

## **RUNNING A COGNITIVE STIMULATION THERAPY GROUP IN A PRISON ENVIRONMENT.**

The Cognitive Stimulation Therapy group for elderly life sentenced prisoners at HMP Norwich has been running for two years now, providing support for older people with cognitive difficulties within the walls of the prison. It is an innovative project and, as far as we are aware, unique, being the only prison based CST group in the UK. This weekly therapy group is delivered by local charity Forget-me-Nots, which was set up to deliver this highly effective intervention to people with dementia and cognitive difficulties. The Forget-me-Not volunteers are joined by the HMP Norwich Librarian and a long standing prison visitor and work in partnership with the establishment.

The number of older people in prison is rising fast, partly as a consequence of longer sentences and increasing convictions for historic crimes. Older people in prison suffer from high rates of mental health problems, with the 'Losing Track of Time; Dementia in Prisons' report (2013) from the Mental Health Foundation quoting an estimate of 30% of older prisoners suffering from depression. There is no official figure for the number of people in prisons who have dementia, but the same report suggests that 5% of prisoners over 55 may be affected. According to the Prison Reform Trust, in March 2014 there were 10,749 people over 50 in UK prisons. Therefore we might estimate that there are upwards of 400 people with dementia in British prisons.

Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) is a psychological therapy designed to be delivered in groups to assist stimulation and maintenance of cognitive function in people with mild to moderate dementia. Both the initial programme and follow up maintenance programme are available in the form of a manual which gives step by step guidance on the content of each session. This helps everybody delivering CST to do so in a consistent way. The key principles of CST, as outlined in Age UK's publication

'Improving Later Life' are 'stimulation of language and executive function, encouraging implicit learning, the continual development of new ideas and associations and a focus on opinions rather than facts'. And there is good evidence for the effectiveness of CST in improving quality of life. Clinical trials demonstrate improvements in memory, executive functioning and especially language following a course of CST, improvement which is sustained at six month follow up. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends participation in a CST programme for everybody with mild to moderate dementias of all types. But CST can also be delivered as an on-going intervention, which is where the HMP Norwich group is now – building on and maintaining well being for participants – while remaining open for new members to join at any stage of the rolling program.

So what does the group look like, and how do the participants feel about it?

The basic structure of the group follows the same pattern week by week, which lowers stress for the participants and allows a sense of security. Each week the group gather in the lounge for tea and biscuits – a small thing for most of us, but quite a treat for people who are in prison. Everybody (including facilitators) is offered a name badge with their first name clearly visible. Each week the participants are welcomed. The group has a name and song chosen by the participants and participants are encouraged to recall these. The name is written up on the board and we sing the song together. This is followed by brief seated exercise and a going round the group exercise, when each person is invited to share how they are. The focus is on listening to each other in a supportive and respectful way. Volunteers do not take part in this, as we avoid discussing our personal lives in the prison, for reasons of security. We have found, however, that this works well – we have many opportunities to talk about ourselves and be heard, whereas the group participants have few, and many say they

have no other opportunity to be listened to. And so it has become more about giving greater attention to them, rather than holding back on our part. And then on to the main theme of the group, which is different each week, but might involve having a discussion, playing a game of skittles, doing a quiz, guessing the mystery object ( very popular!) or singing. Following this, this group ends with thanking the participants and letting them know what next week's theme will be.

Our group of regular participants tell us that the group is much enjoyed, and very important to them...a highlight of the week. Wing staff have noted an increase in socialising and less withdrawal, and have also commented on how participants take more pride in their appearance, smartening themselves up for the group. It's been apparent to us as time has gone on how the group members have become more supportive of each other, and have built and strengthened friendships among themselves. In our last review, group members remarked on the group as a safe space, something that gave them pleasure and that 'lifted them' on the days before and after. Often people tell us that they were sceptical on first encountering the group and now enjoy it very much! We've even put on a Christmas review with songs, sketches, and displays of crafts and garden produce which was planned, scripted and performed by the group members for residents of other wings and was enormously enjoyed.

Of course, delivering this sort of group in a custodial setting prevents some very real challenges. We are working in a prison environment and have to be acutely aware of security at all times. The volunteers have all been thoroughly vetted and there is tight control of what can be brought into the prison. We need to be very mindful of operational rules and boundaries. And then there is the very fact that this is quite an uncommon intervention. Working with prison staff and trying to elicit their support for the group when they are facing challenges of their own is not easy. We are very aware that we could not sustain this without the good

will of the staff and so developing a positive relationship is vital. We actively seek their comments and suggestions and try to respect that we are in their workplace. We have had excellent support from staff over the past two years which has been invaluable. The fact that I am the prison librarian, in addition to being a volunteer group facilitator has been helpful on many levels – giving the group credibility with wing staff, having insider knowledge to negotiate prison rules and procedures, having security awareness and knowledge and extra independence from being a key holder and therefore not requiring so much time from wing staff, as we can get about independently. As a librarian I can promote access to resources like reminiscence packs and Picture Norfolk resources; as a member of prison staff I can work closely with security officers on managing bringing these resources into the prison with regard to safety and security.

The group members are serving time for serious offences and we must remain aware of personal security and boundaries, which can present a challenge when you become used to seeing people very frequently in a relaxed, friendly setting! We are given no personal information about participants other than their first name and any immediately necessary facts – for example, if a person has a hearing or visual impairment or needs assistance to eat or drink. Each group has an observer who assesses how the group functioned, and each session is followed by a debrief and reflection. The volunteer facilitators also have regular clinical supervision with a trained counsellor who is not part of the group and can therefore stand apart. This helps maintain safe and positive boundaries. All the volunteers have been trained in CST and Person Centred Care and undertake an ongoing training program which has covered Safeguarding, therapeutic touch (including when not to touch – in a prison you don't!) and Dementia Care Mapping and many of us have experience in nursing, physical or occupational therapy and counselling.

Despite these special challenges, I personally find my involvement with the group incredibly rewarding. We are providing a supportive treatment that really works, that really makes a difference to people's lives, and we are doing that in the context of people with dementia who are living in a very restricted environment. Everybody living with dementia should have access to evidence based treatment, to support, and to as much stimulation and enrichment as possible, to help them maintain their personhood and well being. People in prison should not be excluded from that...but in the absence of groups of this type, many will be. From the perspective of somebody who has spent 14 years working with people with dementia, a very welcome change in attitudes is beginning to come about, with more and more spaces – including libraries – becoming dementia friendly. It is a great privilege to be able to take part in extending that into prisons through my role as a prison librarian, and although it's not about issuing books, I find my engagement with this program fits well with the librarian role. We seek to continually stimulate new learning and memory in group participants, which chimes well with the core library goal of supporting life long learning. This program also helps enhance the role of the library as providing a safe and welcoming place for community engagement, facilitating social interaction, inclusion and participation, and promoting good physical and mental health.

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