planning from Langholm Initiative, the sessions could have taken place in a quieter setting.

Some issues were unforeseen: the pupils had to register in a different class which reduced time to deliver. The sessions were also just before lunch, a timing issue that could cause distractions.

Commitment to the course should be reinforced from all parties. It needed to repeatedly said that this was an opportunity, not a "skive."

Recommendations for the future

This pilot project allowed the partners involved to have a better understanding of the processes and practicalities of how mindfulness as part of the school week could work. IA2PS and the Langholm Initiative have therefore suggested some routes towards sustainability.

- Run the sessions again, using two groups over two terms to build critical mass and an appetite in school for this service
- Taking the lessons learned from this project, ensure a thoughtful selection process that requires commitment from the young people that take part
- Secure an external location for the sessions to take place
- Form student-led support groups for practice outwith taught sessions
- Encourage a wider audience to utilise the free app promoted by IA2PS
- Mobilise teaching staff to incorporate a few moments of quiet reflection and breathing at the start and end of lessons
- Nominate a member of school staff to lead on mindfulness and related projects within the school, including acting as ambassador to promote the success of this work
- Secure investment from the local authority to promote mental wellbeing as equally important as fitness and physical wellbeing.

How can policymakers benefit from our experience?

Money is tight in the public sector. The NHS, health and social care services and education authorities are trying to operate expected standards on minimal budgets. However, this does not need to be at the expense of young people or their mental wellbeing.

To encourage mindful practice for young people, schools should be made aware of training opportunities and supplied with relevant resources to enable this training to happen. National charities, such as MISP (Mindfulness in Schools Project), offer training for school students aged 7+.

Education authorities should recognise the importance of building resilience and self-compassion within young people by engaging more projects like this one. Increasing confidence and wellbeing amongst teenagers particularly is a crucial step in the transition to adulthood.

Practitioners should build their lessons around the Curriculum for Excellence, as IA2PS have done. This fits with the planned learning outcomes for young people across Scotland and ensures that it complements their everyday learning.

NHS, local authorities and community development practitioners can work together to promote mindful practice among youth clubs as well as schools by offering short courses to targeted groups that would benefit most.

Local authorities and schools can collaborate to lever in investment from charitable trusts to ease the financial burden high-quality experiences like this come with.

We are grateful to the SHAP Day Opportunities Fund and the Holywood Trust for funding this project, as well as IA2PS, Langholm Academy and the participants for making it happen.

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