

## **Living Life To The Full: a life skills course** **by Lesley O'Brien**

LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL; 12 HOURS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE...sleep better, feel happier, gain confidence, get out more...' read the poster on the walls of a Women's Aid refuge. Eager to make the changes promised that would lift their unhappiness or depression, 9 women signed up for the 8-week course. Commitment from the hosting organisation and the workers 'on the ground' is essential for such projects to run efficiently. Planning meetings and a clear understanding of what's on offer is crucial, to get those bums on seats. Is *your* poster clear and enticing?

LLF is a life skills course, based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, developed by Dr Chris Williams of Glasgow University. However, there is no mention of CBT or any jargon in the handouts. It is written in plain English. Each week the women received a new booklet with eye-catching headings such as 'Why Do I Feel So Bad', 'How To Fix Almost Anything', and 'Write All Over Your Bathroom Mirror'.

This is the *practical* use of bibliotherapy, rather than the *creative* use, to improve mental health; it is about learning new life skills. However, creative teaching methods firmly held the attention of the women and inspired their commitment to make the changes suggested.. Creative writing is used, e.g. write to yourself, imagining it's 10 years from now and thank yourself for persevering in making the changes and creating such a great future. Also, blank note-lets were eagerly snapped up, on which the women were to write inspirational messages to themselves about why they wanted to change. The notes were then stuck onto kitchen cupboards, bathroom mirrors etc. One woman placed them next to a photo of her children; 'For Becky and Jo, You Can Do It'.

Some of the more wacky techniques included making a fancy paper aeroplane (and seeing whose went the furthest, of course) although the point being that most things can be achieved if broken down into smaller stages. 'How do you eat an elephant?' asks one of the booklets, answer, a) Break elephant into small chunks and b) Eat one chunk at a time.

Mindfulness was encouraged through the use of 'wow glasses', gold star shaped glasses,

to help see things a little differently, concentrate on the beauty of things around us, instead of walking head down, worrying about tomorrow. The course is based around the theory of putting a stop to the vicious circle that can make people feel bad. By changing one thing in the circle, this can stop it spinning, turn it around and so start to make you feel better. The circle is divided into 4 areas; thinking, feelings, behaviour and physical symptoms. So with 'wow' glasses on or at least symbolically so (we only had one pair to share around) we went for a walk outside in the refuge garden. Before going out, all of the women completed a mood indicator worksheet, rating levels of happiness, anxiety and worry. Women chatted in little groups, reminiscing about playground games, commenting on the benefits of the herbs in the garden etc. Sure enough when we came back and completed the mood chart again, everyone felt, happier and less anxious than before. This simple and silly task, proved the theory to be true to it's word and inspired the women on.

More serious tasks and discussions took place, but crucially there was variety, including the use of worksheets, group discussion and activities, DVD clips, slides, and posters, Being used to facilitating groups that allow plenty time for the exploration of feelings, I had to keep a close reign on this, to keep the focus upon learning new skills. It was a matter of getting the balance right, allowing a limited time for the women to talk about their own situations and permitting individuals 'time-out' if needed, as well as signposting to appropriate support. However, on a bibliotherapy course, tears will flow, so 2 facilitators are recommended to help deal with the emotional issues that are likely to surface.

The women learned new life skills in a fun way and by the end of the 8 weeks, all of the women spoke very positively about its effect upon them. One woman wrote in the evaluation , *'It has been great and helped me so much. I have made changes to my life skills, made friends, and have enjoyed the course. It has helped me with confidence, self-esteem and dealing with problems.'* This woman liked the messages and graphics in the little booklets so much, she planned to frame several and put them up in her new home, to remind her what to do to remain positive.

A reunion meeting took place 6 weeks after it's completion, the content, less prescriptive than before, allowing the women to put their own stamp upon it. The aim being to encourage continued use of the new skills learned. The group decided to double this up as a clothes swap, a suggestion made previously in plans to deal with money being tight.

With the meeting relaxed and informal, the women spontaneously reflected upon what they felt they had learned and benefited from the course. Tears brimmed, as we listened intently to each woman's speech, heartfelt and passionate, with their new found conviction to 'Live Life to the Full'.

*For further information re Living Life To the Full, including practitioner training visit '<http://littf.com>'.*