

The Programme that “Saved my life”

Introduction

A recently-launched physical activity programme specially designed to support people with mental health issues is having a real impact on the lives of participants – this article recounts the story of Claire, for her, **Mind and Be Active** has been life-saving:

“Without a shadow of a doubt, both Linda and Craig have saved my life. My journey is far from over but without them it wouldn't have even begun.”

My name is Craig Salmond, as a fully-qualified fitness instructor and a member of Fife Sports and Leisure Trust's (FSLT) health and physical activity team, I was very excited to be involved in this new health programme.

I hope Claire's story demonstrates the key commitment of Mind and Be Active – *to get those inactive, active* – as her case study demonstrates the exceptional results delivered by the programme.

Mind and Be Active is designed to provide regular physical activity to accompany, or act as an alternative to, other forms of treatment. Evidence proves that increased physical activity can distract from negative thoughts and feelings, increase energy levels and improve sleep patterns.

A referral from a health professional is required for participation.

Claire's situation

Claire was referred as a candidate for Mind and Be Active by Linda, a NHS Fife nurse social prescriber. Claire has a history of severe anxiety and depression. Along with these mental health conditions, Claire had a Body Mass Index of 63*. This means Claire is in the obese class III category, as her BMI should be between 18.5 and 24.9.

Claire's individually-designed programme

Gym – Due to Claire's weight, I was restricted to the type of machines I could make part of her gym routine. I introduced Claire to the hand bike, this allowed her to improve her cardiovascular function and strengthen her arms, while allowing her to sit so that her legs could rest. Claire really enjoyed this and put maximum effort into the exercise.

Swimming – As water halves the body weight due to buoyancy, this was ideal for Claire as it took the pressure of all the joints and she really enjoyed the experience of being in the water.

Walking – Walking is a struggle for Claire but she agreed to do the same walk every second week to monitor her distance and progressions. Over the course of 12 weeks, Claire was able to double her walking distance – she was very motivated by her achievement.

For Claire, the thought of joining a physical activity programme was a challenge, she explains her feeling when first engaging with the Mind and Be Active team:

“I knew this woman was going to change my life. Instantly I felt at ease and most importantly, I felt unjudged. Linda believed in me and gave me the courage to believe in myself, between grief, anxiety and being so unfit and overweight, I was lost. Then Linda introduced me to Craig Salmond my trainer, a godsend – both Linda and Craig have saved my life. My journey is far from over, but, without them it, wouldn't have even begun. The job, both of them do is priceless to someone like me, and, I know I owe them my life – I know I will make them both proud as they are both amazing.”

Results

Claire is now more focused on getting fitter and feels better about herself. With consultation and support from me, Claire has even joined a local slimming group, something she wanted to do but didn't have the confidence or motivation to do previously.

Key learning for Mind and Be Active

Making a phone call to someone who doesn't turn up to a session can help them to stay engaged with the programme.

- Being non-judgemental and encouraging when a participant lacks confidence and remaining approachable throughout the process is essential for long-term success.
- The relationship between the person and instructor is vital – Claire's testimonial demonstrates that a large part of her motivation to continue was to make the person helping her “proud”.
- Claire said: *“I had the courage to believe in myself again, I was lost”* – a clear demonstration of the improvement to her mental health. We need to be aware of the vulnerability of the participants.
- For any participant in a health-specific programme, the job of the instructor is to focus on what is achievable rather than the challenges. In Claire's case, this meant looking at gym equipment and activities which were most suitable – focus on what she could do rather than what she couldn't.