

Embedding mental health into language learning

A case study of Beyond the Page's mental health workshops for ESOL learners.

Introduction

Beyond the Page is a small not-for-profit organisation based in Thanet which offers an engaging and dynamic approach to English language learning for local women. They work regularly with local community arts groups and classes are offered free of charge. Their learners are very diverse, and include women who are born outside the UK, coming from Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. Some are new arrivals while others have lived in the UK for many years and are now British Citizens. Some women have no recourse to public funds which makes it difficult to access traditional ESOL language courses.

The content and aims of sessions are based on learners' needs and interests; the classroom is intended to be a safe space for women, where they can discuss their experiences and the challenges they face living in the UK.

"We really are dictated to by the women. We don't follow a curriculum; we find out what the women want and we base all the learning around that." Operations Director

Mental health workshops

In late 2022, Beyond the Page delivered five mental health workshops. These were developed in response to women regularly raising their experiences of trauma in their ESOL sessions, and learners explicitly saying that this was a topic they would like to explore.

The aim of the workshops was not to provide mental health support to women, but rather to equip them with the language they needed to discuss and understand their experiences, and then to identify and access appropriate support locally.

"We were always quite aware we weren't going to go too deep, but we wanted to kind of gently try these things out... I think you have to be very, very clear as to your role and your boundaries – we are not counsellors." Operations Director

The sessions covered a range of topics, including:

- self-care and wellbeing practices
- vocabulary around mental health
- different mental health conditions
- mindfulness
- where and how to access local mental health support services

The mindfulness workshop was delivered by the Operations Director and the other four were delivered by the tutor. Each workshop was supported by at least one volunteer, who worked with those who needed additional support. One of the sessions included inputs from the primary care manager and a mental health nurse from the local NHS Partnership Trust.

When delivering the sessions, staff used a range of pedagogical approaches to differentiate activities for the range of language levels in the group. These included:

- matching activities
- independent research on relevant websites
- using visuals
- mindful drawing
- pairing higher ability English speakers with those who had less confidence

- building in time for discussion of personal experiences

What worked well

- **Taking a flexible, learner-led approach** meant that the tutor could respond to the issues that the women raised. The workshops grew organically as the women involved identified further topics they wanted to explore.

“...as some things might be of more interest to some women, and they wanted to spend more time on it, I was able just to extend that and add more sessions.” Tutor

- **Agreeing ground rules** for the workshops at the start of the first session was important to ensure the learners felt comfortable to share sensitive information.

“I think that's very important, so we laid out ground rules at the beginning... [we] talked about confidentiality, talked about listening, talked about boundaries, you know, kind of the usual stuff, timekeeping and everything.” Operations Director

- **The gendered nature of the group** meant that learners could have open discussions about female-specific conditions, such as post-natal depression, perimenopause, menopause and hormones, domestic abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and how these affect their day-to-day lives, without fear of judgement or repercussions.

“I think because we have got that relationship, it was quite natural to move on to mental health and they are open because it is all women.” Tutor

- **Being creative to meet different learning needs** meant that women who had lower levels of English-speaking skills were still able to share how they felt and contribute meaningfully to the sessions. This was particularly important as these learners were likely to be the most isolated and in need of support.

“It gave women who may not have great literacy skills or spoken skills an opportunity to shine, because they've got skills in other areas.” Tutor

- **Partnering with mental health practitioners** was key to enabling the women to learn more about local support services. They asked detailed questions about the practicalities around accessing support, and practitioners signposted learners to useful resources that were translated into different languages in both written and audio formats. Learners also shared challenges they had experienced in accessing support. This session enabled many disclosures from women about their own mental health needs.

Lessons learned

- **Ensure that sessions are developed in response to learner needs and interests**, not those of the professionals supporting them.

“[Mental health is] definitely an area that I want to pursue and see where it can go. But... I certainly don't want to do it if that's not what the women want. It's always that balance really of making sure that this is definitely something that they understand, and they want, and they need.” Operations Director

- **Give sufficient time to each topic**, as learners will have many experiences they want to discuss. The women at Beyond the Page engaged so thoroughly in discussions that staff ran out of time on some of the sessions.

- **Provide appropriate training, support and briefings to staff and volunteers** before sessions take place. Some volunteers at Beyond the Page struggled to understand the

benefits of the wellbeing activities. In addition, staff identified the need for more training around trauma-informed delivery approaches. Discussing training needs and briefing volunteers about activities before sessions may help to address these challenges.

- **Use creative activities and differentiation** to ensure that all learners are able to meaningfully contribute to sessions. Pairing higher and lower-level learners for peer support is also effective. The tutor also worked with the mental health practitioners to ensure they were communicating appropriately.

“I think just like anybody coming into our group because we're mixed ability, it's just getting people to slow down, keep the language very simple, repeat things, ask questions to check people understand... I'm there to help facilitate that.” Tutor

Outcomes

For learners

Learners involved in the mental health workshops experienced a range of benefits, above and beyond those which they would usually experience from Beyond the Page's provision. These included:

- **Improved confidence and self-esteem.** This was the result of having mental health practitioners join the workshop, as learners felt like they were a priority.

“I think one of the benefits is it shows them, the women, that they're important enough for these people to come out and talk to them.” Tutor

- **Improved engagement with mental health services.** The session with the mental health practitioners enabled learners to put some friendly faces to what otherwise can seem to be a large and daunting organisation.

“I think it helps them, our women as well, know that these professionals are approachable and just try to help that relationship develop.” Tutor

In addition, one of the women was on a waiting list to have counselling with the mental health nurse who attended the workshop. This meant it was less daunting for the learner when she went for her first counselling session.

- **Improved understanding and awareness of mental health.** Many of the learners spoke about the fact that mental health was a taboo subject in their home countries. Consequently, gaining the vocabulary to describe their experiences and the realisation that this was a recognised condition was very powerful for some women.

“...one of our women, it was just, sort of, like a lightbulb moment. When she heard about post-natal depression, saying, 'I had that, I didn't know there was a name for it'... And therefore them realising they're not alone, it's not just them, this is a condition that exists that lots of other people also get.” Tutor

- **Improved ability to recognise poor mental health in their children,** which learners felt would enable them to identify and access support for them sooner.

“...their children may develop a different condition, so they're able to maybe identify something sooner than they ordinarily would have.” Tutor

For professionals

As well as outcomes for learners, there were a wide range of benefits experienced by the professionals involved in delivering the mental health workshops.

- **Improved awareness of local mental health provision.** Staff learned about a range of local services and sources of support and advice that they were previously unaware of.

“I’ve been able to put together a bank of contact numbers, websites, for the women that they can access and hopefully benefit from. Yes, and it’s made me more aware of services that are available locally, as well.” Tutor

- **Improved partnership working.** The workshop strengthened Beyond the Page’s relationship with the local primary care manager, and they are already planning to involve their team in future activities.

“I just emailed her at the beginning of this week asking for a contact for somebody working in maternity services because our [women] need to interview some professionals... so it’s a relationship that is ongoing.” Tutor

- **Broadened understanding of mental health.** Staff at Beyond the Page learned about views and models of mental health in different cultures. From this, they have a better understanding of the importance of discussing wellbeing in their sessions to enable women to come to terms with their experiences, and how rewarding this can be. This was also true for the mental health professionals who were involved, as they gained a more holistic view of the women at Beyond the Page.

“I think it was also good for them as professionals to see our women in the 3D and they’re not just people that struggle to speak English... they are women that need help. Just like all of us.” Tutor

Plans for the future

Through the mental health workshops, the Operations Director and tutor have identified many opportunities to build wellbeing into their future delivery, including:

1. Involving learners more in co-designing and co-delivering sessions

Through the Women Rising Enabling Neighbourhoods (WRENs) Programme delivered with the St Giles Trust, a group of 10 of the women who were involved in the workshops have trained as community champions. As part of this, they have decided to develop and deliver three wellbeing events for Beyond the Page’s learners.

Alongside this, two of the community champions have trained as peer researchers and have been carrying out focus groups with migrant women about Early Years support in Margate, which has highlighted a high need for mental health support. They have secured funding from Save the Children to carry out more research and put together a report on their findings, as well as a film capturing women’s stories. They plan to launch this at an event.

2. Embedding more wellbeing activities into their wider ESOL provision

Following the success of the workshops, Beyond the Page are committed to continuing to build mental health and wellbeing into their ongoing offer for local migrant women. They have already been working with a local artist to create textiles and have plans to bring in other local partners to deliver activities such as theatre, storytelling, crafts and yoga.