

Innovative Mental Health Intervention

Netpark Wellbeing

NetPark Wellbeing Project (NPWB) is an award-winning mental health wellbeing intervention formed in 2016 as a collaboration between Southend on Sea City Council and arts organisation Metal Southend. It offers a 12-week program of activities, such as journaling, digital art, exploring outdoor spaces, trips to Hyde Hall, yoga, art trauma and therapy psychoeducation, to help participants improve their mental health and well-being. Referrals to the service are made from social care, GPs, social prescribers, learning disability groups, dementia services, community mental health teams and social housing projects, with no cost to referring bodies or participants. NPWB works with Metal Arts and their artists in residence to share a variety of art practices with the participants. This year, Metal secured additional funding from the Community Investment Board for a specialist men's trauma group and a deaf and non-hearing group. NPWB has proved to be a lifeline for those living in Southend and surrounding districts who struggle to access help due to mental health issues, with over 200 participants last year.

NPWB has been running specialist art therapy and yoga groups for people living in the community who are affected by trauma since January 2018. Our project has relieved the current over-extended waiting lists in the area for trauma-related mental health interventions. Those who have benefited from this intervention have ranged from 16-year-olds to the elderly, who were struggling with mental health conditions such as depression, dementia, stress, anxiety, and early psychosis, as well as those who were socially isolated due to the effects of trauma, including the trauma of living through the COVID pandemic, the effects of living with economic pressures over the last two years, and recently-arrived refugees in our community.

Encouraged by the successful results of our previous work, NPWB applied for funding to expand and implement the Art Therapy Trauma Protocol. This format is a twelve-week group art therapy program that addresses the six symptoms listed by the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS). Participants moved through the three stages from the initial strengthening phase to the stage of becoming more aware of their trauma, to the final stage of trusting their own resources.

NPWB evaluated its work with each group at the beginning and end of the three-month sessions using an in-house evaluation against our core aims, the Short Edinburgh and Warwick Wellbeing Scale (SWEWBS), and with four groups, the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ). We also evaluated the types of art interventions offered by being informed by these evaluations.

Our findings suggest that the Art Therapy Trauma Protocol has proven successful in improving participants' ability to cope with their past and present life challenges.

NPWB has exceeded expectations in its efforts to improve community mental health. Our team consists of two part-time paid workers (a qualified and registered Art Therapist and an Art facilitator) and 15 volunteers who have managed to provide over 200 participants with 48 weeks of mental health support annually through various arts and wellbeing modalities. We have spoken to and worked with over 600 people living in the community with the effects of trauma through our current project groups over the last 3 years. We have gathered feedback from each participant who has accessed a 3-month group, and from ex-participants who are now volunteering. We have also held stalls at local community mental health events to interact with the community and ask what they would like to see more of. In the past three years, we have worked with over 200 people in the community who have experienced trauma and have held 7 outreach groups in social housing facilities and adult community colleges to get feedback from participants. This helped inform us when writing successful bids to fund a two-year project focused on trauma, which has included the yoga and trauma art therapy groups. We have also started groups for men who have experienced domestic trauma and people who are deaf or living with hearing impairments. We have trained art facilitators and volunteers and have utilised Art Therapy master's students to ensure quality delivery. Additionally, we have organized 6 weekly 2-hour trips to a Royal Horticulture Garden, providing free transportation and entrance for those who are unable to fund or access transport. It has enabled participants to feel safer and reduce the effects of poverty by helping them meet their aspirations, reduce isolation and loneliness, and improve mental health. We have also encouraged people of all ages to participate, grow skills, confidence, and social connection.

NPWB is the only mental wellbeing project in the UK that is successfully running the Art Therapy Trauma Protocol (Luzzatto et al, 2021), an innovative initiative that breaks new ground in enabling mental health professionals without an art therapy background to utilise art techniques when working with participants who have experienced trauma, under clinical guidance and supervision. The protocol is also

innovative in the way it takes participants through a trauma programme following the recommendations of the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) .

The Art Therapy Trauma Protocol was developed by (Luzzatto et al, 2021) following ISTSS recommendations, and comprises of three concepts (see Cloitre et al. 2011, 2020): addressing the participants' needs, rather than focusing on "trauma exposure" which may lead to drop out or re-traumatisation; targeting the participants' symptom clusters and related needs, outlined in the following six areas: a) Emotion Regulation; b) Relationship with Others; c) Relationship with Self; d) Gradual Exposure to Trauma; e) Distancing and Integration of Trauma; f) Personal Resources; and including three phases (Strengthening, Trauma awareness, and Resources), with “strengthening interventions” provided throughout the treatment.

This protocol, which was first implemented with a group of women in Tanzania and has since been tested in three other countries, Zambia, UK, and Italy, was chosen to trial in the UK due to the professional associations of P.Luzzatto and E. Mills, both Art therapists who had previously tried ways of delivering art interventions to professionals in African countries who are unable to access Art Therapy training. The protocol takes participants through a trauma programme consisting of six two-hour sessions, with a seventh session for feedback, and NPWB has adapted this to include an hour of yoga before the art therapy group. The NPWB sessions are delivered in an Art Room situated in a public park, and are also available online through a large screen, camera and speaker, and are offered free of charge to participants. This makes NPWB the only community mental health provision in the UK that offers this intervention.

The NPWB project has demonstrated remarkable resilience over the past two years, securing additional funding and overcoming challenges posed by the local authority. Our partnership with a highly trained yoga trauma instructor has been instrumental in delivering effective trauma work to our participants. Notably over the last year we have successfully piloted our trauma protocol with men-only groups who have experienced domestic trauma. We are committed to ensuring accessibility for all and have implemented an online platform for those who are unable to attend in-person due to physical illness, COVID recovery, or caring responsibilities. We are proud of our accomplishments and believe that our project is deserving of recognition through this award opportunity and innovation.

We used the Short Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) to measure the impact of the Yoga/ Art Therapy Trauma Protocol on the wellbeing of participants. The results showed a sustained improvement in wellbeing over two consecutive years, with participants in the Yoga/ Art Therapy Trauma Protocol

groups showing an average increase of 4.2 points on the SWEMWBS, compared to an average increase of 3.2 points in the control groups, which did not receive any yoga or protocol interventions.

We also used the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ) with the Yoga/ Art Therapy Trauma Protocol to measure how traumatic symptoms have affected participants in the last month. Results were collected pre and post Yoga/ Art Therapy Trauma Protocol intervention. The average score on the ITQ decreased significantly, from 50 to 38. This could indicate that the people taking the questionnaire are experiencing less traumatic symptoms than they were before.

What was useful?

"Sharing experiences and listening to others gave courage",

"Being listened to",

"Forgiveness of self and others",

"Reconciled with the past",

"I can leave the past in the past and have more hope for the future",

"Gained relief after each activity",

"Connecting on a deeper, more vulnerable level",

"I feel my symptoms of depression and anxiety have improved",

"I enjoyed learning something new about myself",

"I feel less isolated",

"I feel more inner energy",

"Less blocked and less depressed",

What was difficult?

"Nothing was difficult",

"Reliving (recalling) things",

"Sometimes drawing things",

"Verbal expression",

"Needed more time between sessions",

"It was incredibly difficult at times. I found it more powerful than talking therapy",

"Sometimes it was very intense",

"It was difficult at times to express myself without judgement",

"It was hard at times to look at my problems",

Whas the artwork useful/ helpful?

"Initially was reluctant but blew my mind",

"Useful helped me to be a better person",

"Helpful and led to interesting expressions",

"Very – non-verbal",

"Fun, emotional, heart-breaking and healing",

"Triggered memories but felt better after sharing",

"The Symbolic use of colour",

"Found making art on paper much more enjoyable than I expected",

"Drawing the hidden seed, I allowed my personality to emerge",

"Drawing the sad/angry child, I could revisit my trauma",

"After drawing the positive memory, I can now keep it inside me".