



COPING THROUGH FOOTBALL

Evaluation Report 2010

The London Playing Fields Foundation



North East London **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust



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Coping Through Football Project

Introduction

Coping Through Football is not a sports project in the traditional sense, it is a social inclusion project which uses football as a tool to engage with a marginalised group and as a means of improving their quality of life. It recognises the impact that a regular structured high quality programme of physical activity can have on the recovery of adults with enduring mental illness. From its inception the project's primary mission has been to transform community mental health services by demonstrating how sport and health can combine to produce a sustainable approach to engaging with and improving the wellbeing of long term mentally ill adults, eventually setting them on the road to recovery. In doing so the intention is to ensure that Coping Through Football becomes part of mainstream health services at the end of the funding period. With current funding due to expire at the end of April 2010, applications have been made to external and local sources to ensure that it continues in the London Borough of Waltham Forest for the next three years. The evidence provided in the report of the project's impact on the recovery of participants, such as 44% moving on to employment, education and training and eight out of ten clients with a history of drug and alcohol dependency claiming that it has provided the motivation to remain abstinent or reduce their consumption altogether, will add weight to those funding approaches.

Whilst the previous report articulated the need for the project and described how it was delivered, this current one provides more detail on referrals, attendance and formal outcomes for the project ('The Numbers'). We also report on an in-depth interview study with a wide range of stakeholders ('The Story'), and provide a summary of who uses the project and what the benefits are.

Over the past year the project has received critical acclaim featuring as an example of best practice in the Department of Health's "Be Active, be healthy: a plan for getting the nation moving" (2009) as well as being showcased at the British Heart Foundation National Conference in November 2008. It was recently shortlisted for a London Legacy Beyond Sport Award.



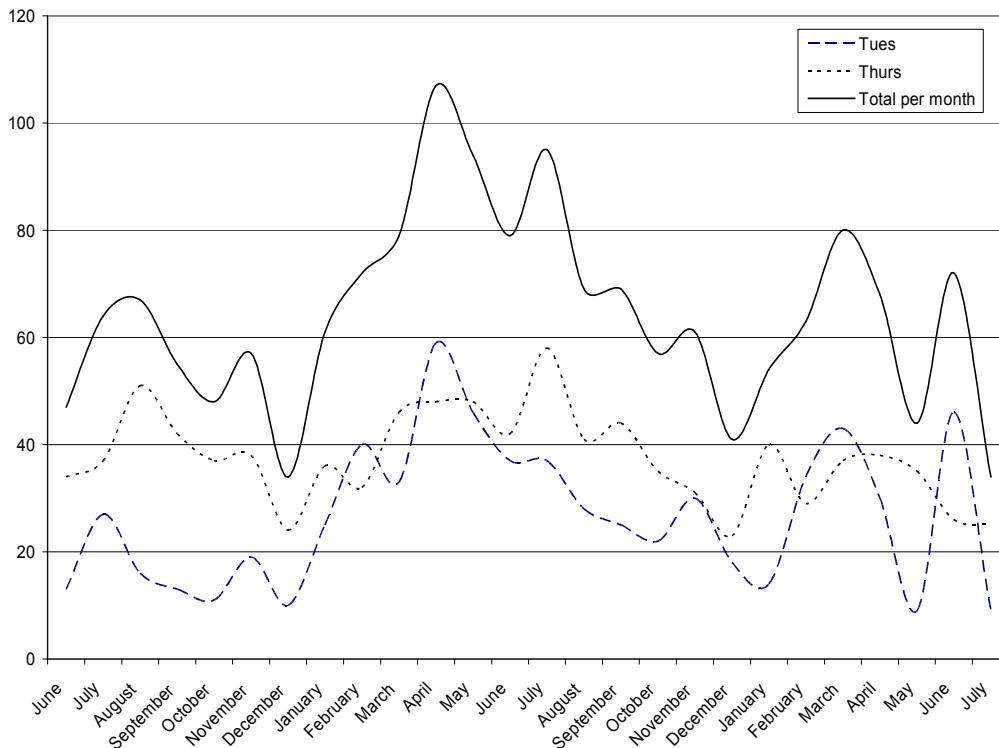
The Numbers

Since May 2007 one hundred and thirty-five service users have been referred to the project. These referrals come from a wide range of sources, though a notable growth has occurred for patients from the in-patient ward (30%). A strong relationship has grown up with ward staff such that they are now referring clients, and attending with them on a very regular basis. A sizeable proportion also originates from Waltham Forest Assertive Outreach Team (AOT: 20%). The Home Treatment, Rehabilitation and Community Mental Health Teams account for a further 18%. Combined, this data strongly suggests that the project reaches service users with a high level of need, chronic mental ill-health and considerable functional disability/quality of life issues. Primary care sources including GPs are also increasingly referring clients, and this relatively large number of referrers is highly encouraging.

Drug and alcohol use is extremely prevalent amongst service users. For a significant proportion of the service users, drug and alcohol use meet criteria for dependency/addiction – forty-eight clients having what is termed a ‘dual diagnosis’.

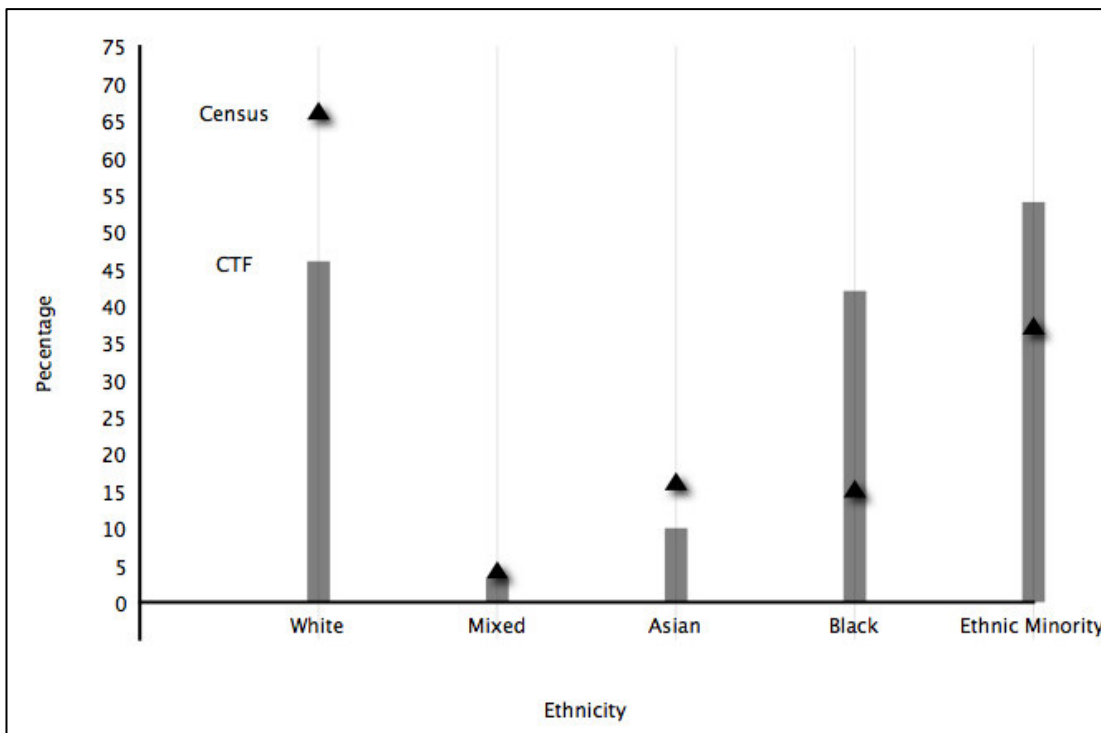
Overall attendance month by month has remained relatively settled throughout the period; with understandably slightly lower numbers during the colder months. The prolonged absence of the Project Coordinator also affected numbers over a three month period (April – July 2009).

Figure 1 – Attendance levels (June 2007 - July 2009)



A key aim of the project is to reach a range of clients within the borough. Although the majority of clients are males, a small minority of committed attendees are female (7%). There is a wide age range: 40% of clients are in their twenties, 37% are in their thirties, and 19% are in their forties. The ethnicity of clients is illustrated graphically below alongside 2001 census data for males (aged 25-50) in the borough of Waltham Forest. While most groups are broadly comparable, the over-representation of clients from a black ethnic minority to a large extent reflects mental health service usage in this area, as in other parts of London. While the ethnicity categories have been reduced to those of the census, roughly equal numbers of Black African and Black Caribbean clients have participated in addition to a range of Asian backgrounds. Overall, the proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds exceeds that of young males in Waltham Forest as a whole and is due to the many Black clients attending the project. As engagement with Black, Asian and minority ethnic patients has often been noted to present mental health services with significant challenges, we would highlight the continued success of the project in this regard.

Figure 2 – Ethnicity of service users

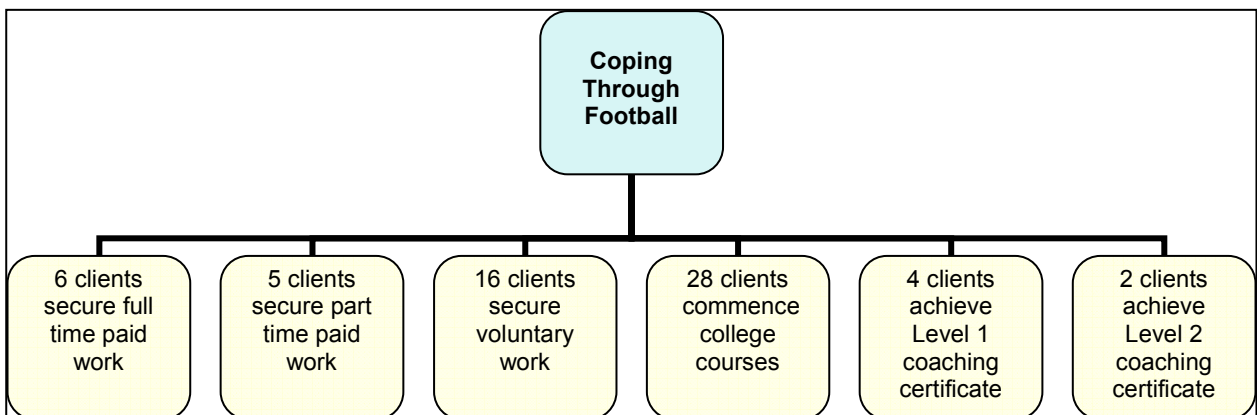


Some clients remain with the project a short time, and others have attended for over a year. All are helped at the outset to identify key objectives such as increased fitness / well-being, smoking cessation, social contact and confidence, or an educational/vocational goal. Though there are understandably set-backs such as readmission to hospital, a substantial number of clients have achieved major objectives. The general quality of their

advances are described in 'The Story' but numerically six clients found full time work – one as a fitness instructor following their success on a training course. Five have secured part time jobs and sixteen have commenced voluntary work, one with a local boxing club. Twenty-eight have commenced a college course of one kind or another. Four have completed the Level 1 FA coaching course of whom two have gone on to successfully complete Level 2. This means that 44% of clients involved in the project have moved on to employment, education or training. Some but not all of these outcomes are facilitated by the expertise and connections of occupational therapists within NELFT and Coping Through Football, though this does not undermine the abilities and confidence needed to take up an opportunity in education or volunteering and make the most of it.



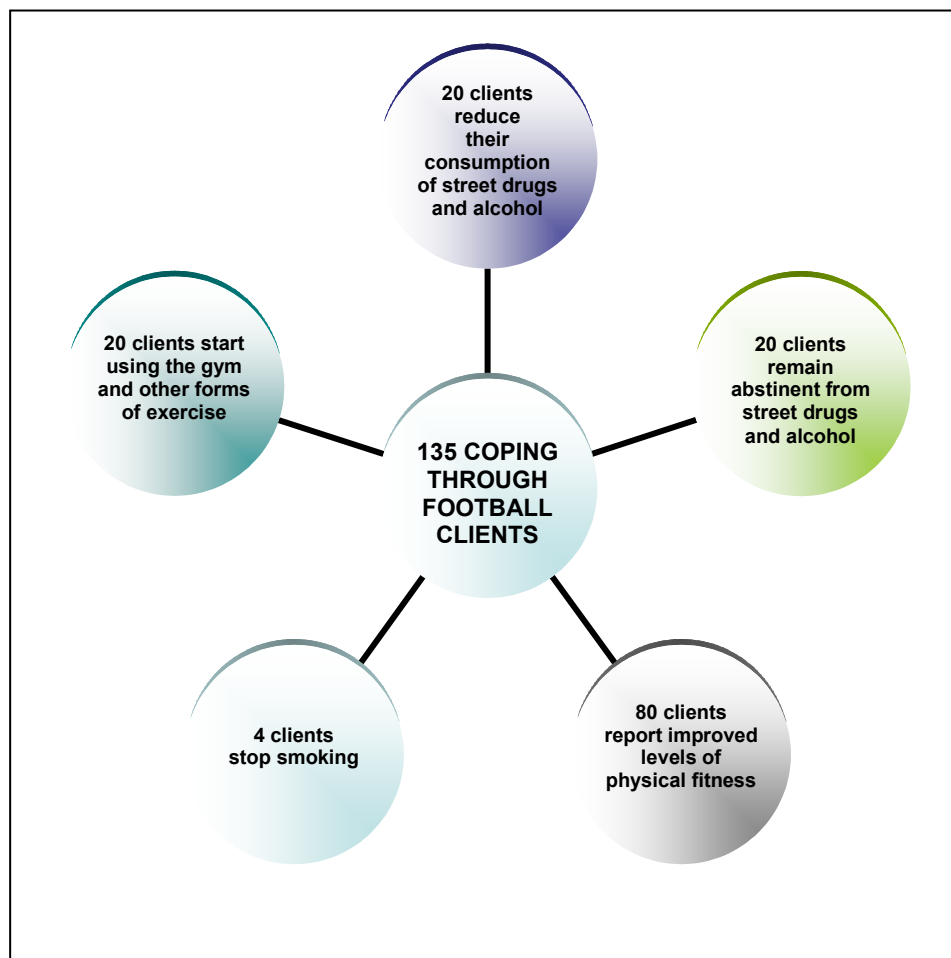
Figure 3 – Recovery routes



Improved physical health is an outcome many identify as desirable. Sixteen clients attended a healthy eating workshop, and twelve attended a smoking cessation workshop and as a result four clients have stopped smoking. For some the sense of well-being induced following their participation in the football sessions has led them to seek additional forms of exercise with twenty service users having attended gym sessions. Almost without exception there has been a marked improvement in physical fitness and an ability to maintain activity levels for longer periods of time.

Attending the football sessions and the resulting improvements in physical fitness and well-being were reported by four out of ten clients with dual diagnosis to be the reason why their consumption of street drugs and alcohol has continued to reduce. Even more encouragingly 42% of service users with dual diagnosis have claimed that the structure and the motivation to remain healthy provided by the project has helped them to remain abstinent from alcohol and drugs altogether. In summary 84% of clients with reported drug and alcohol problems have used the project to either remain clean or reduce their consumption.

Figure 4 – Physical Health Impact



The Story

Understanding stakeholders' experiences of Coping Through Football

We aimed to better understand the possible changes for mental health service users participating in the project by interviewing a range of stakeholders; most prominently that of twelve service users themselves, as well as coaches (two), occupational therapists involved in recruiting and running the project (two) and referrers from mental health services some of whom also got involved in attending it (five).

It emerged clearly that the football **context** is very important to participants, it mattered to them that this is very different to other parts of mental health services; that it helped reduce isolation; and that it gave purpose and structure to at least a part of their lives.

Many interactions and activities were enabled during the **process** of taking part. Friendships are formed; support is given and received; confidence develops during healthy competition; and a sense of belonging to the larger whole becomes stronger.

Out of all of this come many positive **outcomes**: enjoyment, better mood, ending drug use, improved physical health and fitness and new opportunities in the future. Figure 5 shows how many of the important themes (called 'categories' in this study) are related.

One participant was asked what it provided and said: *getting rid of boredom, and I had a heavy drug problem ... my self-worth...[it] keeps me off the street, I just go and pick my methadone up in the morning and then come straight to football.*

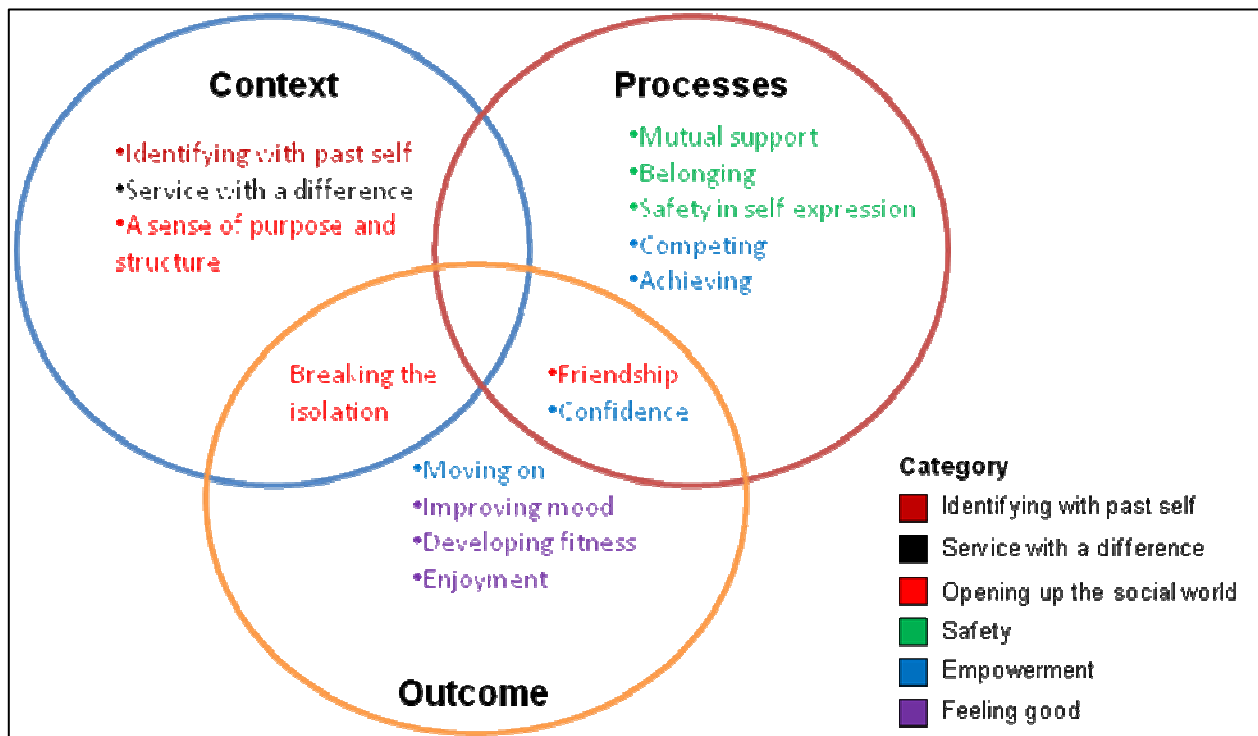
Another added: *[if I wasn't here] I'd most probably be taking drugs, and [another client] is playing and he'd be doing drugs, and there's some other people would just be in the house smoking all day.*

A long-term attendee who comes as much now to help others as to help himself summed it all up:

People put it down saying well all you do is play a game of football. I say to them... Look this isn't actually what we do here. We're trying to bring them out of their shells as well and get their minds on other things and being around people and not thinking of doing drugs or... feeling negative about themselves...



Figure 5 - Context, Processes and Outcome



Categories

Identifying with past self

For the majority of participants, playing football had been an important part of past lives and Coping Through Football offered a reconnection with an identity before becoming unwell. In particular, memories of football were strongly associated with enjoyment and a positive sense of self. Illness was often the reason they were no longer playing football and so playing again signified a return to health.

One of the facilitators summarised how important he thought this connection was:



I think pretty much for most of the people that I have referred and have come have definitely played it in the past and want to start playing again because it's something that they associate with a happy time in their life.

'There's something different about football'

Coping Through Football offered a very different experience to other mental health services that participants had previously accessed. The main differences were that Coping Through Football was not problem focused and offered an opportunity for change and development.

For one, part of the difference with therapy was the normalising environment of football and the identification with others:

By coming to these sessions and identifying with other people and then realising we can all say that we've got mental health issues here but I'm not completely crazy. I've done groups and anxiety groups and stuff like that, but there's something different about football

Another spoke about how, even though she was able to identify with others in therapy groups, sometimes she came away feeling 'more depressed'. This was contrasted with her experience of 'feeling good' after having participated in physical exercise during the football sessions.

However several participants did not make any link between Coping Through Football and the mental health service. Indeed one participant stated quite strongly that he wouldn't be involved in the project if it was part of the mental health system.

The setting of the project in the community, as opposed to mental health service premises was something that many regarded as contributing to the project's success and accessibility. A facilitator said 'you know when clients turn up they don't see it as an NHS group or a mental health group. It's a football training group and that is a key ingredient.'

Opening up the social world

Participants spoke about the previous isolation within their lives, and how coming to Coping Through Football had helped to 'break this isolation'.

It makes you feel that you're not isolated; you're not the only one that feels like you do. You know that the other people that are coming have mental health difficulties

Coping Through Football provided structure and purpose in the lives of participants, which for many had previously been absent. Indeed, a significant motivating factor for attendance was that the project provided a regular, consistent structured activity. Moreover, it offered an alternative to a life that for some was clearly linked with their mental health difficulties.

Because I don't work, it's of great benefit because on a Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, I'm occupied rather than sitting in the house feeling depressed...

One facilitator highlighted the significance of building this structure into their lives:

I've just been so impressed by their commitment and their dedication, and the fact that most of them don't have much structure in their lives, they don't have a job or any commitments but still, they've built this, some of them twice a week, into their routine, Tuesday and Thursday and that.....I just think that is so brilliant an achievement and impact on their lives.

All of the participants spoke about the how their friendship network had expanded since joining.

It's just that they're (friendships) maybe a bit deeper, because we're not prohibited with what we can express ourselves with and talk about our problems that are not acceptable to society. The people I've met through here are my closest friends now. That's the best thing.

They (friendships) are honest. They're true. They're real. There is no pretence. I am what I am and if someone says, I'm not feeling comfortable, we all know okay, we all leave. I don't have to pretend that I'm completely happy. You can just be yourself. It's lovely, its humanity

We talk, a lot of different talking, and we joke and as you know we play football with each other. Again, as I say it's a very good atmosphere, a friendly atmosphere, if not a family....From the way I see it here, everyone is very much open to the other one. So it's like a family in a way. You can only be open, talk with somebody that you know and you think you feel very positive about them, which is usually what happens in a family if you like

Some players meet up socially, attend football matches together, and play other sports. Others felt it was a possibility for them in the future, or just reassuring that they could turn to a social network:

There is bigger network of possible people to turn to if I'm having any difficulties



Coping Through Football

Coping Through Football offered participants an environment in which they felt 'safe'. Feeling safe to express oneself, the level of mutual support and the sense of belonging all contributed to making the project a place of safety.

You see once you're with a bunch of people that you know have got mental health issues, you feel much more comfortable with expressing yourself

You are allowed to shout and scream, you know, there's not someone telling you to be quiet because it's football and you're allowed to shout. If you shout or scream in an anxiety group, then the group leader tells you to be quiet. So it gives you that opportunity to let some steam off which is very important

The mutual nature of the support was striking with many sharing their experiences of offering support to others, both on and off the pitch, even visiting each other in hospital.

An important strength of the football group was the sense of group belonging – something new for many. Although female players are less common one said:

You see familiar faces. Just the seeing of the regular faces, I feel like I'm part of a team and I kind of feel like, I almost feel like I fit in, and that's nice because I don't often feel like that



Empowerment

One of the strongest outcomes to emerge was increased confidence facilitated by the safety of the environment; Coping Through Football was seen as a safe place in which to begin to socialise again as one client articulates:

I suppose without realising it, on a twice weekly basis, I do go to a place where I feel fairly comfortable with people, so as regards to practising socialising, it's a good start if anything

It's given me confidence on public transport and I used to feel shy, and as I said to you just now, I used to feel very withdrawn. And it's given me the confidence to come out and do things you know

It makes me more confident all round, you know. My self-confidence has gone up quite a bit in all walks of life. It's because I'm doing something that I

enjoy. I've got a friend I go out with and collect scrap metal with sometimes. It just makes me feel more confident knocking on people's doors you know

Personal achievements were apparent in different ways for different people.

My first day was okay. I couldn't kick the ball for toffee. It's surprising, but all these things come back, which is good. You see yourself improving

It's made me feel like I can do things as well as other people, that I'm not as disabled as I look

I think the ultimate success story from Coping Through Football is that I end up getting a job

I think over the last few weeks, months, I've realised the benefits of sports and how I would really like to bring it into other people's lives

Once they see their physical health improving, they start to come up with ideas about wanting to do other things, like people are saying to me, right football's great on a Tuesday and a Thursday, but I want to do a college course and...things that they maybe probably wouldn't have considered doing or maybe wanted to do and couldn't see themselves doing a year ago, now they're thinking that's perfectly within their grasp, so they are looking for more opportunities to do other things

Feeling good

'Feeling good' was a phrase used by many about improving well-being and physical health.

A lot of the time, especially when I first came out of hospital, I wasn't doing much. I'd literally be watching telly in bed because I was so depressed, but I'd drag myself out to football so at least once a week I'd be doing a little bit of exercise

Its saving some people from a life of drugs and sitting around all day smoking

I think I'm fitter. I definitely think I'm a bit slimmer, which is what I was hoping for. I've become much more balanced, much more alert. Even people at the hospital have said to me...'you're looking much better than when we last saw you'. That's what people say to me

There's obviously an increase in serotonin in your brain and I feel probably 100% better than I had... you know it's amazing. I would intend every morning to get up and do some exercise, but I don't and because I have to come to football, I come, I do the exercise, I feel better. I spend the evening at home feeling much more relaxed and much more at ease with myself, motivated and things like that and lights are a bit more shinier

Summary

Who is Coping Through Football for and what does it offer?

Getting back a sense of identity

The onset of mental illness is often associated with the loss of a person's sense of self and previous held identity. Our findings suggest that Coping Through Football offers a possibility of a reconnection with a previous identity. Football is viewed as meaningful and relevant in their lives. The findings demonstrate that offering a mainstream activity such as football may be a way for people to re-engage with services via an interest they had before becoming unwell.

Stopping drugs and getting healthy

Around one third of all service users have problems with drugs and alcohol, and the majority smoke tobacco. 84% found that football and the drug-free context it provides essential to staying clean or reducing habits; receiving encouragement and support from others and replacing drugs with something meaningful and worthwhile. Increasing exercise, reducing or stopping smoking are common outcomes that mean improvements to health and well-being.

Finding a service with a difference

Recent guidance on day services for people with mental health problems (*'From segregation to inclusion: Commissioning guidance on day services for people with mental health problems'*) recommends a movement away from day services of the traditional nature towards the use of ordinary community facilities including leisure and sports providers. Coping Through Football offers an excellent working example of how these recommendations can be realised.

Opening up the social world

People with mental illness often have difficulty developing and maintaining social relationships and this hinders recovery. Coping Through Football offers the opportunity for social interaction in the context of a normalising activity and demonstrates how participation can contribute to the reduction of social isolation, relationship-building and a wider social network. The safety to express oneself and mutual support were very evident and in many ways the players function as a social support group.

Enhancing empowerment

Several of the findings reported in this study (achievement, confidence, moving forwards) suggest that clients are developing their personal competence and taking charge of decisions in their own lives, with 44% moving on to employment, education and training.

Notes

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