



Narratives of Personal Renewal

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Narratives of Personal Renewal is a collaborative partnership between Aberystwyth University's Centre for Creative Wellbeing and the Fathom Trust, working in cooperation with the Hywel Dda University Health Board and six creative practitioners.

Narratives of Personal Renewal was established by the Centre for Creativity and Wellbeing of Aberystwyth University with the intention of bringing writing and craft together to investigate whether the combined activity produces more effective wellbeing outcomes than each practice delivers as a single intervention. Writers at the Centre have investigated effective ways of using writing and language as interventions in healthcare and wellbeing settings¹ alongside the Fathom Trust, who work with individuals and groups in Powys suffering with stress, fatigue, and physical and psychological conditions, providing workshops, materials, teaching and marketing opportunities through craft hubs. The Narratives of Personal Renewal programme was offered to all staff from Hywel Dda University Health Board to offer positive pathways to recovery, resilience, and regeneration. It was supported through the Research Wales Innovation Fund and coordinated by Phil Jones, a creative writing practitioner and musician, on behalf of Aberystwyth University. The project was led by Dr Jacqueline Yallop, Director of the Centre for Creativity and Wellbeing, with two consultants from the Fathom Trust advising on project design. The structure of the project was devised collaboratively.

The project had two KPIs connected to practitioner development, which were to:

- Create a new hub of 6 creative practitioners based at the Centre for Creativity and Wellbeing with responsibility for delivering wellbeing activity in partnership with the Fathom Trust

¹ This publication by the Centre asked writers to respond to the role of the subconscious in wellbeing outcomes: [Edited by Aaron Kent & Jacqueline Yallop - Dream Latin. Writing the Subconscious | Broken Sleep Books \(https://www.brokensleepbooks.com/product-page/dream-latin-writing-the-subconscious\)](#)

- Create skills training and employment for 6 writers and makers, with the intention of creating a new network of artists and facilitators working collaboratively together.

Through Phil Jones' contacts within creative writing circles, six practitioners were brought into the collaborative project, including writers Clare Potter, George Sandifer-Smith and Christina Thatcher; textiles artist Laura Thomas; movement and meditation coordinator Lucy Sheehan and Occupational Therapist Clare Clark from the Fathom Trust. Instead of hosting the events at the University, the project intentionally approached venues in West Wales with strong connections to nature and history to facilitate embodied experiences in stimulating environments. Feedback from participants demonstrated that it was hugely beneficial that the sessions were held in historical locations that were closely connected to nature. Three days of movement, crafting and creative writing activities took place in March 2023. The venues were Rhosygilwen in Pembrokeshire, The National Botanic Garden's Pantwgan Farm in Carmarthenshire and Strata Florida in Ceredigion, which is a former monastery. Some of these venues were new to hosting creative interventions and, much like creating a new network of artists and facilitators, hosting at new venues helped towards capacity building for this kind of activity in West Wales.



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Although the funding had a broad remit which didn't specify a target audience for the planned activities, Hywel Dda University Health Board approached NHS staff who had feelings of burnout or symptoms of stress. An open call was released to all staff employed by the Health Board for the days of respite and recovery, with the hope of attracting those who would benefit most.

The objectives, designed and agreed with Hywel Dda University Health Board, were:

1. To create a safe but active space for exploring wellbeing;
2. To use writing and craft to improve health and wellbeing;
3. To enable activities which prompt new ways of approaching, managing and articulating physical or psychological health issues;
4. To enable activities which allow participants to address and/or express complex experience and emotions;
5. To evaluate outcomes in order to propose a framework for future activities.

In order to meet objectives 1-4 it was essential to protect the psychological wellbeing of the entire group. The project prioritised making the sessions a safe place for both participants and practitioners, so the Occupational Therapist was present in every session to monitor the wellbeing of all involved.

Days of respite and recovery

The day-long sessions took place on Saturdays to allow as many staff as possible to attend. The sessions had between five and ten participants, who ranged from Consultant level medics to administrators, to therapists and hospital service managers. Some members of the NHS internal clinical wellbeing team also attended, both to sample the efficacy of the sessions and to benefit from them personally. As there was a wide range of roles, experience and seniority levels involved in the sessions, there was an element of peer to peer support and mentoring in the discussions that arose about the NHS as an organisation.

The structure of the sessions involved movement, craft and creative writing. This interdisciplinary element was particularly successful. The artistic practitioners all devised bespoke sessions following meetings with the project team online in advance, but overall the sessions followed this structure:

- movement and meditation, including yoga
- textile crafts including hand looming with natural materials
- creative writing

The crafting element allowed participants to chat informally between themselves and with the facilitators, before the creative writing session prompted deeper reflection and exploration of the themes which came through in the crafting. Hand looming practice was introduced as something the participants could do at home very easily with very cheap or found materials, such as pieces of driftwood. Some participants created sophisticated landscapes from pieces of wood and cuts of thread, which could be eas-



Textiles 1 ©2024 Phil Jones

ily replicated at home.

The creative writing exercises were pitched for doctors or NHS staff who use writing consistently but very practically as part of their jobs. The prac-

titioners asked them to examine what creative writing is and what it's for. Is it something you can take away and put into your daily practice?

The creative writers also offered suggestions for ways the participants could continue to practice, along with information around further reading. Interrogating the theme of creativity ran through all the sessions, prompting participants to consider what creativity means to them and how it could be utilised in their lives going forward.

Feedback from participants demonstrated that the collaborative structure of the different artistic practices enabled those involved to benefit from a day of reflection and respite. In particular, pairing textiles craft work and creative writing together was effective, especially following the movement sessions which helped participants to feel grounded. As one participant noted:

“It was very well thought out and designed, beginning with the movement and meditation to slow our minds down to start which was a super start.. and the meditative hand looming sessions which was fab... and the interesting and creative way to dig down into our thoughts with creative writing.”

Evaluation

The project leads sought feedback from the participants through questionnaires, and held a debriefing meeting with the practitioners to interrogate what worked well and what didn't. Wellbeing outcomes were examined through this feedback.

In terms of meeting the stated goal of renewal, rest and relaxation, participants described their emotional states following the days as:

- “Refreshed”,
- “Looking forward to a new start”,
- “Some days after the session – fatigued following a day’s clinical practice, but still fulfilled”,
- “Grateful”,
- “relaxed”,
- “Very satisfied with my achievements”,
- A further five stated they felt “Good”, “Well” or “Very well”.

When asked if attending the session had made a difference to how they felt, all 16 responses stated that it had:

“It made me feel so connected to other professionals who experience the same issues, and it was so nice to have fun trying out new things together without any pressure. It was genuinely just so much fun to have a lovely time together. I can’t stop thinking about all the lovely wholesome conversations we shared together, it has really re-energised me.”

“Yes, I felt I had some time and space to breathe. The session inspired me to explore my creative self.”

“The wellbeing session has allowed me to participate in activities with colleagues from varying parts of the Health Board, and at varying stages of their careers – as such it has made me feel a deeper sense of community, and more at ease.”



Writing 1 ©2024 Phil Jones

One participant noted: “I must confess to a certain feeling of trepidation that they would sort of be wishy washy, creative stuff, and that the emphasis would be on resilience. And this comes up a lot within the health board. They talk about resilience a lot. But actually, the conversation was turned

more towards vulnerability. And yeah, the whole approach smashed my preconceptions about what true healing could feel like.” When asked “To what extent would you agree that following the session you are more likely to introduce more creative practice into your day-to-day life?” 100% of respondents said that they would.

The informal feedback from practitioners was similarly positive, noting that working with other creative disciplines brought a new depth to the sessions and outcomes which felt really rewarding. The Shaw Foundation has provided further funding to enable the Centre for Creativity and Wellbeing to continue working with the Fathom Trust in developing the project’s format. The Centre will work with the Carers Trust to use creative activity to improve wellbeing outcomes for carers in West Wales.

Through discussion with a number of health and wellbeing networks, carers were identified as a key target group because the project has been shown to address a issues of particular relevance to carers in West Wales including: isolation, mental health stresses, lack of opportunity for creative activity; lack of opportunity on account of low income. The project will include both paid and unpaid carers, with help from The Carers Trust and Ceredigion Carers Network to reach participants.

Additional information:

Department of English & Creative Writing , Aberystwyth University: <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/english/about>

Fathom Trust: <https://fathomtrust.com>