

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for People Affected by Cancer

Evaluation Report

9th July - 3rd September 2016

Background

This 8 week course was for people who are suffering from cancer and was open to family and friends who can be affected by the diagnosis of cancer, each session was 2 hours.

The course was funded by MacMillan Cancer Support and open to the Forth Valley community. Information was circulated widely and advertised in the local press. The course was free to all participants.

The design and delivery of the course was aided by research into courses run with this client group and also relied heavily on texts from *The Mindful Way Workbook* by Teasdale, Williams and Segal (2014), *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer* by T. Bartley (2012) and stories from *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by R.N Remen (2006). Sage ital. (2008) indicates that there is a strong overlap between issues which occur in a mental health context and those that happen in relation to life-changing illnesses.

On this basis themes similar to both conditions were considered and informed the design and delivery of the course. In broad terms the themes of the course were to support the adjustment towards 1) an optimistic attitude, 2) improve problem solving 3) foster positive social supports. The three main elements that focused the delivery of the course were a) a structure b) an opportunity to reflect c) an invitation to gain insights. The structure included led mindfulness practice sessions and built in time to reflect within through group discussions and without the sessions as "homework". New insights were explored and shared within the safety of the group and "home" practices discussed at the beginning of each session. As each individual is unique the practices invite a person centred way to explore and relate to issues of concern for that person as they control the level of self-exploration in thinking and the habitual patterns of responses to experiences. The course's overarching aim is to help people cope with the psychological challenges that arise from a cancer diagnosis. Helping people recognise and respond more skilfully to patterns of thinking that create and sustain emotional distress and to cultivate and develop healthier life style choices, decisions and relationships.

For both trainers this was their first delivery of a mindfulness training course to participants suffering from cancer. However in total they have delivered over 20 mindfulness courses to people suffering mental health distress, both are qualified counsellors and trainers working in the field of mental health.

Participants were at differing stages of treatment and prognosis and necessitated a delicate balance in respect of participant's emotional and physical condition on a week to week basis. The trainers adapted to the needs of participants as fully as possible and each session had an outline planned but was not prescriptive.

Course Outline

The course had three different methods for evaluation: 1) The Evaluation Tree, 2) A questionnaire focusing on the impact on participants Behaviour/Knowledge/Attitudes with regard to their learning and wellbeing. 3) Continuous feedback after each individual practice session and at the end of each module.

During the first session of the course, in pairs, participants were asked to place themselves on the Evaluation Tree and provide comments about how they feel and why they have placed themselves at that point. Then, once the course was completed, participants were asked to revisit the Evaluation Tree and once more place themselves upon the tree and comment about how they felt after completing the course and why they placed themselves at that point. This provided a visual representation of travel for people and given the delicate nature of the topic individuals reflections were confidential to them and thus not include in this report.

In the second last session participants were asked to complete an evaluation form which asked them to consider how useful aspects of the course have been, how well presented the course has been and if they feel any changes need to be made. This included the Behaviour/Knowledge/Attitudes questionnaire and participants were asked to consider how their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours have changed (if at all) since completing the course and what, if any, has been most and least helpful about the course.

Evaluations

The course began with 13 interested participants, 3 people did not attend the first session or subsequent ones. Over the 7 weeks 10 people attended and there averaged 7 attendees and 7 participant's questionnaires are included in the evaluation summary.

Thoughts and Feelings about the Course

Have there been changes in your **knowledge** since starting the course?

If so, what have these changes been?

1. I am happy to put myself in a lot of situations which is new to me and allocate time every day to myself.
2. Better understanding of how your mind works and thought process- both positive and negative and use practice to cope with this.
3. I suppose there have been changes but maybe more than I am aware that there is usually a reason for people's behaviour. It has helped me talking through various situations with people who have had cancer. I now know my feelings are normal.
4. Yes, I have a better understanding of mindfulness process and thinking that relates to everyday situations.

5. I have gained knowledge on the principles of mindfulness and how this works to de-stress and de-clutter the mind. I have also seen the benefits gained to particular patients on the course who have been experiencing worry and anxiety in relation to their cancer.
6. Subject:
I had come across Mindfulness previously but had not practiced any of the techniques outside of a "classroom" situation. Previously the link between the taught subject and translation into everyday life had been missing for me - not so with this course. Repeating the practices over several weeks allowed exploration into what did and didn't work for the various individuals. For me I can see where the various techniques would fit into different aspects of my life - for example using the three minute breathing space whilst out at work and the longer meditations at home/before sleep/when unable to sleep.
Self:
I had for a long time known that I could use my breath as a point of focus. The course has taught me that whilst practicing the meditative techniques that my breathing is an indicator of my ease with the subject in my mind at the time. A positive example of this is my current situation and cancer diagnosis. I was feeling fairly at ease with the whole thing but several comments from others made me begin to question whether I was perhaps in some form of denial. Exploring this during one of the led meditations has convinced me that I have come to terms with it, I no longer need to worry. Conversely, I was unable to sleep one night recently, mind racing, unable to switch off. I started the counting/breathing process, trying to focus on sounds in my bedroom. I could barely reach 3 before my mind had gone off on a tangent again and again and again. The topics occupying my mind were throwing my breathing off, it became shallower very quickly indicating to me that they were topics "bothering" me and things I needed to deal with.
7. I have learned not to take everything on my own shoulders. Bit more time for myself. Good to talk over problems with other cancer patients. Was beneficial to me as I have always been conscious of my breathing due to having a stammer, but discovered other ways it can be helpful to me.

Have there been changes in your **attitude** since starting the course?

1. Yes, I am more forgiving of myself.
2. A few times I found myself thinking about how the other person is doing something- knowing it's not always me- stops guilt and negativity.
3. Yes definitely! I consider other people's emotions more and what circumstances are behind their moods. I am not as pessimistic as chatting to the others has helped me considerably.
4. Yes-
5. I have stopped judging myself in situations where others actions and responses are not what I expected. My old self would be looking inwardly to see what I could have done differently.
6. My attitude towards certain aspects of my personal life has changed. I accept my limitations now with a positive and accepting slant and not a negative one as before.
7. I think I'm prepared to be kinder to myself. I don't accept that I'm not invincible and as such am prone to 'beating myself up' over my current change in physical and cognitive ability.
8. I've been told often that I tend to put others before myself often (just my nature) but have learned not to be so hard on myself in certain circumstances. Often I was afraid of hurting someone and the only person that ended being hurt was myself.

Have there been changes in your **behaviour** since starting the course?

1. I feel I am more choosy in what situations I remain in i.e. if someone being negative in conversation, I now remove myself from the conversation or am able to voice my opinion.
2. I feel more calm and feel able to deal with things better- the meditation side of it has helped with this- I feel I have taken back some control of my life.
3. I believe it has, I am more open to as to how I am feeling instead of keeping it all in. I am more tolerable to 'crap' as I can take myself out of the situation and get into my breathing.
4. Yes- less reactive and stand back from circumstances/situations that might be difficult. More aware of protecting from unnecessary stress.
5. I am definitely using the breathing space now and can see the advantage of taking time to think before reacting to a particular situation.
6. I am also sharing aspects of the course with my colleagues and patients.
7. Yes, definitely. Red dots rule! I've also been able to identify where I'm applying Mindfulness techniques and as a result get more out of the process.
8. Silly and stupid situations don't bother me as much now, this is down to not being so hard on myself and experiencing cancer

What did you find **most helpful** about coming on the course?

1. Learning to forgive myself and allow myself to be in the moment.
2. Learning new coping mechanisms to deal with stressful situations and I thought it was very thought provoking.
3. The fact that the others could understand how I felt through my loved one's treatment. Making me see that I only need 10mins a day for myself.
4. The meditation practices.
5. I found it broadened my mind and I was open to change. Due to the positive effects the course has had on my patients, I can promote mindfulness more readily now, having had first-hand experience.
6. The fact that it was a multi-week course with the ability to practice the techniques in a specialist-led way.
7. Relaxation and breathing sessions were very good. Preferred the shorter ones though. Couldn't understand about the raisin in the beginning (thought, what am I doing here lol) but soon realised what it was all about, to take time to see, to feel everything around you. Having my family member with me on the course, I believe benefited us both. Shared some special moments.

What did you find least helpful?

1. They were both welcoming and understanding to our health needs and open to new learning.
2. Found it all helpful.
3. The gift of silence!! – Neil knows ☺
4. (The silent break!)
5. I'm really struggling to find any aspect that I didn't get something from or enjoy. I know that some of the group, due to physical limitations, found the longer sessions difficult to sit through for the full duration.
6. Getting up early on a Saturday!

7. The longer sessions as I found them difficult to sit through. Neil's 10 minute silence (notice that he left the room) lol. Sometimes as we discussed the wording on the documents were a bit beyond me.

How did you experience the Trainers?

1. Both trainers were very knowledgeable and honest in their delivery of the course. I found their honesty very enlightening and it helped to make everyone feel at ease. There was more than adequate time and space for the attendees to have their say, and the trainers facilitated discussion very well.
2. I found both Neil and Louise to be calm and knowledgeable. They were both happy to let the course flow a bit to accommodate the group inputs.
3. They were both welcoming and understanding to our health needs and open to new learning
4. Excellent-both helped you to explore yourself and your thinking, enabling you to make changes
5. I thought they were both amazing! Very polite, understanding and caring. I will miss our Saturday mornings! Neil's voice is the "Morgan Freeman" of the counselling world!
6. Both trainers were competent and skilled in delivery of the programme
7. Both Neil and Louise were fantastic. Made us feel welcome the minute we arrived. Both were good at explaining throughout the course and answering any questions we may have had. Took us through it all, step by step. Were very considerate of our feelings and capabilities within the course.

Any other comments/suggestions?

1. As previously mentioned, I feel a few weeks of possible anxiety/stress management training prior to mindfulness would have helped introduce me to putting myself first, living in the moment and accepting my transitional feelings were 'normal'
2. Any hand-outs were not layman friendly using 'jargon'. When I came to the group I was coping with a difficult situation regarding my health, the course has given me the tools to deal with this – short term and in the future.
3. I think that this experience should be made available to all cancer patients and their families. I have been so angry and confused since my mum's diagnosis but this course has made me see that my emotions are normal. It has given me a small piece of 'me' back that isn't about the fear of cancer coming back. It's made me more appreciative and understanding.
4. Opportunities for any other personal development would be welcomed. Venue excellent. Generally, I have been very happy with course and I have enjoyed participation in all aspects.
5. I would just like to see more of these courses as I can think of quite a few of my patients who would benefit greatly from them. Would it be possible to shrink down to 6 sessions?
6. I think this is a course that could prove to be very useful for a lot of people in similar situations. The problem will always be in finding the right time for each individual. I think the 8-week duration is right - any shorter and I don't think there would be enough repetition of the practices for them to sink in sufficiently for use outside of the group situation.
7. Enjoyed meeting the group and was nice to feel like an individual again and not that cancer patient. On the whole, I thoroughly enjoyed the course and wouldn't hesitate to do it again. Reading matter was a bit beyond me at times.
8. Had good discussions and lots of laughs.
P.S. Forgot to add that my "wee" figure rose from lying face flat on the ground to a few branches up at the end of the course, so that in itself speaks volumes and proves how good yourselves and the course was x.

Conclusion

Participants comments suggest that the “meeting and talking” to others as one of the most valued parts of the course. It also seemed to suggest throughout the course discussions that people really valued being able to talk openly about their experiences with fellow sufferers and like-minded people. The delivery of the “training” course had more elements of a “support” group than at first expected. Highlighting the importance of creating a place for participants to be heard and “held” safely and kindly.

The evaluation process and discussion with participants suggested that a “taster” session could have been useful and in ways I would agree. In others not as people coming and meeting in something “new” in my experience tend to bond together and find their place in the journey helping create a cohesive group experience. Added to that the extra time needed to prepare and populate the taster session has a cost in terms of finance, time and actual room availability.

The inclusion of a MacMillan nurse in the group was I believe a benefit to other participants who valued her knowledge and her wiliness to engage the practices and to share her insights. As her feedback suggests she has more informed information on Mindfulness -Based Cognitive Therapy to disseminate within her team and to her patients.

The course evaluations highlighted the benefits people gain from the course content, the opportunity to meet others in a similar position, the opportunity to develop new skills and coping strategies at times of stress or distress.

Perhaps, more could have been done to explore why people did not return or indeed did not attend. It is a consideration that this report will not address but will bear in mind for future courses.

Both trainers valued the opportunity to offer participants tools and techniques that could add to their own coping strategies. Both trainers were delighted at meeting such wonderful, inspiring and fun people who willingly opened their hearts and shared their stories.