



CLEAR Post-Project Report

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

Table of Contents

01	Executive Summary	01
02	Introduction	02
03	Methods	03
04	Results: Participant Overview	06
05	Results: Mental Wellbeing	07
06	Results: Optimism	08
07	Results: Programme Feedback	09
08	Discussion	11
09	References	12

| Executive Summary

This project was supported by the Public Health Agency through the Clear Project. Verbal developed and delivered a six-week Shared Reading programme 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 Shared Reading programme to target aspects of positive wellbeing such as fostering a hopeful outlook, creating connections with others, the importance of self-care and more.

This intervention was delivered to those receiving cancer care at the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Campus in Derry~Londonderry. Sessions were delivered by facilitators from Verbal.

Mental wellbeing improved in all participants. The programme helped participants to manage problems in their lives and helped them to feel closer to others.

We also found that all 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 storytelling nature of the programme as it helped them to relax and reignited their love of literature. The ability to discuss the stories and share their own stories helped participants to spend time with and make friends with others on their cancer journey.

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 a creative avenue for meeting others and sharing their story.

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).

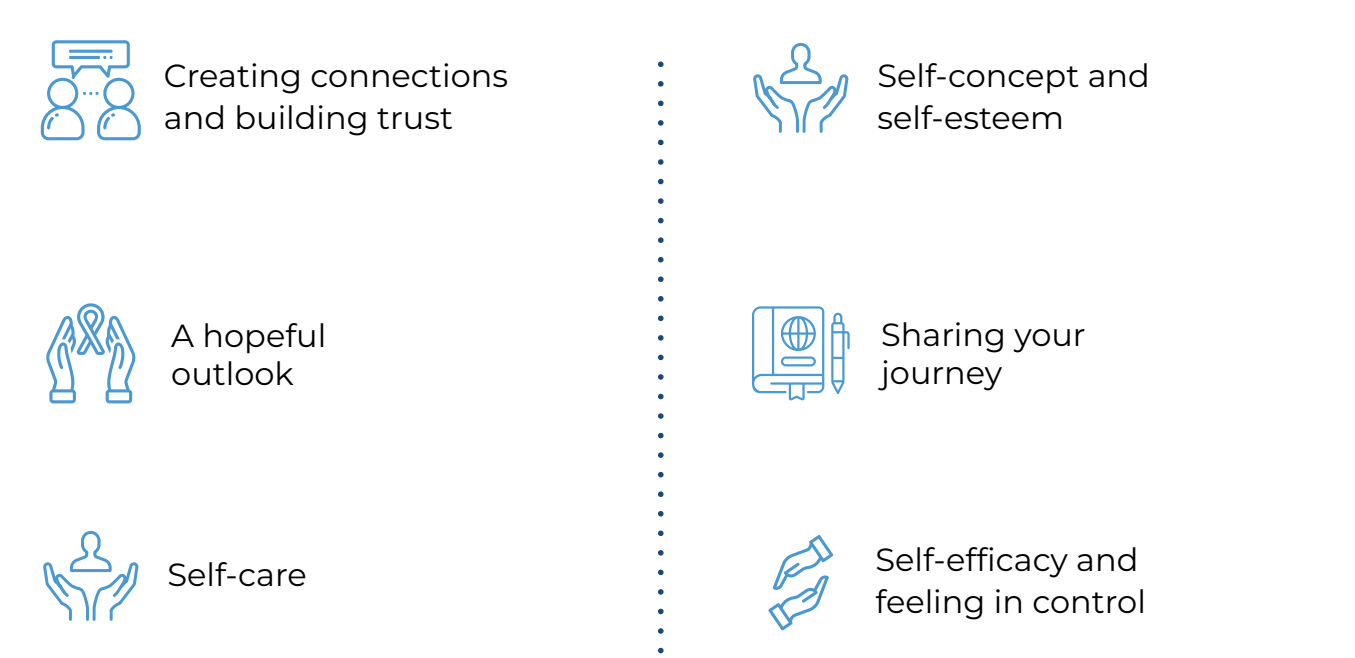
The aim of this programme is to develop an arts-based intervention to improve mental wellbeing and foster feelings of hope and optimism for those on their cancer journey. This project was supported by the Public Health Agency through the Clear Project.

Methods

The Programme

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

Sessions used Verbal’s Shared Reading Model to encourage self-reflection and discussion related to the following topics:



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 and short stories were 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 delivered by facilitators from Verbal.

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:



Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale – Short Form

This is a 7-item measure which uses positively-worded questions to assess mental wellbeing, including facets such as feeling hopeful, relaxed and connected to others (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). High scores are indicative of participants feeling positive, hopeful and getting along with others.



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 January-February 2024. Participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire before the beginning of the first session.

During sessions, participants would be read a poem or short story pertaining to themes of wellbeing and fostering hope. Literature was 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. The programme was delivered in six sessions delivered once per week. Participants completed the post-intervention questionnaire at the end of the programme.

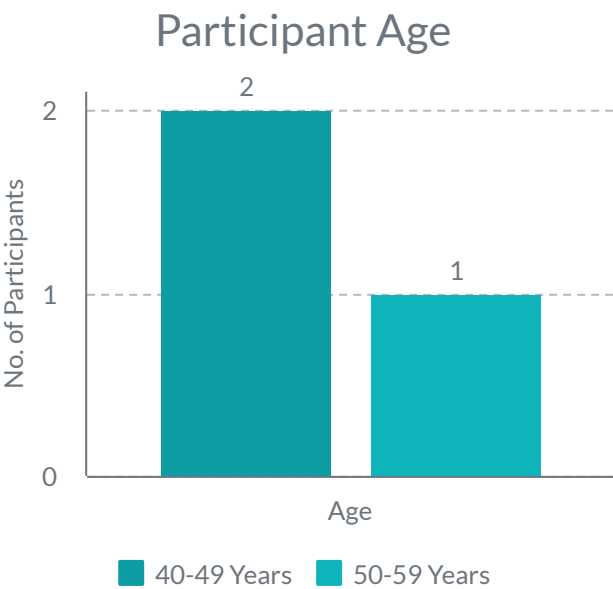
Data Analysis Strategy

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 five participants. Three participants (60%) completed a pre-programme questionnaire, with two participants (40%) completing a matching post-programme questionnaire.



Participants ranged between ages 47-55 (mean age: 50)

All participants were female and described themselves as being of white ethnicity. Two participants (67%) were of a Protestant religious background and one participant (33%) was of a Catholic religious background.

Results: Mental Wellbeing

Programme Results

↑ **100%**

Improved their wellbeing

Mental wellbeing **improved in all participants** after taking part in the programme, with particular improvements seen for being able to manage problems and feeling closer to others which improved in **50% of participants**.

↑ **50%**

Improved problem management

↑ **50%**

Felt closer to others



Results: Optimism

Programme Results

↑ 100%

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

Felt more optimistic

The programme helped **all participants** to feel more able to solve problems and make plans for the future, while **50% of participants** felt more confident and motivated about setting goals and overcoming obstacles.

↑ 100%

Improved their
problem-solving
and future planning

↑ 50%

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 and if they had any suggestions for improvement. Responses were organised into the following themes:

Theme 1: Enjoyment

“

**Relaxing and meeting
friends.**

Participants enjoyed multiple aspects of the storytelling programme. Being read to led to feelings that the programme was "*relaxing*", while the discussion breaks incorporated into the story sessions led to participants "*meeting friends*" and forging connections with others in the programme.

“

**Learning to enjoy stories
again. This has encouraged
me to get back into reading.**

The programme also helped to reignite a love of reading as one participant reported that it had "*encouraged [them] to get back into reading*".

Theme 2: Future Programmes

When asking for feedback on how the programme could improve, one participant's feedback reflected the challenging yet rewarding nature of working with those on their cancer journey. They reported that "*larger classes would be good for discussions*" as attendance was impacted by poor health and treatment sessions, otherwise they felt the programme was "*excellent*".

“

Larger classes would be good for discussions. Otherwise excellent.



| Discussion

Verbal designed a six-week Shared Reading programme for those currently receiving cancer care. The aims of the programme were 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 improved in all participants after taking part. The programme had a range of mental health benefits for participants, such as helping participants to manage problems in their lives and helping them to feel closer to others. These findings demonstrate the range of positive effects that arts-based interventions can have for those receiving cancer care.

We also found that all 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 50% of 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 that the programme helped to reignite a love of storytelling in participants, helped participants to relax, and helped participants to meet and spend time with others on their cancer journey. 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). The value of meeting and sharing stories with others was highlighted in programme feedback requesting larger group numbers in the future. Future iterations of this programme will strive to meet this feedback while being mindful of the time and health challenges experienced by those receiving cancer treatment.

In conclusion, our arts-based programme was successful in improving mental wellbeing and optimism in those receiving cancer care. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to meet new people and helped to reignite their love of literature. 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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