



Cancer Through Our Eyes Post-Project Report

Evaluating the Effectiveness of a 6-Week Shared Reading and Digital Storytelling Programme to Improve Wellbeing for Those Receiving Cancer Care

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Executive Summary

This project was delivered by Verbal in partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support and the Western Health and Social Care Trust as part of the Macmillan-funded 'Cancer: Through Our Eyes' Creative Arts Grant Programme. Verbal developed a six-week programme based on Shared Reading and digital storytelling to improve mental wellbeing and foster feelings of hope and optimism in those receiving cancer care.

It is imperative to improve mental wellbeing and optimism for those who have received a cancer diagnosis. Rates of poor mental health are over twice as high in those with a cancer diagnosis compared to those without (Hewitt, Rowland, & Yancik, 2003), and this has been attributed to increased fears, lack of control, and low morale.

As poor mental wellbeing can impact the treatment and recovery process, we aimed to improve mental wellbeing and morale for those receiving cancer care. We designed a programme combining Shared Reading with digital storytelling, encouraging participants to write poetry to the theme of 'Cancer Through Our Eyes' which was recorded and used to create a digital output.

This intervention was delivered to a total of 10 participants at the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Campus. Sessions were co-delivered by facilitators from Verbal and the North West Cancer Centre.

Mental wellbeing significantly improved in 86% of participants. The programme helped participants to feel more rested, more active, more cheerful, and calmer in their daily lives.

Nearly half of participants felt more hopeful and optimistic after taking part in the programme. Particular improvements were seen for the ability to solve problems, plan for the future, and feeling more confident and able to overcome obstacles.

All participants enjoyed taking part in the programme and would take part in a similar programme again. Participants enjoyed the social aspect of the programme and the ability to hear and learn from the stories of others on their cancer journey. The friendly atmosphere cultivated by facilitators and group members was praised, particularly when dealing with such sensitive topic material. Finally, participants appreciated the ability to be creative and to share their cancer journey with the world as the video created from their stories will be showcased at World Cancer Day 2024.

The findings of this programme demonstrate the benefits of arts-based interventions in improving wellbeing and morale for those receiving cancer care, helping to create connections between those on their cancer journey and providing an empowering avenue for creativity and sharing their story with others.

Introduction

Over 18 million people were diagnosed with cancer in 2020, and this rate is posited to rise to a yearly diagnosis rate of 28 million by 2040 (Cancer Research UK, 2024).

In addition to the physical health burdens associated with cancer, a diagnosis of cancer can be accompanied by mental health difficulties. Adults with a cancer diagnosis are over twice as likely to experience debilitating mental health difficulties than adults without a cancer diagnosis (Hewitt et al., 2003). In particular, cancer survivors have an elevated risk of being diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Mitchell et al., 2013). Poor wellbeing following a cancer diagnosis has been attributed to factors such as treatment fears, feeling a lack of control, and a loss of hope and optimism (Bloom, Petersen, & Kang, 2007; Andrykowski, Lykins, & Floyd, 2008; Trijsburg, Van Knippenverg, & Rijpma, 1992).

The mental health challenges of a cancer diagnosis can inadvertently impact physical wellbeing and treatment effectiveness. Untreated mental health difficulties can both accelerate the progression of cancer and can reduce both attendance to and adherence to treatment (Adler & Page, 2008; Grenard et al., 2011). It is imperative to improve the mental wellbeing of those with a cancer diagnosis to speed up their recovery process and improve treatment effectiveness.

Research indicates that an effective method of improving wellbeing for those experiencing cancer care is to foster feelings of hope and optimism (Carver et al., 2005). This can be achieved through arts-based interventions which promote tenets of positive psychology such as optimism, resilience, self-esteem and a sense of purpose (Rieger et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; VanderWeele, 2017). At Verbal, Shared Reading programmes have previously been effective at improving participant wellbeing and sense of optimism, particularly helping them to feel hopeful and energised (Verbal, 2023).

The aim of this programme is to develop an arts-based intervention using both Shared Reading and digital storytelling to improve mental wellbeing and foster feelings of hope and optimism for those on their cancer journey. This programme is part of the Macmillan Cancer Support funded 'Cancer: Through Our Eyes' Creative Arts Grant Programme in partnership with the Western Health and Social Care Trust. Creative outputs from this programme will be showcased and celebrated on World Cancer Day in February 2024.

| Methods

The Programme

A six-session intervention designed to improve mental wellbeing, foster feelings of hope and optimism, and encourage creativity was delivered at the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Campus at Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry~Londonderry.

Sessions were divided into a Shared Reading component and a digital storytelling component. The first three sessions used Verbal's Shared Reading model to encourage self-reflection and discussion related to the following topics:



Self-care



Sharing your
journey



A hopeful
outlook

The final three sessions involved the creation of a digital output based on a poem written by each participant to the theme of 'Cancer Through Our Eyes'. Verbal's Audio-Visual Project Officer recorded each participant narrating their poem; either audio or both visual and audio narration was recorded based on the preference of the participant. The narration of each poem was used to create a video which celebrates each participant sharing their cancer story and their journey. This video will be exhibited as part of World Cancer Day in February 2024.

Shared Reading Model

This intervention was developed using Verbal's Shared Reading Model. This model is derived from Affective Bibliotherapy (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008, Heath et al., 2005), a process involving the guided reading of literature combined with targeted discussions. Shared Reading fosters change and understanding in others by gently breaking through defence mechanisms to help develop insight (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008). Stories act as an "intermediary object" between the person and their problems (Gray et al., 2016), offering a less direct but appropriate way of discussing their emotions and experiences in a safe and inclusive environment (Detrixhe, 2010).

Programme Development

Poetry was selected by Verbal's Literature Team to align with the mental health themes previously outlined. In the Shared Reading Model, discussions are guided by psychologically-informed annotations written by Verbal's Psychology Team to prompt personal and group growth, healing and understanding. These annotations are guided by key psychological frameworks, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to change unhealthy thoughts and behaviours, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to accept and/or change emotions and behaviours.

This programme was co-delivered by facilitators from Verbal and the North West Cancer Centre. Audio/visual content was captured and edited by Verbal's Audio-Visual Project Officer to create the final video output.

Programme Assessment

Participants completed a questionnaire before and after taking part in the intervention; these questionnaires contained the same psychological measures to allow direct comparison pre- and post-intervention. These measures are:



WHO-5 Well-Being Index

This is a five-item measure designed to assess psychological wellbeing and quality of life (Bech, 2004). High scores are indicative of positive wellbeing and a high quality of life.



Adult Hope Scale

The Adult Hope Scale is a 12-item measure which assesses components of hope and optimism such as the ability to overcome obstacles, goal-setting, looking forward to the future and more (Synder et al., 1991). High scores are indicative of feeling hopeful, confident and optimistic.

Procedure

This programme was delivered at the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Campus, Altnagelvin Hospital between October-November 2023. Participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire before the beginning of the first session.

For the first three sessions, participants would be read a poem pertaining to themes of wellbeing and fostering hope. Stories were selected by Verbal's Literature Team and structured breaks were implemented for discussions. The Psychology team developed questions for these breaks that would encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. For the final three sessions, participants wrote poetry to the theme of 'Cancer Through Our Eyes' and recorded their narration of the poem to be used in the final project video. The programme was delivered in six sessions delivered once per week. Participants completed the post-intervention questionnaire at the end of the programme.

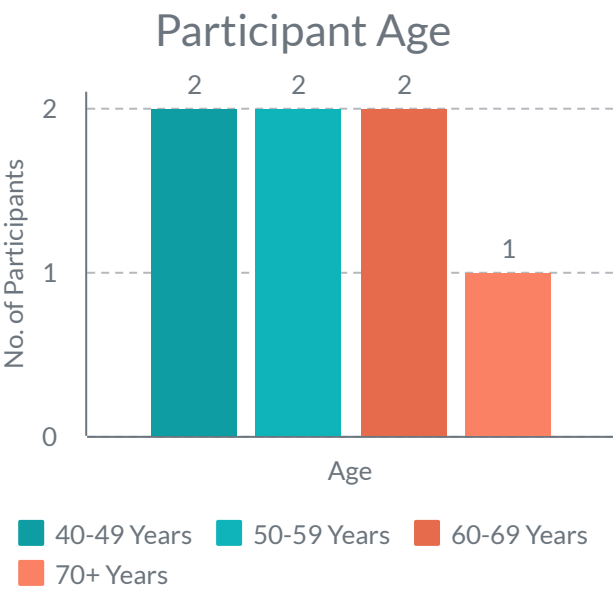
Data Analysis Strategy

Quantitative data were entered, cleaned and statistically analysed by the Verbal Psychology Team using SPSS Version 29. t-tests were used to explore whether scores on psychological measures significantly changed before and after taking part in the intervention.

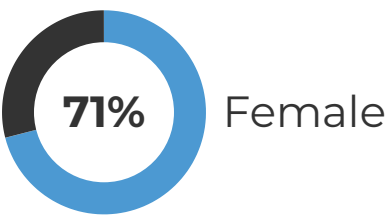
Statistical significance was explored when analysing data. Statistical significance refers to the probability that a finding happened due to a specific cause, most likely the result of the programme. In alignment with established guidelines, results were considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$. This means that we can be at least 95% sure that a finding was not due to chance or coincidence.

Results: Participant Overview

This programme was delivered in the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Campus to a total of 10 participants. A consent form, a pre-programme questionnaire, and a post-programme questionnaire were available for seven participants (70%).



Participants ranged between ages 47-82, with a relatively even distribution of ages across the groups (mean age=59.14).



The majority of participants were female (71%) and all participants described themselves as being of white ethnicity. Three participants (43%) were of a Catholic religious background, three participants (43%) were of a Protestant religious background, and one participant (14%) denoted their religious background as 'other'.

Results: Mental Wellbeing

Programme Results

Mental wellbeing **significantly improved** in participants after taking part in the programme ($t=1.77, p=.008$). We found that overall mental wellbeing scores improved in **86% of participants**, with particular improvements seen for feeling rested and active which improved in **86%** and **71% of participants** respectively.

↑ **86%**

Improved their
wellbeing

↑ **86%**

Felt more rested

↑ **71%**

Felt more active

↑ **57%**

Felt more cheerful

↑ **57%**

Felt calmer

Results: Optimism

Programme Results

↑ **43%**

Felt more optimistic

Feelings of hope and optimism improved in **43% of participants** after taking part in the programme.

The programme helped **43% of participants** feel more able to solve problems and make plans for the future, while **29% of participants** felt more confident and motivated about setting goals and overcoming obstacles.

↑ **43%**

Improved their
problem-solving
and future planning

↑ **29%**

Felt more confident
and able to
overcome obstacles

Results: Programme Feedback



Enjoyed
taking part

All participants enjoyed taking part in the programme and would take part in a similar programme again.

Participants were asked what their favourite part of the programme was. Responses were organised into the following themes:

Theme 1: Socialising

“

**[My favourite thing was]
meeting the group.**

Participants enjoyed the ability to meet new people as a result of the programme and to enjoy their “*friendship and camaraderie*”.

A particular aspect of socialising that participants enjoyed was the ability to hear the perspectives and stories of other people on their cancer journey. Participants would “*whole-heartedly*” share their stories which the group enjoyed hearing.

“

The most favourite part of the programme for me was meeting the other participants and listening to their "cancer journey". Each person who took part did so whole-heartedly and they shared their stories/experiences willingly.

“

**Great mix of lovely people...
hoping we can stay in touch
and do more of the same.**

Theme 2: Friendliness

A popular component of the programme was the “*happy atmosphere*” and “*friendliness*” that both project facilitators and group members themselves cultivated during the programme, ensuring that friendships were made and all stories were welcome.

This was particularly welcomed by participants who appreciated the seriousness of the subject matter and how delicately it was managed.

“

I also really enjoyed the friendliness and happy atmosphere considering everyone is affected by cancer.

“

The people who we met who facilitated... Great attitude and very positive. Look forward to every week.

Theme 3: Creativity

“

I loved getting my personal story turned into a poem after 20 years.

Finally, participants appreciated how the programme helped them to tell their story and provided a space “*to be creative*” and “*share [their] cancer journey*”.

“

[It was] an opportunity to be creative, to meet others and share my cancer journey.

| Discussion

We designed a six-week programme combining the Shared Reading of poetry with digital storytelling for those receiving cancer care. The aim of this programme was to improve mental wellbeing and to foster feelings of hope and optimism as these outcomes are associated with improved treatment outcomes for those in cancer care.

We found that mental wellbeing significantly improved in 86% of participants after taking part. The programme had a wide range of mental health benefits for participants, including helping them to feel more rested, calmer, more cheerful, and more active and invigorated. These findings demonstrate the range of positive effects that arts-based interventions can have for those receiving cancer care.

Nearly half of participants felt more hopeful and optimistic after taking part in the programme. Participants felt better able to plan for their future and felt more equipped to solve problems in their lives, with nearly one in three participants feeling more confident and better able to overcome obstacles. Increases in hopefulness, optimism, confidence and problem-solving support the benefits that arts-based programmes can bring to those receiving cancer care in a supportive and empowering manner.

All participants enjoyed taking part in the programme and would happily take part in a similar programme again. Qualitative feedback identified three key components of the programme that participants enjoyed: the ability to meet and spend time with others on their cancer journey; the positive and kind atmosphere cultivated when managing such sensitive topics and material; and the opportunity to be creative and to tell their story. This feedback indicates that the programme allowed participants to use their voice and share their story with others in a manner that fostered social connections. The friendships fostered from this programme can continue to benefit the mental wellbeing of participants by providing additional sources of support and help-seeking during their cancer journey (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996).

In conclusion, this arts-based programme was successful in improving mental wellbeing and optimism in those receiving cancer care. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and share their story, and found additional benefits such as getting to meet new people and hearing their story. These findings demonstrate the mental health, social and creative benefits that arts-based interventions can provide to those on their cancer journey.

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Thank you

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