

Research Executive Summary

Title: “Thinking Outside the Clinic: The Impact of an Adventure-Based Therapy Intervention on Adversarial Growth for Young Adults with Experiences of Chronic Illness”

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Background:

- The survival rates for youth diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses, such as cancer and renal disease, have dramatically increased in recent years. Accordingly, more children and young people now live *with* the long-term physical, psychological, and social effects of chronic ill-health.
- Research suggests, however, that over 50 per cent of young adult survivors of chronic health conditions report that their support needs had been unmet by service provision.
- Accordingly, clinical guidelines and national policies advocate for innovative and comprehensive rehabilitation modalities outside of the NHS, which are impactful, cost-effective and accessible.
- Beyond a model of recovery, a growing body of research findings recognizes that aversive life events, such as life-threatening illness, may not be uniformly concerned with negative outcomes, but may instead be viewed as opportunities for growth.
- This research examined whether Climbing Out may not only help to recover and recuperate the psychological and social effects of chronic illness in adolescence, but may also provide opportunities for growth and positive transformation in the face of adversity. Such findings were conceptualised under the term ‘Adversarial Growth’, which contends that under the right conditions, highly challenging life events can foster positive psychological change.

Method:

- Mixed-method, longitudinal, quasi-experimental design.
- Standardised questionnaires were provided at the start of the programme, end, 3-month and 6-month follow up.
- A control comparison was also recruited to compare changes.
- We also conducted a focus group to better understand the psychological, and social changes that occurred.

Results:

- 92 Individuals were included in the final study. 60 who attended Climbing Out and 32 who were recruited from online support groups for cancer and renal difficulties.

Key Headlines:

- Those who took part in Climbing Out reported a statistically significance increase and large improvements in their scores for Adversarial Growth (thriving after adversity), Social Connectedness (their sense of belonging), Self-Esteem (their view of how worthy they feel) and Self-Efficacy (how masterful they feel).
- Results support claims that Climbing Out might provide the right therapeutic environment in which young adults with experiences of chronic illness can not only recover but also grow from their experiences of health-related adversity.
- For those who took part in Climbing Out, their improvements in scores for Adversarial Growth were maintained at 3-month follow-up.

- This study also investigated whether Adversarial Growth is a natural phenomenon in the process of recovery from childhood and adolescent chronic illness. To do this, we investigated the differences between Climbing Out and the control group over 3 months. Results demonstrate that *only* participants who attended Climbing Out reported elevated scores for Adversarial Growth over time
- Participants talked of their experiences of change after Climbing Out as:
 - Theme 1: 'A Turning Point'
 - Theme 2: 'Feeling Confident in Myself'
 - Theme 3: 'Pushing Yourself in New Directions'
- Participants made sense of these changes through the following themes:
 - Theme 4: 'The Group'
 - Subtheme 4.1 'Being Around People That Totally Get It'
 - Subtheme 4.2 'Feeling Supported'
 - Subtheme 4.3 'Encouraged by others'
 - Theme 5: 'You Can Overcome Adversity'
 - Subtheme 5.1 'It's Not I Can't, It's How Can I?'
 - Subtheme 5.2 'Capable Body'
 - Theme 6: 'A Safe Space to Deal With Fears'
 - Subtheme 6.1 'Opportunity for Reflection'
 - Subtheme 6.2 'Opportunity for Risk'

Further Findings:

Results for Social Connectedness:

- This study investigated changes in 'Social Connectedness', otherwise understood as a person's subjective experience of belonging in their journey of recovery.
- Results indicate that Climbing Out was effective at the end of the programme in facilitating enhanced scores for 'Social Connectedness'.
- Individuals spoke about the significance of 'The Group' during the intervention, as a support network that continued beyond the confines of the 5-day intervention. In contrast to peers at home, with whom participants' shared experiences of feeling judged, misunderstood and anxious when discussing health-related issues, participants shared the importance of 'Being around people that totally get it' (Sub-theme 4.1). Participants shared that they no longer felt alone or alienated but among a peer network with whom they felt understood, 'Feeling Supported' and felt a sense of belonging. Not only citing a resource in witnessing the achievements of others, participants also reflected upon the importance of others 'bearing witness' to their own achievement.

Results for Self-Esteem

- This study investigated changes in 'Self-Esteem' in their journey of recovery.
- Results from this study indicate those who took part in Climbing Out reported statistically significant increases in Self-Esteem scores at the end of the programme.
- These changes in self-esteem were mirrored by participant narratives for changes in Theme Two 'Feeling Confident in Myself'. Participants discussed how the intervention served to transform their sense of self and participants spoke of renewed confidence, motivation and sense of personal agency.
- However, for participants attending Climbing Out there was not a significant effect of time on Self-Esteem across six-month time intervals, indicating that the effect of the intervention is not maintained longer-term.

Results for Self-Efficacy:

- This study also investigated changes in ‘Self-Efficacy’, individual’s assessment of their sense of mastery and capability.
- Results from this study indicate those who took part in Climbing Out reported a statistically significant increase in Self-Efficacy scores at programme completion.
- These changes in Self-Efficacy were mirrored by participant narratives for changes in their sense of capability and mastery following involvement in the intervention. Thus, in Subtheme 3.3: ‘Pushing Yourself in New Directions’ participants appeared to be able to transfer accomplishments and experiences of ‘pushing yourself’ to wider psychosocial challenges in their day-to-day life post-intervention. Similarly, Theme 5: ‘You Can Overcome Adversity’ is characterised by individuals’ renewed appraisal of their capability and sense of mastery in their ability to overcome the associated difficulties of their chronic health condition. Participants also shared the transformational quality of engaging in experiences that enhanced their sense of having a ‘Capable Body’ (Sub-theme 5.2). The physical challenges of the intervention may provide an embodied experience of confronting and overcoming adversity and may provide a shift away from the body being a site of disability, fear and danger.
- However, for participants attending Climbing Out there was not a significant effect of time on Self-Efficacy across six-month time intervals, indicating that the effect of the intervention is not maintained longer-term.

Implications:

- Given that over half of adolescent and young adults with experiences of chronic illness state that their psychological and social support needs have been unmet and that National Health Service is increasingly restricted in funding, there have been calls to explore more innovative psychosocial interventions provided by the third-sector (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2005).
- Not satisfied with simply removing the suffering of our clients, there are strong ethical and clinical contentions, which propose that individuals who have faced adversity deserve opportunities to excel, thrive and grow from their experiences.
- Results from this study provide initial evidence to suggest that Adventure-based interventions, such as Climbing Out may provide such a transformative intervention.
- Given evidence to support men’s underutilization of mental health services the higher proportion of men accessing Climbing Out may provide insight that these types of interventions may fill the gap in service provision for men who may traditionally shy away from accessing psychological help.
- However, the longer-term effects of the intervention remain unclear, with queries raised as to whether growth after adversity for some may be illusory. Further research is required to examine longitudinal changes and to better understand the process of recovery with a population for whom their health and self-appraisals of recovery are tied with a cyclic notion of ‘good’ and ‘poorer’ health.
- With United Kingdom policy guidelines acknowledging the limits of current service provision to support the psychosocial effects of chronic illness during adolescence and young adulthood, this research provides initial evidence to claim that Climbing Out, may provide this population with the right conditions in which to achieve personal growth, and thrive ‘outside of the clinic’.

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