



The Mental Skills Training for Life programme for Homeless Young People

This new case study outlines how the Mental Skills Training for Life (MST4LIFE) programme takes a novel approach to helping homeless young people, in particular those with complex and high needs, to gain the confidence and resilience required to engage in education, employment, and training, with the end goal of allowing them to successfully lead independent lives as adults.

As a collaboration led by the University of Birmingham and a West Midlands youth homeless charity St Basils, the programme is based on interventions more commonly done in sport to help athletes enhance performance and achieve their potential. Launched in 2014, the MST4LIFE has since been delivered to over 150 young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Dr Jennifer Cumming**, School of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham and **Dr Giles Anderson**, independent researcher.

September 2016

Introduction

Every year, over 130,000 people aged from 16 to 24 present as homeless or at risk¹ with many more not counted in official statistics.² They are the age group that is most likely to be homeless, with the majority asked to leave by their parents, and many driven out by violence or abuse.

In addition, with the budget for housing benefit reduced by a third since 2010 and specific cost-cutting measures introduced that target those people under 35 (the shared room rate), there is evidence that youth homelessness is on the rise³, with younger people on benefits increasingly unable to secure accommodation in either the private rented or social housing sectors.

Barriers and challenges

As well as the financial hurdles, homeless young people face many psychological barriers and challenges to living independently as adults. They often have problems forming relationships, finding it hard to trust others and share personal information. Moreover, they can feel increasingly disconnected from society, especially if they have dropped out of school or come from a dysfunctional family.

These factors contribute to poorer communication and interpersonal skills, as well as difficulty in regulating their thoughts, feelings, and actions (e.g., they may be easily provoked and find it difficult to control their anger and frustration). Support is therefore needed, not just to put a safe roof over young people's heads, but also to help them develop the necessary mental skills to avoid the vicious cycle of homelessness.

Working with St Basils

St Basils has been providing supported accommodation and a range of services to homeless young people for over 40 years. Every year, over 4,000 young people from across the West Midlands come to them for assistance, and they provide accommodation for over 1,200.

Sport psychology researchers, led by the University of Birmingham, have worked closely with St Basils to develop the psychologically-informed MST4LIFE programme. It aims to help young people, particularly those with complex and high needs, to gain the confidence and resilience required to engage in education, employment, and training, with the end goal of allowing them to successfully lead independent lives as adults.

The MST4Life programme

Mental skills training is a robust approach used by the University of Birmingham and academics worldwide to help elite athletes to maximise their performance by focusing on their psychological strengths. To adapt the programme to homeless young people, an extensive consultation took place with the staff and users of St Basils.

¹ CentrePoint (2015). *Beyond Statutory Homelessness*
http://centrepoin.org.uk/media/1690269/0054_yhd_report_full_v12.pdf

² Clarke, Burgess, Morris, & Udagawa (2015). *Estimating the scale of youth homelessness in the UK*. Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning. Research.
www.centrepoin.org.uk/media/1522377/Cambridge%20full%20report%20-%20scale%20of%20youth%20homelessness.pdf

³ Homeless link (2015). *Young and Homeless 2015*.
www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/201512%20-%20Young%20and%20Homeless%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf

This consultation outlined the challenges young people typically face, such as low self-esteem, motivation, and poor social skills, and how they would like to develop these skills through a programme that was group-based, fun, experiential, and tailored to their specific needs. Informed by these factors, the MST4LIFE programme helps young people to develop and apply mental techniques, such as goal-setting, planning, support seeking, reframing, and mindfulness, to improve their self-confidence, interpersonal skills, resilience, and well-being.

Rather than trying to fix problems or issues, the focus of the programme is more on nurturing talent as well as helping participants to realise their potential by focusing on their strengths. Such a strengths-based approach is grounded in the belief that all young people, regardless of their situation, have the capacity to learn, grow, and develop. By helping young people to discover and build upon their mental skills and strengths, MST4LIFE creates empowering and affirming experiences with the long-term aim that these changes will transfer to their normal day-to-day life.

Programme structure

The MST4LIFE programme involves 10 weekly sessions, capped by a trip to the Lake District during which participants stay at the University of Birmingham's Raymond Priestley Centre on the banks of Coniston Waters.

The programme demands a hands-on approach from participants, so they learn to recognise and further evolve their mental skills and strengths in progressive personal and group challenges. The challenges and activities include structured reflections that facilitate the development as well as the implementation of skills that help with self-regulation, coping with stress, and interpersonal relations.

As part of the course, participants create portfolios to record their achievements which are used to provide evidence towards up to six credits towards their Level 1 Award in Progression accredited by the Open College Network West Midlands.



Principles of the programme



Preparing for the high ropes challenge during the residential part of the MST4LIFE programme

At its heart, the programme is driven by a psychological approach. The activities, whilst fun and challenging, are used as an opportunity to promote positive development. There is a focus on empowering young people so they feel like they belong and are connected to others around them.

As a consequence, young people are encouraged to improve their personal efficacy and their autonomy, so that they are more likely to persist with the programme and take the skills learnt forward after the course.

The young people also play strong roles in determining the nature of the course. They can direct their own participation, and the activities are adapted to their needs rather than vice versa. The programme team also work closely with the St Basils staff, fostering a sense of community and shared development.

Feedback

The MST4LIFE programme is being extensively evaluated and shows that young people positively respond to the programme and think it has been a valuable experience. It is helping them to discover an inner belief about their capabilities and recognise how this can help them in life. One young person explained:

“Before this course I wouldn’t believe in myself, but now I’ve learned I can do what I want to do if I just believe ... The confidence I found in myself to do the activities is the confidence I feel I need to move on to my next step, which is hopefully to find a job or volunteer.”



Young people working on their dream team during a MST4LIFE session

Along with confidence, young people begin to more readily recognise increased motivation, decision-making, and a positive attitude. The programme also encourages young people to work with others, developing important groupwork and communication skills. Together, these improve their social competence and feelings of being connected to others.

A favourite activity for many is the Dream Team, which uses the analogy of a sports team to encourage them to recognise and further build their support network. Following this activity, one young person said:

“I have learned that in tough situations I can be mature and appropriate. I can do things if I just put my mind to it, and that I have some true friends.”

Lessons Learned

Key to the success of the MST4LIFE programme is the emphasis on having fun through meaningful activities and the relationships between young people and programme deliverers. The programme is informal in style and very different from the educational experiences most will have encountered in their lives. Furthermore, the researchers delivering the programme have a background in sport psychology and are trained in the ethos and principles of a strengths-based approach. The supportive and flexible nature of the researchers is appreciated by participants, as one explained:

“I think the style and approach of the people that delivered the programme was very, very great and energetic. It felt like I could talk to them about anything.”

It is also important for staff from St Basils to be closely involved in MST4LIFE. St Basils’ Learning, Skills and Work team support young people in their re-engagement with learning and work, underpinned by the holistic support provided by the support team who provide a Psychologically Informed environment. Their role is to initially encourage young people to enrol

onto the programme and provide practical support to encourage participation. Staff also come along to sessions, get involved with activities, and contribute to reflections. This means they are also able to carry on discussions about the mental skills being developed between sessions as well as after the young people completed the programme. Indeed, part of the longer term sustainability of the programme is for the St Basils staff to co-deliver the programme, and avenues to facilitate this are currently being explored.



Enjoying the accomplishment of reaching the top of the Old Man of Coniston (Lake District)

Conclusions

The MST4LIFE programme is a strengths-based psychological intervention that is also informed by best educational practices. Working with homeless charity St Basils, it has successfully engaged some of the most hard to reach young people, helping them to gain confidence and develop skills to allow them to be more independent and engage with education, employment, and training.

**MENTAL SKILLS
TRAINING
FOR LIFE**

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

Acknowledgments

Funds to support the MST4LIFE programme have been gratefully received from the Monday Charitable Trust, Edith Murphy Trust, Economic and Social Science Research Council, University of Birmingham, UnLTD, St Basils, and private donors. Many thanks also to the staff and young people from St Basils, as well as members of the MST4LIFE research and delivery team: Dr Mark Holland (Newman University), Dr Sam Cooley (University of Birmingham), Mary Quinton (University of Birmingham), and Benjamin Parry (University of Birmingham).

About the Authors

Dr Jennifer Cumming is a Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist with research expertise in developing and evaluating psychologically-informed interventions for young people. In addition to the MST4LIFE programme, Dr Cumming has also published and lectured on the applications of psychology to sport, exercise, and dance.

Dr Giles Anderson is a well-published psychology researcher, writer, and editor.

For more information about the MST4LIFE programme, please contact: Dr Jennifer Cumming (Director of the MST4LIFE programme and Principal Investigator).

Email: J.Cumming@Bham.ac.uk

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population

For information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources on housing and homelessness, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/tags/index.cfm?tag=homelessness

Published by

Housing Learning & Improvement Network
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor,
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

Tel: 020 7820 8077

Email: info@housinglin.org.uk

Web: www.housinglin.org.uk

Twitter: @HousingLIN & @HousingLINews