

# Evaluation of the BU Mental Health Diploma

The BU Mental Health Diploma is a course for eight to 19 year olds which aims to improve their mental health and emotional resilience. Children North East deliver the course in schools and in community venues across Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne. This is a summary of an external evaluation that was undertaken in February, 2011.

## Introduction

The Diploma was developed by young people who were service users of the West End Youth Enquiry Service (WEYES), a project of Children North East based in the west end of Newcastle, with support from project workers. It was specifically developed to help young people understand the factors that impact on their mental health and to support them develop confidence, social skills, resilience and strategies to cope with difficult situations.



## The course

The BU Mental Health Diploma is a course made up of five units, each unit consists of between four and six sessions (each session lasts roughly one hour). The course can be delivered over shorter time periods, if required. The course has been accredited and students gain an NCFE entry level accreditation at the end. Individual units are also delivered and each has its own certification.

It is delivered to children and young people in primary or secondary school or in community settings. The courses are attended by small groups of children, with an average class size of eight. The courses generally take place in school time, often in a mid afternoon session. The children and young people are identified through the school by Parent Support Advisors, Educational Welfare Officers or learning advisors and share characteristics which include:

- victims of bullying
- non or sporadic school attenders
- few friends or are felt to be isolated
- young carers
- bullies
- poor mental health.

Children North East has delivered a total of nine courses and five units since October 2008. These have benefited a total of 80 children; 59 of these have completed the courses and received a certificate or accreditation.

## Evaluation findings

The evaluation made the following findings.

**Schools noted a significant improvement in participants' behaviour and school performance.** Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires recorded a general score improvement of 66 percent in participants' emotional, conduct, hyperactivity and peer problems and in prosocial behaviour. Comments from schools include: "The children now have more confidence and social skills"; and "Our children are finding the project a positive and enjoyable experience that is helping to raise their confidence and self esteem".

**The course has significant flexibility which means it can be adapted to different situations:** the course is constantly evolving and developing new course materials influenced directly by children and young people. This means it can be tailored to specific needs, for example, the course is currently being delivered to a group of Romanian and Czech children who have English as a second language.

**The courses have benefited from being held in non-classroom settings:** the courses have been held in locations such as nurture rooms and have engendered equal relationships between both students and facilitators. This has been an important element in the course's youth-work, relaxed and informal approach.

**There is a high level of ownership of the course by the young people:** this is an important aspect of the course. In other words, the young people have taken responsibility for their own learning in the context of a cohesive and open group.

**The course has enabled young people to create new social relationships and networks:** participants reported that they had made good friends within the

course group and these friendships were thought likely to be long lasting because of the bonds that had been created.

**The courses have assisted school staff in their roles and responsibilities:** it has been reported by school staff that the BU Mental Health Diploma has helped them achieve their goals with course participants. It was also identified that school staff cannot always devote sufficient time to students in need of support and that the BU course has allowed that time (and provided a different youth-work approach) to be spent with needy students.

**The accreditation is an important motivational tool:** the project specifically gained NCFE accreditation status to enable the students to earn an entry accreditation at the point of course completion. Course participants have often gained few academic accolades and gaining an accreditation is important for their self confidence and self worth.

" I feel a lot more secure about my feelings ... I feel better, more confident"  
Jo, aged 14



# Outcomes

The evaluation made the following judgements relating to the project's outcomes.

**The course had a series of positive emotional and psychological impacts:** these have all contributed to increasing students' emotional resilience and have better equipped them to deal with the issues they face in school and at home. These positive impacts have included the following:

- **Increased self confidence:** one course participant said "BU has made me more confident about myself and it has made me more happy". An analysis of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires completed by the students before and after the course showed that 72 percent of respondents felt more confident as a result of going on the course. It also showed that 72 percent of participants felt better able to cope in new and difficult situations.
- **Increased understanding:** another participant commented "BU has helped me understand how I feel about myself and how other people see me". The questionnaires showed that 60 percent of respondents felt more able to discuss their problems. This increased understanding also related to students' awareness of their own triggers which led to poor mental health and gave them techniques and methods to control their anger. Project workers also reported that many course participants live in households where other family members have mental health problems. Workers said that several students had reported feelings of "I now realise it's not my fault" and "I realise that I'm not the problem". The course improved their understanding of both their own feelings and of other close family member's mental health problems. This has significantly positive psycho-social and emotional impacts.
- **Improved self esteem:** one course member reported "My self image is now much better because my friends have described me [commented upon it] and it has made me feel much better about myself". The questionnaires showed that 64 percent of respondents said they access more activities as a result of the course.

- **Improves behaviour:** one young person said "The friendship module has helped me to understand that fighting gets me nowhere and making friends could be a good thing to do". The questionnaire showed that 56 percent of respondents felt happier after completing the course.

**The course results in strong friendships and strengthens psychological resilience:** a significant level of bonding occurs between young people during the course which provides an important safety net in times of emotional difficulty. This means on a basic level the course participants now have others who understand their situations and can appreciate their difficulties. These support arrangements are apparent both inside and outside of the school environment.

**The project has improved student's school performance:** there were a series of examples given by both school and project staff of course participants who had previously not engaged or been disruptive, who were now doing well in school, both behaviourally and academically. One school reported a particular course participant who initially only attended school on the days on which the BU course was run; they are now a full time attender.

**The project has supported young carers:** young carers often have a very poor school experience with corresponding school absences, problems with bullying and feelings of isolation. Approximately 25 percent of all course participants have caring responsibilities. This has been identified through the process of discussion and sharing within the groups and had previously been unknown. The course has helped such young carers address many of their problems, for example, it has helped them form new social relationships and networks and also raised awareness amongst their peers of the issues they face.

" I learned to control my anger and understand my feelings ... I feel I can communicate more and better"  
Charlie, aged 13

# Conclusion

The issue of children's mental health is currently in the public eye and the corresponding high level of need, the negative impact of poor mental health and the poor level of provision. Indeed, the Coalition Government has committed itself to invest £400 million in early intervention and in work with children around mental health issues.

The BU Mental Health Diploma has had significant impact on improving the mental health of children. This impact is many layered and includes increasing self confidence and esteem, increasing understanding of both the self and of others and strengthening (or creating) social networks. These impacts have also had the knock-on effects of improving attendance, behaviour in school and academic performance.

There are also less apparent impacts of the project, which includes improving conditions in the home environment. The evaluation found that many students reported mental ill health in the home and that the course helped them realise this. It has importantly helped them understand that they are not the problem or to blame for the mental ill health of others. There are also the impacts that the course has on supporting young carers, who are hidden and under supported in schools and commonly have multiple problems. The BU course helps young carers to both understand their own role and be understood by others.

It is the conclusion of the external evaluation that the BU Mental Health Diploma improves children and young people's mental health and school performance and should be available to more students in North East schools.

## Case study: Sarah\*

Sarah who is 12 years old began the BU course in a negative and disruptive manner. She would regularly talk whilst others were trying to express their points of view and repeatedly say activities were boring. She would threaten to walk out of sessions and did so on one occasion.

As the course progressed Sarah's behaviour settled down and her attendance improved. She began to feel more at home in the sessions and contributed freely to group tasks and discussions. After a few sessions, she became the life and soul of the group at times demonstrating good creative arts skills and a lively sense of humour. She began to talk with a school staff member about her problems at home, her dislike for eating in public and her problems controlling her anger.

Towards the end of the course Sarah helped other group members with techniques for relaxation to help with anger management and she encouraged others to join the after school computer club that she started going to.

\* Name changed

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