

"I feel like my life is making sense, I feel like
I am in a place where no one judges me,
and I don't think about death anymore"

THINGS TO LIVE FOR

Report for BMBC Public Health

OVERVIEW

Connecting with others through a shared passion is known to be one of the best ways of improving your mood. The 'Things to Live Project' was born with this in mind. **'Things to Live For' is a six-week course using art and connection to aid people to make changes**, to shift focus towards some of the positive aspects of life and develop creative ways of coping in difficult times.

We provide a space for three things to happen:

- Building Connection - Through open conversations with like-minded people, and an introduction to a supportive creative community.
- Finding Purpose and Inspiration - By trying new creative activities and learning new skills people begin to feel more curious and inspired in their own lives.
- Therapy with a small 't' - We encourage sharing, and teach creative coping strategies for dealing with difficult feelings, anxiety and overwhelm.

Tailored to individual needs

Artists/courses are commissioned according to the interests of people referring onto the Creative Recovery pathway at any given time. TTLF has become an essential part of our programme enabling people who are more chaotic, anxious and isolated an opportunity to become part of our community by connecting with others who are also new, and crucially, meeting in small groups. We understand that people who are struggling may not attend referral meet up initially. Part of our approach is to employ persistence. That sometimes means getting to know people through phone conversations, often over long periods, until they feel ready to make that first step. Within this project we allocate funding to support the provision of a Referral Role to enable us to spend extra time getting people to the starting blocks. At the point of registering we work closely with individuals to fully understand the barriers to participation and put support measures in place.

Course and methodology

Courses develop in response to the continuous evaluation and reflections of our team of experienced practitioners under the direction of our therapy trained Project Leader. While some of the course content is tried and tested, we also encourage practitioners to adapt delivery around the mindsets, stability and interests of each cohort. Permission to develop creatively means that the same course delivered to two different groups may follow a completely different path. This has been of great benefit for participants, practitioners and our organisation alike, keeping delivery relevant, and testing new approaches as we go. The following principles are consistent throughout;- the skilful holding of a safe space in which everyone is valued and heard, the leverage of the creative process to do the heavy lifting, and the returning of focus to how learning/experiences can benefit participants at the most difficult times and well beyond six weeks.

Practitioners

These courses have been carefully devised and adapted by a team of 12 highly skilled and experienced artists, including individuals with therapy backgrounds and lived experience (who have developed their practise to support their own recovery). We consider this team to be an enormous asset and therefore name (and thank) each practitioner who has given so much to this develop this approach.

Project list and description

- Street Art (Helen Boutle and Philip Hunter)
- Happiness Habits and Mindful Movement (Becky Wakefield)
- Writing for Wellbeing (Diane Hinchliffe)
- Connect Within (yoga, sound and meditation - with Sara Teal)
- Rooted in Place (Hannah May Batley)
- Arts as Therapy (Helen Boutle, Cecilie Brown and Shannon Wishon)
- Music Meditation (Nick Lewis)
- Moth Stories (writing from lived experience - with Cat Copley and Gemma Geldart)
- Music Moves Us (Hayley Youell)
- Reading Together (Cat Copley)



PARTNERSHIPS - LEARNING AND LEGACY

Not strictly a partnership but the **Street Art Course** carried a huge significance for a broader community, connecting us with the family and friends of a beloved community member who died by suicide. 12 days, 20 painters, and one enormous wall of remembrance. This project stays live in our hearts and minds as it enabled us to process the shock and devastation of this collective loss and restore some beautiful memories.

“‘Still I Rise’, by Maya Angelou, was Gemma’s favourite poem. The Raven (one of her favourite birds) symbolises Gemma’s great wisdom and intelligence, all of the images are taken from Gemma’s beautiful drawings. The ram skull is a headdress that she made. Together we created Gemma a paradise from her own imagination. One where she can climb trees, camp out and be free! Rest in Paradise Gemma.”

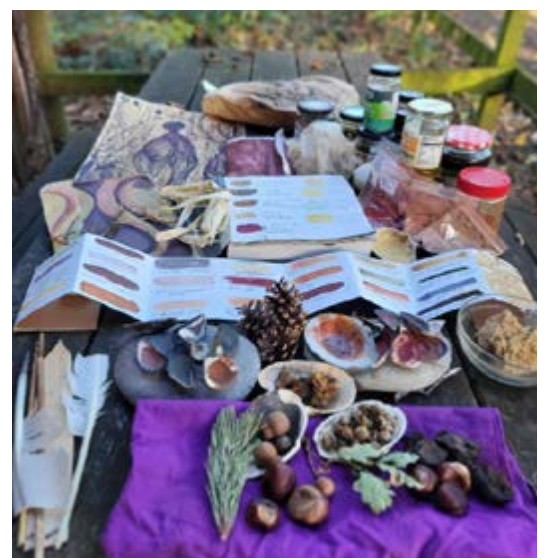
Music Meditation - Partnership with Wentworth Castle Gardens. Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=000p96Nhw7A&t=4s>

This sound journey was created by members of the Creative Recovery Community, working alongside Musician Nick Lewis. It is inspired by the Wentworth Castle Gardens site. It offers the listener a full ‘nature immersion’. A chance to relax and recharge a wild mind. The words, and voices you hear belong to participants of our ‘Things to Live for’ Project, and all the sounds of nature were collaged together using sound recordings from our segment of the Union Jack Gardens.

In My Own Words - Partnership with Barnsley Libraries. Six weeks during which participants carefully craft tales of triumph and adversity. Inspired by the New York ‘MOTH’ (extraordinary tales told by ordinary people). The impact of this course has proved (twice) to be transformative. The course ends with a sharing event in which people truly ‘find their voice’ speaking to a packed, spell bound audience. An additional legacy of the course has been the forming of a new self-facilitated writers’ group at Creative Recovery.

Therapeutic Art at the Recovery College - While there were certainly benefits for the group that attended there is some way to go to develop partnerships of this kind. Being remote limited the amount of support available to the practitioner as well as which the preparatory conversations that we now understand to be crucially important for individuals connecting for the first time weren’t possible. Participation was also low which may indicate issues relating to promotion and expectation setting. We also now understand that courses achieve more profound benefits (particularly in relation to optimism and connection) when delivered as part of a pathway within an existing service and community.

‘Rooted in Place’ - At the YMCA Allotments - This course was supported by CR in the usual way but combined some allotment ‘caretaking’ in gratitude for the use of a unique and wonderful space. This course encouraged people to reconnect with the land (through folklore, foraging and art making) and begin to consider the healing power nature.



OVERALL PARTICIPATION

826 contacts over 20 x 6-week courses.

223 individuals enrolled on courses.

30% of attendees were male, 69.5% female and 0.5% non-binary.

51 attendees were new to Creative Recovery.

The remaining participants were prioritised because they had relapsed, had disengaged and/or were experiencing a period of significant stress/anxiety/crisis/traumatic life event.

On average 7 people attended each session.

'In My Own Words', 'Rooted', 'Music Meditation' and 'Music Moves Us' were the most well-attended courses.

Notes on attendance

Every course (held at CR) was oversubscribed. There were between 15-24 initial expressions of interest per course. Between 12 and 16 people were booked for each course (numbers depended on expected 'drop off' and group capacity). Anyone who wasn't able to book but remained 'priority' was added to a waiting list and prioritised for future similar courses.

A small number of people accessed more than one course. We felt some people needed more time in this more structured environment before they were ready to join in the larger community/drop-in style groups.

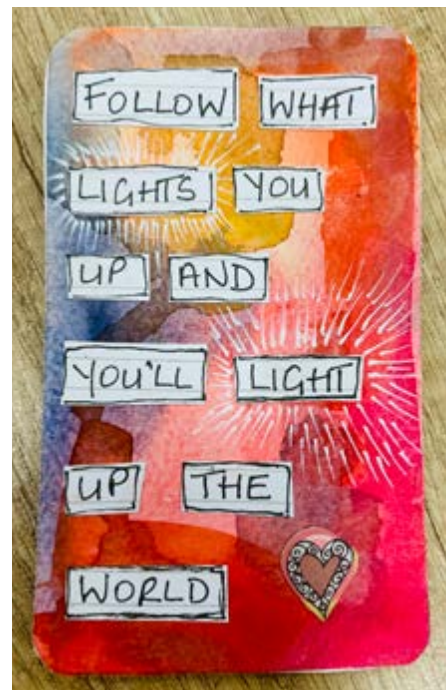
HEALTH AND WELL BEING OUTCOMES - EIGHT INDICATORS

97 evaluations were collected. Participants were asked to consider if they agreed, disagreed or if there had been no change, in response to eight wellbeing statements, 'since attending the project'.

93% of participants agreed that they felt more inspired

Every TTLF practitioner shared new inspirations with the group and encouraged participants to find their own creative inspiration. E.g. during visits to the sculpture park the group were encouraged to become 'collectors' (magpies of the visual), our writing and reading course participants shared words that moved and inspired them, music and sound course participants began to understand the songs and sounds of their hearts.

Discovering new inspiration broadens our horizons, awakens our senses, and ignites our sense of purpose and motivation. Finding new constructive things to do is fundamental in recovery, filling the hole left in lives previously overwhelmed by addiction. New inspiration provides focus for the anxious mind and lifts our self-worth through the exploration of positive identities. A spark of inspiration takes us to new places and can become 'who we are' or who we aspire to be. We enter a state of possibility that can take us anywhere.



"I have a new network - I met a friend and have spent time with her horses and I'm now learning to horse ride. It's a new hobby. Having a Thursday routine has helped with mental and physical health symptoms."

"I will also take the information I have learned and use it for personal development. I have gained a new hobby here"

"This group is important to me. It's a social occasion and an exchange of ideas, it has reinforced my interest in colour, different art techniques - the feeling of being free"

93% of participants felt closer to others as a result of attending

Being creative with others is a great way to make meaningful connections e.g. mutual sharing through self-expression, collaboration and joint problem solving, entering a more relaxed and open flow state, sharing skills and ideas and meeting like-minded people.

'I feel like I've found something I can connect with, nice to be around friendly people, I've found my people.'

"I have re-evaluated my art as a coping mechanism, and have also met a friend, one which I can rely on and can rely on me for friendship, company and support."

'Harmony'

Where two trains meet
When two wires connect
Junction points of communication
Feels an authentic exchange
Something in common
Something of difference
Identifying with similarity
Offers a sense of belonging
A bond created
A space between us
A physical connection
Together, with trust, brings harmony

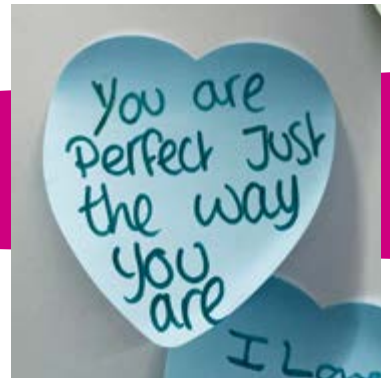
Writing For Wellbeing Group Poem



92% of participants felt more optimistic about the future

Optimism is a strong predictor for change. We understand that the initial stage of change often involves a high degree of optimism, as people focus on the potential benefits of change. Optimism is also important in order to maintain perspective. Someone with high levels of optimism is more able to view hard times as temporary and is therefore more able to bounce back.

"I feel more confident and hopeful in life itself"



88% of participants felt more accepted and understood

Weekly check-ins were a fixed feature of this work. These remain essential, creating a supportive atmosphere where people feel heard and peer support networks can form organically. Sessions also facilitated safe/comfortable sharing, a chance for reflection (within the creative process) leading to fuller self-knowledge and new 'languages' through which to express.

"I feel acceptance and have had an opportunity to meet new friends"

"I feel I'm now less judgemental of others and myself"

"I'm happy and glad that I've found a group where I've been accepted with my differences... Sometimes differences can set us apart."

"People understand my values, I feel important. I'm good at something"

"Standing up in front of an audience to tell my story made me feel worthy - now and forever"

86% of participants felt more cheerful

The impact of engaging resulting in an on-going sense of cheerfulness.

"This course has lifted my spirits and helped with my anxiety"

"I feel more cheerful"

"Feel calmer, more in tune, focused, relaxed, connected, happier, positive educated, creative and appreciative"

"The interaction has been brilliant and has lifted my mood somewhat!"



79% of participants were thinking more clearly

Time in company where problems can be shared, not only releases us from circular/stuck thought patterns but also serves as a reset for people who may spend the majority of their lives isolated and with limited support networks. Aspects of mindfulness are built into each session. Therapeutic Art includes activities to try at home that combat emotional overwhelm e.g. 'grounded foot doodle meditation' and 'Writing for Wellbeing' sessions extol the benefits of automatic writing to clear an anxious mind and find clarity within the tape loop of internal noise.

"I'm more able to manage and cope with negative thoughts, fears and anxieties. I have new coping skills and able to face the challenges of life"

"I have been suffering badly with migraines. After the experience with the Sound bath. It has stopped the migraines and helped me think clearly."

71% of participants were coping better

Small steps achieved in sessions leads to increased confidence to fulfil tasks for daily living. When people who have been socially isolated start to engage, wellbeing evaluations sometimes show a dip in how well they feel they may be coping. As the world opens up a series of new challenges reveal themselves and issues that have been avoided may come to the fore. It's important to acknowledge this within the evaluation framework. Within this approach we offer opportunities for one to one support, to avoid individual achievements (brave efforts to overcome barriers to attending) becoming failed attempts.

'Safety' (Group Poem)

Inner peace and space
Blown away
Life comes in waves
and I can still breathe
Freedom.

"When negativity at home creeps in, I have a lay down, window slightly ajar a few deep breaths and before I know it, I'm back on track, happy music, cup of tea, going to group, contacting friends, etc, whatever is needed"

"I feel more grounded, able to cope more"

"This course has enabled me to see how I can reverse my bad thoughts and feelings towards myself. It has also given me insight to new forms of art to manage my anxiety issues."

70% were feeling more useful

"From feeling lost to having a new direction to my life, without the constant looking back as before"



ANALYSIS

Outcomes according to art form

As expected, outcomes related to connection and inspiration have scored highly across all projects. Mindful Movement, Writing for Wellbeing and Reading Together achieved a total wellbeing score of 90% with participants nearly unanimously agreeing that their wellbeing had improved across all aspects. Evaluations revealed that 'Art as Therapy' achieved greater impact around relaxation and reflection. Courses with performative aspects achieved greater impact on confidence, sense of connection and acceptance.

Confounding Variables

- New people referring to Creative Recovery have often tried and failed to secure support elsewhere. The positive results recorded in this report can be considered evidence that this model of delivery works but should also consider the fact people have found a community and have access to other projects over a longer term. A stand-alone course may or may not achieve the same impact.
- At first read it may appear that one art form may be more impactful than another. We should acknowledge that some courses may be more attractive to people who present as having a higher level of resilience/positive functioning. Some courses are more accessible than others and this supports our adaptive approach, offering courses that suit the trend of referrals at any given time and adapting delivery around the groups need and abilities.



ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES

Positive Functioning, Health Choices and Life Changes

"Things have come to a head, and I've made a big change to my living arrangements. I'm spending more time with my family. I have a new diagnosis and new meds."

"Building strength, reduce spasms, help, calm nervous system"

"A positive change in my life is through breathing exercises we learned, this calms me down, brings me back to the present, I feel grounded, I have been stretching in the morning after the first week"

"I have overcome several anxieties, walking into town, alone, talking to new people talking to a large group of people and made friendships"

"Reduce medication (sertraline) with the agreement of my elderly persons nurse"

"This has made me get counselling for bereavement and has helped me deal with my anxiety better than what I did before"

"Been trying to exercise more, even on bad days I've been making of an effort"

"The course has given me a motivation to do creative writing and poetry at home however my home is cluttered, hoards of fabric, wool clothes, also untidy and unclean. At the weekend I made a start at sorting my home to make it a comfortable haven to do writing in, also sewing, reading and knitting"

"The Tibetan singing bowls made me feel incredibly relaxed. It was such a needed relief. My sleep is coming back and is less elusive."

"Drinking herbal teas with no sweeteners, instead of five sugars or honey, the teas have been beautiful without sugars"



Reflection and Healing

A Group Poem

The silence is just too loud
I hear sacred truths
I sense the feeling, that today –
Is the start of something good.
I sense being safe

“To open up in relationships
and to be able to discuss
what has been hurting me.
This is the best group activity
I have done so far on my
healing journey.”

“I like many others have a
very painful past, writing and
reading aloud has made me
realise that not all my past
was sad and bad. I am starting
to look ahead and will once
again take up writing.”

“It made me feel stronger, so I can
express my feelings and wants”



Supporting Drug and Alcohol Recovery

“Reduced going out to
the pub/club boozing,
I enjoyed the course,
focused more on reading
to focus my thoughts, sat
by myself in peace and
quiet more at home.”

“I have realised that the
most rewarding activity is
when I’m being creative, I
have cut down on my use
of alcohol significantly in
recent months.”

“Reduced alcohol,
facing fears,
though still with a
long way to go, not
as isolated.”

Reducing Self-Destructive Behaviours

"It's enabled me to be more aware and regulate my emotions, which in turn regulates my self-harming."

"I feel like my life is making sense, I feel like I am in a place where no one judges me, and I don't think about death anymore"

Reducing Anxiety

Anxiety relief is the most commonly mentioned positive benefit with a quarter of participants feeling less anxious and more relaxed as a result of participating.

Purpose Driven Life

"Has enabled me to feel more purposeful and to become more mindful of the positives in my life however small."

"I'm more positive, more able to accept myself as I am warts and all, being challenged to push myself out of comfort zone."



Confidence and Self Esteem

"Biggest benefit to my confidence and being able to like myself again, and be okay as I am"

"I am feeling more confident about myself I am still anxious but more positive"

"Being able to have the confidence to talk in front of an audience"

Reducing Isolation

"It has made me realise the variety of people who are affected by different problems, and that I'm not alone in needing help"

"The benefits I have received is making friends and talking. I feel not so isolated and depressed as it has opened a new side of me."

Suicide Prevention

We know that this project has achieved its aims for a number of reasons. Our responsive approach means that people who are high risk of suicide can access support quickly (within 1-2 weeks). We are working directly with vulnerable and high-risk groups. This year we have more referrals than ever from people with ASD (who are either diagnosed or self-diagnosed). We have supported over 50 people who are new to creative recovery who, without entering this project may have struggled to connect with us. 94% of these individuals remain on the CR pathway, some have also been signposted to other specialist services for support recovering from trauma from sexual abuse and assault, substance misuse and housing issues (threat of homelessness). Recovery is not a linear path. This project, as an addition to a pathway of creative alternatives has been fundamental for CR in offering people something extra special when it has been most needed. It is an essential part of our programme.

KEY LEARNING

- 1) Finding the right practitioners is the key to growing and sustaining this work. Although a framework has developed over time, a great deal of the content of these courses is drawn from the 'Artist's toolkit' (gained through years of immersion in creative practise) and unique to that individual. Maintaining and supporting a freelance workforce is now bedded into the CR plan for the next three years. We wish to support emerging Artists to develop their own creative health practise, alongside local initiatives and training provided through the Creative Health Partnership.
- 2) Practitioner support and safety is essential. External/in house supervision is available and time for weekly reflection is factored in at the point of contracting. The gathering of Artist Reflections to date has been ad hoc. The creation of an appropriate format for shared learning and peer support amongst the team is something that will now be prioritised. It's essential that the project lead role is someone with experience of creative health practise and has a counselling/therapy background.
- 3) Gentle Accountability. Within groups we hold each other accountable while holding each other up. Having a partner (within the group) with whom to share and report personal goals and achievements was reported to be hugely beneficial for participants of our Happiness Habits course.

**"I needed to set goals in a way that I could achieve them, which I now understand how to do.
My goals for obtaining/sustaining my mental health with regards to being out in nature"**

- 4) Creating space for reflection and self-discovery, embracing stillness and encouraging autonomy is key. One Artist reflected 'I tried to inspire and push their imaginations by seeding ideas, not telling people what to do. I had planned activities but made it clear that people were free to go with whatever felt right to them, that I was there to help and support their own unique process.' Letting the artwork do the heavy lifting is where much of the success of this work lies. As an antidote to psycho-educational equivalents, we don't teach, and we encourage practitioners to trust the creative process.
- 5) Ripples of hope. Projects where shared benefits spread beyond group level have achieved a further and deeper impact. For example the Union Jack Garden- Music Meditation and Memorial Wall projects evaluated in a similar way to other projects, but anecdotal evidence suggests an elevated impact. Having created something good together people seem more deeply connected by a sense of collective pride.



Further Development

As already stated, next steps will include a combined effort to further develop the Creative Health Workforce. We will also create a framework for employing volunteers who have participated in projects and aim to co-produce course curricula wherever possible. It has also become apparent that each one of these courses could continue well beyond six weeks. Our most common feedback is that people want to carry on, and that once formed, groups want to continue meeting. We are considering ways in which some of these courses may develop further into longer term therapeutic groups. We are also keen to explore how some of our partnerships may continue e.g. Therapeutic Art at the Recovery College, and MOTH inspired storytelling- in Partnership with Barnsley Recovery Steps and the Light Box. Creative Health is now included within BMBC young people's strategy and there is interest in piloting a young people's 'Things to Live For' six-week therapeutic intervention alongside Chilypep.

CASE STUDY 1

At the time of my first attempt, life was perfect, I had everything ahead of me, a safe career, a small family building, yet my choice was to end life. Luckily, I failed but that shadow seemed to follow me through the following years. It caught me again in a 'not so perfect' position in life. The family I had was lost, my career was in shatters and alcohol and drugs had become a replacement for happiness, which in truth stimulated the further failed attempts. To which one thought I can't even succeed at suicide, how much of a failure am I? Then I made a vow, as failing and knowing the damage I would leave behind for those who love but now suffer, I thought I'm clearly not suitable in my own skin. Give life one last year, and if no change comes, then my 4th will be my final attempt.

That change came when an old friend introduced me to creative recovery. I went there in March with a desire to find myself again. To learned to trust people and associate myself with the right ones. The people there helped open my confidence again, made me realise what's important about the self and opened me up to new possibilities that brought out the real person that had been laying dormant. I found my love for art again, or just the general idea of being creative, and from there it's helped me open more to the world around me and given me the desire to give more back to those that have given time to me. Recovery isn't overnight, it takes time. For the last three years I've been working hard at keeping the person who I've now become, but in truth I was always this person, I just didn't have the right people around me that understood. Once you find the right crowd your passion for life will become stronger than it's ever been before. For me, it's about finding the truth inside you, in order to strengthen those darker days and look forward to the lighter one's.

CASE STUDY 2 (LATE 30'S MALE)

J had been registered with CR for well over a year and hadn't been to any courses/groups/events. After the evening event his mum reported to The CR team that J had never been able to finish anything and barely left the house. There was anxiety amongst the family when J started the writing course and then surprise when, week after week, he returned. His family came to the Lightbox event to see what had ignited his passion and kept him coming back. J's story (read by the course facilitator) tells of his experiences over most of his adult life, in and out of psychiatric wards. These times were recounted with care and concern for the people he met on the wards, but ripe with fear - after discharge that anything outside of his comfort zone may take him back to that place. He describes his daily life as, rarely feeling any sense of peace, apart from the hour a week when he walks the family dog. His deep affection for his many pets was the focus of his beautifully written story. About the experience on the course J says:

'It's been very inspiring. So proud of everyone. Can't wait until I'm well enough to tell my story in my own voice. This has just made me want to do it more and more. It wasn't meant to be my time this chapter, but I now know that it's going to happen. What an amazing feeling after 39 years and 8 months, I know it's when, not if, and I can't thank everyone here enough for the love and warmth felt. You're all amazing and so am I.'

REPORT COMPILED BY HELEN BOUTLE (PROJECT LEADER) APRIL 2025

