Manchester Mind: Transitions in Later Life: Building resilience and wellbeing in pre-retirement

1. Our six-week programme, Building a Healthy Future in Later Life was based on our positively evaluated course for people with long-term conditions. It had an emphasis on teaching basic CBT tools for improving mood management, as well as introducing some concepts and skills derived from positive psychology, and teaching relaxation skills, with an accompanying CD to help people practice at home. We added in some specific skills and exercises which we felt were going to be important in helping people transition into retirement and cope with later life challenges.

Our approach was based on making peer support integral to the course, and on delivering the sessions in as participatory a way as possible. Thus, as well as learning ABOUT skills and tools, participants had the opportunity to work together in implementing them (using case studies) during the sessions and were encouraged to put into practice tools and techniques in between the sessions. They were also encouraged to think creatively about their life going forward. Initially aimed at people pre and immediately post retirement, we soon learned that the course was also appealing to older people who had retired some time ago but who were transitioning in other ways in their life – moving on from the bereavement of a partner or loved one, moving to another city or location, and adjusting to life with a long-term condition. While the majority of the content and approach did not change during project delivery, lessons were learned about session length, encouraging more interaction and using skills and knowledge of the group to share ideas and build resources. On the initial course, each session was 2 hours long, but on subsequent courses, we extended the final two sessions to be two and a half hours long in order to give more time to some of the in-depth content covered.

It was interesting to note the differences between delivering the course to people pre-retirement (where there was a lot of FEAR about retirement) and to a group of people where some were retired, some recently, some a long time ago and some not retired. This mixed group worked well, with those who had retired a long-time ago and were much older providing good role models and reassurances to those yet to retire and those who were struggling initially. Problems arising for those already retired tended to be around social isolation and other transitions occurring that were unrelated to their employment status but perhaps more related to age and time of life.

"Thank you for all your support during a difficult time for me. I can now look to the future with positivity and excitement". Michael, 89.

2. We have completed delivery of 7 courses, which is a total of 35 course sessions, plus 4 follow-up sessions. Three more follow-ups are due in January 2017. Around 50 people completed the course. We have partnered with: Southways Housing NORC project (Naturally Occurring Retirement communities), Wythenshawe Grand Day Out Northwards Housing, Northmoor Community Association, Levenshulme Inspired People (all of these provided training rooms, some provided refreshments and all helped to recruit), and delivered one course to Manchester City Council staff. This latter course was the only one where 100% of attendees had not yet retired. Most courses were delivered to a mix of attendees. Verbal evaluations, forms and interviews have indicated that the course has helped people in the following ways:

- Developing problem-solving skills;
- Developing a more positive mindset;
- Feeling calmer and less stressed;
- Feeling more confident about the future or about retirement.

One venue/project (Levenshulme Inspired People) was so pleased with the course that it has commissioned us to deliver another one in the new year.

“The course has provided me with the tools to feel more confident about my life during retirement”. – Clare, recently retired.

3. I feel that what we have missed in terms of transitions are the transitions that occur post-retirement such as bereavement of a spouse (or close family member), or moving (from home to sheltered housing for example), as well as those that happen as a result of illness (themselves, or their partner/family member). There are lots of transitions that happen in later life, and this intervention can be useful for all of them. Basic CBT has proved useful for the majority of participants, not necessarily in the formal way it has been taught (using thought records and other techniques) but in its basic message, which is that thoughts are not real, can be challenged and that there can be alternatives. This is the strongest message that has come through the course that people have taken away with them – this and the idea that
putting themselves first and looking after their own mental and physical wellbeing is not selfish and is important. Self-care, therefore, is a key message of the course and one that has been well received and implemented by participants.

“[I’m not going to] feel guilty about ‘me’ time and [will] say no when I feel [I] need to even though others may not like it.” - Anne.

4. Key successes and highlights have included:

- Recruitment and retention has been positive given that this was a pilot project and a pilot course. We were over-subscribed on a number of courses.
- Big changes from individuals, and positive feedback from participants who completed the course.
- New partnerships (Levenshalme Inspired people).
- The biggest highlight has been the positive changes observed in individuals who started the course depressed and isolated, and finished it with hope and positivity about the future.
- Seeing the course help people from a variety of backgrounds and ages from 55 to 89.

The course: “Helped me to see what was lacking in my life so that I could feel happier. Gave me tools to lead a more fulfilled life”. - June

5. Other outcomes that have been achieved for participants (that perhaps weren’t planned for) have included taking up volunteering and other activities. While we had hoped that the course would inspire people to concrete action, it has been gratifying to learn of some specific activities that some participants have been inspired to do as a result of the course – sometimes as a result of increased confidence, and sometimes as a wish to change their circumstances. These have included: becoming a volunteer, joining a committee in an older people’s project, starting to write an autobiography, starting to make friends in a sheltered housing scheme who now meet regularly, organising trips out with friends which hadn’t happened before the course, and starting belly dance classes.

Since the course finished: “I have contacted many old friends since my return, I found this good for me and my friends to have contact and lots of things to share.” - Stella

Since the course finished: “2 afternoons/week I go to local school to read with children. The course helped me realise I needed to do something more purposeful.” – Marie (recently retired)

6. Recruitment and keeping people onto the course was one of the main challenges. Ill health is prevalent amongst this age group and illnesses can lead to people missing some key sessions. Bereavement is also much more common amongst this client group and we have seen a number of people unable to attend due to attending funerals or dropping out as a result of having to deal with a key loss during the course. Later life also means people are more likely to have a long-term health condition requiring multiple medical appointments, and this has been a challenge as people have had to miss sessions due to a prior appointment, which is clearly important for them to honour. Some of these challenges are difficult to overcome. However, recruiting larger numbers than we expect to complete the course is one way of ensuring the groups don’t become too small to be useful. Other challenges have been when partners have promised to be intermediaries and recruit on our behalf but have been unsuccessful in doing so, or promised more than they could deliver in terms of grassroots communication. In future, we will be doing more to support partners with recruitment and do more of our own legwork where necessary. Other potential partners (such as Age UK) were disappointing.

7. As a result of this work, we have been commissioned to run a second course for Levenshalme Inspired People, an older people’s project with whom we had not previously worked with. Additionally, Manchester Mind had not specifically worked with an older age-group in the past and had also not worked directly with council staff until this course. The council hosted one of the courses, although unfortunately is not prepared to pay for future courses at this time.

“Old age and retirement scared me but now I accept it will happen so I have to face up to it. I was dreading retirement ... but I now realise, though it will be hard, I can cope with it”. Paula

8. Our starting assumptions for the course have proved to be mainly correct, in that the course would appeal and be relevant to an older group of people for whom work is a distant memory but who are struggling to remain socially and intellectually active.
9. We hope that increased emphasis on positive ageing and ageing projects will help supply some funding and publicity for future work. We have gained a small amount of funding from local CCG mental health grants to run two more courses in 2017. We also hope that small groups or housing associations might financially contribute to us running courses in the future.

10. We interviewed five participants (with plans to interview more), about their experiences of the course and also collated the comments from the evaluation forms. These are the key points:

- Working with a group was seen as key to the learnings of the course. Those interviewed emphasised that the course would not have had the same impact if it had been online, nor the lessons absorbed in the same way in a one-to-one session. Sharing stories, meeting others and supporting them has been important. Some friendships were also made on the course.
- A positive and optimistic mindset came up in interviews and verbal evaluations as being as important as the tools themselves. The learning that thoughts can be challenged and that mindsets can change was seen as key for many people.
- Relaxation and self-care also came up numerous times in verbal evaluations as a key message from the course.
- The course also helped people evaluate where they were, with many participants realising that changes to their lives weren’t as necessary as changes to their mindset.
  - “I was feeling down but having attended the course I suddenly realised you know what, I’m okay!”
  - A lesson learned: “Stepping past thinking and to stop worrying about something that might happen. Dealing with every day, one day at a time.”
  - “I am confident that I am on the right track.”
  - “I’ve learned that there can be a ‘new lease of life’ in later years.”
- People wanted longer sessions and to problem solve the social network issue.
- During the interviews, all participants described how the course came at the right time for them. Timing was seen as crucial; many were in a transition or rut and described themselves as being ‘stuck’.

**Case Studies**

**John**, 68: John joined the course after his daughter contacted us worried about her father who she said was depressed and becoming more isolated and demotivated. We waited for him to contact us, which he duly did and registered him onto a course at his local community centre. He was in lots of pain from arthritis and had other health problems as well, which he felt led him to stopping a lot of activities, such as volunteering with the Polish scouts, which he used to enjoy. The evaluation forms indicated that after the course John was more relaxed, feeling better about himself and more determined to get through difficult times. On the final session, John filled out a volunteering form for the venue, and has since signed up to sit on a ‘conversation table’ for older people. He said that his attitude had changed and he hoped to converse more and be more active. This is a huge change from the first session where he was extremely anxious about being with other people and low in confidence about what he could offer. He has also signed up to read to young children in the centre.

**Maggie**, 84: Maggie had recently moved back to Manchester, and was struggling emotionally in her new home in sheltered housing. She had wanted to move to a new place and get back in touch with the lively, outgoing woman she had been before she became ill a few years ago. She attended all but one session, and over the six-week course gradually got more confident in her general mood and outlook. Three months after the course finished, she reported that she has made friends in her sheltered housing. “We now meet together regularly which did not happen when I first moved here” she said. She reported that the course “gave me the chance to meet others, it gave me confidence and I feel quite a different person than when I first came.” Three months on she told us, “I am grateful for all I have, and try to be content with my life.”

**Jane**, 64: Jane had retired due to ill health and was struggling with the change in status as well as other changes, such as moving to a new city. “Retirement was a big shock to the system and I suddenly felt very old and that doors were closing.” She reported that the course gave her permission to find life challenging at times. “It’s okay that things are hard even if you have a lot of coping strategies. I used to think that if I just did more work on myself, it would all go away.” She felt the course was a good bridge and that, “The doors are now open and that’s very different to how I was when I started the course.” Jane said that if she hadn’t attended the programme she would have felt ‘cheated.’ “The pressure I
was putting on myself has eased. I don’t push myself as much… I think what’s nice is that the course was a one-off. I don’t feel the need to do anything else like that. It was just the right place at the right time. It brought me some closure. The doors are open – that’s how I feel about the future which is a big contrast”.

**Greg, 63:** Greg lives in a housing association scheme in North Manchester and came on the course we held there – mainly out of curiosity. He’d moved to the scheme a couple of years ago after his wife had moved into a residential care home. He’d had mental health problems, anxiety and depression so thought the course might be useful. “I was going through a bit of an ordeal at the time, which I still am a bit, but it feels as if there’s light at the end of the tunnel now. From the course, I feel as though I’ve got a more positive outlook on things. At the time I was having counselling as well and the course complimented it. I got a lot out of it and I felt more positive in myself and I could look forward to things in the future more than I could at the time I came on the course.” Greg particularly enjoyed the homework aspects of the course, wrote his first poem during the course and has now started writing an autobiography. He said that the course prompted him into doing other things. “Overall, the course has helped me spot the light at the end of the tunnel and approach it quicker than I was before.” Since the course finished, he is now vice-chair of an ageing project and is also securing funding to DJ for Age-Friendly Manchester for older people. “There are still problems around, but the cogs are moving and I feel better able to cope and less anxious than I was. Life’s too short.”

**Janice 72.** Janice lives in Victoria Square and said she came on the course because she was ‘nosy’. “I wanted to see how other people cope. I liked the course content and the way it was delivered. It was just like a conversation.” She described the course as coming at the right time for her in helping her find different ways of thinking about things, and to come out of her comfort zone. “Before I started the course I felt stuck. I didn’t give myself a chance to look forward, just to carry on. The course taught me that I’ve got determination and courage. It has strengthened my knowledge about what I already had. I knew that I had to do something for me and it helped me look forward and think differently.”

*Names have been changed to keep people’s anonymity*