



This evaluation report was undertaken by the University of Gloucestershire, 2019.

Engage With Your Community With Fresh Eyes

Preliminary evaluation of mindful
photography as an intervention to support
wellbeing



Dr Rachel C. Sumner
Miss Samantha Hughes
University of Gloucestershire

Prof Diane Crone
Cardiff Metropolitan University



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Funding Declaration

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Mindful Photography course offered by Look Again was established to support individuals to increase their wellbeing and mental health. Mindful Photography is defined as “using our sight and a camera as an anchor to help us become more consciously aware of the present moment. It is experiencing the process of creating photographs in a non-judgmental, compassionate way” (Ruth Davey, 2017). The mindful photography course involved six half-day sessions to develop photography skills and improve mental health and wellbeing through mindfulness techniques. The present evaluation was commissioned to evaluate this intervention for its efficacy in improving participants’ health and wellbeing

Objectives

The evaluation set out to answer two questions:

1. Are there changes in participants’ levels of health, wellbeing, and mental health after involvement in the intervention?
2. What are participants’ experiences and perceptions of the intervention?

Method

The evaluation employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the objectives. Participant self-report data were used to address objective 1; comparing before and after scores on a bespoke questionnaire. A focus group was carried out at the end of a course to address objective 2.

Results

Quantitative assessments show support for this intervention in increasing mental health and wellbeing of those that take part. All measured, self-reported outcomes show improvement in comparisons of before and after self-completion of the bespoke questionnaire. The programme appears to appeal to both men and women, in contrast to many existing social prescribing interventions where men are often less likely to elect to be involved.

Qualitative evidence provides support for the use of this intervention to increase participant wellbeing. Participants identify that the programme provides them with an ability to learn sustainable skills (mindfulness and photography) and use these to support their day-to-day lives. The nature setting that the intervention takes place in is of importance, and provides participants with feelings of relaxation and wellbeing. The intervention provides opportunities for social connection that are valued by participants. The provision of an exhibition at the end of the course also is reported to provide participants with a valued opportunity to showcase their work, and to feel that they have transitioned into being able to continue activities independently.

Conclusions

The intervention, from the methods employed to assess them, shows support for it being an effective intervention in promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are provided to increase data robustness to facilitate future evaluation. Recommendations regarding practice are also provided to both continue and enhance good practice.

Lay Executive Summary

What is the report about?

The Mindful Photography course offered by Look Again was established to help support the wellbeing and mental health of those taking part. Mindful Photography is defined as “using our sight and a camera as an anchor to help us become more consciously aware of the present moment. It is experiencing the process of creating photographs in a non-judgmental, compassionate way” (Ruth Davey, 2017). The mindful photography course involved six half-day sessions to develop photography skills and improve mental health and wellbeing through mindfulness techniques. This evaluation was commissioned to evaluate this intervention for its ability to improving participants’ health and wellbeing.

What did it aim to do?

The evaluation set out to answer two questions:

1. Do participants’ levels of health, wellbeing, and mental health improve after involvement in the intervention?
2. What are participants’ experiences and perceptions of the intervention?

How did it do it?

The evaluation use survey data and the responses from participants during a focus group to answer the questions. Participant self-report questionnaire answers were used to answer the first question by comparing before and after scores. A focus group was then carried out at the end of a course to answer the second question.

What did it find?

Survey response assessments show support for this intervention in increasing mental health and wellbeing of those that take part. All measured outcomes show improvement in comparisons of before and after self-completion questionnaires. The course appears to appeal to both men and women, with an even number of men and women attending.

Analysis of the focus group also supports the use of this intervention to increase participant wellbeing. Participants value the ability to learn sustainable skills (mindfulness and photography) and use these to support their day-to-day lives. The nature setting that the intervention takes place in provides participants with feelings of relaxation and wellbeing. Participants appreciate the opportunity for social connection that the course provides. The exhibition at the end of the course provides participants with a highly valued opportunity to showcase their work, and to feel that they have transitioned into being able to continue activities independently.

Conclusions

The intervention is effective in promoting mental health and wellbeing.

What happens now?

Several recommendations are provided to increase the strength of future evaluations.

Recommendations regarding practice are also provided to both continue and enhance good practice.

Introduction

The mindful photography course offered by Look Again was established to support individuals to increase their wellbeing and mental health. Mindful Photography is defined as “using our sight and a camera as an anchor to help us become more consciously aware of the present moment. It is experiencing the process of creating photographs in a non-judgmental, compassionate way” (Ruth Davey, 2017; www.look-again.org). The programme involves being referred (or self-referring) to a course of mindful photography. Each course of participatory mindful photography consists of six half-day sessions. Participants are provided with a course to develop photography skills focused on aesthetics rather than technical knowledge. The intervention includes increasing activity by walking to find objects to photograph, and using mindfulness to support the development of photographic composition, using colour, texture etc. Participants do not require professional photographic equipment, and are encouraged to use whatever equipment they may have (e.g. mobile phone, tablet). The intervention involves visits to different locations, providing the participants with an acquaintance of nature environments through the County.

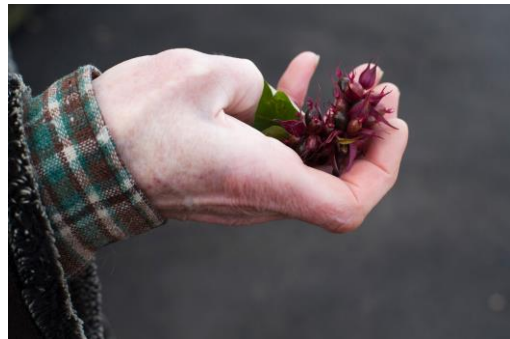


Image courtesy of Look Again

Evaluation framework

The evaluation framework adopted a mixed method design to investigate the efficacy of using mindful photography as an intervention to support wellbeing. The small sample size of the cohort limits the scope of quantitative analyses; however, some preliminary analyses have been carried out. To complement this, the qualitative component included a focus group of participants, undertaken to provide a more in-depth exploration into participant experiences and perceptions of the intervention.

Aim of the evaluation

To undertake a mixed-methods evaluation of the mindful photography intervention (“the intervention”) provided by Look Again as part of the Thriving Communities initiative. The aim of the intervention is to provide participants with a toolkit of practical skills and techniques that will help to improve their general health and wellbeing. The present evaluation sought to provide preliminary evidence on the efficacy of the intervention in supporting individuals’ wellbeing through analysing basic responses from a before and after bespoke survey, complemented by a focus group taking place at a ‘wrap-up’ event held at the end of the programme.

The evaluation included the following objectives:

1. To assess the effect of the intervention on the aspects collected in the before and after form.
2. To qualitatively investigate participants’ experiences and perceptions of the intervention.

Ethical considerations

Ethical and governance approval was received from the University of Gloucestershire School of Natural & Social Sciences Research Ethics Panel (ref: NSS_SUMNER_190506), June 2019.

Method

Process of referral and data collection

Participants were referred for the intervention via referral from third sector services (for example The Nelson Trust), or via self-referral having seen the information about the programme from local advertisements. Pre and post the intervention, participants were provided with a bespoke questionnaire, asking them to provide a self-assessment of their photography skills, mindfulness skills, community connections, enjoyment of nature, confidence, self-esteem, mental health, overall wellbeing, and motivation to engage with the activity. This questionnaire was designed by the programme director to answer specific objectives for the programme, and can be found in Appendix 1. On completion of the course participants, who had already signed up to attend a follow-on group activity, were invited by the facilitator to take part in the focus group discussion.

Written and verbal consent was collected from the participants that agreed to take part in the focus group prior to the discussion. Simple demographic information was also collected to help understand the participants perspectives in context, which can be found in Appendix 2.

Quantitative Data

Data were collected by the facilitator delivering the programme and were provided as an anonymous data set to the research team. As the questionnaire was devised specifically for this programme, limited inferences can be gathered from these data in terms of the programme's generalisability to other arts on prescription or social prescribing methodologies. Analysis for change pre and post the intervention was undertaken. Data collected included the following self-assessments:

- Photography skills
- Mindfulness skills
- Community connectedness
- Enjoyment of nature
- Confidence
- Self-esteem
- Mental health
- Overall wellbeing
- Motivation to engage with the activity

Qualitative Data:

A focus group with participants who engaged in the programme ($n=1$ focus group with 11 participants) was undertaken at the completion of the course. An interview schedule was devised to guide the discussion to address objective 2, which can be found in Appendix 3. The

focus group lasted 62 minutes and was audio recorded. The recording was transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Quantitative

Limited quantitative analysis can be carried out with this small sample size ($N=38$), and without psychometrically validated scales. However, we compared pre to post scores on the bespoke questionnaire issued to participants before and after taking part in the intervention to provide an indication as to efficacy in this cohort.

Qualitative

The focus group transcript was analysed using inductive thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These included the following phases:

1. Familiarisation with the data - transcripts were read and re-read, with brief notes recorded to create preliminary ideas for the next phase of the analysis.
2. Codes of interest were generated by extracting and collating pertinent excerpts of the data.
3. Emerging codes were organized into broad themes that reflected the content and meaning of the data, and reflected the evaluation aims and objectives.
4. Themes were reviewed and refined in relation to the generated codes and the entire data set.
5. Themes were labelled and defined, attempting to capture the essence of the data it contained.

Quotations were used in each theme, where possible, to enable the voices of participants to be represented in the findings.

Findings

Quantitative

The quantitative findings addressed objective 1:

1. To assess the effect of the intervention on the aspects collected in the before and after form.

An overview of the demographics of those that took part in the Look Again Thriving Communities intervention are present in Table 1. Most participants were in the 25-50 age group, however individuals from 18 up to 75 years of age took part. There was an even split of men and women that participated, which is unusual for an arts-based intervention, where usually samples are far more likely to be majority female (1). This is an important point, as it shows the activity is attractive to both men and women, where men are usually “left behind” in social prescribing and wellbeing activities.

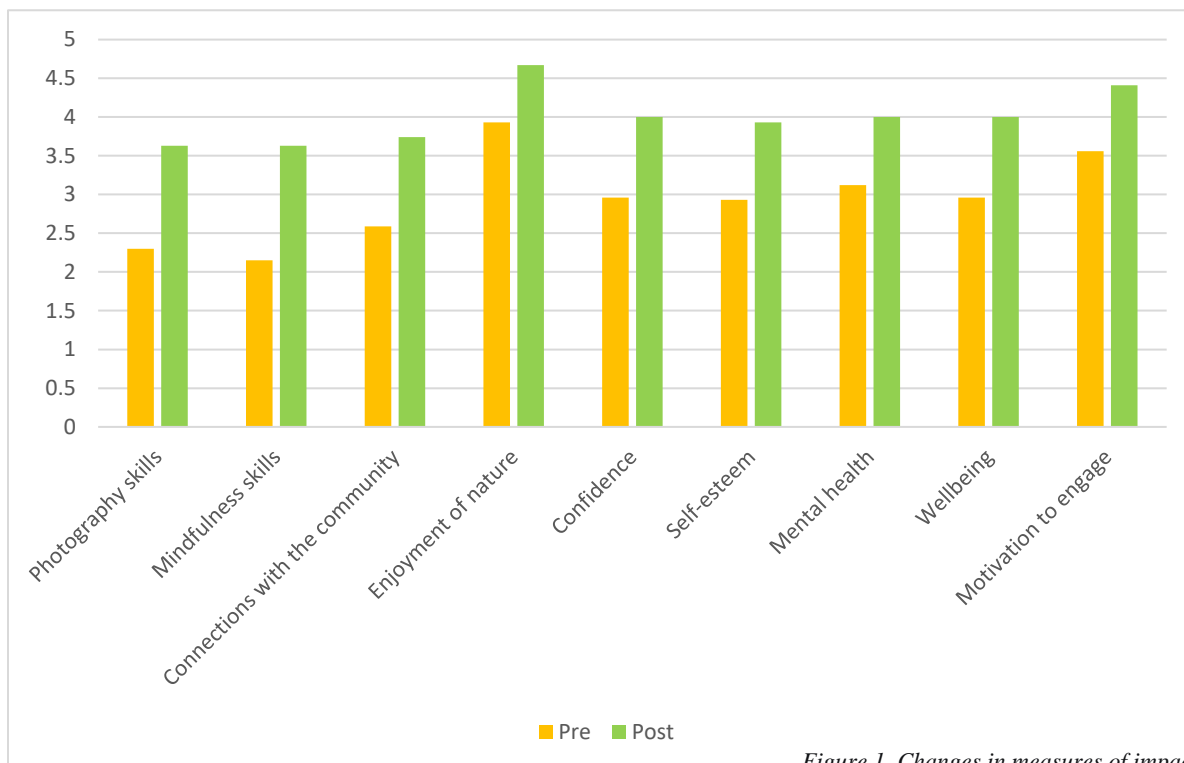


Figure 1. Changes in measures of impact

Assessing change from pre- to post-intervention, statistically significant improvements were detected in all measures. To this end, participants' perceptions of their photography skills, mindfulness skills, connections with their community, enjoyment of nature, confidence, self-esteem, mental health, overall sense of wellbeing, and motivation to engage with mindful photography all improved. Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the mean changes observed from before (pre) and after (post) the intervention. It can be concluded from these findings that the intervention is successful in increasing parameters of wellbeing and mental health in this sample of participants. Future evaluations may seek to include empirically validated scales to add to the existing literature in the area of social prescribing and interventions for health and wellbeing.

Table 1. Demographic overview of participants

		N	%
Group	Stroud Nature	8	22.9
	Nelson Trust	10	28.6
	APT Stonehouse	8	22.9
	Forest Green Rovers	9	25.7
Employment status	Full time Employed	3	8.6
	Part time Employed	3	8.6
	Unemployed	15	42.9
	Retired	12	34.3
	Other	2	5.7
Age Group	18-25	2	5.7
	25-50	16	45.7
	55-65	7	20
	65-75	10	28.6
Gender Identity	Male	18	51.4
	Female	17	48.6
Marital status	Married or in civil partnership	8	22.9
	Not married or in civil partnership	19	54.3
	Answer not given	27	77.1
Ethnicity	White	33	94.3
	Asian/Asian British	1	2.9
	Answer not given	1	2.9

Qualitative

The qualitative findings addressed objective 2:

2. To qualitatively investigate participants' experiences and perceptions of the intervention.

Findings that emerged from the data analysis are presented in themes. Due to the small size group, it must be noted that these outcomes are not generalizable. Furthermore, the small size also means that anonymity is difficult to maintain, so we have not included pseudonyms or reference numbers to quotations. Where interactions are quoted, the first speaker is numbered 1, the second 2 and so on.

The overarching theme from the analysis was *'increased health and well-being.'* That is, the participants' utterances suggest that they *"felt better"*, both physically and psychologically, as a result of attending the course. This central theme will be discussed below in relation to the sub-themes: learning to slow down, being in nature, and perception of the self. Finally, there will be a brief discussion regarding the participants overall views of and recommendations from attending the course.



Image courtesy of Look Again

Learning to slow down (a.k.a. mindfulness)

Learning to slow down related to the mindfulness aspect of the programme, although not explicitly stated as such. The participants described how “grounding” themselves, “breathing” and “learning techniques of...just be[ing] present in time and space was really effective” for enhancing their health and wellbeing. In the utterances below, two of the participants describe how learning to “just be in a precise moment of time” provided them with a solace in which they felt able to escape the worries and stressors of their everyday lives:



Image courtesy of Look Again

“Those techniques of being able to just be present in that space at that time...just let you forget what had come before, whether that be road rage or kids screaming, or whatever, and not worry about what was coming, but just to keep in that present moment”

“I think that’s really important, that you’re just in that precise moment in time. We’ve all got our worries [in] our futures or pasts that we have to deal with, so just to take those moments to get out your head...For me it’s the way that I can get out of what my life had become, because a lot of things were beyond my control with domestic relationships and stuff; so it’s a place for me to get away.”

Furthermore, by learning to slow down the participants were able to *notice* their surroundings in a way that they had not noticed them before, as is depicted in the examples below:

“[After attending the course] instead of just walking past, or rushing past, [I learned] to take a step back and say, “Hey, hang on a minute, there’s [a] shadow there...There’s a spider there. Look, the squirrel” ...whereas normally you’d just rush past it. “Oh, there’s a wall there.” You took time out to – and when I say time, a couple of minutes, but [in] that couple of minutes, you saw the colours, the textures, the angles, the shadow...I thought you saw something that you’d seen a gazillion times before, but you’d never ever seen it in that way before.”

“For me, when I looked at the things...it was like seeing with seeing eyes. Looking at things in a way that you’ve never looked at them before, and I found it was almost a spiritual dimension to it. Even looking at like a small fern on a wall and I got really close to it, and you appreciated the beauty of this...it made me think that it’s all about creation, and this is just part of creation that’s just so beautiful. It made me realise how much beauty there actually is in nature all around us, if we only stop and have a good look at it.”

Noticing the intricate details of their surroundings stimulated a new founded appreciation within the participants; this helped them to feel more peaceful and contented within themselves. Not only did the participants describe how learning such mindfulness techniques helped to relieve their psychological distress but additionally, for one male in particular, learning to slow down had a profound impact on relieving him of his physical pain, as he describes below:

"I had a condition which is an abdominal pain constantly and what really helped me was taking my mind off that completely. So I was slowing down and focusing completely on what was around me, taking in what was around me. It really helped me take my mind off of [the pain], and gradually over time it's helped me get through the [pain]...it got me to the point where I actually could go from [not being able to] walk around the block, because there was so much pain, to the point where I'm now back at work...it's helped me that much...just slow down, take things in and be part of that moment, not ruin it. Everything else at the time...just seem[s] insignificant, basically."

The course helped this participant to become completely immersed in the present moment, distracting him from other distress that he may have been experiencing at the time. This *"absorbing"* aspect of the mindfulness techniques inherent within the course was reciprocated by all of the other participants. Furthermore, *'learning'* was identified as a significant factor by the participants. In the quote below one individual suggests that learning to slow down has now become a *"lifelong skill"* that she will be able to recall and apply to sustain and / or enhance her health and wellbeing throughout her life course.

"Yes. It's a tool. I think mindfulness is a tool that you can use. Perhaps you might use it at certain times in your life and then other times you might not need it quite so much but...it helps you to stop and just look at what's there. There might be times when you are in a bit of a rush, you've got a bit of pressure on you and, if you use your mindfulness technique, it will just slow you down a bit and just help you; so I think it's a useful tool to have."

Thus, by learning such skills, participating in the mindful photography course engendered benefits for the participants that can extend beyond the formal sessions.

Being in nature

Primarily, nature was perceived as being a quiet and peaceful space. Thus, being in nature offered the participants a place of escapism and tranquillity in which they could reflect upon and appreciate aspects of their lives that would usually go unnoticed; this is highlighted in the quotes below:



Image courtesy of Look Again

"[Being in nature] is a huge benefit for me personally...there's no artifice...there's no interruption or interference...and being able to capture moments like that in whichever way you choose to.... I think that's really powerful."

"I think when you get back to nature you're away from the traffic and the noise and the smells, and the grime...I come from an industrial background...and you're away from that...you're in a totally different world, where you can hear the bird's tweet and this, that and the other."

The ability to escape the urban environment was also deemed to be important for people's health and wellbeing because, in being away from the noise and urgency of everyday life, the participants senses were stimulated allowing them to notice and appreciate the sounds, smells and sights that were around them. The importance of being in nature was reciprocated by another participant who continued to highlight research evidence to substantiate the assertion that being in the natural environment is facilitative for people's health and wellbeing:

"There is a study in Japan which has been taken on board now, that walking in woods actually lowers your endorphin level...They can measure it."

However, although being in nature was a dominant theme identified by the participants for enhancing their health and wellbeing, it was not considered to be a necessity. For example, in the utterance below, one participant suggests that individuals are able to demonstrate similar benefits to those experienced from being in nature (i.e. immersion in the present moment and feelings of peace and serenity) when they are in an artificial environment such as a swimming pool or a sports arena:

"I think it could be quiet in the swimming pool. I remember talking to a...swimmer who said, "When people are shouting for you and cheering...you don't hear or feel anything." And boxers say it...they don't hear anything, they are absorbed in the activity."

Similarly, in the example below, one individual demonstrated how he was able to experience comparable outcomes to those described from being in nature (i.e. focusing on the present

moment and absorption in the activity) within a confined artist studio; thus, again deliberating the prerequisite of being in nature:

"I had never done [art] before but [I] painted a pot for three hours, and my mind was totally on my painting."

So as one individual stated *"is it absolutely essential to be within nature? Personally, I would say no, it isn't. But it does help."* On the whole, all of the participants agreed that while it may not be fundamental to the successful running of the course, being in nature was advantageous for enhancing their health and wellbeing because it facilitated their ability to slow down and to practice mindfulness techniques, as is suggested below:

[There's] something about nature that slows you down.

1. *"I think nature, being in the natural environment is very conducive to mindfulness. I think it just calms you down.*
2. *You've absolutely hit the nail on the head there. You're right, conducive.*
3. *Just being in that environment, it's really easy to get into mindfulness techniques."*

Perception of the self

Prior to the course the individuals inferred feelings of anxiety and worry within themselves. For some, this related to their perceived lack of ability and not feeling *"good enough"* to participate in the programme whereas for others their anxieties were associated with concerns of isolation and loneliness. However, by attending the programme the participants were encouraged to slow down and to reflect upon their surroundings and on their photographs. In doing so, the individuals were not only able to appreciate their skills and abilities, but they were also able to learn to be kinder and more appreciative of themselves.



Image courtesy of Look Again

"I think as a really keen amateur photographer for years and years, [the course was] validation that actually the way that I take photos or the way that I see things isn't completely bonkers...And that [my photographs] have their own merit and they don't have to be amazing photographs. [I learned to] just give myself that permission to have that time to do [the course]."

"You realise that...David Bailey's taken some lousy photographs as well. Not everything turns out fantastic, because the sun got in the way or it went behind a cloud, or whatever. Some of the best photographers in the world have taken some lousy photographs...There are times when I think I can do better than that."

The examples above highlight two of many quotes in which the participants infer the facilitative effect that the programme contributed towards their self-confidence. Social aspects of the course also helped to enhance the participants self-esteem in a number of ways. Firstly, by sharing ideas and photographs with other members of the group individuals learned to appreciate and accept each other's differences. In the quotes below the participants illustrate how being in a non-judgemental and supportive environment not only helped to boost their confidence, but that it also broadened their thoughts and ideas:

1. *"I think that it was really interesting how, in our group, everyone captured things so differently. So being able to appreciate and accept the way that people see things differently, not just physically but in a very metaphorical sense. And I think that that's a huge advantage to communities and acceptance around being with other people.*
2. *I have to second that. I found that the techniques that [the facilitator] was teaching us, to look at things from a different angle, was something I'd always done when I was younger and I had a camera, and to get together and have everyone look at everyone else's pictures and talk about what we liked about them was really good confirmation, that actually I can take photographs. It boosted my confidence and interest actually in other people's photos as well."*
1. *I think...the thing I enjoyed most was looking at other people's photographs....and seeing the difference.... positives and the negatives.*
2. *I really liked all the feedback everyone got on all their pictures.*
1. *Yeah, absolutely...Nobody got arsey about it, nobody went, "Well, that's crap." There was none of that and nobody got upset about it and...That's the word, constructive criticism – positive, constructive criticism.*
3. *[And providing] inspiration to other things to look for when taking photographs.*

Secondly, for one participant in particular, being around other people helped to elevate her fears of isolation and loneliness, making her feel more self-assured, as she describes in the quotes below:

"Loneliness is a big thing for me, being on my own for years, so to be out...Because I'm such a people person, I like to chat a load of rubbish...So to be able to be with people it's actually helping my mind expand again."

"[The course] helped me come back to myself I think, 'cause of where I was I had half secluded myself, 'cause of my condition at the time. [The course] did help bring me back more and start[ed] me being more confident with other people."

Continuing this, the diversity of the group was enjoyed by the participants. Although the individuals did not know each other's reasons for attending the programme, the inclusivity and

shared appreciation of one another's history encouraged the group to feel self-assured in the company that they were in:

"[I particularly enjoyed] meeting a completely different group of people, as all of them were younger than me, and I don't often mix with people that are younger than me, so it was really really interesting and important I think because..."

"...Everybody brought something different to the table...We've all done different things, we've all had different experiences...So it's nice to get a different group of people all together.... If we were all the same it'd be very very boring."

"And it didn't matter one bit [not knowing the reason why each other was referred to the course]. You were all there to get support for an issue that you've got to work through, so in a way you're all there for the same thing."

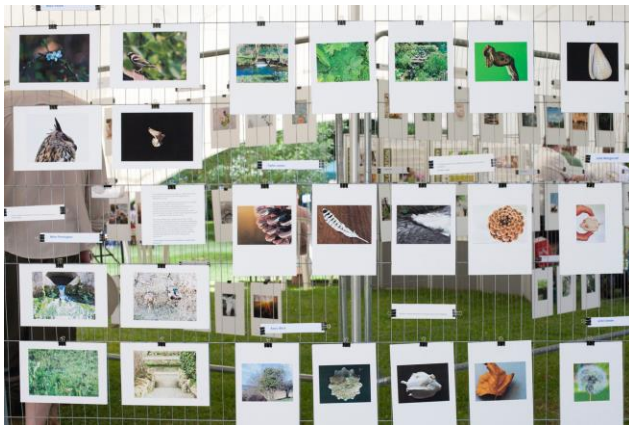


Image courtesy of Look Again

Providing the participants with an exhibition at which they were able to display their photographs contributed significantly to their self-esteem also. Not only did this instill the participants with a sense of pride and self-worth in feeling that their work was worthy of being displayed, but it also helped to build their identity and sense of character as a "photographer". The group highlight their experience of this in the excerpts below:

1. *Another thing about the self-esteem. My son is coming up from Bristol to look at the exhibition and I said to him, "I've got some photographs in an exhibition," and he was like, "What?! [Laughter] You've got photographs in an exhibition?" And it just makes you feel a bit better about yourself.*
2. *You're being exhibited.*
3. *Your family are seeing you in a different light.*
 1. *Yeah, that's it.*
 3. *They're not just seeing you as mum, they're seeing you as somebody who actually has a hobby and a life outside of being mum.*
 4. *Some photographs are good enough to go on public display.*
 5. *It's like when a scientist gets published and all this, that's a big deal for a scientist. Or an academic...It's a big deal.*

"It really boosts your self-esteem to think that some of your photographs are gonna go on display, 'cause before I don't think anyone would've wanted to see my photographs."

[The facilitator] rung me up and asked me about that photograph, “Do you mind if I put it on the flyer?” and honestly I was really chuffed about it [Laughter]”

Finally, building on the idea of identity, the participants inferred that attending the course encouraged them to show their true self and drop the persona that they often felt they had to portray in their everyday lives, this is highlighted below:

1. *I used to be terribly shy. I was the person who would never go into a pub I hadn't been into before, even with my wife... But then I took on teaching training and I was still the same shy person, but I managed to develop an act where I was not me, I was this person...*
2. *A persona.*
3. *And that comes back to what [name] was saying about creating that different identity...that I'm maybe a photographer.*
1. *Well, as a teacher, you're a different person when you're out there.*
2. *You're acting, aren't you.*
1. *To a certain degree, yeah, and to different levels to different people, and to different groups.*
2. *I mean, I, like you – I'm very shy and vulnerable like this, but I've given a lecture to 150 people, and strode out on stage... And then it's all an act.*
3. *It's all an act, yeah.*
1. *But having a common interest actually helps break down barriers almost immediately...And today you can call me [his name].*

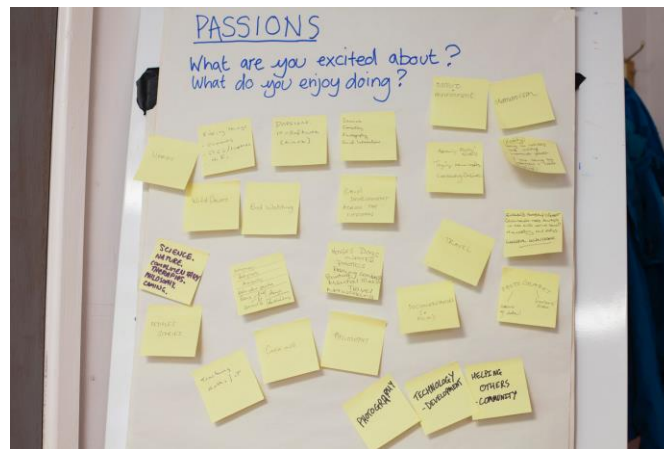


Image courtesy of Look Again

Thus, on the whole attending the course helped to develop the individual's character and enabled them to feel more self-assured and self-confident with the person that they truly are which, in turn, enhanced their health and wellbeing.

Overview of the course and future recommendations

Scepticism was a common theme expressed by the individuals prior to engaging in the course. The excerpts below highlight how negative preconceptions of mindfulness discouraged a number of the participants, initially, from attending the programme:

“I was a bit sceptical ‘cause I’m a retired teacher, and every year you get a buzzword, and mindfulness is this year’s buzzword, so I was a bit sceptical. It did put me off a bit, to be quite honest”

“I’d already gone [along to the first session]. I went on it as a photography course. I didn’t realise it was mindful – I’d never heard of this mindful thing until the first day...I wouldn’t have known what mindfulness was and when I’d gone on Google, I’d have thought, “Oh, hang on, this isn’t for me” sort of thing, so I wouldn’t have done it. No to be quite frank, if I’d have known what [mindfulness photography] actually was from day one...I wouldn’t have gone.”

“For years I’ve always been on about doing a photography course and this came up so...that was why I did it to start with. [When I realised it was mindfulness] I was...very very sceptical, and [thought], “Hang on, this is a bit hippy for me – you know, Hey man” and all this...”

Furthering this, one participant recognised how such scepticism, could potentially limit future engagement in the programme:

“I suggested to my husband, who’s quite keen on photography, that he could come along as well, and he said, “Ooh, mindfulness. Oh, I don’t know about that,” and so that word actually put him off...I think that word ‘mindfulness’ is still not understood by a lot of people and so it would initially perhaps put people off coming.”

However, there was consensus throughout the group that attending just one session could change such negative perceptions of mindfulness and thus they recommend that people “just give it a go” before discounting it as a means to enhancing their wellbeing. Moreover, the participants stated that they would recommend the course, not only to people with specific health concerns or illnesses but also to the wider community.



Image courtesy of Look Again

The importance of providing such courses in schools or in the education setting was particularly salient due to the programmes potential for enhancing health and wellbeing, as is described below:

“I would definitely recommend the course. I’d recommend it to anyone, whether they knew that they had some sort of mental health issue or not, because I think once they started the course they would enjoy it and they would get something out of it.”

“There are so many young people at school, well young people generally, who are having mental health problems. I do think that mindfulness is something that perhaps ought to be taught in schools. I think the techniques of mindfulness, I think could possibly help a lot of children to...cope with the stress that they have in their lives.”

Next, the photography itself. While ‘photography’ was not a dominant theme to emerge from the participants discussions the activity was highlighted as a common motivator for attending the course due to the groups prior interest in taking photographs, as is described below:

“I’ve always been interested in [photography and] one of the few regrets of my military career is that I didn’t take many photographs”

“I’ve always been a keen amateur photographer and loved being in nature...and [the course] just seemed like a good marrying of things that I was interested in.”

“In the past...my photographs tend[ed] to turn out without a head or...you know they’re not good photographs and I thought, although we weren’t finding out about the technical side of photography, [attending the course] just gave me more practice in taking photographs.”

Having said this, the group felt that the photographic element of the programme was not essential to achieving the beneficial outcomes associated with the course, such as enhanced health and wellbeing, and that photography could be interchanged with other activities, as is illustrated below:

“It doesn’t have to be specifically photography...There are all these other things...Mindfulness colouring in books.”

1. *“And it could also be taken into other areas as well like...pottery, pot-making or joinery, painting.*
2. *And like [name] mentioned, maybe education.*
1. *Yeah. Absolutely. It’s just all sorts of areas. It could be...it’s interchangeable isn’t it.”*

Nevertheless, this was not deemed to be a negative, rather it showed the programmes potential to be expanded to suit a wider variety people, as one participant infers in the statement below:

“What’s good for you or what may work for you and is good for you, may not be good for everyone...And what’s not very good [for you] may be good for somebody else. That’s the beauty of [the course] – it’s [flexible] and it’s not one size fits all.”

The ‘*process of photography*’ however did serve a significant role in the participants ability to capture, focus on and appreciate their surroundings, all of which ultimately enhanced their health and wellbeing. Additionally, the participants recognised that photography was beneficial in offering them tools in which they may be better able to sustain their health and wellbeing autonomously. In the example below one lady states how using a photograph as her mobile phone screensaver acted as a prompt to remind her to slow down:

“It’s made me more aware when I go out with my mobile phone, that I can take these kinds of photographs, and then I use it as a reminder. So I use them as a screensaver so that it reminds me to slow down and to just breathe and...Actually, is whatever it is you’re stressing about as important as you really think it is? So there’s that lasting reminder side of it as well.”

Finally, the participants felt like the course offered them noteworthy follow-on opportunities in which they would be able to continue to pursue a similar social group with their peers should they desire. However, the exact nature of these groups, the participants felt, still needed some negotiation as to their purpose i.e. some individuals wished to pursue photography as a business by attaining “*grants*” or becoming a “*professional*” while other people wanted to partake in a social retirement group free of pressure and obligation, as is noted in the excerpt below:

“What I felt...[the follow-on support worker] sounds like she wants to make [the follow-on group] more formal – I don’t want that. Two of the people from [our] group have been talking about [meeting] once a month, once every six weeks, getting together...just something social with no pressure.”

However, in all cases the participants were glad that they took part in the mindful photography programme and found that, in one way or another, it had a beneficial effect on their overall health and wellbeing.



Image courtesy of Look Again

Collated findings

The present evaluation sought to understand whether the intervention provided health and wellbeing benefit to participants. To this end, the intervention is supported as being effective, from the perspective of self-report measures, opinions and experiences at providing participants with tangible and meaningful benefits to health and wellbeing by both quantitative and qualitative findings. Whilst this is a relatively small evaluation, the findings here are promising in that the intervention would appear to offer similar benefits to other social prescribing programmes.

The quantitative findings are encouraging, finding increases in all metrics of wellbeing and mental health outcomes. However, as the measures for these assessments are not based on valid psychometric questionnaires, the results should be viewed with caution. The qualitative evidence provides additional support for the provision of sustainable skills for wellbeing, where participants have noted their increased ability to use mindfulness techniques beyond the course. The setting of the intervention in a natural environment, and using nature as a medium for creative expression and to facilitate mindful techniques appears to be highly valued by participants. Interestingly, the present intervention appears to provide a social aspect that is well-received by participants, and is cited as an important aspect of their journey to self-improvement. The social aspects of such interventions can often be quite daunting for participants in related social prescribing programmes (2), and so the ability for the present intervention to successfully include a social element is encouraging. The provision of an exhibition at the end of the programme appears to be an important aspect of participants' progression from the intervention. Frequently participants in social prescribing schemes cite trepidation at the end of their course, but it would seem that providing an exhibition allows participants a final celebration, and an opportunity to feel that they have achieved, and have transitioned from being a learner to a successful photographer.



Image courtesy of Look Again

Conclusion

The present preliminary evaluation provides support to the mindful photography activities directed by Look Again as part of the Thriving Communities programme. The intervention appears to be effective in increasing levels of participant wellbeing and mental health, and is well-received by those taking part. Importantly, it appears from this initial pre and post evaluation, that this intervention provides participants with sustainable skills for life beyond the programme. However, as the evaluation did not include a longitudinal element this finding must be viewed with this in mind.

Recommendations

Whilst the present evaluation is able to lend support for the intervention, it is recommended that further evaluations take place in the future to provide more substantial support. The collated evidence indicates the following recommendations:

1. To include the use of empirically validated scales to provide weight to future evaluations. Such scales could be the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (3), or relevant anxiety (4) or depression (5) scales that are used in similar schemes. The use of such scales provides more substantial and robust quantitative assessment, and (in the case of anxiety and depression) clinically relevant markers of mental health.
2. To include participant postcode in participant materials to allow for Index of Multiple Deprivation to be calculated. This will show the socio-economic background of participants.
3. To include reason(s) for referral (or self-referral). These may be broader in terms of what the participant seeks support with from the intervention, or may be more specifically tied to health or wellbeing concerns (e.g. living with chronic pain, recovering from substance dependence, moving on as a veteran). Inclusion of such data will allow a more detailed overview of the application of the intervention, as well as to which groups the intervention is appealing. Such information would also prove useful should the intervention be targeted towards specific groups in the future.
4. To continue to offer a final exhibition for future projects. This seems to be critical in allowing participants the opportunity to feel like they have moved on, and provide a sense of achievement and mastery.
5. To consider placing less emphasis on the mindfulness aspect of the intervention at point of advertisement. Participants cite this as being potentially an area that may be off-putting to some. However, it is nonetheless an important element of the intervention that provides sustainable benefit for participants and so should continue to be an important aspect of the intervention itself.
6. To continue to carry out the programme in natural settings. This appears to be an important component of the intervention for participants, and is supportive of wider evidence that shows engaging with nature to be positive for health and wellbeing.
7. To consider applying the conceptual framework to other activities, where the use of mindfulness techniques could be applied in similar means but with different activities.
8. To consider a longitudinal element to the evaluation to establish whether mindfulness skills and photography are continued beyond the duration of the programme.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Bespoke questionnaire distributed pre and post intervention



Look again photography course – the Hub Academy

Place: Hub Academy Date: 27 March – 2 May

Personal info:

Write the first two letters of your mother's first name e.g. Carol = CA

Write your birth date e.g. 31 for 31 May

At the beginning of the course how do you rate:

Your photography skills

None 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Your mindfulness skills

None 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Your connections with your community

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your enjoyment of nature

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your confidence

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your self esteem

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your mental health

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your overall sense of wellbeing

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Your motivation to engage with activity

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Thank you!

Appendix 2 - Demographic information sheet for the focus group participants

We would like to ask you to complete some demographic questions before participating in the focus group. This will provide us with background information that will enable us to put your views in context. Any information that you give will be made anonymous and be treated confidentially.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to ask.

Please circle or tick as appropriate:

1. To which gender do you most identify?

Male Female Prefer not to say Other (please state) _____

2. What is your current age (years)? _____

3. How would you describe your ethnicity?

Asian or Asian British-Bangladeshi	Mixed White and Asian
Asian or Asian British-Indian	Mixed White and Black African
Asian or Asian British-Pakistani	Mixed White and Black Caribbean
Asian or Asian British-Any other Asian Origin	Mixed-Any other mixed background
Black or Black British-African	White British
Black or Black British-Caribbean	White Irish
Black or Black British-Any other Black Origin	White-Any other white background
Chinese	Prefer not to say
Other (please state) _____	

4. Are you currently in employment or education?

Yes No Prefer not to say

5. Do you live with a long-term health condition?

Yes No Prefer not to say

6. How would you describe your current living situation?

Live with partner	Live with friends
Live in a family home (e.g. with partner and/or children)	Live in shared accommodation (e.g. share a residence but do not know the others)
Live with children (e.g. single parent family)	Live alone
Live with parents and/or siblings	Prefer not to say
Other (please state) _____	

7. What is your marital status?

Single (never married) Married, or in a domestic partnership Widowed Divorced Separated Prefer not to say

8. What is your postcode? _____

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this information sheet, it is greatly appreciated.

Appendix 3 - Interview schedule for focus group with participants that completed a Mindful Photography (MP) course

Hello, and thank you for coming to the Focus Group.

Please can you introduce yourself and tell me which MP course (i.e. location / project) you attended.

1. Icebreaker / introduction questions:
 - a. How did you heard about / get involved in the MP course?
 - b. Why did you decided to take part?
2. What did taking part in the MP programme involve?
 - a. What did the weekly sessions consist of?
 - b. Do you think that this was effective and if so, why? Or why not?
3. What were your hopes and expectations of taking part in the MP course?
 - a. Emotionally, socially, physically?
 - b. Did it enable you to achieve your hopes and expectations?
 - c. Has there been anything you experienced that you didn't expect to experience and if so, what was this?
4. What impact did participating in the course contribute towards your life?
 - a. How did it make you feel?
 - b. Why do you think it made you feel this way?
 - c. What impact did it have on your relationships and ability to connect with other?
 - d. What effect did it have on your motivation to be active?
5. Was there anything that you particularly enjoyed about participating in the course?
 - a. What was this and why?
6. Was there anything that you found particularly challenging about the course?
 - a. What was this and why?
 - b. How do you think this could be improved?
7. Can you tell me about your experience of the following in relation to the course?
 - a. Mindfulness
 - b. Being in nature
 - c. The creative process-photography
8. Now that you have completed the course, what do you think will happen going forward?
 - a. Do you think you will continue to use the skills that you have learned from participating in the MP programme and if so, why?
 - b. How do you plan to do this?
 - c. What could support you in doing this?

9. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you think is particularly important or that you would like to add?

Thank you for taking part in the Focus Group, we really appreciate it.