Health in Mind Project

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Abstract

Health in Mind is an innovative five-year partnership project led by Libraries NI and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Libraries NI works with four local voluntary sector partners, Action Mental Health, Aware, Cause and MindWise to deliver a range of wellbeing events and activities in public libraries throughout Northern Ireland. Programmes are free and open to all.

Keywords: Mental Health, Library initiatives, Northern Ireland

According to the Public Health Agency, at least one in five adults in Northern Ireland may suffer from some form of common mental health disorder in any year. Conditions such as depression are extremely common and anyone of us can go through times when we feel stressed, anxious or low. Good mental health improves our ability to cope and bounce back from setbacks and challenges. Even if we do not consider ourselves to have a mental health problem, looking after our emotional and physical

9 http://www.publichealthagency.org/directorate-public-health/health-and-social-wellbeing-improvement/improving-wellbeing-through-peace-
wellbeing prepares us for whatever life may bring. The Health in Mind project is delivered by Libraries NI staff, project partners and workshop facilitators across all 96 public libraries in Northern Ireland. Libraries whether large or small, urban or rural, provide inclusive, neutral and welcoming spaces for events and activities. Other community spaces may also be used, dependant on need. This project aims to reduce stigma and raise awareness of mental health issues and provide opportunities for people to look after their wellbeing through services and resources.

Objectives

The objectives of Health in Mind are that by the end of the project:

1. 40,000 people will have accessed up to date and relevant information to enable them to improve their mental health
2. 2,000 people affected by mental illness will have acquired the self-help skills and knowledge necessary to access and use relevant information to assist their recovery process
3. 3,000 people affected by mental illness, their families and carers, will have enhanced opportunities for social interaction through reading and learning activities enabling them to play a fuller role in community life and to access further training and potential employment
4. 15,000 people will have a better understanding of mental illness and awareness of positive mental health thereby improving their own mental health as well as contributing to tolerance and social inclusion
5. 40 volunteers will have enhanced skills and confidence to participate in local community activities and will offer a longer term resource for all partner organisations.

Participation has exceeded expectations and by the end of year five, the project had achieved all of the objectives. More than 50,000 people have now benefitted through a combination of attending programmes and accessing online services. Following this success, there was an opportunity to extend the project for a further year, again funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

Outcomes for the project are achieved through three key strands: Information, Learning and Reading.

1. Information

When we experience difficult times we can sometimes feel like we are the only person that feels that way. Finding information about how we feel in the words of others can help us to feel better and respond to our problems positively before they become too much to cope with.

Health in Mind provides high quality information on mental health and wellbeing, accessible both online through the website [www.yourhealthinmind.org](http://www.yourhealthinmind.org) and through resources in libraries. A range of leaflets and brochures signpost people to trusted sources of help both locally and nationally. A quarterly newsletter gives tips and hints about keeping well, showcases the value of the project and outlines upcoming events. This is the latest edition [http://bit.ly/HiMnews](http://bit.ly/HiMnews)

Libraries NI offers a range of therapeutic books to help you relax and maintain your mental health and well-being or simply to make you laugh. Health in Mind promotes bibliotherapy collections which provide a wide range of self-help books and audio CDs on many topics, for example: overcoming anxiety, coping with addiction or improving self-confidence.

**Your Health Online**

Your Health Online is part of the Libraries NI Go ON initiative, which offers a number of modular courses in online skills, ranging from online shopping and social media to digital photography. This short course is designed to assist people, who have basic online skills, to access high quality, relevant information to help them improve their health and well-being. The course provides participants with a glimpse of many reliable sources of health information online, as well as a number of useful interactive exercises such as healthy eating self-assessments and stress tests.
2. Learning

Learning throughout life can build self-esteem and develop social relationships. Health in Mind’s learning opportunities offer free access to mental health and wellbeing courses, workshops and group activities, some of which are outlined below.

Health in Mind aims to encompass the entire spectrum of well-being and to promote better understanding of mental illness and of the importance of positive mental health. The wide range of activities delivered by partner organisations includes topics such as depression, suicide awareness, stress management and personal resilience. One participant in Personal Resilience stated: “It helps very much to know techniques to overcome the stresses and pressures of life.”

As well as these one-off workshops Health in Mind also offers longer courses such as Living Life to the Full (six weeks) and WRAP-Wellness Recovery Action Plan (eight weeks) which take a comprehensive look at personal wellbeing and everyday positive tools for coping.

Through the Go ON programme, people can improve their IT skills, competencies and confidence in a supportive environment. They can also discover new ways to look after their wellbeing through workshops focusing on nutrition, laughter yoga, stress management and more. Health in Mind supports knitting and crochet groups which meet regularly in libraries and provide an opportunity for customers to connect with new people.

Nutrition workshops help motivate and encourage individuals to make small, positive changes to their diet and lifestyle. Interactive talks include topics such as Food and Mood, Nutritional Stress Busters and Kickstart Your Health. These are packed full of simple and practical ideas to help people make immediate positive changes for the good of their health.

Laughter yoga helps participants to relax and connect in a fun environment. Laughter Yoga teaches that remembering to laugh is one of the best things we can do each day and that laughter makes us feel good. Research proves that laughter has positive effects on the body, reduces stress and builds the immune system.11 These workshops are often accompanied by positive thinking activities, where people can learn how to use affirmations to feel and act more positively in life. As one participant shared: “I really enjoyed the session, it’s definitely a good way to help relax and relieve stress.”

Music therapy is the use of organised sounds and music to support and encourage physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing. Music therapists engage groups by using a range of activities and instruments to get creativity flowing. Having the opportunity to improvise on a range of instruments, to sing and to write songs can promote confidence and self-esteem, as well as being a fun and relaxing way to interact within a group.

Mindfulness has become hugely popular with a high demand for these workshops. Health in Mind has brought a range of one day and six week mindfulness programmes to library users, focusing on topics such as Mindfulness for Stress Reduction and Mindful Eating. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for the prevention of relapse in recurrent depression.12


12 https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg90

Laughter Yoga event held in Finaghy Library to mark World Mental Health Day 2014
Health in Mind Project combines mindfulness techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and stretching, with elements from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help break the negative thought patterns that are characteristic of recurrent depression. Mindfulness gives us the tools to be more present and cope with every day stresses. As one course participant shared: “I know that there are difficult times in everyone’s lives but I feel ready and able to cope with anything the future throws at me!”

Knit and Natter Knitting and needlework have become regular activities in libraries. Health in Mind has supported libraries setting up Knit and Natter groups to promote craft activities such as embroidery, knitting and crochet. Along with the therapeutic benefits of learning new skills, these groups encourage people to share ideas and build relationships. Since Health in Mind first became involved with a new group in Comber Library in November 2011, the enthusiasm for knitting together has grown and there are currently 84 groups meeting in 78 libraries across Northern Ireland.

This strong network of groups provides an excellent framework to develop opportunities for enhanced wellbeing and social interaction. There has been heart-warming feedback from library staff including the story of a lady whose first outing after the death of her husband was to attend the knitting group. She said she was so glad to have met such friendly people and took away some information about support for bereavement.

Knitters with Barnardos Bears – Members of Ballyhackamore Knit and Natter group who designed and produced jumpers for the campaign ‘Knit a Jumper for Barney Bear’.

The repetition of needlework is known to have a calming influence on the body by helping to reduce stress and focusing on the work in hand can help to manage anxiety and chronic pain by diverting the brain’s attention.

As knitting and crafts groups continue to flourish in public libraries, so too do the opportunities for libraries to form creative partnerships. Libraries NI’s Knit and Natter groups frequently work on projects that benefit others and have been involved in projects for many causes and charitable campaigns, such as Age NI’s Big Knit, Tiny Life, Oxfam and Barnardo’s NI.

3. Reading

Reading is a great way to take the focus of attention off everyday troubles and worries for a while as it transports you to seemingly better places.

TechnoStitch-Skill Sharing – TechnoStitch event in Brownlow Library to mark Adult Learners Week June 2014. Taking part were members of Brownlow Knit and Natter group and local pupils from Lismore Comprehensive School.
Reading can give you an insight into things you know little about and it can open your mind to new ways of thinking. So the importance of reading for well-being runs through many aspects of Health in Mind.

Read Aloud

Health in Mind promotes the natural link between reading and well-being through Read Aloud, a group activity designed to offer literature (poetry or prose) in a shared reading experience. Material is read aloud in the session itself and open-ended discussion is encouraged by the facilitator. Group members participate voluntarily and interact in relation to what is happening in the story or poem and what may be happening to them as individuals, in response to the shared reading of the text and the wider group discussion. Read Aloud sessions are a unique opportunity for people to experience the joy of shared reading in an inclusive and informal way.

One Book Campaign

The duration of the project has also seen a number of milestone projects, including the One Book Campaign for Northern Ireland in 2013. This campaign resulted in a number of inspirational regional events being held to promote discussion of mental health themes around the chosen book, Rachel Joyce’s The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry, which was borrowed by over 7,000 library users throughout the seven month campaign. As one reader eloquently said:

“Harold’s story is deceptively simple and yet very profound. He is struggling with the same things most of us struggle with in life – regrets, fears and an urge to do something, to make a difference. He finds that he is not alone. He sees that people are all the same really. This book is so simply and beautifully written, it will stay with you long after you’ve read the last line.”

As a result of reading the book, one person plucked up the courage to tell her personal story in a moving way at a One Book event. This has led to positive changes in her life and she now helps others by volunteering with one of the Health in Mind partners.

The Future

The Health in Mind project officially ends in January 2016. It has surpassed all initial expectations both in terms of the objectives set at the beginning of the partnership but also in the way that the project is now held in high regard by professionals, partners and customers alike. The Big Lottery Fund generously awarded an additional year to the project – an acknowledgment of the success of the team and programming. This has enabled the project to enhance the events delivered, pilot some new activities and extend some services to families as well as individuals. The project has also been successful in the last two years in the Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure (DCAL)’s Learning and Innovation awards. Last year saw the project winning the Individual Learner award, no small feat given the large number of submissions across the whole of DCAL. Pauline Corrigan was the lady at the centre of this award. She attended a Mindfulness course and Vital Nutrition workshop in Fivemiletown Library. She describes the information and tools

13 See http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/about_us.htm
she received as “absolutely mind-blowing” and has been using them since to enhance her coping skills. Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, speaking at the event said:

“Projects and programmes delivered or funded by DCAL enhance education and lifelong learning, support families and add value to the work of teachers, youth workers and community-based training providers.

“These creative initiatives make a real difference to people’s lives and demonstrate the important role and contribution of culture, arts and leisure in helping people to realise their potential. This role and contribution is needed now more than ever as our society tries to effectively deliver social and economic change.”

Health in Mind was also presented with a Highly Commended award this year in the Community Impact category. This recognised the programme delivered by the project in tackling the social isolation that people feel living in rural areas. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) had kindly funded the enhanced delivery of the Health in Mind programme in ten carefully selected rural libraries.

Currently in its sixth and final year, and due to be concluded in January 2016, Health in Mind continues to deliver wellbeing programmes across Northern Ireland. This project has been innovative in the way that the partnership between statutory and voluntary sector organisations has enhanced and showcased the strengths of all partners.

Libraries NI will continue the good work delivered by the project over the next few years, by mainstreaming key activities into the core services offered by libraries. Staff trained as part of this project will continue to support and encourage customers with low levels of mental health using the skills and knowledge that they have learned. Partners acknowledge the benefits of engaging with library services and have already agreed that they will continue to signpost people to libraries for support.

For more information visit the Health in Mind website: [www.yourhealthinmind.org](http://www.yourhealthinmind.org)

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